

Rhea Dillon,
Press

Rhea Dillon's "Heads"

Maddie Hampton



Rhea Dillon, 71"67"55.4"94"06'40.2"25: XII, 2025. Sapele mahogany, glass, resin, molasses. © Rhea Dillon. Courtesy of the artist and Arts and Letters. Photo by Charles Benton.

November 6, 2025

**American Academy of Arts and Letters,
New York**

September 27, 2025–February 8, 2026

The library of the American Academy of Arts and Letters is paneled in warm wood, lit by picture lights, and softened with ornately patterned rugs. The shelves are stocked with books by the Academy's members—among them Paul Auster, Joan Didion, Toni Morrison, Susan Sontag, James Baldwin, Raymond Carver, and William Faulkner. These have been accumulating since 1923 in a space which, like the best-intentioned of preservation projects, continues to grapple with its identity and the inevitable limits of its documentary mission.

At present, seven shelves have been fitted with additional lights at either end, creating sharp, cinematic angles that dissolve into a diffuse, inviting glow. On each shelf: an oblong cut crystal plate, coated in layers of molasses and discernible chunks of soil, pitched distinctively and

e-flux, 2025

angled towards cardinal east or west within wood-trimmed glass vitrines. In a nod to her own British-Jamaican heritage, cut crystal is repeatedly deployed in Dillon's work as a symbol for the shared habits, memories, and aspirations of the Caribbean community in England. Constructed from sapele, a tropical African hardwood often substituted for mahogany and prized for both its durability and its patina, the vitrines bookend a series of titles hand-selected by the artist. Three volumes of the correspondence of W.E.B. DuBois are shelved alongside Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) and Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1990). A touch heavy-handed, the implication is abundantly clear: the record remains biased, replete with holes.

Using the readymade as a wedge, "Heads" illustrates how grandeur congeals accepted histories by placing a studied counter-emphasis on the quiet and the quotidian. The library itself, with its hushed, hallowed aura, is primed for Dillon's intervention. If her work illuminates the uneasy relationship between archives, story, and lived experience, the space becomes just as much a found object as her crystal plates, her molasses, and her curated group of first editions. It stands as a monument to countless attempts to capture, describe, convey, or otherwise forge meaning through language. If the plates invite a specific Caribbean-British sensibility into the room, then the room itself is there to underscore its own limits. Because even as it has become fashionable to critique "the archive" as a kind of container, the rhetoric we rely on to do so remains relatively empirical. We talk about gaps, constructions, absences, and though we may acknowledge that "history is written by the victors", to fully admit the extent to which this is true is to allow in the specter of both fiction and happenstance, making history almost too soft, too malleable for comfort.

But this murkiness is precisely the point. Emphasizing poetry and obfuscation as productive methods of abstraction, Dillon's practice often probes the limits of representation, not so much in a political or democratic sense, but a descriptive, semiotic one. Her work is interested in the myth of saying *exactly* what we mean, and the discursive utility of symbolic imprecision. Her subtle pieces require attention: an object placed just so, situated to invite an alternative understanding of passively accepted truths. She embraces language's ability to both describe and create simultaneously. If her project is to destabilize and rewrite the accepted myths around Black identity—often narratives authored by the colonial project, and reinforced by its aftershocks—she explores how language can be used to illuminate, alter, and restitch such assumptions just as much as it was exploited to erect them in the first place. This understanding of narrative as the base tool through which we build our everyday dovetails with Dillon's reverence for the mundane, daily object. The found object, in Dillon's positioning, becomes conductive, charged with metaphor. Or put another way, it operates not unlike a word: a sign within a semiotic system of symbols, signifiers, and slippery meaning.

What is interesting is where this capacity stops, or rather short-circuits into static. "Heads" makes the case that this happens with depictions of place, and specifically land. Though Dillon has quite literally brought the land into the work through the layers of molasses and soil collected from various parts of Jamaica, the representation glitches. Here, through the lens of place, she obliquely gestures at the impossibility of complete comprehension, of exhaustive documentation, and of a narrative structure capable of carrying such a totality. The system of relation is too complex; the work must be done in fragments.

In this light, the selected texts by Caribbean writers now make a neat allusion back to the limits of language as a system in itself. By constellating our existing tools of representation (objects, texts, imagery) and proving their inability to communicate the essence of a place, Dillon makes a rather elegant case to instead embrace that failure. That these natural materials, the molasses and the dirt, will degrade, shift, and decompose over time only furthers her argument that we must give our assumptions the necessary grace to change.

Category

Language & Linguistics,
Literature

Maddie Hampton is a writer based in Brooklyn, New York.

Subject

Blackness, Caribbean

HOME | ART IN AMERICA | COLUMNS

Rhea Dillon's Oblique Portraits of the Black Diaspora

By *Nicole Kaack*

June 17, 2025 5:00am



Within **Rhea Dillon** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/rhea-dillon/>)'s studio cubicle at the Whitney Independent Study Program (ISP), the artist and writer talked quietly about preparations for three exhibitions, opening weeks apart over the summer: her ISP group exhibition; a solo show at the Heidelberger Kunstverein; and a booth in the Statements section of Art Basel Switzerland. Famed for Marxist-leaning, theory-rich seminars, the ISP is a clear fit for the 29-year-old artist, who has temporarily transplanted from South London; her work engages a canon of Black and Caribbean historians, novelists, and poets including Kamau Brathwaite, Beverley Bryan, June Jordan, and Sylvia Wynter.

Art in America, 2025

A second-generation British citizen with family in Jamaica, the artist often draws from her correspondence with the Caribbean, and critiques the sociopolitical ceilings inherited with diasporic identity. Sculptures such as *Caribbean Ossuary* (2022)—included last year in “Tituba, qui pour nous protéger?” (Tituba, who protects us?) at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris—suggest an immigrant’s aspirational longing for Old World luxury. The work presents a mahogany cabinet, echoing one owned by the artist’s grandmother, tipped on its back and seeming to float like a ship across the gallery floor. Within, items from a cut-crystal tea service (for when “the queen came”) hover atop a mirrored backing.

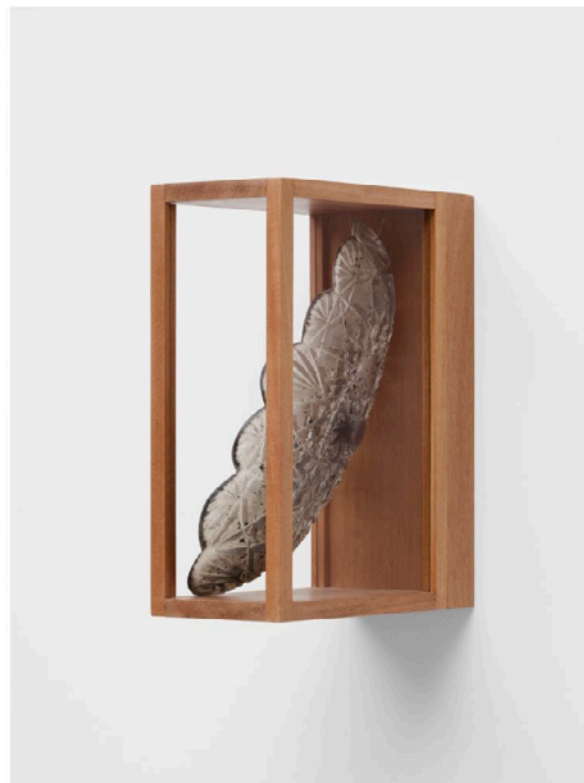
Dillon often produces sculptures like this one, crafting visceral portraits of postcolonial Black experiences from everyday objects, symbols, and language. Reflecting on her work’s territorial politics, Dillon said, “I think about land very physically now—soil, as opposed to geographies or trajectories,” citing American anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones.

Dillon’s 2024 exhibition “An Alterable Terrain” at Tate Britain bridged the body and its diaspora through fauna. She presented a fragmentary Black woman, abstracted in a sparsely arranged constellation of sculptures representative of eyes, mouth, lungs, hands, feet, and reproductive organs. In *Swollen, Whole, Broken, Birthed in the Broken; Broken Birthed, Broken, Deficient, Whole—At the Black Womb’s Altar, At the Black Woman’s Tale* (2023), dried calabash gourds are mounted on an angled plinth of sapele mahogany; some fractured, some whole, they stand in for womb, breasts, and vagina. Dillon calls out the commodity equivalence slavery drew between human flesh and wood, and underlines the parallel migrations of Black people and plant life.

Complementing her theoretical rigor with “poethics” (per the artist, borrowing poet Joan Retallack’s term), Dillon imbues her artworks with linguistic slippages and nonsensical evasions. Dillon’s writing favors elision and repetition, the latter shaping sections of her libretto for *Catgut—The Opera*, performed at the Serpentine Gallery in London in 2021. Pointing to photographs in her studio, Dillon explained this linguistic approach through a series of drawings central to “Gestural Poetics” at Paul Soto Gallery in Los Angeles last year. Originating when Dillon learned that “spade” was a racial slur, the oil stick drawings repeatedly rehearse the contours of the playing card icon, distorting the derogatory expression into a tree, a shield, or a pair of breasts. Looking over the recurrent symmetries of her drawings, the artist wondered, “Can I extend a definition? Or can I create a new definition through repetition?”



Rhea Dillon's work actively invites political interpretation through material and historical density. Born in London in 1996, Dillon received the Balaise Art Prize for her "Leaning Figures" series (2025) at Art Basel's Statements, presented by Soft Opening (London). Her sculptural language draws from colonial histories, minimalist abstraction, and Black feminist theory to explore the shaping of Caribbean and British identities. The installation reconfigures the domestic dinnerware cabinet and museological vitrine — both boat and casket, vessel, and container. Wall-mounted boxes of glass and mahogany enclose resin-cast crystal plates tinted with molasses or Jamaican soil. These sculptural assemblages quietly imply Black bodies at rest, resisting both erasure and display.



1 2 3 ④ 5 6 7

Rhea Dillon, *Leaning Figures*, 2025. Installation view of , Soft Opening at Art Basel 2025. Photography by Mark Blowe. Courtesy of Soft Opening, London.

Rhea Dillon – Soft Opening, Art Basel Statements



Corroded and fragile, Rhea Dillon's sculptural installation at Art Basel Statements, presented by Soft Opening, confronts the lingering aftershocks of colonialism through disfigured glassware boxed in sapele mahogany vitrines. The vitrines don't just frame the objects, they evoke the aesthetics of museum cabinets while destabilising their authority. The result is a powerful meditation on preservation, erasure, and resistance.

Dillon is an artist, poet, and writer and builds upon a language of absence in her practice. Her sculptural forms appear weathered yet beautifully preserved, revered as a semi-reliquary in their cabinets. They are part of a history that refuses to be silenced and settled.

Rooted in Black feminist thought and Caribbean material culture, Dillon's practice abstracts diasporic histories into minimalist, affective forms. In her acclaimed 2023 solo exhibition at Tate Britain, *An Alterable Terrain*, she examined how the Black female body has been encoded, commodified, and staged throughout history. In Basel, that inquiry intensified, crystallising around materials loaded with colonial memory, from glass, soil, and molasses, each a residue of trade, extraction, and displacement. Dillon's work invites a slow, embodied encounter with the objects before you. It's a study in how violence inscribes itself into the material world, and how that material world might still speak back.

News in brief



Rhea Dillon's winning *Leaning Figures*

SCULPTURAL WORKS WIN BALOISE ART PRIZE

The Baloise Art Prize, given to two presentations at Art Basel's Statements section, has this year been awarded to the London-based artist Rhea Dillon and the Lebanese Canadian artist Joyce Joumaa. With Soft Opening gallery, Dillon shows *Leaning Figures*, a series of wall-based sculptural works for which she has replicated cut-crystal plates, casting them in resin mixed with molasses and soil from Jamaica. The work has been acquired by the Museum für Moderne Kunst (MMK) in Frankfurt as part of the prize. Joumaa was awarded for her installation *Periodic Sights* with Montreal's Galerie Eli Kerr. Consisting of repurposed fuse boxes, illuminated and refitted with photographs of everyday scenes from Beirut and Tripoli, the work comments on Lebanon's energy crisis. *Periodic Sights* was acquired by Mudam Luxembourg.

Kabir Jhala



ART

These British Women Artists Took The World's Best Art Fair By Storm

BY MAHORO SEWARD

23 June 2025

Every June, the typically sleepy Swiss city of Basel becomes the global epicentre of the art world, roaring to life for the pioneering art fair that is arguably its most famous brand. Indeed, Art Basel has, over its 55 years in operation, become a flagship cultural institution. Though its Miami edition may be flashier, its Hong Kong version more daunting in scale, and its newly minted Paris fair more grand for its setting, the Basel show is the mothership – the OG edition where, typically, you can expect to see the best work.

That's certainly the case at this year's iteration, which took place over the past week. While it's a knowingly commercial context, the works seen across the fair comprise the zenith of available works on the contemporary and modern art markets. Among them this year were booths and public projects by some of Britain's pioneering artists, with the likes of Rhea Dillon, Ebun Sodipo, Alexandra Metcalf and Lubaina Himid taking Basel by storm.

British Vogue, 2025



Rhea Dillon at Soft Opening. Image courtesy of Art Basel. Nici Jost

To start with Dillon, the swiftly rising young London-based artist, writer and poet presented *Leaning Figures* at Soft Opening's booth on the main fair's second floor. An extension of her sustained meditation on the material expression of colonial narratives – in particular the material expression of Black feminist history, theory and thought – she offered an arresting series of wall-mounted, mahogany-framed glass boxes, each containing the kinds of vaguely kitschy cut-crystal bowls that you'll often find in the fine glass cabinets in many a Black British home – or that you did in mine, at least. Slicked with molasses – and in some cases Jamaican soil – Dillon envisages the ornate, fragile objects as Black bodies at rest. It was a powerful, meditative presentation from one of the UK's most deftly critical young artists – a fact that was formally recognised by her winning of the prestigious Baloise Art Prize.

ART THIS WEEK IN CULTURE

Here Are the 8 Gallery Exhibitions Opening This Month That You Cannot Miss

Hugo McCloud, Lucy Bull, Jesse Darling, Rhea Dillon, and more are on view in exhibitions opening across the globe.

"Gestural Poetics" by Rhea Dillon

Where: Soft Opening at Paul Soto

When: April 13 – June 1

Why It's Worth A Look: In a wide open white space, mahogany boxes sit on the floor, propped up against the walls. Inside those boxes are works on paper by Dillon. The unusual presentation signals an artist willing to push beyond the ordinary, and her quick-sketch style is unlike much of what you'll see on the gallery circuit.

Know Before You Go: The artist is also fresh off of her first institutional exhibition, "An Alterable Terrain," open last year at London's Tate Britain.

PICK OF THE WEEK: Rhea Dillon

Soft Opening at Paul Soto

by Estelle Araya | May 15, 2024



Installation View of *Gestural Poetics*, Rhea Dillon. Photo courtesy of Soft Opening and Paul Soto.

There's no trick of the moonlight at Rhea Dillon's show, "*Gestural Poetics*." Inside and out, each work happens twice. Dillon's drawings, nestled in sapele mahogany boxes within the white cube gallery, enact two histories at once. While the moniker "sapele" hails from a Nigerian city, the hardwood was once used to build slave ships, consequently disrupting how to read Dillon's works against the supposedly neutral space of a gallery. Inset in boxes propped against the walls, her oil-stick drawings of spades emerge in clamorous flesh tones or occasional bursts of yellow or purple. If this exhibition intends to release the recognition of Blackness from an object or commodity and lean into Blackness as a natural form of abstraction, the entirety of the show is clever, verve and precise. Dillon's sensitivity to Black hyper-visibility recovers a sense of amorphicity for Blackness through reconfiguring canons of representation. In probing questions about this long crisis of recognition and addressability, an intimate relationship between imaging, the world and "the way things are," I came to the contradictory question: Is it wonderful that she has created these works or should I be outraged that the world is this sinister?

[Paul Soto](#)

2271 W. Washington Blvd.

Los Angeles, CA

On view through June 1, 2024

Elephant, 2024

Traversing Demonic Grounds: In Ode to Rhea Dillon's Quiet Feminism



An Alterable Terrain Installation view 23 May 2023 – 1 January 2024 Tate Britain, London Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London Photography: Theo Christelis

From May of last year to January of this year, a constellation of corporal fragments – eyes, mouth, soul, reproductive organs, hands, feet and lungs — came together at Tate Britain in the evocation of a Black woman's body. The first solo institutional exhibition of polymath artist Rhea Dillon, *An Alterable Terrain*, parsed the infrastructural fundamentality of Black female intellectual, physical and reproductive labour within the British Empire's construction and legacy. Amidst a biennial in which exhibitions of loud feminism have become the de facto institutional modus operandi, Dillon's presentation constituted a poultice – sociopolitically engaged, yes, but quieter and slower paced – a generous invitation to reflect, breathe, and re-energise oneself for the good intersectional fight.

Consisting of new and existing sculptures, the exhibition was metonymic of Dillon's profound penchant for storytelling via abstraction: the deployment of subtly referential materials and formations in allowance of the viewer's own coming-to-relation with the work. The complexity of the themes enfolded in the minimalist sculptures has been levied as both the power and the downfall of the work insofar as additional reading is required to unearth the underlying histories that drive the sculptural outcomes. Appropriate then, that Dillon has produced a publication of the same name, in accompaniment to and expansion upon the exhibition: an elucidation of the thoughts and thinkers, concepts and creative discoveries upon which the body of work draws. On the heels of the publication of a special edition

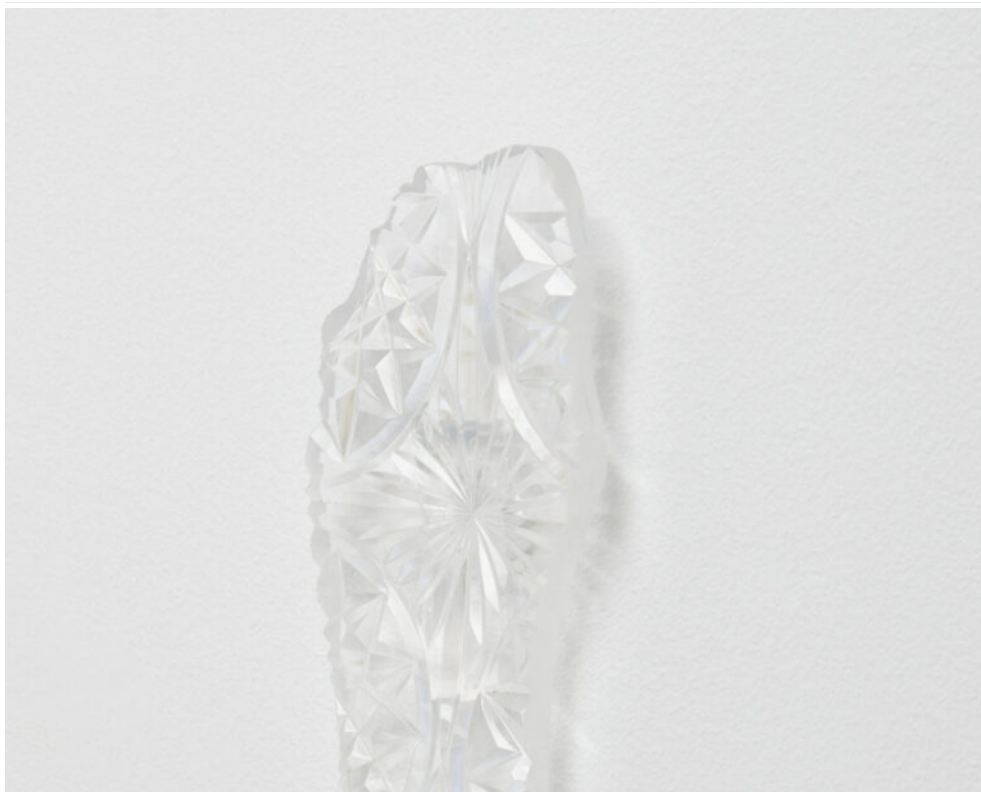


Elephant, 2024



An Alterable Terrain Installation view 23 May 2023 – 1 January 2024 Tate Britain, London Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London Photography: Theo Christelis

One could be led to view Dillon's penchant for symbolic representation as a clear side-taking in the historic storm of contention that has swarmed around Black abstraction; the 1960s and 70s prioritisation of figuration as a route to capturing the black experience that led to the levying of pandering to western modes at artists such as Sam Gilliam and David Hammons. For Dillon, however, the Blackness – a remit that includes the masterful reclaiming of the tenets of canonic Western materiality and sculptural form, a form of subversion via updating. The entry point into recapitulation is always the written word – “I think about society through linguistics, and its own grammar, for instance, the difference between blackness and Blackness.” Encountering canonic writing is a first diction; to be able to enter into conversation with someone's writing, or with them as people, and build upon it is deemed a gift by the artist.



Elephant, 2024



Sole Responsibility: Aged 12, but above VI, 2024. Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London

The writing within the publication *An Alterable Terrain* is an ode to the centrality of this notion to Dillon's practice – bringing together the words of Pat Noxolo, Barbara Ferland, Zoé Samudzi, Vanessa Onwuemezi, Françoise Vergès, Katherine McKittrick and Martine Syms. Vergès essay, in particular, frames a feedback loop of mutuality – a response to Dillon's response to a lecture delivered by Vergès Institute for Art and Olfaction, Dillon is enamoured by “air, aura, smell...” with olfaction serving as both direct and indirect inspiration. “One's sense of smell is colloquially considered as the last or a forgotten sense, yet it informs so much. It's the sense most closely and directly linked to memory, with the power to instigate and even control memory.” The body of work is an exercise in the challenge of societal interpretation of the black, queer body and experience within the UK. With the recognition that the digital age has normalised concentration via two screens – one's device, alongside one's physical vision of the world – air as a non-tangible medium becomes fertile ground: “We can't control it, and it can't control us, we can only respond.” The exploration of aura comes to hold greater weight within lofty institutional buildings endowed with a deep-rooted physical and perceptual atmosphere. Within *An Alterable Terrain* Dillon deployed sculpture as a challenge to the Tate Britain – for instance, the inclusion of molasses plates *C/leaning Figures* (2023) to frame the relationship between the gallery's founding family and the sugar/transatlantic slave trade.

Forcing the viewer to enact an embedded gesture of prayer – to genuflect and engage from below – to pay witness to her show exemplifies Dillon's “process of transforming, moving and playing.” Disrupting and guiding the viewer's movement within the gallery space can be extrapolated to Dillon's wider interest in the relationship between notions of exile, innate discourse around nations, empire and territory, and the (de)colonial project. Dillon's relationship to exile is not one that pertains to a sense of physical banishment per se but in relation to the degree to which laws enable or complicate belonging, with specific reference to citizenship as a frontier of inclusion, the crystal footprints. The two cut crystal feet – modelled on the treads of her grandmother and uncle, installed always facing one another – *Sole Responsibility: Aged 12, but above* (2022) illuminate the “Sole Responsibility Law”: a symptom of the 1971 Immigration Act, which legitimised the notion of black people as second class citizens.



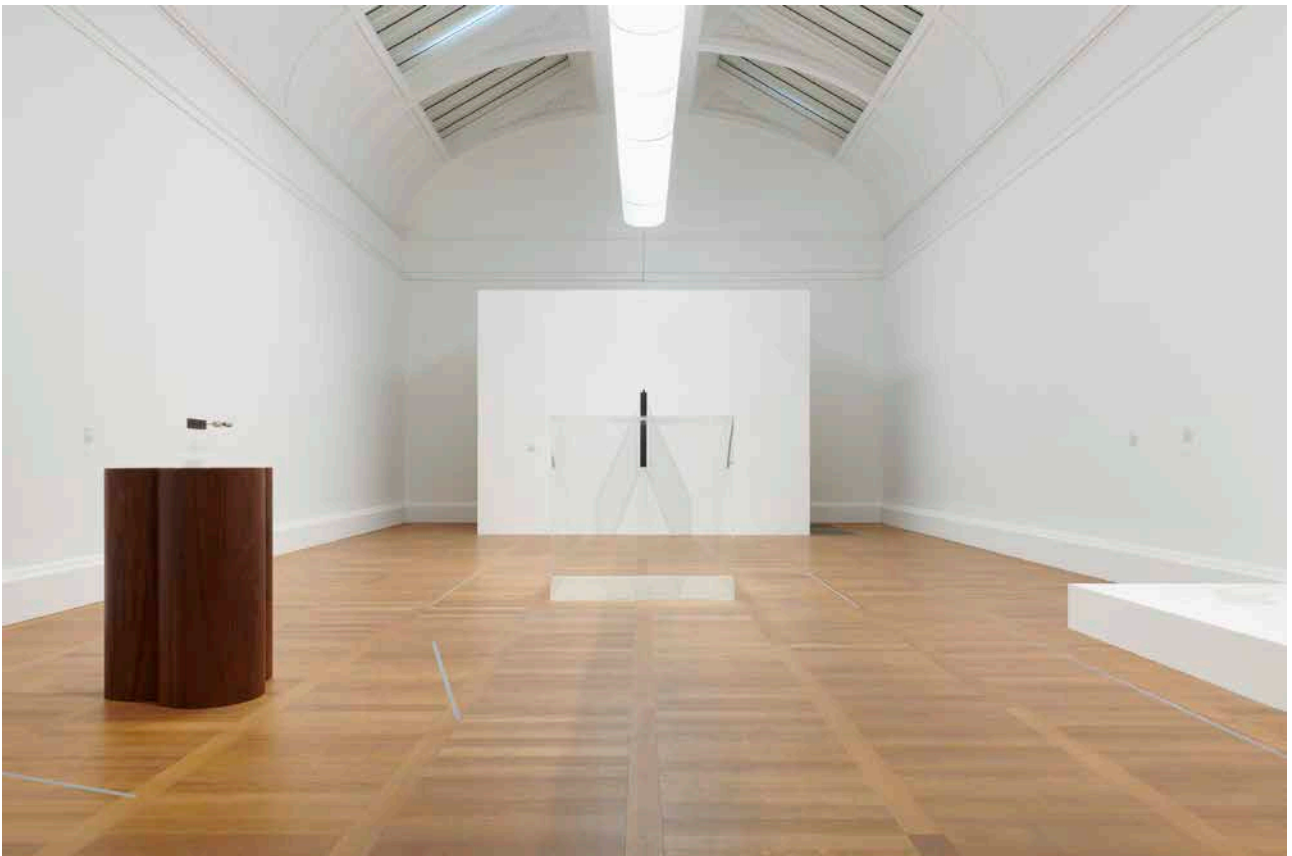
Elephant, 2024



d in the Broken; Broken Birthed, Broken, Deficient, Whole—At the Black Womb's Altar, At the Black Woman's Tale, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London Photography: Theo Christellis

The term poethic is key, preferred by the artist to the externally nominally ascribed verb “storytelling”. Dillon first encountered the term when working on her 2021 publication *Catgut – The Opera*. Introduced to Joan Retallack’s *The Poethical Wager* in conversation with author and poet Simone White (“I think the best way to think about language and its definition is through conversation”), Dillon qualifies the term as a thickening of language as innately imbued with a Caribbean notion of poetics and narrative. The publication *An Alterable Terrain* interrogates the possibility of a continuation of poetics in writing, as it approaches a point of dissemblance – the point at which writing becomes less descriptive and less sticky, becomes indirect, and able to speak through movement, light and the spirit.

To reverse the glutinous involves recessing into and reframing archives; when Dillon reads or meets writers, she goes through their reading lists and bibliographies, “filling in the gaps” she readily and humbly admits she is possessed of. So rooted in feminist and queer thought, the legacies of influential texts reverberate throughout her practice; those that informed *An Alterable Terrain*, much like how the title of the exhibition is cited from Katherine McKittirick’s ‘Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle’, oscillate within a collection of so-called “Bible books”: “I was drawn to the idea of the Bible as representative of a generic book of “godly” guidance. I was thinking about a collection of books that you might take on a desert island that represent a time machine version of yourself at a specific moment.” Dillon’s “bible books” are all exemplary of her impetus to queer the canon: she names Malorie Blackman’s *Noughts and Crosses*; Stuart Hall’s *Familiar Stranger*; the poetry of June Jordan and Derek Walcott; and Stella Dadzie, Suzanne Scafe and Beverley Bryan’s *The Heart of the Race* – “an emblem of things that exist, that are often absent from declarative or academic texts”, that Dillon has widely gifted to her family members.



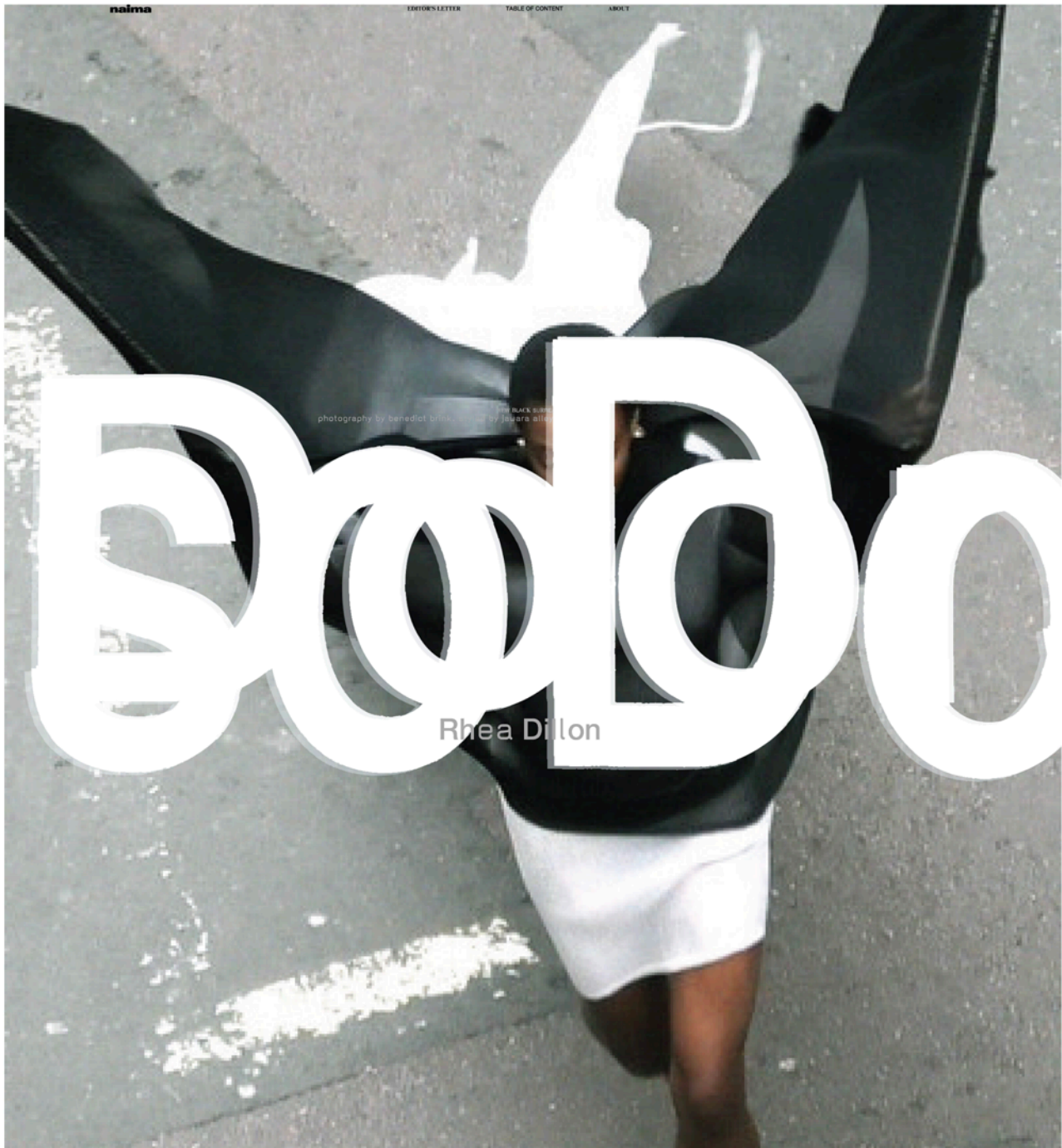
An Alterable Terrain Installation view 23 May 2023 – 1 January 2024 Tate Britain, London Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London Photography: Theo Christellis

Elephant, 2024

The careful contemplation that defined Dillon's sculptural installations is evident in the publication's construction; working closely with studio OK-RM, Dillon praises co-founder Rory McGrath: "It was the first time a design team was prepared to run with me, and treat the book as an art object itself." So too is the reader challenged to run alongside Dillon – to participate in the relocation and reconstruction of literary geography. The mores of exhibition monographs are subverted in the placement of the catalogue of works at the book's rear, borne upon the satin paper typically used by 20th-century artists. We return to the loci of "Bible books" in the choice to render the remaining pages in papyrus, the varying of the paper's thickness dominating the sectioning.

Both Morrison and Dillon's work operate upon a Demonic Ground, as elucidated by Sylvia Wynter (1990). Back at the Tate: the placement of four calabashes directly above the entrance into the gallery – *Swollen, Whole, Broken, Birthed in the Broken; Broken Birthed, Broken, Deficient, Whole – At the Black Womb's Altar, At the Black Woman's Tale* (2023). The title is framed as a two-line poem that ends at the black woman's altar, at the black woman's ta(i)l(e), subverting the typical irreverence with which the black female body is treated. The visitor was forced to enter the poem in crossing the threshold – Dillon specifically "wanted the show to end with this work, to constitute an encircling, or embrace by, and engagement with the body." To be at the woman's tail is to ask oneself about the nature of the history of black women and what we can dictate. Moving between the past archival and theoretical, to the present, fictionalised and everyday, exhibition and publication – both versions and with all the references enfolded – are in service to the making visible of previously invisible female geographies: "creating one's reality together."

Written by Katrina Nzeogu



Rhea Dillon describes her work as a “research-based” practice, which barely scratches the surface of her immersion in the archive of the Black diaspora and critical theory. Drawing on references as diverse as the poetry of Édouard Glissant and bell hooks, to the thought of Stuart Hall and Françoise Vergès, and the cults surrounding figures like Donald Trump and Jeffrey Dahmer, Dillon produces visual art, poetry, and installations that question the “rules of representation.” Her carefully executed pieces are densely layered with references and critique: histories overlaying poetry overlaying personal narratives to produce a geology of meaning. Recent shows, like “An Alterable Terrain” currently at Tate Britain, London, have expanded on her interest in the formation of British and Caribbean identities as well as her investigation of the exploitation of Black female bodies.

RHEA DILLON
We've been talking about titles.

Titles of my work, yes. You mentioned Deana Lawson.

AS

There's one title of hers that I find super interesting—she took a picture of a hole in a couch at a strip club and called it “Portal.” I love that because there's this detachment from the idea of myth or spirituality in spaces like a club—you wouldn't expect it. And sometimes, honestly, that crosses my mind when I'm holed up somewhere at six am—that we're all just souls floating around in this dingy little place. So I love that she sees a hole in a worn out couch as a kind of emptiness of space, a portal.

RD

It's a known-known. We know there are other souls happening around us all the time—even around that hole in the couch. She's seeing this hole and thinking about those who have sat amongst us, those who have used this place as a portal, who have gone through the portal of death into a second life or who may be back here in a reincarnation. That really aligns with this practice, which I think is shared across a Black diaspora, of thinking with souls and thinking with death. When we arrive at blackness, we often arrive through death. Many theorists and practitioners have their own ways of saying



Naima, 2024

multiracial always very apt. Especially if you're arriving at this from a Black British, African American or Black French perspective. It's interesting there's not the term 'African-French', but that's another conversation.

55 That is interesting, that 'African-French' isn't a term we use.
60 I was talking to Saidiya Hartman about this—how these terms were arrived at, and why they're so heavily practiced—especially when it comes to America. I have a lot of friends who say that they are Black American instead of African American, others who only say African American. It's about the desire to place power onto linguistics itself. Saidiya mentioned that a lot of university courses in the US are changing their title from 'African American Studies' to 'Black Studies'. That was quite cool to me as it signals this shift from thinking only about the New World—and taking that to be singularly American—to having a more global capacity. I'm excited by that.

INTERVIEWER

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ARTIST



66 It's interesting to start thinking very intentionally along those lines. Because traditionally these terms get used and then those labels just stick—it's not really conscious, just like the way Native Americans were called Indians for centuries.

68 But even in its unconsciousness it's a conscious choice, because that terminology comes from the colonizer just picking up any old word and using it. That's what happened with the West Indies—Columbus just picked up a word for the Other that he already knew and used it again for this new place, which is often the case: conflating a former Other with a new Other.

The idea of a 'Contemporary African' sounds wild, but that's kind of what we're talking about.

66 In America, in particular, there's also this sense of the Other continuing to be 'new' because they don't actually have African immigrants in the same way that Britain or France does. I think that must influence these perceptions in a subtle way.

68 There are African immigrants, but perhaps fewer than in Europe. But I think you're right in so far as Europe has this disengagement that happens when old meets new, whereas America just has the new.

Stuart Hall talks about this with his three *présences*: *présence africaine*, *présence européenne*, and *présence américaine*. I always move to change that last term to be *présence nouveau monde* aka New World *présence*, because '*présence américaine*' re-synthesizes this idea that only America is dealing with the post-colonial experience of racism. But what's interesting about this from a Black British perspective is that we are both the '*présence européenne*' and '*présence nouveau monde*'; mutually. We generally know what our heritage is, at least for the first pit stop—whether you're in France and you know that you're from Martinique or you're in the UK and you know you're from Jamaica. So, to me, that's a key difference between here and the US. And then again, as you said, I went to school here with people who were born in Africa. My Nigerian friends aren't Nigerian by movement, they're Nigerian because of birth. Because they have Nigerian passports. That's really what you're saying in terms of Europe having Africans, right? The idea of a 'Contemporary African' sounds wild, but that's kind of what we're talking about.



Naima, 2024



AA Exactly. And we have our lineage, at least somewhat.
 RC We have the contemporary generations versus only being able to say "I'm a descendant of..."
 AA Yes. I talked to Marcus Jahmal about this actually, because of the heritage inherent in his name: Marcus. Jahmal.
 RC *Al-Bayhaq's Moor... Jahmal? Sure?*

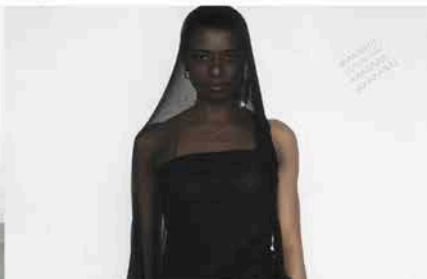


AA And that took us on a whole spin because he has a real, almost unconscious fascination with the Moors. It's a longing that influences a lot of his work. Obviously, there was a lot of Moorish movement into the Americas, which is captured in the name Jahmal, and that made me think about a kind of blood memory or an unconscious memory that ties us. Of course, I'm sure not every Black American has this kind of longing—

RC Or desire.

AA Right. On the one hand there's someone like Marcus who does have that desire, but on the other I'm thinking of that scene in "Boyz n the Hood," at the very beginning. The teacher calls Tre "African" and he's like—

RC "I ain't no African."



Naima, 2024



^{AA} Well, it's a deception because it satisfies the sense of belonging that people are so desperate for.

RD There's a need for security in that desire for belonging. It feels good to know where you're from. It's like when people do an ancestry test and then they can say "I'm Nigerian and I'm this and I'm that." But the thing is, ancestry.com doesn't understand that you're only Nigerian insofar as your tribe was in Nigeria for some period of time. Do you know what I mean?

You can carry souls more than you can carry blood. One is lighter than the other. Potentially. Depending on how troubled your souls are.

Naima, 2024

AA

I really do, because I don't personally have any sense of belonging to a nation. I could say I'm Egyptian and Eritrean. But it's a romanticized myth, because I go back there and quickly realize that I'm not from there. It's my blood and I have that connection, but I don't think I could live there. So already there's a split between those two places, and then even in England, where I grew up, I don't feel English. That continuous, generational movement makes you lose your sense of belonging. You're always looking to arrive somewhere, but it's an illusion to connect belonging to a place or a nation or an ideology. That question of belonging would be far better satisfied by something more eternal, which is why I'm more concerned with the soul and the unseen.

RD

The soul and the unseen: exactly what I was going to say. You mentioned blood, and I thought back to souls—souls have more prescient weight here. Blood thins, blood changes, and the colonizer's blood runs through us because of rape and pillage. But souls can't be ignored. So thinking through souls just makes things more honest and more able to be carried, right? You can carry souls more than you can carry blood. One is lighter than the other. Potentially. Depending on how troubled your souls are.



AA

Yeah, troubled souls, certainly. Earlier you said “when we arrive at blackness, we often arrive through death.” That this feeling is shared across so many different contexts and places. You could see it as a path on which this collective soul or the collective conscious has set out, to try to arrive at an understanding. It's a feeling that connects far more in this case than a place or nation.

RD

Which takes us to your prompt of ‘New Black Surrealism’—and also to the language and titling of my own works. A number of the titles—I wouldn't say a majority, but a number—are instigated by a past artist, writer, etcetera and my belief that there can be shared remembrances across souls. My title **The Myth of the Noble Savage: A Hoodlum Afar And A Saint At Her Desk**, is a good example of this. The title is quoted from two places: bell hooks for “the myth of the noble savage” and Édouard Glissant for “a hoodlum afar and a saint at his desk.” With the hooks quote, she's talking about this romanticized notion of our Blackness and she says in parentheses “(the myth of the noble



Naima, 2024

savage).” I felt she had just briefly dipped her toes into poetry with that phrase. She quickly returns to didactic argumentation, but I wanted to take that parenthetical and continue her poetics. So I went to Glissant’s passage that says “imagine a young man oblivious to anything that is not his machine; before it he is absolutely ‘deranged in his senses,’ a hoodlum afar and a saint at his desk, one who has conquered the mechanics of vowels and consonants and penetrated their color.” He’s thinking about how linguistics meets a colonizing hold, just as hooks is when she mentions the myth of the noble savage. I wanted to play with placing the two together to make visible their shared remembrances that I think a lot of us have in this postcolonial place.



AA That’s very interesting—especially about the hooks parenthetical, because she almost opened up to the unconscious. Whether intentional or not, you as a reader perceived that phrase to be a portal she was opening.

RD They are portals, yes. I think that artistic work should be a portal. That aligns with how I think about good art that I’m making—and when I say ‘good,’ I mean in the sense that it’s something worthy of leaving my studio. Because the studio is a place of practice and not everything you make should leave. I have a mantra that I describe as a post-it note. Perhaps all our generation’s mantras are on post-it notes—which is very Virgil (Abloh) of me to say! It is “good art belongs in the conversation.” So if there’s a work that I’m making that doesn’t make someone want to have a conversation—even just in their mind—about it, with it, for it, or against it, then it’s not good; it’s not worthy of presentation. When you are trying to start something off the work has to be good to create the portal for more. I’m always trying to start something.

AA You open a door. And when it’s received, people can go in and open other doors onto new places, which is what’s so interesting about your work. Which makes me wonder, do you think that certain of your works are imbued with a soul? Because I think when you make something—when you truly make it—you infuse something into it. It’s not quite Benjamin’s idea of aura, but that sense of something live being present. For example, in your pieces, the dark reds evoke an emotion immediately, they feel like a portal to me.

RD My work has soul. There are points when I directly feel like I’m putting souls in the work, certainly. A good example would be my series of spades—those sculpture paintings that are in deep-set mahogany frames and made with oil-sticks. When I’m working with oil sticks, I get really obsessed with the head that forms over the top. I was actually geeking out about this with Anthea Hamilton recently on how oil sticks form a literal skin that you have to peel off to start working with them again. It makes them very human, this skin. I was

Naima, 2024

thinking about that engagement with humanness and the desire to break free from the old colonizer's debate about what is human and whether Blackness gets to be included in that. When I use oil sticks, I think of them as these souls, the heart of the work, that get situated quite explicitly by me in the piece.

AA I love that. These are objects that you feel have souls already and those souls can join into the work, in a sense. Are there other examples?

RD

A different version of thinking through souls occurs in **A Caribbean Ossuary**. For this sculpture, I put all this cut crystal glass I had collected in Marseille into a cabinet. Then I bound the cabinet up, but without any support or protection, and shipped it to my gallery, which meant that all the glass broke in transit. I have this great affinity for performing objects—as a means to perform work without the body. It's a way of thinking about this hyper-placement of duty and work that's put on Black and Brown women. I guess we could say it started with bell hooks's definition with the womb as a machine for slaves, for producing more and more slaves. With the cut crystal I was thinking about work, performance, and also how glass is made—a process of hyper-heating and then hyper-molding. All this made me feel that if the glass broke in transit there could be this release of souls on many different levels. So that's what was happening there—the souls got released into the ossuary.



I have a great affinity for performing objects—as a means to perform work without the body. It's a way of thinking about this hyper-placement of duty and work that's put on Black and Brown women.

AA So it's a release across time and place, in that sense. It's about souls passing down generations and over oceans.

RD

My grandma was my focus while making this work. She is part of the **Windrush** generation. I was engaging with how she and that generation deals with emotions, with trauma. There's such space that's being created for descendants of slavery, but not as much for the displacement that happened with her generation taking up the Queen's call to rebuild the nation of the UK. I wanted the breaking of the glass and the release of the souls to help think about her generation's movement so I positioned the 'casket' that held the glass on a diagonal in the gallery, to look as if it had been moored at sea. Yet, inside the casket's bound encasing there are these fractures that need to be addressed. That can be addressed and should be addressed.



AA

The broken glass has so much meaning—and then someone else might bring their own to it too. I guess when you make something, you give it a life that will outlive you, hopefully. And once you give it that, as an object it follows its own life in a way. So, in transit, if it's breaking apart, if it's changing, you're also releasing it into its own life. You made it and now it's gone.

RD

It's funny, in terms of making works that exist beyond your time, I had a confrontation with a conservator who freaked out over me using anti-climb paint and newsprint in my paintings. He said to me, "You know that's going to change color, right? Very quickly." And I said, "Yes, I do. That's okay. I don't actually want to make things that last forever in that respect." He was very mad, but I don't care to have such a heavily weighted timestamp on my work—it doesn't have to last forever. It's about the conversation that is being had now and that needs to be had now—and whatever the latent result of that is, we can think about that when it unfolds.



Conversation: Conceptual artist *Rhea Dillon* speaks with friend and fellow artist *Tiona Nekkia McClodden* about film, the ethics of poetry, the genius of Toni Morrison and what it means to ground their work in the expanses of African Diasporic histories

**‘I want there
to be commas
in how
I approach
my practice.’**

Previous page
Rhea Dillon in her
studio, 2023. Courtesy:
the artist; photograph:
Sirui Ma

Below
An Unholy Trinity (the)
Imaginary, Symbolic
and Real, 2022, sapele
mahogany, 117 × 87 × 87 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Soft Opening,
London; photograph:
Theo Christelis



TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN How do you re-enter the studio after producing a body of work?

RHEA DILLON I think when you enter into a controlled environment that you are building for yourself – whether that becomes defined by the classic term ‘studio’ or not – I’m more interested in its confinement. Solitude has come up recently in many conversations with people I care about. Folks are coming up against their own break, whether desired or forced. Coming back into the studio after making a body of work, that’s its own break. That was my irritation with video and moving image, as film and cinema have this desire for a full stop. I want there to be commas in how I approach my practice.

I was talking to my friend recently, and we were discussing my choice of working within fine art as a solo artist and the difficulty it takes to have your inherent solitude not fall into solipsism. So, coming into the studio after a large project, I try to sit and do a deep listening to what existed outside of this confined space.

TNM When you say that you feel like film has a desire for a full stop, what do you mean by that?

RD There’s such a purity of process. I’m coming from a place where I was labelled a filmmaker because I engaged in a lens-based practice in university. ‘You make films, you’re a filmmaker.’ But did I know that artists made films before that? Not really. Did anyone let me in on that? No. So were the films I made more akin to how artists choose to exhibit and present films? In the end, yes.

TNM I agree. This idea of not being able to move away from something that wants to push you towards reconciliation or conventions is the reason why I left the film scene at the time that I did. It’s interesting to think about the relationship between art and industry, and how it can inform a cutting-off of self, a lack of forming your own voice or identity so as to conform to a certain kind of format. My impulse was to figure out how to do cinema in a different way that allowed people to enter and exit whenever they wanted to, as well as to work out their own beginning and ending.

RD That’s a good point. Figuring out how to enter or exit my work boded well for figuring out what kind of film I was making, and that comes with devising your own language – or what other people call theory. It’s also how I understand and level with other filmmakers, artists or lens-based medium practitioners. For me, there’s video art, film and then there’s cinema. A while back I talked about this with my friend who’s a painter and musician, Jasper Marsalis, with regards to video. He was saying that he expects to be able to walk into the room at any point and engage with what’s on the screen: in other words not *have* to watch it from the beginning.

TNM For me, painting can be a time-based medium. In Jacob Lawrence’s canvases, moments are painted in a gesture towards re-memory – framed by Toni Morrison as the remembering of a memory, which prompts the mind to do the work of taking in the history, while also thinking about what’s happening beyond the frame. August Wilson’s *Century Cycle* [1982–2005] opened my mind up to think about the span of a Black historical narrative where objects become the focus as characters, and then appear in various forms throughout the ten plays in separate contexts and across different

Frieze, 2023

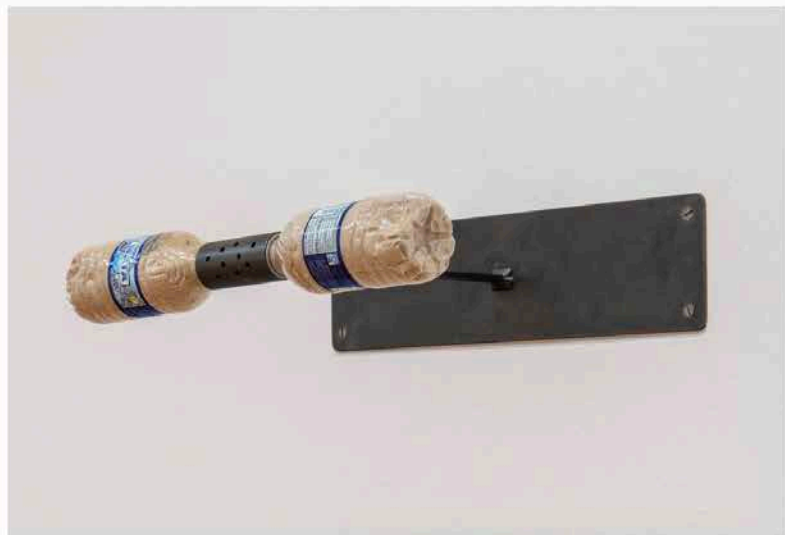


Left
'An Alterable Terrain',
2023, installation
view. Courtesy:
the artist and Tate
Britain; photograph:
Reece Straw

Below
As Wata to Wine, Wine
to Blood, Blood to Dirt,
Dirt to Sand, Sand
to Water; Wata (Blit),
2023, iron, plastic and
sand, 10 × 41 × 30 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Soft Opening,
London; photograph:
Theo Christells

The Caribbean is a fractured place in constant flux.

Rhea Dillon





generations, like how the piano is featured in *The Piano Lesson* [1987], which holds the lineage of an entire family.

RD When you mentioned those two examples, the first thing that came to mind is Richard Wagner's cycle of four operas *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*) [1869-1876], otherwise known as *The Ring Cycle*.

TNM For *Catgut – The Opera* [2021], you've written a libretto and it made me think of Toni Morrison's libretto for *Margaret Garner* [2005], an opera based on the life of a runaway slave. It was the first libretto I'd ever read by a Black woman.

I actually attended the presentation at the Academy of Music at the Kimmel Center years ago in Philadelphia. It was snowing and many couldn't make it, so I got a rush ticket. Morrison was there and it blew my mind to see her language elevated by the music and performance. It made me think of the concept of 'poethics' that you've mentioned to me before. How does that come together in your artmaking and writing practice?

RD I remember, in this early stage of understanding spirituals, seeing Georges Bizet's *Carmen* [1875] at the Royal Opera House in London with my mum. It's the only opera I've seen in person. I lost space for that in my mind and then it came back when I focused on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor – who grew up in Croydon, as did I, and was the first Black composer in the UK. That to me, sitting within the framework that I was born into – a Black working-class family – is needed when thinking about the UK.

**When you come from
an island nation, you can't
help thinking about sand,
land and movement.**

Rhea Dillon

I came across the term 'poethics' in a conversation with the poet Simone White whilst I was doing research for the libretto. She brought up Joan Retallack, who wrote the book *The Poethical Wager* [2003], in relation to my work. I was excited by this because poethics has this framework of a 'thickened' language; that's how Joan phrases it. She says it's language 'thickened with an "h"'. I liked how that could be embodied and how it made the word 'poethics' wider. I brought up class because, being a descendant of migrants, I find that there's a real possibility for Caribbean poethics to be given space. I looked at several poets, but I was taken by Jamaican-American June Jordan's poetry because I felt like she was the closest person to get into the diction of a descendant. So, I was scouring her poems to see if there were creole inflections or disturbances in her writing. I think that Kamau Brathwaite begins a lot of what could be the foundations of where I'm trying to collate a new extension that synthesizes an already existing plane. This is what I found with Barbara Ferland's poetry, where her writing was just so different from everyone else's. This is despite the fact that the school curriculum in Jamaica was the same as the UK, in that most of the poetry was quite banal and repetitive of this old English vernacular and stanza, whereas Barbara's was so *poethically* charged.

There's an ability to marry the poethical charge with a Caribbean charge, in that there have been great essays and conversations around how the Caribbean is, in its foundation state, a fractured place in constant flux. Other places say there's *something in the water*, but there's something in the spirit of those islands that has this poethical feel.

TNM On the notion of spirit, I want to talk about your work *As Wata to Wine, Wine to Blood, Blood to Dirt, Dirt to Sand, Sand to Water; Wata (Bit)* [2023]: two plastic water bottles filled with sand and joined together with a metal mouthpiece, like an hourglass but suspended horizontally. When I saw your current show 'An Alterable Terrain' at Tate Britain, it was the one work that gave me the most trouble but also the one that forced me to sit with that difficulty. I thought it was very successful, even though I didn't know what it was or what it was about. Where did you pull from historically to arrive at this final presentation?

RD I went to Ghana for the first time in 2021, where I visited the slave forts Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle. In the dungeon cells, they had these bottles of water that sat next to each other in clusters. No one was talking about them, but they were clearly there as offerings. It led me to a question: 'What is a drink of water to the dry mouth of the dead?' That stayed with me. Being from an island nation you can't *not* think about sand; you can't *not* think about land; and you can't *not* think about movement and transportation. I was thinking about sand when I was on this beach in Jamaica last year. I went away to do some intensive reading of Sylvia Wynter's writing and I bumped into a friend. She was telling me that the beach we were on had been 'stolen'. Heaps of sand had been taken away; it made international news. Then, years later, a hotel suddenly popped up on that plot of excavated sand. That was a bit of gossip in the way that gossip and news in Jamaica intertwine with politics.

Opposite page
Catgut – The Opera,
2021, performance
view. Courtesy: the
artist; photograph:
Rosie Marks

Below
*9/5 or I know how to
fall (5) and I was born
to nights (9)*, 2022,
sapele mahogany and
steel, 460 x 65 x 65 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Bold Tendencies,
London; photograph:
Deniz Guzel



Frieze, 2023

Right

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink—a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach., 2023, brass and polyester, 21 × 9 × 13 cm. All images in this spread courtesy: the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin; photograph: Joanna Wilk



For me, painting can be a time-based medium.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden



Left

Incomprehensible Sex Coming To Its Dreaded Fruition; nothing remains but Pecola & the Unyielding Earth, 2023, sapele mahogany and marigold seeds, 22 × 38 × 15 cm

Above

My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me., 2023, deadstock paper, rope and metal, 50 × 40 × 2 cm



Above
Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run, Jip runs. Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest's blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory blue eyes. Alice and Jerry blue., 2023, anti climb paint, paper and sapele mahogany, 91 x 91 x 6 cm

As Wata to Wine... shares a connection with the voiceless ancestry that I have, and this mouth that can't drink. I used the water bottles that we were given at the resort. I filled them with the same sand and I wanted them to be constricted by this mouthpiece. This mouthpiece then came to represent the mouth shackles that were used on enslaved people across Africa and the Caribbean, and subsequently in the US. This mouth bit feels like the continued constraint on the voices of postcolonial lands and nations, and how they're still stuck in that time.

The work is in communication with sand timers. Sand is a symbol of time, that's also why it comes out of the wall. It's then embodying this chaos of the language in postcolonial nation politics. When you look at it head-on, it will really fuck with the mind of anyone who enjoys straight lines, because it's slightly off. That was intentional in that it needed to be just off to create this irritation, perhaps what you were seeing as a sight line or shoreline. It then embodies this pause in the chaotic spin of time, evolving and descending.

TNM We both share an affection for Toni Morrison and you directly reference her work in object in your show at Sweetwater in Berlin, 'We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils'. It's the show I wanted to see the most but didn't get to. The exhibition focused on Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* [1970], which I read in the 11th grade – quite a daring thing to do in Greenville, South Carolina, where I was raised. The book

was eventually banned in much of the South. Could you just talk about your thinking behind that show?

RD I was raised Roman Catholic. I have my issues with it but one thing that provides a language for great feeling for me is the tome that is the Bible. I have several books that are mainly theory or nonfiction that I describe as 'Bible books' for what would be best described as my life's study. *The Bluest Eye* is the only fictional one, which, of course, can be argued is an example of poethics. It was also the first Morrison book that I read. It really affected me because it potently spoke to the feelings that I knew I had at some point engaged with in my youth – not in full, but always in time. There was something that was left unspoken to that reality that I felt compelled to give space to. I have such a deep respect for the feelings and the affectations of growing up as a dark-skin Black girl in a dark-skin-Black-girl-hating society. I got obsessed with the topography of *The Bluest Eye*. It doesn't have titles to the chapters but is split into parts spanning a year. It houses so much emotion in such a controlled framework. That's what I desire to achieve in my own works ●

Tiona Nekkia McClodden is an interdisciplinary research-based conceptual artist, filmmaker and curator.

Rhea Dillon is an artist, writer and poet. Examining and abstracting her intrigue of the 'rules of representation' as a device to undermine contemporary Western culture, Dillon seeks to continually question what constitutes as the ontology of Blackness versus the ontic.

Flash Art

THE ALWAYS ALREADY



RHEA DILLON
words by ZAKIYA MCKENZIE
photographed by ELLIOTT JEROME BROWN JR.

ART & LANGUAGE
NIKITA GALE
PRECIOUS OKOYOMON
RORY PILGRIM WITH CAROL R. KALLEND
SOIL THORNTON
WANGSHUI
ISSY WOOD

+ SEMIOFUCK EPILOGUE by ARMATURE GLOBALE
+ THE CURIST FREDDIE POWELL on GINNY ON FREDERICK, LONDON
+ CRITIC DISPATCH POSTPOSTPOST

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Flash Art, 2023

Viewing Altered Grounds

RHEA DILLON

WORDS BY
ZAKIYA MCKENZIE
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ELLIOTT JEROME BROWN JR.

Flash Art, 2023



Flash Art, 2023

RHEA DILLON BY ZAKIYA MCKENZIE

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Rhea Dillon is an artist whose work spans video, painting, sculpture, writing, live performance, and even olfaction. I first met her at the “War Inna Babylon” exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London in Summer 2021. As fate would have it, Rhea and I ran into each other a year later in Jamaica and spent meaningful time together in Trelawny. We sat down for a third time in July 2023 to talk about her artistic practice and first institutional solo exhibition, “Rhea Dillon: An Alterable Terrain” at Tate Britain.

For me, Dillon’s artwork attains beautiful aesthetic resonance as well as thoughtful reflection on deep and sometimes painful topics that are rarely explored in British and European visual art.

There are sets of words that come to the front of my mind when I encounter her work:

Glass/Fragility

Each of the artworks in “An Alterable Terrain” reference one of six Black women’s body parts — mouth, feet, hands, the reproductive system, lungs, and soul. The anchor of the exhibition is a clear acrylic glass cube titled *Placing Her Within An Alterable Terrain* (2023). I am immediately intrigued by the work and ask Dillon which body part it gives life to. She explains that it is deliberately 160 centimeters tall, the average height of women worldwide, and is about the lungs. Here Dillon honors Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah, presenting a visual consideration on the effects of air, especially in city spaces. Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah died in 2013, aged nine, from an acute asthma attack due to high levels of air pollution from the major roadway nearby her family home. “For Ella to be the first person in the UK to have air pollution officially listed as their cause of death, for it to be a young Black girl and for it to be in my own city, I was greatly affected.”

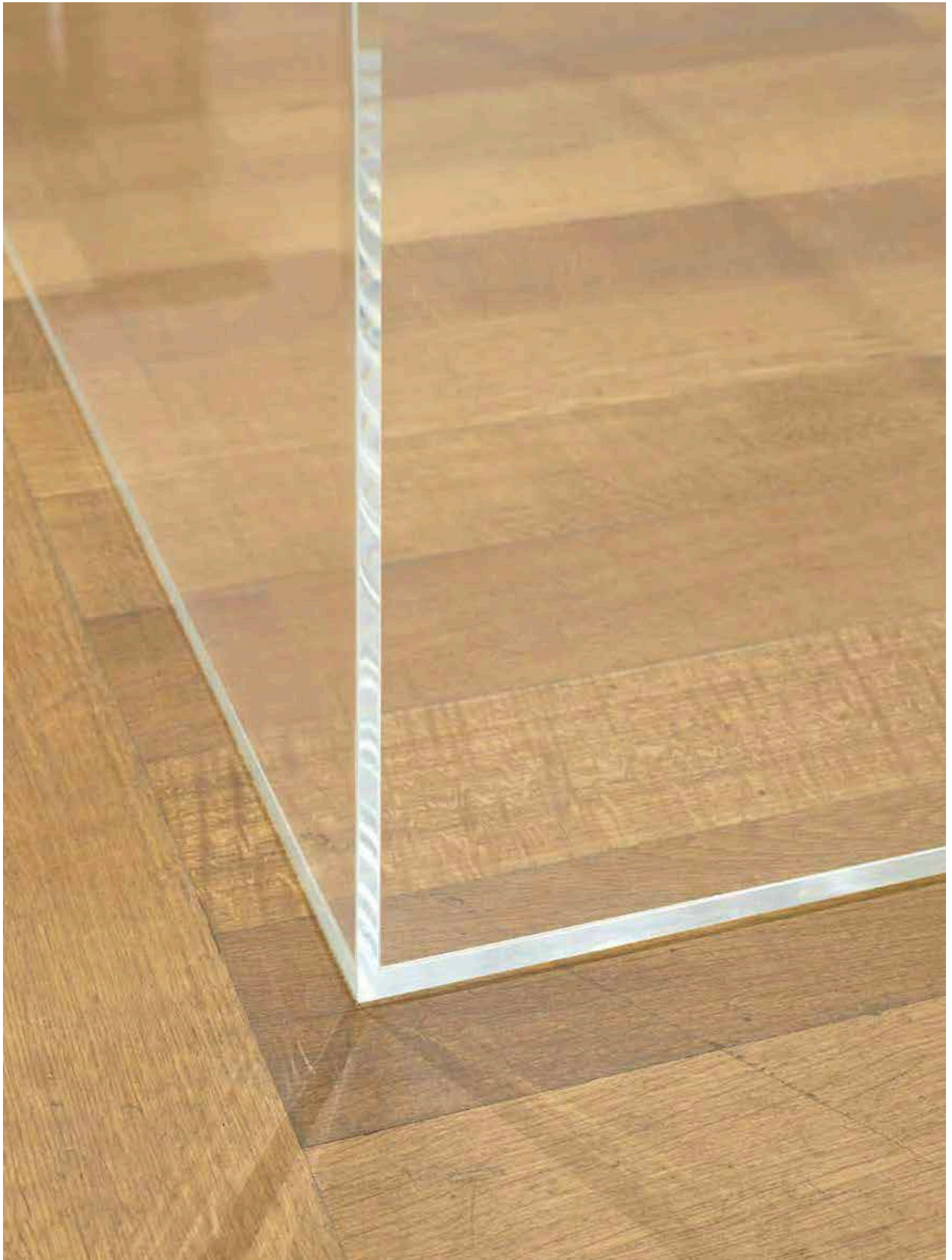
I view *Placing Her Within An Alterable Terrain* as being in conversation with my own writings on Ella Adoo-Kissi-Debrah. My short story “The Old Heads of Elder Grove Learn About Air Pollution” was published in 2019; it draws attention to the same notion that Dillon highlights in her artwork — the fragility of Black life in the built environment and what she refers to as “a visible invisibility.”

“I was thinking about what a controlled hold of air would look like,” says Dillon. *Placing Her Within An Alterable Terrain* gives site (and sight) to how we emotionally and artistically process and talk about environmental injustice and ecological crisis.



“An Alterable Terrain”. Exhibition views at Tate Britain, London, 2023. Photography by Theo Christelis. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.

Flash Art, 2023



Flash Art, 2023

RHEA DILLON BY ZAKIYA MCKENZIE

Head/Body

Flash Art 73

Scent is another invisible presence that Dillon gives body to. Her scent, *NEGR-OID* (2022), debuted in "The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)" at Soft Opening in London (2022).

NEGR-OID was a response to E! News "Fashion Police" pundit Giuliana Rancic's comment that actress Zendaya "looked like she smelled of patchouli oil and weed" at the 87th Academy Awards because of her hairstyle: faux dreadlocks. I note that though Rancic made these comments in 2015 it is a pop culture moment etched in both of our memories.

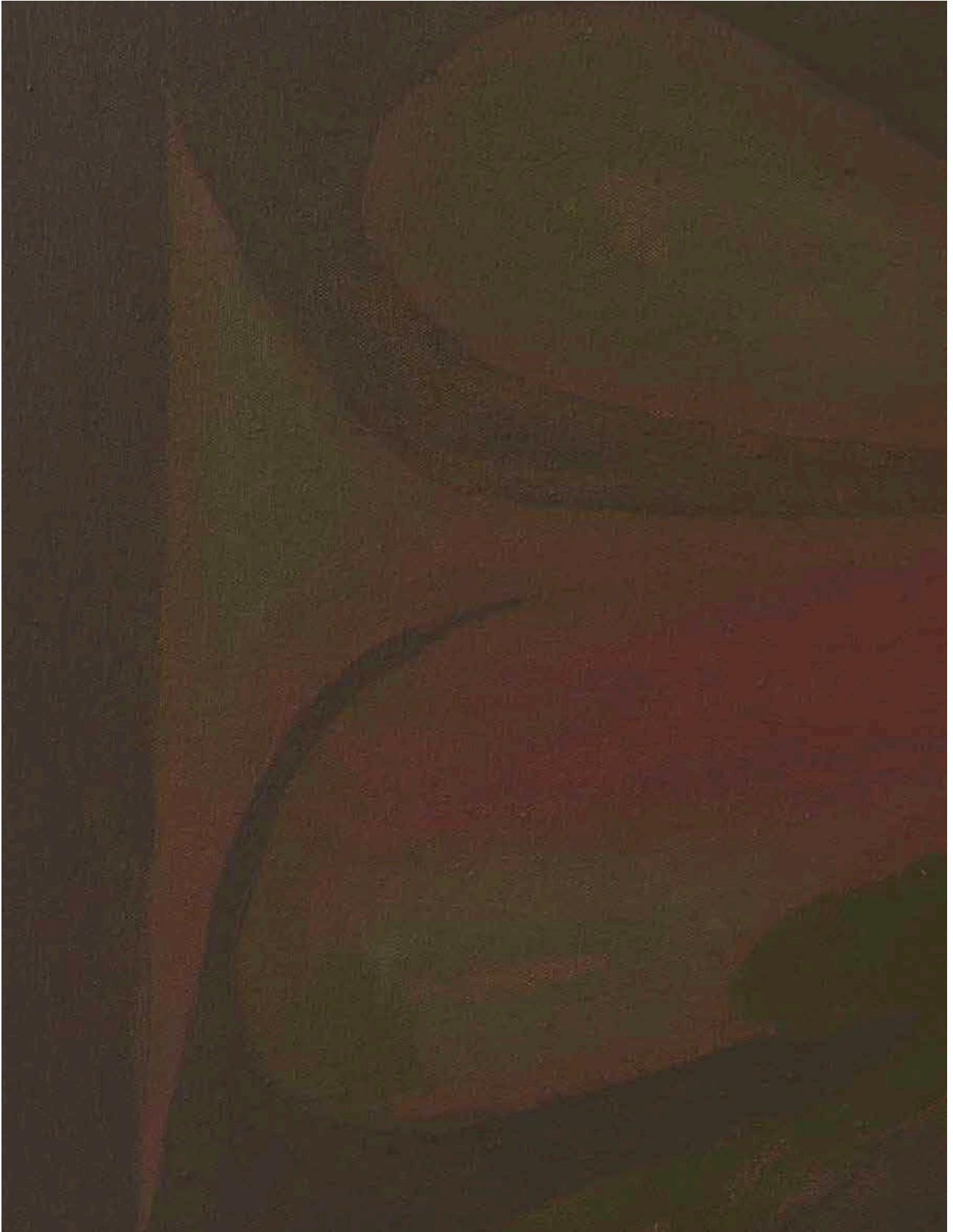
I ask what *NEGR-OID* smells like, Dillon laughs, replying, "Well, what do Black women smell like?" She pauses and answers, "It doesn't smell like any one thing in particular because Black women don't universally smell like one thing."

I haven't experienced *NEGR-OID* but therein lies the point. Dillon and Zendaya are the same age, and both operate in entertainment and art spaces that are traditionally white, wealthy, and male. Dreadlocks is a hairstyle that millions of Black women across the world wear, including myself. Dillon's foray into olfaction here unsettles me by pointing out that we live in a world where even something as intimate as the smell emanating from our bodies is fair game for mass consumption and discussion.



Placing Her Within An Alterable Terrain, 2023. Single work; detail. Acrylic glass. 160 x 160 x 160 cm. Photography by Theo Christells. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.

Flash Art, 2023



Flash Art, 2023



42 Old Way 77 2019, from b to 8, 2022. Detail. Oil on canvas. 30 x 80 cm. Photography by Theo Christells. Courtesy of the artist and Soft Opening, London.

Flash Art, 2023



Flash Art, 2023

RHEA DILLON BY ZAKIYA MCKENZIE

Oracle/Orator

Flash Art 77

"So much of my practice is about listening to what arrives around me and through me." This is how Dillon describes her residency at the Black Cultural Archives in London in 2020 that allowed her to take a deep dive into the collections of composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.

Dillon continued researching Black classical music and "Black operatics." This work led to *Catgut – The Opera*, a live performance for Serpentine Gallery's Park Nights series in the Counterspace Pavilion in 2021. *Catgut – The Opera* pays homage to the character of the orator, like those Dillon often sees protesting outside the House of Commons and the House of Lords on bus rides to and from her studio – the soapbox, the voice box, and the strings of our vocal cords come to mind for me here. Dillon's costume design for *Catgut – The Opera* was made by Caymanian-Jamaican fashion designer Jawara Alleyne. Alleyne referenced the Black woman as oracle by citing the fantastic drapery, gowns, and headdresses of performers the I-Threes and Erykah Badu.

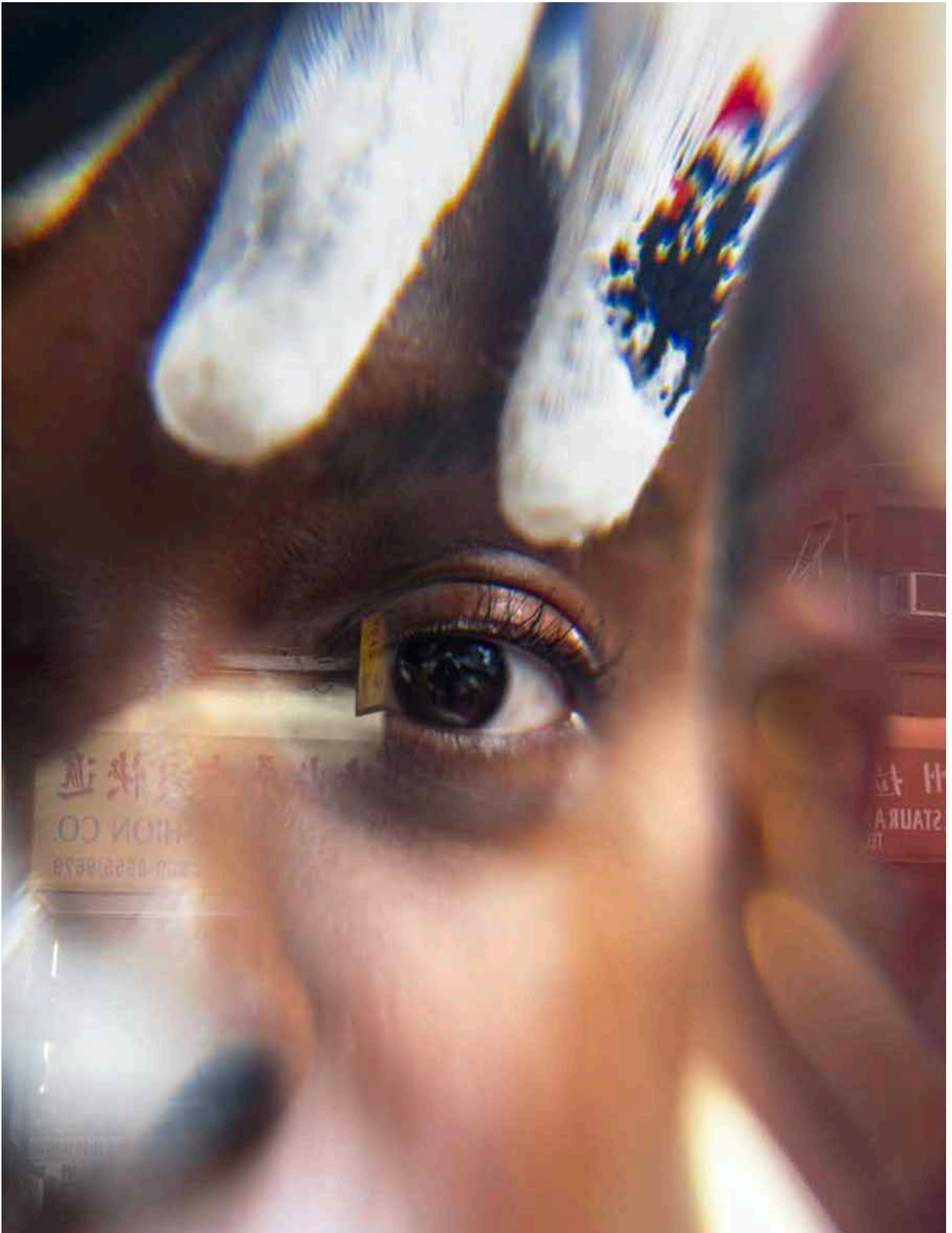
Catgut – The Opera has been described as an "anti-performance." "It's about visceral and internal pulling – a ringdown," reveals Dillon. "It's about me dismantling the class expectations of opera and that kind of storytelling that is innate to spirituals, innate to blackness."

The libretto of the opera was published as a book of the same name in June 2023 by Worms Publishing.

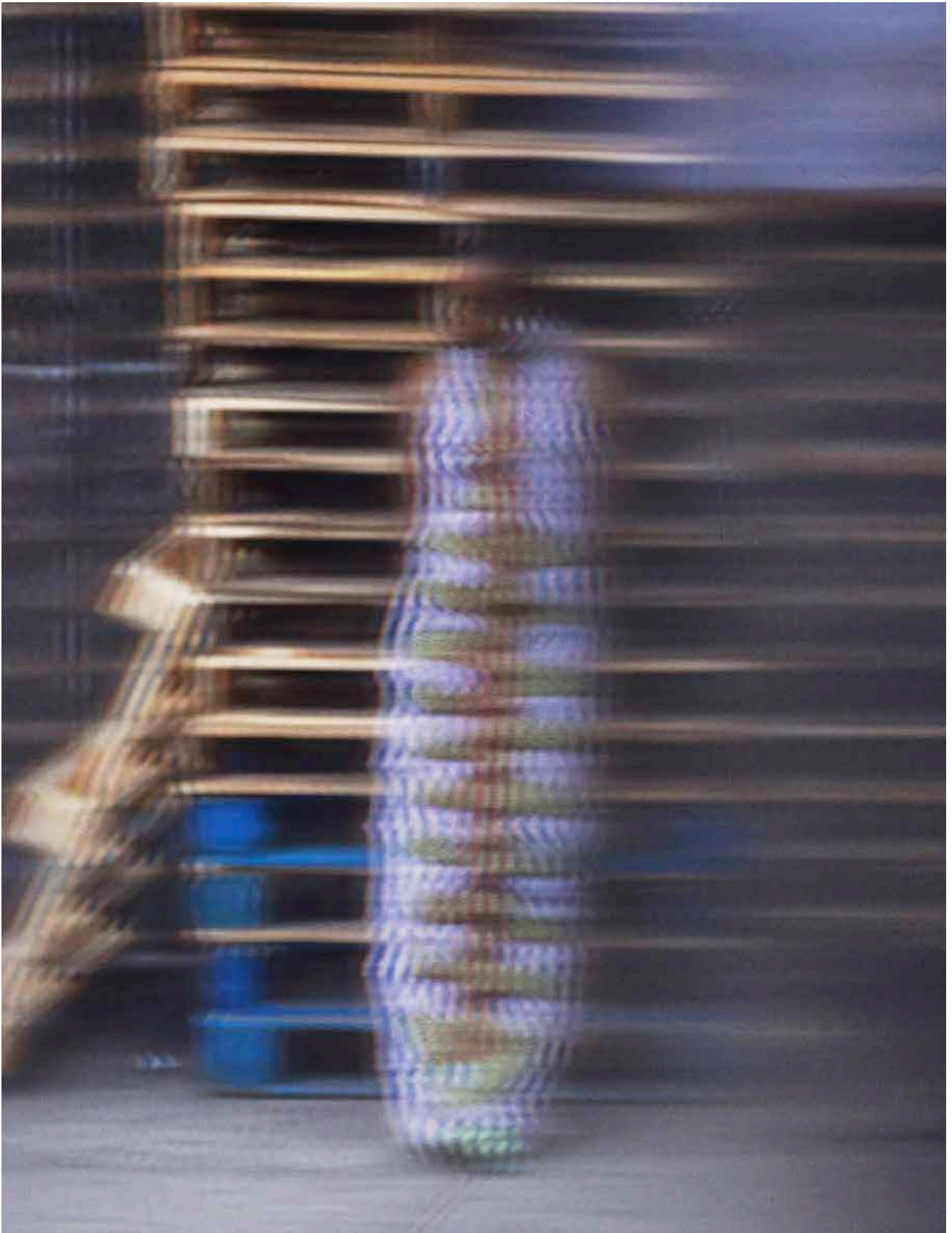


Catgut – The Opera, 2021. View of the performance at Park Nights, Serpentine Pavilion, London, 2021. Photography by Henry Jay Kamara. Courtesy of the artist.

Flash Art, 2023



Flash Art, 2023



Flash Art, 2023

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VIEWING ALTERED GROUNDS



Flash Art, 2023

RHEA DILLON BY ZAKIYA MCKENZIE

Flash Art 81

Uprooting/Mahogany

Our conversation turns to Dillon's use of sapele mahogany for several artworks in her practice. Like Dillon, I have drawn mahogany into my work to tell the story of colonialism and environmental extraction, such as in "An Elegy for Lignum Vitae" published in *The Wild Isles: An Anthology of the Best of British and Irish Nature Writing* (Head of Zeus) in 2021.

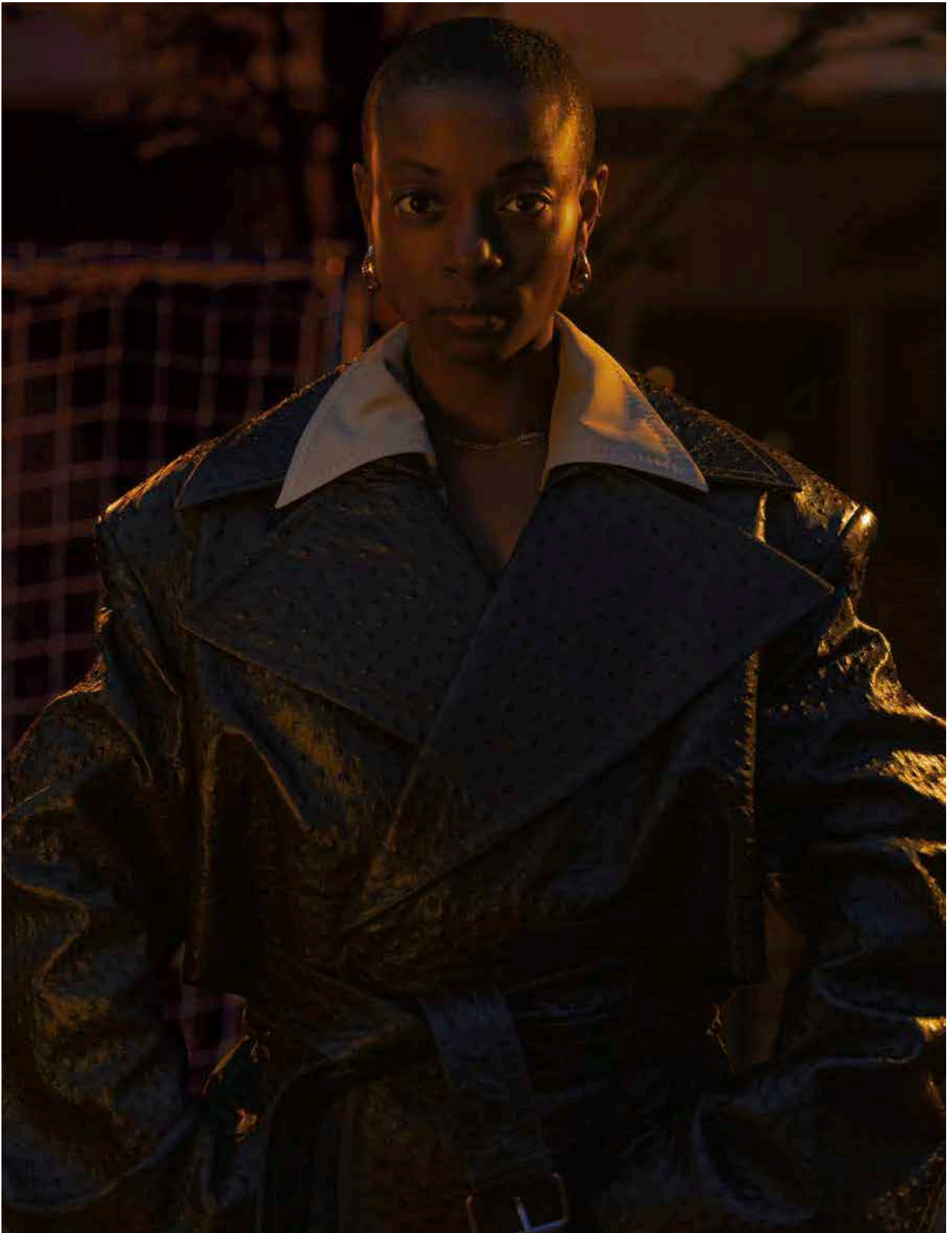
Dillon's *Incomprehensible Sex Coming To Its Dreaded Fruition; nothing remains but Pecola & the Unyielding Earth* (2023) is a small coffin-like box, made of sapele mahogany, opened to show marigold seeds. It is in reference to Toni Morrison's 1970 debut novel *The Bluest Eye*, which Dillon focused on for her solo exhibition "We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils" at Sweetwater, Berlin (2023). The protagonist, Pecola, is raped by her father and becomes pregnant, the child is born prematurely and dies. The artwork is thus reminiscent of the reproductive organs of Black women and the souls of Black babies (plus those of abused mothers). Dillon mentions that her continued choice of sapele mahogany is to bring questions of indigeneity and identity into her work. Sapele originates in West Africa and is in the same family of plants as genuine mahogany. In the late nineteenth century, sapele mahogany came to replace genuine mahogany in commercial use after the latter was greatly deforested in the Americas (its natural habitat) to feed European and North American timber markets. In Dillon's artwork, mahogany's use in slave ships further signals the upheaval of Europe's slave trade of both people and nature.

"The wood was brought to the Caribbean. Bodies were brought to the Caribbean, and the mahogany carried them here on ships. Everyone and everything was uprooted and affected."



Incomprehensible Sex Coming To Its Dreaded Fruition; nothing remains but Pecola & the Unyielding Earth, 2023. Single work; detail. Sapele mahogany and marigold seeds. 22.5 x 38 x 19 cm. Photography by Joanna Wilk. Courtesy the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin.

Flash Art, 2023



I am drawn to another artwork in her Tate exhibition, *As Wata to Wine, Wine to Blood, Blood to Dirt, Dirt to Sand, Sand to Water; Wata (Bit)* (2023), a sculpture made from iron, plastic, and sand.

"Sand is imbued with so much because it's formed over deep time," explains Dillon. "It makes me think of who stood here before, and what happened before that remains in the sand."

We are again in agreement in our artistic conception of ground and its relationship to time. Like sand, my pamphlet, *Testimonies on the History of Jamaica Volume 1* (Rough Trade Books), shows deep time compressed into a single point to call forward various Jamaican voices across four centuries of our past. *As Wata to Wine, Wine to Blood, Blood to Dirt, Dirt to Sand, Sand to Water; Wata (Bit)* presents a world in chaos; I think of it as the state of flux that caused the council to be convened for testimonies at the beginning of my story.

The mouths of the two water bottles in *As Wata to Wine, Wine to Blood, Blood to Dirt, Dirt to Sand, Sand to Water; Wata (Bit)* are held together by an iron rod, evocative of an iron bit used to gag enslaved people.

When Dillon visited Elmina and Cape Coast Castle in Ghana in 2021, she was struck by the number of water bottles left as offerings to the spirits of the captives brought to the coast to be shoved onto slave ships.

But, "What is a drink of water to the dry mouth of the dead?" she thought.

There is, however, another location and layer of meaning to this artwork. I am surprised to hear that this piece was further conceptualized from our chance meeting at a resort in Jamaica in 2022. It hadn't occurred to me until I arrived there, but the site we were on was of the infamous "stolen beach" saga where approximately five hundred truckloads of sand were removed from a stretch of beach in Coral Springs, Trelawny, in the summer of 2008. The sand has never been found and no one has ever been held accountable. The sand in Dillon's artwork was collected in 2022 during our stay. She collected it in the plastic "Wata" bottles, now part of the final work, as she proceeded to learn more about the incident.

This work, responding to unmentionable corruption in one place and voicelessness and the lack of breath in another, serves as an inquiry into the notion of caging the tongue and being unable to speak.

With her first institutional solo exhibition in Tate Britain's "Art Now" series on view until January 1, 2024, and an upcoming catalogue to accompany the display (edited by herself and featuring an introduction by geography professor Pat Noxolo), Dillon presents a captivating body of work commenting on Black women, the human body, psychoanalysis, the environment, the Caribbean, and colonial history.

Artist: Rhea Dillon
Photographer: Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.
Editor-in-Chief: Gea Politi
Art Direction: Alessio Avventuroso
Photographer Assistants: Alberto Vargas and Alex McDowell
Production: Flash Art Studios
Production Assistant: Vittoria Martinotti
Location: New York

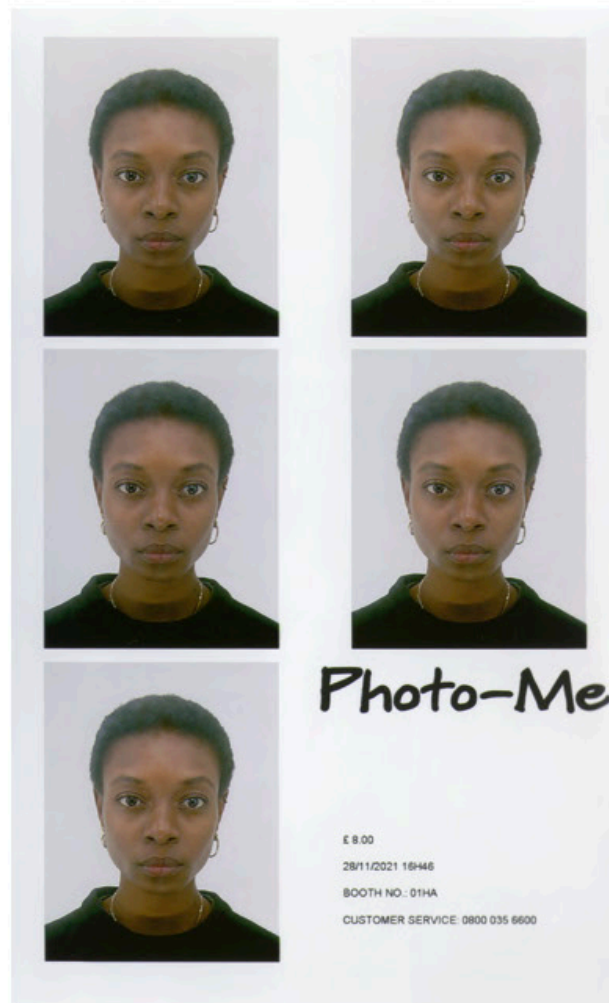
Clothes and accessories: Bottega Veneta

Rhea Dillon (1996, London) lives and works in London. Dillon is an artist, writer, and poet who works across a range of mediums including sculpture, painting, video and olfaction. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Sweetwater*, Berlin; *Soft Opening*, London; *V.O. Curations*, London; and *Peak Gallery*, London. The artist's work has been exhibited in group exhibitions at Gladstone Gallery, New York; *Park Nights*, Serpentine Pavilion, London; and *Almine Rech*, London. Dillon's solo exhibition "Rhea Dillon: An Alterable Terrain" is currently on view at Tate Britain, London, through January 1, 2024.

Zakiya McKenzie is a writer and PhD candidate in English based in Bristol. In 2019, she was writer-in-residence for Forestry England. In 2021, she was artist-in-residence at Studio Voltaire, London, ending her time with an audio/visual exhibition based on her writing. McKenzie's essays have appeared in a number of anthologies including: *Haunting Ashton Court: A Creative Handbook for Collective History-Making* (2023), *Radical Landscapes: Art, Identity and Activism* (Tate, 2022), *Reading the Forest: A Forest of Dean Anthology* (Douglas McLean Publishing, 2022), *Women on Nature: An Anthology of Women's Writing about the Natural World in the East Atlantic Archipelago* (Unbound, 2021), *Gifts of Gravity and Light: A Nature Almanac for the 21st Century* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2021), and *The Wild Isles: An Anthology of the Best of British & Irish Nature Writing* (Head of Zeus, 2021). Her 2021 Rough Trade Books historical fiction pamphlet *Testimonies on the History of Jamaica Vol. 1* explores the natural and social history of Jamaica in 1655 — the year Britain took the colony from Spain.

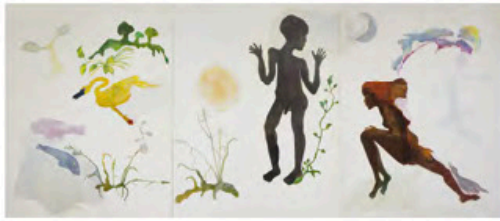
Artist's Favorites

By Rhea Dillon



This was meant to be a list of "artist's artists" who have not been revered enough, perhaps by a masses, stated the magazine's prompt. This list, however, is no attempt at that. Instead, it consists of people who first came to mind, that I like to carry with me in my mind. Some lived as artists. Some did not. Regardless, they hold in their legacies tales of their own wielding, which have everything to do with how to be stretched and held by beauty, not necessarily with what someone should look at.

© Suzanne Jackson. Courtesy: the artist and Orrius Projects, New York. Photo: Tim Doyon

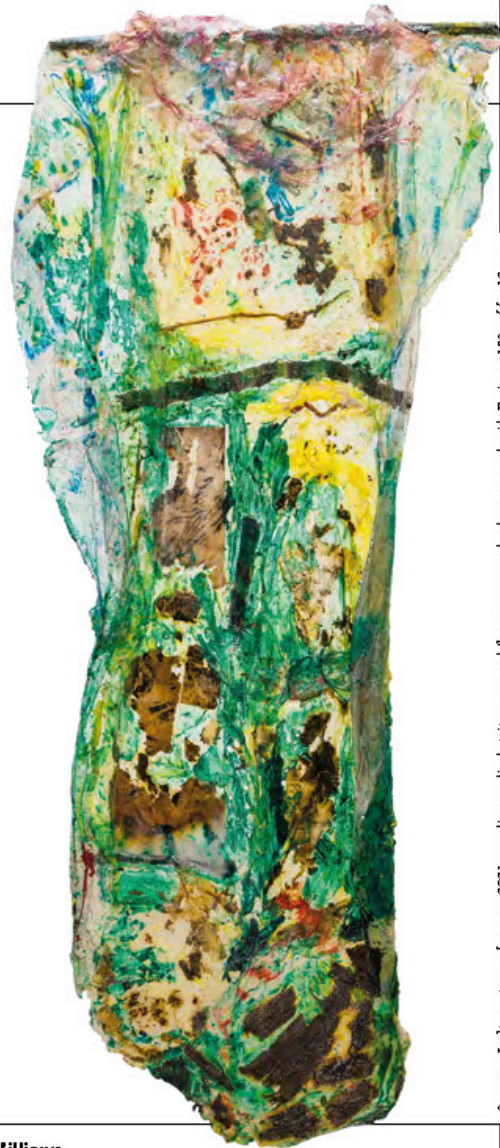


Suzanne Jackson

From one Aquarius to another, I knew I was in the presence of a journey that begins again and again with every gaze. That's how Suzanne Jackson's suspended acrylic and mixed media works affect both my vision and thinking. Eyes feel like they are working on the piece with her – at both a loss and a control. I want to lose myself in Jackson's suspended works, which I'm grateful are consistently installed to be viewable from 360 degrees. Then, there's her acrylic-on-canvas paintings: The way she affects the paint, into something dreamy and almost watercolor-like, leads me down Toni Morrison-esque storytelling. The washes feel like words of nuance only Jackson and a single viewer at a time can understand. An intimacy is present here, yet the spaces in the paintings allow the viewer to fill or fit oneself into the gaps. You can become part of her myths. I see so much connection to myth, fables, and folktales in these works that are treated as subtleties by their single-word/phrase titles. *Sundown* (1974), *Talk* (1976), and *Triplicial Communications* (1969) sound like the beginnings of folktales that a black diaspora knows best how to tell.

Born 1944 in St. Louis, lives in Savannah, Georgia.

In a Black Man's Garden, 1973, acrylic and graphite on gessoed canvas, triptych, 273.5 x 211 x 4 cm each



Suzanne Jackson, *pressed greens*, 2021, acrylic, acrylic detritus, pressed flowers, paper, burlap, woven band, D-rings, 139 x 66 x 12 cm
Courtesy: the artist and The Moderna Institute / Toby Wheeler Ltd., Glasgow. Photo: Patrick Jameson

Courtesy: Jeanine Johnson Gallery, New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles



Aubrey Williams

Born in the former British Guiana, Aubrey Williams is someone I look to for depth in color. Being heavily influenced by pre-Colombian art – although many abstract expressionists have used an array of bright tones of late – I'm taken by Williams's muteness. The dullness of his palette has a swallowing effect, due to the texture and energy he produces through layering that I love to be struck by. I was first swept up by him in the National Gallery of Jamaica's collection in 2018, and in the rehang at Tate Britain, a whole room has been dedicated to his paintings. This immersive way of reading the work has further cemented him as not only one of my favorite artists, but as someone whose work I would love to be read by every day.

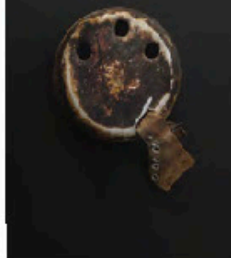
Born 1926 in Georgetown, Guyana, died 1990 in London.

Aubrey Williams, *Chakravali IV*, 1975, oil on canvas, 60 x 105 cm

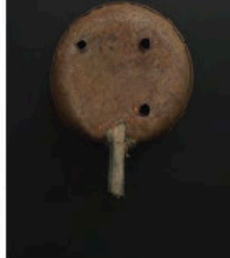
Hawkins Bolden, *Untitled*, ca. 1986–90, metal, rubber and wire, 48 x 25 x 7.5 cm



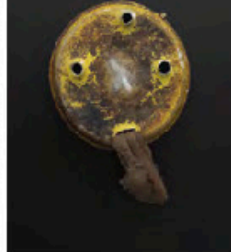
Untitled, ca. 1986–90, metal, leather and wire, 28 x 20 x 10 cm



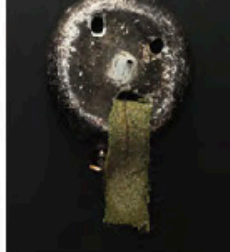
Untitled, ca. 1986–90, metal, rubber and wire, 28 x 24 x 13 cm



Untitled, c. 1986–1990, metal, rubber and wire, 26.5 x 25 x 7.5 cm



Untitled, c. 1986–1990, metal, carpet and wire, 38 x 24 x 5 cm



Hawkins Bolden

Seriality as both self-process and output became a question of study for me a couple summers ago. Hawkins Bolden proved a path worth following and extended my affinity for assemblage. Bolden was just seven years old when a baseball accident involving his twin brother left him blind and with lasting effects on his brain, including seizures. In his later life, he made work from discarded materials sourced, using only his sense of touch, from fields and alleyways near his home. The results were a number of incredible works, like the totemic "scarerows" and masklike objects that made up the 2020 exhibition "Tongues" at Robert Heald Gallery in Wellington, New Zealand. All of his works are untitled, which suggests, borrowing from Jacques Rancière, "no need for a title – the photograph (sic) itself is sufficiently eloquent on the subject." This is the only case where I accept "Untitled" as a title or non-title. I think Bolden's work is a great example of the fact that, where senses like language and sight fall short, intrigue and desire can still exist.

Born 1914 in Memphis, died 2005 in Memphis.



View of "Dorothea Zuckertine," Dia Beacon, Beacon, New York, 2018–22

© Dorothea Zuckertine/Artists Alliance Society (AAS), New York. Courtesy: Dia Art Foundation, New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York

Courtesy Robert Heald Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand

Dorothea Rockburne

I discovered Dorothea Rockburne in one of my favorite art spaces: Dia Beacon. To be among her work is to be confronted by questions of study and time. She puts to the test her medium of choice: paper. I think of paper as a most tender material, but Rockburne shatters that notion with works that peel off, bifurcate, and often fold against the walls. I've been returning to Deleuze's fold theory in my practice, which holds that the marginalized individual can encounter an alternate self through the fold. It's an idea that I see with an affinity in Rockburne, whose folds make space for the margin to be seen in its minimal glory. A fold for a margin. A margin for a fold. I bend to her practice when I am lucky enough to witness it, for it truly demands a presence of sight/site, unlike versions of digital or printed life. I can't wait to study a single medium for as long as she has – and I only hope to make something as beautiful.

Born 1982 in Montreal, lives in New York

Without Shoes I Must Run...

poems by
Barbara Ferland



Barbara Ferland

While I was in the poetry archives at the National Library of Jamaica, Barbara Ferland was one of two women poets that I found whose work was published before Jamaica became independent in 1962 (the other was the revered dub poet Louise "Miss Lou" Bennett-Coverley). Ferland's less widely claimed style, which I would call "Caribbean poetics," was ahead of its time. While researching and working through the final work for my current exhibition, "An Alterable Terrain" (Art Now, Tate Britain), I was feeling deeply connected to calabashes, which Barbara mentioned in the poem "At the University" (1960), and how reminiscent of the womb they are. During my time in Kingston, I was reading from a series of anthologies of Caribbean poetry, and hers proved to be the only one that stood out for me. Then, when I was back in my studio in London, I realized the correlation whilst listening to my friend ekrl's song "Will the Feelings Leave" (2020); it felt like fate aligning, and I cried in deep relief, recognizing that my innate sense of following where my energy leads had, yet again, proved to be the best thing for me.

Born 1919 in Spanish Town, Jamaica, died in England (date unknown).

RHEA DILLON

(*1996, London) is an artist, writer, and poet based in London. Shrivying and abstracting her hair type of the "rules of representation" as a device to undermine contemporary Western culture, Dillon probes what constitutes the ontology of Blackness within the white. Recent solo shows took place at Tate Britain, London; Sweetwater, Berlin (both 2023); Soft Opening, London (2022). Recent group shows include "Real Corporate," Gladstone Gallery, New York (2023); "Caught – The Open," Park Nights, Serpentine Pavilion, London (2021).

© Dorothea Rockburne/Artists Alliance Society (AAS), New York. Courtesy: Dia Art Foundation, New York. Photo: Bill Jacobson Studio, New York

ART NOW AT TATE BRITAIN

Rhea Dillon talks to fellow artist *Anthea Hamilton* about the resonances and meanings of materials, colonial histories, and her desire to be at play with an audience

An Alterable Terrain

RHEA DILLON IN CONVERSATION
WITH ANTHEA HAMILTON

ANTHEA HAMILTON *In short, what would you like to do with this exhibition?*

RHEA DILLON The exhibition is my most direct engagement with black women's geographies and my viewpoint within the Black British diaspora. There is this play within the title, *An Alterable Terrain*, where I am trying to give location's reins to a black woman, from her body, and with her own hold on her visibility/invisibility.

AH *We're in your studio, on the 18th of April, surrounded by some of the works that will be included in the show. How will these constituent elements come together?*

RD I wanted to think about the framework of the/a black woman's body. I asked a friend, a lover, my mother and a 'brother' two questions: 'What would you say the key parts of a black woman's body are?' and, secondly, 'What would you say the key parts of a woman's body are?' These questions had to be asked in that order. Confronting the subconscious is an important part of my research.

So I'm thinking about perception, and how curation could be described as 'architecture meets artworks'. These plates, for example, will be suspended from the wall, allowing light to shine through them, to convey the textural quality of the works. They almost look bodily in a way. They're made from molasses mixed with resin, in differing quantities. The second part of this work is a series of cut-crystal plates made from soap, which is scented from an ongoing sweat project I'm working on. These are positioned in four stacks on a low plinth. Four, because each of the soap stacks represents a number from the year of Jamaica's independence: 1, 9, 6, 2.

The plates on the wall will be in conversation with the plate stacks below them. I see the neat meeting of the low plinth that the plates will sit on with the wall as a representation of Deleuze's fold theory. During the act of folding, Deleuze articulated that the marginalised individual has the ability to encounter an alternate self that is 'different ... from the identity imposed by external, marginalising forces'. The fold could be like looking into a black hole. What is the future and what could it look like? Could the fold be a perceptive analysis of the question: when is a point of folding – or even leaning – able to be self-governed by the black woman?

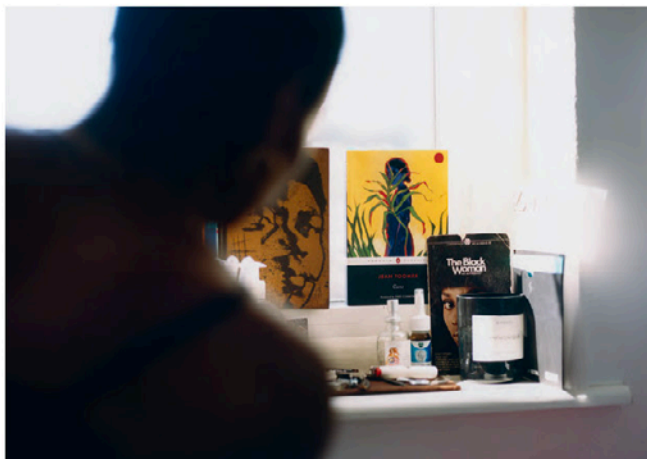
AH *There's an exhausted lean, there's a posturing lean... What type of leaning are you thinking about?*

RD I feel that in all acts of leaning there are points of rest, and that's my main desire. There is a lean that is also a rest with non-desirous consequences; like the biblical leaning on the cross, or a leaning on stocks as public punishment. The stocks and cross both make a

Tate Etc, 2023



Tate Etc, 2023



Rhea Dillon in her studio in London, photographed by Sirui Ma, April 2023

point of contact with their 'support' where the subject is leaning off it under duress.

AIH *I like the idea of the point of contact. I'm interested in how your work physically touches the institution – this idea of Tate being 'concrete' or 'solid' and the works being edited, even translucent in some cases. There's this kind of contrast between the total object and the partial.*

RD Absolutely. I like to think of it as a process of affecting, and imbuing. My artworks are sometimes described as found-object sculpture, but they're sourced objects; there's a didactic means as to why I've chosen a thing. With the calabashes, I sourced them through another artist friend whilst I was in Jamaica conducting research. They came from her family's land.

AIH *For me, as well as the source of the objects, it seems to be about their presentation, and an aesthetic lineage – why your grandmother would have this particular curtain, for example. It's quite specific, right?*

RD Obviously, with the net curtain in *Flagging Visions of Periphery* and the cut-crystal plates in the cabinet in *A Caribbean Ossuary* (which joined Tate's collection last year), there's a deep desire carried forwards from my grandma and other relatives to give a presentation. Perhaps I would be doing a disservice to the reality of having lived with my grandma multiple times throughout my life – seeing her care for the presentation and beauty of objects – if I was to just collect or 're-frame' them.

AIH *I think that's why I'm stuck on certain objects. Because they're familiar to me, in quite a particular way, and I feel close to them. I understand the struggles of how they came to be and I identify with them, which is quite a strange sensation, because they have both a warmth and a coldness.*

RD What you're saying is exactly the experience that I share, that we all share. That's why with *A Caribbean Ossuary*, there are broken pieces of cut-crystal glass: it's about receiving the object and then repositioning it from your perspective.

AIH *There's a potency in these objects. What roles do geography, theory and mythology play in the exhibition?*

RD I always think about a birthing. How one rebirths. How we give birth. The support in the labour, the labour in the support. I think about what the academic Katherine McKittrick expressed through M. NourbeSe Philip's poetry of how a geographic story could be produced 'from the last place they thought of, from the "place in between" the legs: the seemingly silenced and expendable black feminine body/parts and selves'.

bell hooks talks about how important black women were to the slave trade because they were the ones who could keep making the slaves. The production line. It gets stated that the black man had the world on his back, but Atlas would actually be a black woman in that respect. Holding this world, both in the sense of how the Capitalocene started through that birthing and through the slave trade, but also how the cleaning of society is leant on the backs of black and brown women today.

AIH *How are you hoping your show will be received by visitors to Tate Britain?*

RD Good art for me is art that belongs in the conversation. So, art that produces questions; whether that's questions to your kin, or to yourself. It's like these molasses plates here: a strictly 'good' one for me is just one that can hold itself – structurally, but also one that meets the desire for questioning. Which one looks the most interesting? What is that? And why is that? I think those are the most fundamental questions that anyone can ask. I have no desire to educate an audience, but I have a desire to be at play with them, and to extend my shared questions with them. That is always what I feel most excited by.

AIH *That's why I'm excited about your body of work being in that building. There's a stillness to it, but I see it talking: not only to bodies, but also to the stone of the building, or to the light in the room. There's a monumentality to it even within its physical lightness. There's a great gravity to what you're doing; I always feel like I'm sinking into something when I see your work.*

Art Now: Rhea Dillon: *An Alterable Terrain*, Tate Britain, until 1 January 2024. Curated by Daniella Rose King, Adjunct Curator, Caribbean Diasporic Art, Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational. Art Now is supported by the Art Now Supporters Circle and Tate Americas Foundation.

Rhea Dillon and Anthea Hamilton are artists who both live in London.

Tate Etc, 2023



Spike, 2023

By Isabella Zamboni

6 May 2023

Gallery Weekend Berlin, Berlin

Gallery Weekend Berlin 2023

**Rhea Dillon, "We looked for eyes creased with concern, but
saw only veils"**

26 Apr – 10 Jun 2023

Sweetwater

How much do credos bewitch? If you get the blondest hair, people will love you. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) hijacks *Dick and Jane*, a mid-century book series with which US schoolboys and girls learned how to read, how houses are made, how red is the door, how mother, father, Dick, and Jane smile, how pretty they are, how all four are white and have blonde hair – unlike Morrison's little protagonist, Pecola, who is black, has brown eyes, and feels ugly.

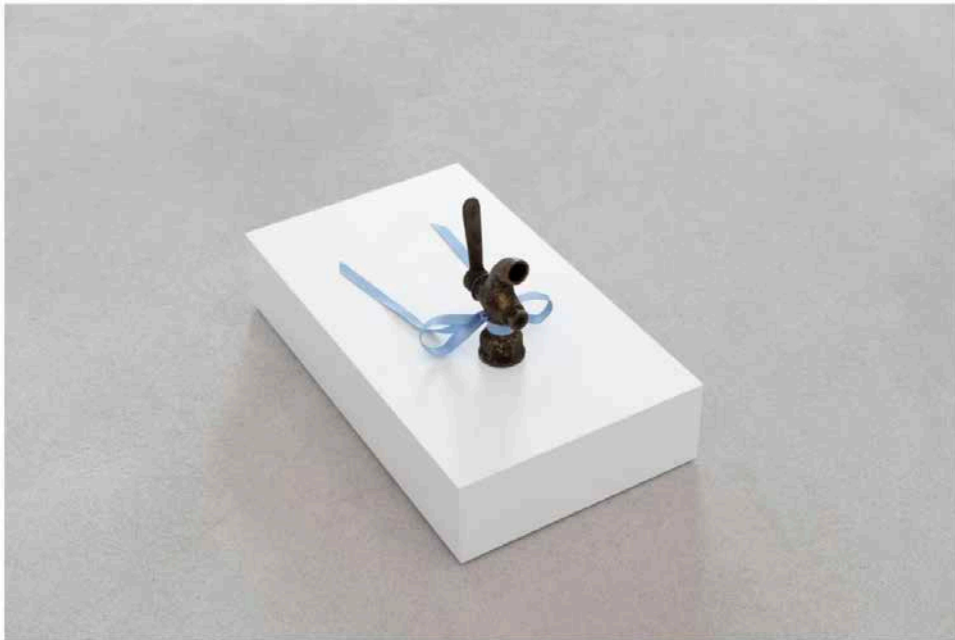
Rhea Dillon's (*1996) show at Sweetwater translates narrative ingredients from the novel into sculptures. On the wall left of the entry, copies of a *Dick and Jane* book are inset in frames made from mahogany – a wood indigenous to West Africa used to build slave ships – and coated in black with never-drying, anti-climb paint, except for cutouts that expose a drawn, blue eye and the plea "See me, Mother, see me!"

Pecola loves chewing Mary Jane candies and drinking milk from a Shirley Temple-emblazoned glass, white girls smiling from their containers, blonde hair in gentle disarray. At Sweetwater, that specific blue glass is half filled with Mary Janes that Dillon herself has chewed and spat out, displaying the disgust underneath the desire for a sweet life. "There can't be anyone," writes Morrison, "I am sure, who doesn't know what it feels like to be disliked."

Spike, 2023



View of Rhea Dillon, "We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils." Courtesy: the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin. Photo: Joanna Wilk



Rhea Dillon, *She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink—a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach*, 2023, brass and polyester, 21 × 9 × 12.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin. Photo: Joanna Wilk

CULTURE › EXHIBITIONS

The best free exhibitions in London – get your culture fix and keep your money for coffee

Want to have a fun day out but also save those pennies? These free London art exhibitions are perfect

By [Elizabeth Gregory](#) [Nick Clark](#)

Spring is officially here and [London](#) is, as ever, absolutely packed with things to do – whether that's [exhibitions](#), people, events and music.

But of course, it can all get a bit pricey. So if you want to have a great weekend seeing some of London's best [culture](#), but also want to save a few quid, look no further than this guide to the best art shows to see in the city, which are all absolutely free.

Rhea Dillon: An Alterable Terrain



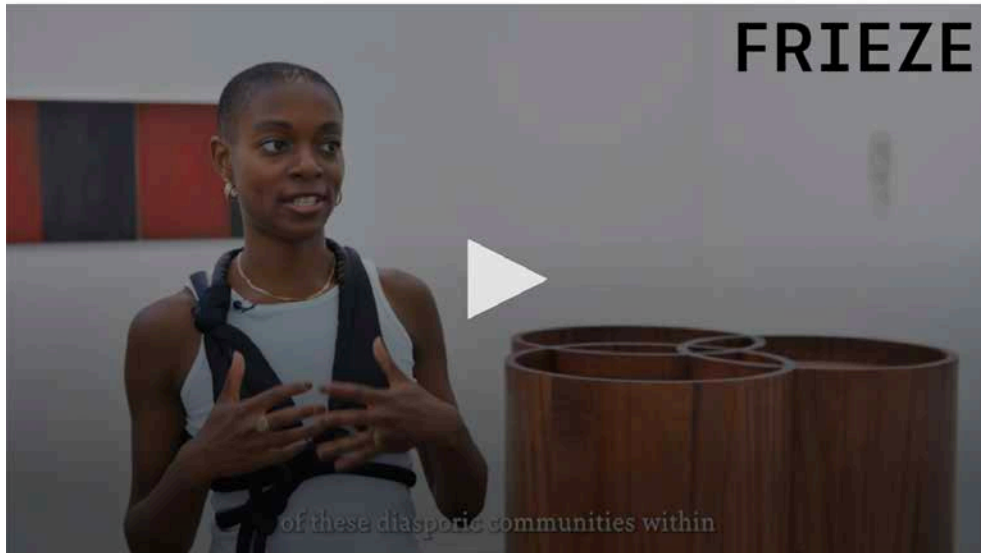
An Unholy Trinity (the) Imaginary, Symbolic and Real, 2022. / Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photography: Theo Christells

Art Now is Tate Britain's long-running exhibition series spotlighting rising stars in the art scene; this time, it's Rhea Dillon's turn to shine. The interdisciplinary artist and Central Saint Martins alum explores British and Caribbean identities using new and old sculptures which are being presented as "a conceptual fragmentation of a Black woman's body".

Tate Britain, to January 1, 2024; [tate.org.uk](https://www.tate.org.uk)

Rhea Dillon: From Landing to Arrival

We talk to the artist, who is showing in the *Focus* section at Frieze London 2022, about her works that deal with the experiences of the Caribbean diaspora



In *From Landing to Arrival*, a project specifically conceived for Frieze London 2022, artist Rhea Dillon (b. 1996, London, UK) re-considers the significance of — and difference between — the concepts of arrival and landing for the Caribbean diaspora. For Dillon, those who were moved by the triangular slave trade *landed* in the Caribbean or *landed* in the Americas, but did not choose to *arrive*. Similarly, those who were invited by the Queen to rebuild the UK post-WW2 were misled in their expectations of a country that would accept them with open arms. They thought they were *arriving*, but *landed* instead. By contrast, the artist, part of the second generation of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK now feels able to *arrive* almost anywhere.



Frieze, 2022



Rhea Dillon, *Sole Responsibility: Aged 12, but above*, 2022.
Foot 1: 24.7 × 10.3 × 1.6 cm, Foot 2: 26 × 10.5 × 1.2 cm.
Cut crystal.
Courtesy the artist and Soft Opening, London Photography: Theo Christelis

In this video, Dillon tells us about her work *Sole Responsibility: Aged 12, but above*, 2022, a wall-based sculpture that recreates the soles of the feet of Dillon's grandmother and uncle in cut glass. In 1971, a new Immigration Act legitimised the notion that Black people were second-class citizens. This was followed by a series of immigration rules, which although went almost unnoticed by the media at the time, severely affected Black communities. One such regulation, known as the Sole Responsibility rule, made it particularly difficult for Black women to bring their children to the UK if they were a single parent. Always installed on walls facing each other, like mother and child, these works offer two parts of one whole that remain perpetually separated and roots the presentation in Dillon's personal history.

Spike, 2022

TO HOLD TRUTH ON YOUR TONGUE OR IN YOUR HAND: AN INTERVIEW WITH RHEA DILLON

by Dara Jochum



Rhea Dillon, *A Caribbean Ossuary*, 2022, wooden cabinet and cut crystal, 42 x 208 x 161.5 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photo: Theo Christelis

In her pursuit to excavate the roots of a diasporic Blackness, the British-Jamaican artist and poet Rhea Dillon traces her own ancestral memory through language and domestic objects. After her show “The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)” closed at Soft Opening in London, Dillon spoke to Dara Jochum about Caribbean identity, the myth-building qualities of poetry, and her love for the London bus.

Dara Jochum: What are you reading at the moment?

Rhea Dillon: I'm attempting to return to Robin Coste Lewis' *Voyage of the Sable Venus*, which was introduced to me by a friend and became a really important book to me. The first half is a collection of poems, and the second half is a kind of rumination through the archive. I think I've not even necessarily been desiring to speak directly to archiving, but the archive has been coming to me a lot recently. I'm also reading *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* by Saidiya Hartman. Her critical fabulation is about basing the Self in the archive and then fantasizing from there: archival transposition, the elaboration and augmentation of statements, the intensification of silence, the embrace of opacity.

Does Coste Lewis work the archive into her poems as well?

Yes! Coste Lewis goes through this journey of attempting to find the Self in history, or the Self in an archive, like Hartman. Coste Lewis went on multiple trips to find records of Black women in paintings, in museums, in all these different archives, and she finds that these

Spike, 2022

Black women are often not described in the title of the work at all. Or, if they are, it's like "slave girl" or "maid." She pulls together all these different terms of objecthood for black women across a seventy-nine-page long poem. The whole project is about being able to use those titles and work poetry from them. Fragments used to create a whole.

**I'M SEEKING OUT OTHER PEOPLE'S
IDEAS, OTHER PEOPLE'S MYTHS,
THAT HELP ME EXPLAIN THE
EXPERIENCE THAT I AM LIVING IN
OR THE EXPERIENCE THAT I WOULD
LIKE TO LIVE IN.**

You lay emphasis on engaging with writers and theorists in your practice. What's your relation to these written documents as a visual artist who is also a writer?

Theory in itself is myth. People are constantly building language to understand the frameworks in which we exist, so I see that as just what I am innately doing. I'm seeking out other people's ideas, other people's myths, that help me explain the experience that I am living in or the experience that I would like to live in. I feel that's where these extensions of language towards fabulation come in: as mythbuilding. Artists are also mythbuilders I believe. Or myth players - a jazz player methodology perhaps.

I've always been a reader, I've always been a keen observer and these things come from the same place. There is a lot of observation and practice through language and I think if you create and expand time for yourself to think through things there is nothing more powerful for that than poetry and theory. That's where a lot of my language building comes from and what I care to nurture.



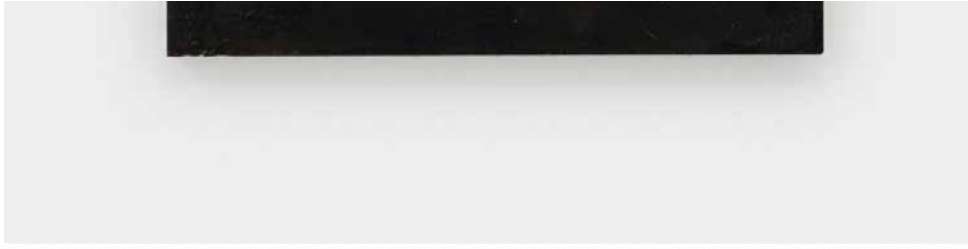
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Rhea Dillon, *Golgotha*, 2020, thread on Barbie blanket mounted on rusted steel cross, 196 x 120 x 30 cm, London. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photo: Dijby Kebe



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Rhea Dillon, *Cellar Door (A Litany)*, 2020, anti climb paint, oil and newsprint on wood, 86 × 51.5 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London

Last time we spoke I remember how you were talking about the tellers and the expanders.

Yes, there are the tellers. These people who are changing the course of language or changing the course of basically how we denote time. And then there's the expanders. There are two sides to it. There is the formulation of my own theory, as a practitioner or a writer, as someone who engages in scholarly text and language. Then there is the reverence and the care for other people who are tellers, they could also be called introducers. As an artist myself, I can expand on those through this really magical place that is the sculptural part of my practice, or olfaction, or painting. I also think that anything can be an "expanding." Anything and everything is a response.

But the tellers are still fabulating a kind of myth, right...

Totally! I think we shouldn't be afraid of the word myth. Myth is also just a form of understanding. If we think about myths and fables, they're just stories that are used to help people understand something or different avenues of understanding something.

You're a multidisciplinary artist, a writer, and a poet. What can the term "poet" include that the term "artist" can't?

Poet allows for the nonsensical in a way that an "artist" can engage with but doesn't directly speak to. Essentially, it's about what I want to change with language. I believe in the nonsensical like I believe in the abstract. I believe in poetics as myth that can soften approach, too. Sometimes a title can also change the approach for a person; it can sharpen or soften it. The simplest line is that I also have a poetry book that exists in the world, so why not just call myself a poet!

A lot of artists are writers even if they don't directly notate in a linear way. But they all have an incredible capacity for formulating ideas through the lineage that they hold. Whether they hold it on their tongue or in their hands is a different story.

**CAN I HAVE FOUND A TREE?
PERHAPS NOT, MAYBE THE TREE
HAD TO FIND ME. IT'S GREATER
THAN ME, STRONGER THAN ME,
OLDER THAN ME FOR SURE!**

Your show "The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)" just closed at Soft Opening. In the show, you map a compendium of found objects lifted from your Black British environment. We see textiles from public buses, cut-crystal glass, a bright-blue plastic barrel, and beautiful mahogany objects. How did these items and materials end up

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in the show? And how do they speak to one another?

Objects are imbued with the experience of how we live and work with them. I think a lot about the relationships that we build to objects, to materials. How has this wood, this mahogany, affected me or brought me to understand it? How do they also tell a story of my family members? Mahogany is indigenous to West Africa, and it was also found in the materials that were predominantly used to build the slave ships in the first leg of triadic trade. So, it would have been an object that was experienced and used by my ancestors. It's then a formal, inherited material that I'm working with. A tree for example could have found me, and that's the same with objects. Objects hold a domesticity. Can I have found a tree? Perhaps not, maybe the tree had to find me. It's greater than me, stronger than me, older than me for sure! So how do I interact with those objects and how have I given a soul to these objects, too?



Rhea Dillon, *Both Low Hanging Fruit And The Scavenged High Rise – Either Way: Suspension. So, Slackening The Hold Here I Ask Through The Poethics Of Suspense, 'How Can You Rest When Still Strung Up?'*, 2022, sapele mahogany crosier, bus seat moquettes and thread, 311 x 110 x 93 cm.
Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London Photo: Theo Christelis

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View of Rhea Dillon, "The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)" Soft Opening, London, 2022, London. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photo: Theo Christelis



Rhea Dillon, *A Caribbean Ossuary* (detail), 2022, wooden cabinet and cut crystal, 42 x 208 x 161.5 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photo: Theo Christelis

Could you talk a bit about the cabinet work?

It's called *A Caribbean Ossuary*, an ossuary being a small catacomb or an underground container of bones. That cabinet is the same frame and build as the one that's in my grandma's house. It contains cut-crystal glasses and bowls and is placed on its back on the ground, in reference to a kind of mooring. It holds itself in a similar way to a boat, and it is very much an anchoring work in the exhibition, where I am speaking about my Caribbean identity. That piece was created in conversation with my grandma, who was born in Jamaica and is part of the [Windrush generation](#). A cabinet is a symbol and also an anchor in a typical Caribbean household of someone in her generation. There was this viral tweet someone posted "An image that is quintessentially Caribbean" with a photograph of a similar cabinet in their house. So many people were responding, posting their own cabinets, and speaking about what it was like to see them but not be able to really engage with them. The cut crystal pieces were only for when "the queen came to tea." I took my grandma to see the exhibit on the last day, and we discussed that it's also a display of class, a "lower-class opulence."

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I collected the cut-crystal pieces in Marseille and shipped them back without packaging support knowing that some of them would break. That was to speak to both the movement of Black bodies, the breakage of some of them, the non-bodily of those bodies, and it speaks to the second part of the show's title, "or, on being the pronounced dead." I felt this breakage as a release of souls.

Do you believe in ghosts?

I believe in souls. And I believe in duppies needing their rest and nurture.

What is a duppy? What does it look like?

A duppy is a Patois term for a ghost or a soul that could be at a point of unrest or just a point of moving to the next realm. There is a Patois saying, "duppy know who fi frighten." The literal translation would be a ghost knows whom it can scare or frighten. Generally understood to mean that people know whom they can intimidate. I guess this comes back to fables and myths. But I don't see them as myths. I see them as truths that use fabling to express what truths are.



Rhea Dillon, *Faeces I*, 2021, polyester backing and foam, 45 x 55 cm (59 x 73 cm framed). Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photo: Theo Christelis

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This underlying theme of movement, or this state of transit, of the Black body crops up in your work in a lot of different ways – there's the triangular trade, the movement of souls, and also the Black maintenance workers who use public transport to get from the outskirts of the city to the centre. And you seem to travel a lot to make work, too. Do you feel that this has an impact on how you work?

If I didn't sit with what impacts me, it would be a disservice to what I experience. I write a lot on public transport. I went to school on scholarship and had to take two buses to get there, the first into the heart of Croydon through this lower-class neighborhood, and then this other bus into South Croydon, which was this threshold into a different class structure. Even the bus was daintier. The bus's architecture denoted the change of surroundings. I still get the bus pretty much everywhere, I love it. It's a really languid point of movement. You can't get there directly but you will eventually. You're still above ground and can see everything – remaining both physically and consciously aware of your surroundings, unlike the tube or the plane which are very much vortex ways of travelling.

Also, this relates to my idea of trickster methodology which I speak to in my work *Every Ginnal is a Star*. If you think of life as being a train which is always moving forward, then for a white cis person there is this certain ability to just go through the door into the next carriage, into the next compartment of life. Whereas non-white people always have to employ this trickster energy to find other things that can help them get through to the next carriages. Things that aren't the key but maybe still fit the lock. They need to go sideways and take detours instead of just going straight ahead, and that takes more time and energy. Just thinking of the cleaning my mum had to do to get me into school, to set me up to be more amorphous and languid, which was my word for 2020. Or my desired word.

And do you have a word or desired word for 2022?

I'll choose what first came into my head, but it was two words: Discipline and play. Or discipline in play.



Rhea Dillon, *From Landing to arriva(L) In Clear Waters Only I Can Paint Black*, 2021, foam, bus seats, nondrying anti-climb paint, plastic, acrylic paint and bleach, 135 x 88 x 72 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Soft Opening, London. Photo: Theo Christelis

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One's Place Within:
Ufuoma Essi and Rhea Dillon

in Conversation
with Alex Bennett

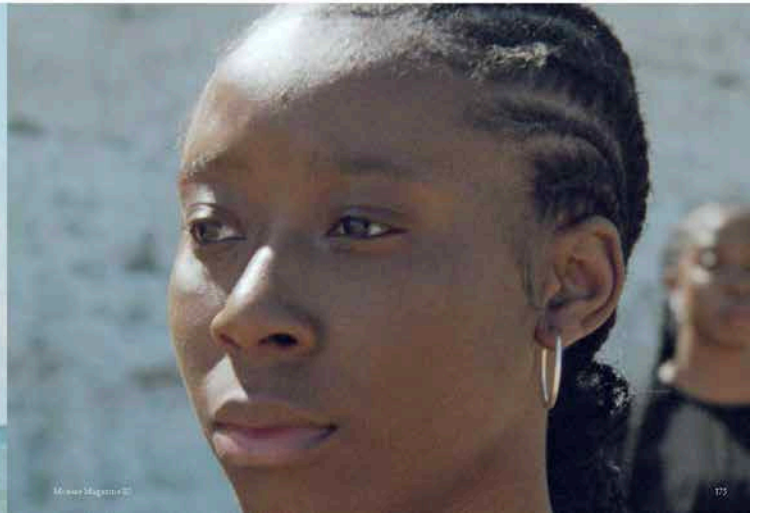


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UK born, London-based artists UFUOMA ESSI and RHEA DILLON share a common interest in researching through Black British life and history's legacies. "What does home look like to you? What does home feel like to you? Is it London? Is it England, or is it elsewhere?" Nambi, Vanessa, and Francyne—all first- and second-generation Black British women—are asked in *From Where We Land* (2021), a film by Essi commissioned and presented last year at South London Gallery, while at Soft Opening, London, in *The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)* (2022) Dillon focuses instead on the differences between "landing" and "arrival," and her Jamaican heritage. Looking for an "elsewhere," in this conversation moderated by ALEX BENNETT, Essi and Dillon delve into ideas of identity, body, race, nation, ethnicity, and coming to terms with the diaspora and the reality of being nationless and post-state while living in the capital's capital and owning a British passport.



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ALEX BENNETT

I was looking across both of your practices and thought it might be nice to begin thinking about place, your sense of place—more specifically in terms of the personal, the biographical, and the familial, but also in terms of the historical, and how those are intertwined given a specific resonance is your keen engagement with Black British life and history.

Ufuoma, I was watching *From Where We Land* [2021], which was commissioned and exhibited at the South London Gallery last year, and one of the questions it poses is “Where is the place we will land on?”—an open and generative question that cannot be easily resolved in an answer, lending instead, a sense of potential. Similarly, Rhea, I was thinking about how you’ve ruminated on the difference between “landing” and “arrival,” how this speaks to your conception of place in relation to diaspora generations and experiences—especially since your current show at Soft Opening [*The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)*] reflects more explicitly on your Jamaican heritage.

Tell me about the places that are important to you both: To what extent and in what ways do these places manifest in your work?

UFUOMA ESSI

Place is very important to me—South East London is my home—that’s where I was born and raised, but in the past couple of years I’ve been thinking about “home” in a larger sense as I’m Nigerian-first-generation British born. My mom came to London when she was twenty—and the first place she ever lived was Brixton. I remember thinking, when I was making *From Where We Land*, about South East London as such an important place for me in terms of my work, in terms of my identity, in terms of my family’s history. *From Where We Land* tried to connect them all in a way. The women I worked with helped me ground the work; in the workshops I lead with them we were constantly thinking about our own personal and collective identity and histories, asking questions like “What does home look like to you? What does home feel to you? Is it London? Is it England, or is it elsewhere?” These women—Nambi, Vanessa, Francyne—are all first- and second-generation Black British women.

During these workshops we were using *The Heart of the Race: Black Women’s Lives in Britain* [1985] by Beverley Bryan, Stella Dadzie, and Suzanne Scafe, as our course book to guide us, to explore and expand ideas of what it means to be Black, British, and a woman living or existing in England, in London. One of the questions I asked was “Where do you see your final resting place? Do you see it as being London, or do you see it as being Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, or Jamaica? Where do you see that place being?” One woman said she saw herself as almost stateless, although she was born and raised in the United Kingdom. She was like, “The only real connection I have is to London, growing up here, my friends and family, but I don’t feel a real connection to England,” and “Scatter my ashes across the Thames. That’s it for me. I’m done.” With the River Thames being so synonymous with London, there’s clear understanding of how London has shaped our lives but then there’s also rejection of a wider British identity. I thought in some ways it could be seen as quite somber, but I found that there is quite a lot of power in such a decision to reject or accept

nationhood or identity in that way. That’s what really helped spur parts of the film. There wasn’t one question I was wanting to write at or get to; it was open-ended, and so I wanted the film to be, in that sense, collaborative. There isn’t an answer to this question of the unease in our relationship to Britain. Whether we claim it or we don’t, or we aspire to be British, there’s a rejection of that, almost, but there’s an elsewhere that we’re all still searching for, and that could be London. That could be within the wider diaspora. That could be our parents. But there could also be another place that we’re searching for. Philadelphia is another important place—that’s where I started making films. The new film I’m working on *Is My Living in Vain*, which has been commissioned by Gasworks and will open at the gallery in October 2022, it is based there and in some way is also looking at place, specifically the connections between South East London and West Philadelphia, and those diasporic and sonic connections that exist between those specific places.

RHEA DILLON

I like how you think about *The Heart of the Race* as a course book—I feel the same in what I describe as “Bible books,” which are books that provide the frameworks of my practice and thinking about my upbringing. *The Heart of the Race* is definitely a newfound “Bible book,” alongside Stuart Hall’s *The Fateful Triangle* [2017], which was what I was returning to whilst I was in Ghana for the first time in December. Obviously Stuart Hall, if you read even just one line of his texts, will make you blow out the words *identity*, *race*, *nation*, *ethnicity*, and all these other terms for a home, for a land, and for an arriving. I think that’s really important to do, especially now, with what I’d call a desire for there to be a post-race mentality, which doesn’t exist as we are still in our races, quite literally! We haven’t got to this 2025, or 3035, versioning of us all being brown, where this book called *The Tanning of America* [2011] comes into play. I extend both that idea and syntax to the tanning of the Western world, which is referenced through my video (*Working Title*) *Browning 2025* [2021] that’s currently exhibited on the Kitchen New York’s online Video Viewing Room. A few people have mistakenly thought the “working title” at the beginning is to be dropped, but it’s there with purpose because (1) I can, with that stated in the title, keep inviting other dark-skinned Black women’s voices to be part of the work, and (2) society itself is set to be a continuous working on this browning of the Western world with so many people creating mixed-raced children and those children being a present-day aesthetic, see the Kardashian Klan.

What you’re thinking about, Ufuoma, in terms of open-ended questions, but still starting with questions, is really important for me. And for all these questions that will come up for us quite pertinently in the skin and the bodies that we’re wearing: How does it align? How can it not be misaligned with societal desire/ placement/ reality as equals of those things? Is asking these questions as to why you get placed in these different spaces brought up, or even sought after, like in the context of this interview right now? That’s just always an innate thing. Like when people ask that question “Who do you make your work for?” or “Do you make work for Black women?” I make work for myself

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predominantly, because it's coming from my mind. I'm exploring what it is to be someone like me. That's what I am most excited about when I see other people's work also. I'm like, "Thank you for that offering and that sharing of you," because it's really quite an incredible, really vulnerable thing to share work in that way and to ask yourself these didactic questions: Why am I here? Who am I here for? What am I doing? That comes into this landing-to-arrival thinking, thinking about the transatlantic slave trade and being stateless in a way, and I really speak to the diaspora here, especially as a second-generation Black British person of Jamaican ancestry. We're in the age of coming to terms with the diaspora and the reality of being nationless and post-state, even though we have these passports that we're most grateful for. I think, in terms of what you're asking, Ufuoma, or what you mentioned in the question initially, Alex, regarding the language that I'm breeding with "from landing to arrival" as a framework phrase using poetry to form my poethic practice, is that "landing" to me is just very thud-like, onomatopoeically. I believe "to land" is to be dropped somewhere, and I think that is the displacement of Africans to the Caribbean and the Americas, and therefore the first part of the triadic movement. Then you get to the migrant and first generation's stage—that's the "to" in the phrase—in that there was this invitation by the queen to come over and actively support the UK post-World War II. So it's on the way to, and now is, the second generation, as I mentioned regarding passport holding: I really can arrive anywhere. I feel the phrase really does that lineage of "home" for me in the best way, along with three in the triad that we talk about.

ALEX

I think of both of you as researchers, and with this I don't mean that your practices are necessarily archival in the same way. You are both readers actively engaged in Black feminist epistemologies, and these references often remain legible and accessible across your work. In this approach to research one negotiates the conditioning of legibility and invisibility, the psychical behaviour of the archive, the racist imagination. I was thinking about how the archive suppresses as much as it reveals; it's very dependent on what parameters are in place to validate specific narratives and to have those preserved. There is a parallel spectrality between the archive and the raced and gendered body—I'm thinking of the visible invisibility of the Black woman analyzed in Françoise Vergès' writing on labour and care. Embodiment is something you both consider—how does embodiment influence this process of making visible?

UFUOMA

I want to go back to what you mentioned about accessibility. I didn't study fine art, I studied history, but it was really bell hooks and my mum who made me want to study history. When I was younger and reading hooks, I was like, I get it, this is very to the point and direct. When I was studying for my degree, I was very much determined I was going to just focus on specific historians, theorists who were not on my syllabus in the UK, people like hooks, Robert D. Kelly, Black historians that I really admired and who helped me understand the world but also understand how structures operate. It was during my degree, when I thought of

historical records a bit more, and so that's why the archive is the most natural place for me to really sit and exist within my work, because it's a place that I know really well. I spent four years researching in archives, seeing what I wanted, what I didn't want, and this informed my work as a filmmaker.

My first films were found footage and archive footage films with things that were spliced together. Then studying in Philadelphia, I was accessing lots of different archives, and there was a Philadelphia TV archive that I became obsessed with. I was watching a lot of different archival material—I want to bring it into my own orbit, my own language, and make things make sense for me. I wasn't sure if this was video art, if I was going to make traditional narrative films in that sense—I was just experimenting, thinking this is the mode in which I can express myself the easiest way.

My process originally starts from either a place or within an archive. In my previous films, the answer to the question that I was wanting to know, or wanting to answer, or even just wanting to explore, it's not always a definite one that I want to get—it's more about making work that I'm thinking through the ideas I want to explore. That's where my process initially starts. A lot of my practice is intuitive as well, depending on the research, who I want to work with, or where the film is taking place—it's more about letting everything else guide me through that process. Also because when I work I'm always editing: I edit all of my films. Anything can happen on the set on the day when you're shooting, but it's the edit where I take the most control, and that's where things start making sense to me.

A previous work, *Bodies In Dissent* [2021], started with the homonymous book by Daphne A. Brooks [2006], which was a big influence, and then researching Black performance archives, watching footage of Loretta Abbott, Judith Jamison and Alvin Ailey; from looking at all these performances that's how the work developed, through thinking about how we carry history in the body and how we express that.

ALEX

Rhea, thinking of *Janus* at Soft Opening, London [2021]. I wondered if you could speak to how you negotiate your research, as I feel embodiment is also a dimension of your practice.

RHEA

It's interesting to think about the etymology of "embodiment" versus "body." I also find it interesting when people speak about the body being present in my work. Naturally, invisibility and visibility comes to mind. These incredible people—writers, theorists, poets, thinkers, et cetera—that we get to be led by and lean on, who have such a great capacity for language in this poethic (a term I learnt from Joan Retallack's writing) but also a didactic way to the reality that we're living. Reading bell hooks is such an insane experience as a young black woman, when you're like, "Damn, she really is just spitting the clearest facts I've ever and may ever hear." I am grateful for the people who aren't afraid to write viscerally. It's about vulnerability, and it's about an honesty.

I'm always reading. I've always been a reader. I also didn't study art at university, I studied fashion communication. Originally, I was going to study English and then fashion as I thought I was going to be a fashion

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writer—especially because there weren't enough Black fashion writers when I was younger. It was very on my teen-with-duty shit. That aside, I've always been a reader, a lover of language, and possessed a capacity to be both didactic and abstract with language, which intertwines well with the physicality of my practice, for example, sculpture, olfactive elements, et cetera.

Janus "pause" leaking fortified enclaves is a wooden cross, this pharmacy cross—it's one of the most universally recognised signs: an understanding of care and aid. I think about care and aid in terms of Blackness and specifically Black women. Highlighting the capacity that Black and brown women have to consistently hold up the capitalocene and have done from its creation. This links back to bell hooks, where she talks about the womb of black women being—thinking about objecthood and subjection of Blackness, which I do so much in my work—the most vital component of the slave trade, which we know was the most important formation for Western capitalism as we know it today.

As someone who is from London, what I call up in the capital's capital, these are all direct relations to how I come to be here right now—my ontic. *Janus* specifically is bringing that together in that we're doing a kind of phantom clap for health workers in 2020. Françoise Vergès actually talks about Black women as these phantom bodies that support the neoliberal white male CEOs of companies. I love the use of the word *phantom*: it goes back to this visible and invisible that both she and I talk about too. Having this huge cross that engages with the pharmaceutical, yet made out of sapele mahogany (which I used again in the solo show at Soft Opening) is in reference to the West African native woods that would have been used for those slave ships moving black bodies.

The cross itself is what I describe as a "performing object." It sits on a metal arm that allows it to be filled with fluids. There are three holes underneath to create a slow drip: this drip is important because it connotes healthcare—an IV drip—and the fluids fall to pool on the ground. This performance of the object becomes heightened by the question of who is exhibiting. The first time it was shown was by a white male curator, a friend of mine, so it was a question of "Are you going to have to clean up this puddle underneath this? Am I, as the artist, going to have to clean up the puddle, or is the cleaner—who most likely has a body similar to mine and a racial identity similar to mine—going to have to clean this puddle?" Who cleans the world? Black and brown women. Through the work, we go through a question and it comes out as a question as well. Having this performing object and performing work calls for thinking about the duty of a person in the world versus capitalism, and about how they interconnect. Also, I guess this versioning that Black women have this duty to uphold the capitalocene as well. So, how do I evade that? How do I dodge that? How do I play with that?

Then that comes together into this trickster methodology that I speak through in terms of descendants of the slave trade market—that's the diaspora kids, who really are these incredible tricksters within present-day society because doors aren't directly open for us, so we often have to find another route or another key. Diaspora kids: thinking identity-wise, thinking race-wise, thinking of non-homeness as well. We have to evolve, and

we embark and move through different means of (you could think of it like a kind of *Super Mario Kart* game for Black folk) getting all these other things to add, to bode to, and to support the nonlinear existence posed by white supremacist societies. It weighs on us as well, of course. We've got to be doubly strong to be getting onto this next level. So it's kind of bringing all of those things together and more.

ALEX

Duty, as well as responsibility, made me think about representation. Ufuoma, can you expand on how you sequence your material, where intermixing develops its own choreography of source material, between your own footage and various other sources—including oral histories, home videos, and YouTube clips? I am curious as to how you are thinking through representation—as your videos collage rather than coalesce narrative. Could you speak to some of the sequencing and sourcing in your work?

UFUOMA

Anything, really, could be the archive. It's such a vast space to kind of explore. I could never fully represent everything that's in there or even try and pull everything to the forefront. On a personal level, when I go into the archive, I'm going with my own narrative of what I want to find there, knowing that a lot of the histories that I'm interested in haven't been documented in the same way that other histories have, and that is frustrating. When I talk about unlearning, it's about the idea that you're going through an archive and everything there is fact when that's not true at all—you're going through an archive and you're going to be presented with curated bits of history. You have to go in and decide what is what you want and what you don't want. I'm very intentional; sometimes you're operating from a place where there is not a lot that you can really pull from. That's where I see my artistic practice form: "Okay, this isn't here, but how can I piece these together so it feels like it was here, feels like they are speaking to each other?" For *Bodies In Dissent*, I used three different sources, because what you hear is a mixture of audio from Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln performing live. I was listening to lots of different recordings from their live performances when I was editing, and I really wanted to pull them into the film.

And then I was watching lots of videos of past performances, and I wanted to have this specific performance of Lorretta Abbott—she is one of the most amazing dancers. So I knew that was in the archive, so playing that out and then using footage from Black Ballet. And piecing it all together with the footage we shot on location. For I see the archive as a place where ideas start, but I don't always fully rely on it—if there's something that doesn't work, when it comes to the edit, I'll leave it out. But it's knowing that those exist or they don't exist that informs how I put the work together; that's the process that I've always had.

In terms of responsibility, because my work very much deals with image production, most times I don't necessarily feel responsible to represent anyone particularly. When I'm working with found footage or archival material, I'm working with images that already exist. If I'm paying homage to someone I respect, putting them in the work feels just right. I feel responsible to honour their images and their lives. But ultimately, I make

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work for myself as well. I never think about the audience when I make a piece of work. It's always about what I want to see, what I want to create. Now that I'm working with actors or with people, members of the community, there's more responsibility for me as the creator and director in making sure that they are comfortable with the film being in a show or wherever it will go afterwards. Alongside that, there's a big responsibility in also making sure they feel they are adequately represented, and that is really important.

ALEX

Rhea, abstraction is something that permeates your practice as a means to permit a certain opacity or illegibility. Your abstraction creates a tension against the various violences of appropriation and this enforcement of being readable in some way and on designated terms. I was thinking about your reflections on this word *amorphicity* as something that creates a sort of friction with the overdetermined body. I wonder how you negotiate abstraction, and how it relates to representation and resistance.

RHEA

Amorphous is such a great word if only to pronounce—I'd probably come across it in 2020, in a poem, which is where I always find my favourite words. It boded so well with the reality of the state of the world we were in—the global uprising that was happening and the call to arms from everyone, yet still to be led by Black folks universally. And so, what does it mean to show up when you are also desired to not exist? That's why the word *amorphous* struck me so potently, because we should be able to rest and we should be able to just exist. How does that happen alongside an uprising that's about you? How does that happen alongside being inside and not being able to be seen as well in terms of the pandemic lockdown? So I'm always trying to expand language and, here, the understanding of this word *responsibility*. I would like to push beyond "responsibility" and go into two other words: *respect* and *ethics*. Ethics is a broad term and had really spun me out in 2020—a year of versions of beauty, versions of need, and on versions of, I guess, truths too. And I think that so much in every capacity comes down to a respect. If we're talking about amorphous and Black amorphicity, is that you're trying to retire the idea of *responsibility*, having to hold it. Which goes into this Atlas recurring sculpture that I always come to, where I envisage that Atlas the Greek god is actually a Black woman through my own myth and my own theory (because theory is also myth!) I was talking about with Vergès's language, this upholder of the capitalocene, which is the Western world.

It's pushing past this idea that we have to be responsible or we have to hold up a flag or we have to hold up a nation that doesn't care to even hold us, let alone hold the door for us. When I wake up, my desire of the day is to respect both the work but also the people I'm speaking through and speaking to. Everyday objects are deemed to be amorphous too, but they're actually not; they are greatly affected by how we use them and how we treat them, so therefore they carry stories and bodies even, sometimes only fragments of bodies. *A Caribbean Ossuary* [2022], which is the new sculpture in the show that just opened, is talking about these fragments and the releasing of souls through

fragmentation. So that's how I feel about not wanting to speak about responsibility.

ALEX

I also wanted to touch on perfume and olfaction, elements that you've been using in your work. Scent, music, language—they're transporting, sensorial things but also gendering and racializing. Can you expand on instances where scent is used in your work?

RHEA

I'm glad you mentioned music. Thinking about the first part of the transatlantic trade, this extraction of bodies to the Americas and the Caribbean, is thinking about what, by all those singular bodies, could be carried, which was nothing except for music yet the bodily scent as well. There's this incredible book that another artist working with olfaction, Anicka Yi, had sent me called *The Smell of Slavery: Olfactory Racism and the Atlantic World* [2020]. Olfaction has this underlying existence in society that people deem to be secondary, or even just not important—in fact, it is one of our most important senses, connected to our mouths and to how we process information, how we build memory. If we're going back to the archive, there is so much ignited with memory. It's a desire to hold on to memory, to respect memories and existences and generations. Scent, to me, is just a really exciting space that has all of this really geeky scientific specificity on how didactically connected to memory it is. When I initially started working with it in 2019, I'd been desiring to be a sort of evil scientist where I had a Byredo scent and my dual screen video work that explored looking at queer Black British experiences, and I tried to imbue the minds of the audience that when they come across the notes in the scent in life again, they'll only think about good things in regard to Black British queerness as opposed to this version that we are something to be erased.

With the olfactive artwork I compounded from scratch that's in the show at Soft Opening, *NEGR-OID* [2020–22], it really is following that *-oid* as a suffix means "a resemblance of."

I remember when *Fashion Police* was still on the air and this barely celebrity, Giuliana Rancic, had made a comment about Zendaya, who was wearing faux dreadlocks to the Oscars, that she looked like she "smell(s) like patchouli oil or weed." I had gone to the Institute of Art and Olfaction in Los Angeles and had just been playing around in the lab. I was, again, with this desire to play into how a trickster would meet this racist reality, so I asked myself, "What if I made a scent in a resemblance of what a Black woman or person would smell like today in accordance with the ontology of Blackness?" *NEGR-OID*, therefore, has five accords: Accord 1 is for skin, Accord 2 is an oils accord, Accord 5 is a hair accord, thinking about the hair products and the Black girls on the back of the bus growing up. Accord 4 is land. I'm thinking about land in two definitions. Firstly, where I'm from are two islands, thinking about (Stuart) Hall again with Jamaica and the UK, so adding notes of sea breeze with Calone. Secondly, how the land is supported by Black and brown bodies in a Françoise Vergès sense. Accord 3 is food: I made a mini accord resembling allspice, also called Jamaica pepper or pimento, then brought in a ricey note through adding acetylpyrazine. It's one of my favourites with a crackly rice, almost popcorn-y, note, used in the work to think

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about how rice was braided into the hair of Black women during slavery as a means of survival for themselves and the culture of their homeland.

All of the notes added speak to an ontology of Blackness, which can also form or be called the stereotypes of Blackness. I then mixed the accords together, to then obviously add patchouli to complete the cycle, back to the racist comment against Zendaya. Then as a cherry on top, I added cocoa—that doesn't need any explanation.

That's how that scent was researched and compounded. Because I worked on that scent in 2020, just before the lockdown, I had been thinking about how to bring it into an exhibited work. With one of the symptoms of COVID being that we lose our sense of smell, it felt like, in this stage of almost post-pandemic, this would be great to actually try to engage the sense of smell again. Many people have actively turned to olfaction to support and reengage their sense of smell since losing it, especially those who have long COVID. I'm sure we're all aware of what happened barely a month ago with Child Q, who was pulled out of her exam because the teachers had said that she smelled of cannabis, strip-searched by police whilst on her period, and then put back into her exam. This disgusting racist incident with Child Q was just another barely two-year reminder that olfaction needs to be discussed, and even more so alongside the definitions of race, identity, ethnicity, and nation. I'm trying to unearth those terms and definitions through my practice to really get down to that framework and then disengage their stereotypes to build anew. Yeah—that's something that's quite magical that could be done.

ALEX

I was thinking about that moment in *Bodies in Dissent* where there's the overlaying of gesture and choreography. It's a question for both of you, in regard to performance and its relation to agency, affirmation, and the body as a site of remembrance. Ufuoma, following from your mention of Abbey Lincoln, I thought it might be worth thinking about these instances of a performative body and how you layer them. Rhea, I was also thinking about *Catgut—The Opera* [2021]. I feel like you are both engaged with the transgenerational potential of Black performance and how it can be reactivated, and how a body that performs in space can, even if temporarily, transform one's surroundings or can reactivate one's sense of self. I was also thinking about this performing of objects, Rhea, in *A Caribbean Ossuary*, which feels like a new direction for you as well.

UFUOMA

Black performance history has been a real center in my work and research. My film *All That You Can't Leave Behind* [2019] was the first iteration of me wanting to explore this subject a bit more closely. That film featured a few of my influences, Abbey Lincoln, and women like Nina Simone and Grace Jones. It's an experimental film that works with appropriated video footage to explore the relationship between Black women's collective experience with music, history, and the act of reclamation. Taking influence from Daphne Brooks's essay "All That You Can't Leave Behind": Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe," the film is an exploration of the archival and performative legacies of Black women singers

and performers. It explores how Black feminisms can be restorative and a reparative mode strengthened by the history of Black women's collective refusal, resistance, and creativity.

I was piecing through the archive and putting things together, and at that point, in 2019, it was the longest film I'd made, it's around fourteen minutes. Then, last year, I made *Bodies in Dissent*—the name comes *Bodies in Dissent* [2006] by Daphne A. Brooks, as I was very inspired by that book of the same name. Brooks writes about how mid-nineteenth-century to the early twentieth Black transatlantic activists were able to transform themselves through performance, music, acting, and theater—they were able, in some ways, to change their societal conditions or their lives. I love all of Brooks's writing, but that book was really interesting because I was looking at people like Abbey Lincoln and Loretta Abbott, and they kept coming up in terms of what I was interested in, what I wanted to explore a bit more deeply. The film is an exploration of the body as a central site of remembrance and resistance. Exploring ideas around "bodily insurgency" and using the body as an archive, as a point of return, a position of refusal, a broker between transgenerational life and histories, past, present, and future. The film is inspired by the Black performance histories throughout the Black Atlantic focusing on the US and UK and their direct potential to transform societal conditions and constructions around racial identities.

When I was putting the film together, I was interested in seeing how I could bridge that with the performances from the archive, how I could create this new performance with Nambi Kiyira, who isn't a dancer or performer. She's an actress, but one of my favorite collaborators as she's always very intuitive in how she works. We built this performance together over a period of weeks.

That's what the film was based on, but the whole idea was looking at how the body can be this place, an archive in itself that transforms, not only the way we view history or where we view but how we carry history within ourselves, across generations, across histories, across the Atlantic. But also in a way that you find agency through the body in that sense, the way that you can create change or create a sense of a transformation within the self, a self-actualization of coming to terms, in a similar vein of the sentiment in *From Where We Land*, where we are thinking about ourselves and rejecting what we don't want and taking what we do want, and that idea of dismissing or accepting that starts through the body, through that stance. That's where everything came to together, I guess, thinking through those ideas.

RHEA

I actually want to go back to what Ufuoma was saying. I really am taken by a question that Saidiya Hartman presents as to whether we inherited not only the condition of slavery, but can the traumatic experience be passed down generationally too? She talks about the Black slave experience and the memories of that in her book *Scenes of Subjection* [1997]. I really loved how you were describing that through performance, Ufuoma. Through that residency that we both did in 2020 I was able to research opera, operatics, and Black performance as a whole. That started with looking at Samuel

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Coleridge-Taylor, who was from Croydon like me, and was the first Black British composer in the UK. He had a great dialogue with Paul Dunbar, who was an incredible African American poet who wrote a lot of words for Coleridge-Taylor's work. Sound is just an innate Black performance. I talk about sound the most, I guess, because I would say that I'm a sound geek as opposed to a music geek. Thinking about sound as this pre- to becoming "music." Even analysing the sounds in music like the utterances that musicians use as signature: the grunts and squeals—things that make trap music what it is, make soul what it is. These are the foundations and frameworks that I'm talking about that make Black music. So thinking about performance and then how performance exists and has existed in the UK, through the research, I was intrigued by what opera even looked like for Black folk. It was really interesting to come across what I found, and that was this incredible piece called *The Masque of Blackness*.

The Masque of Blackness—the title was just so potent to the Black experience, thinking about masks and even extending to Achille Mbembe's continuous metaphors using "mask." It's a masque, which is a pre- in language terms to operas in that it was court entertainment in England principally in the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth centuries. This masque was asked to be written by the then queen of Scotland, Anne, who was from Denmark, and had come into power in England through her king, who was from Scotland. King James VI and I was coming to be king of Britain as a whole, which saw the union of the Scottish and English crowns for the first time. It's just so funny how directly it engages with nation and with ethnicity perhaps as well, and that she had asked the poets of the time (who were the politicians, which again, I find really interesting) to write this masque to show to England that this king, who wasn't English, but still British, cares so much about England as the supreme land. In this masque, three daughters of the character Niger, who are obviously black, are looking at their beauty, and then the poets, who are the politicians and the most important prophets in the masque's time, explain that they're not actually beautiful; beauty is only found in Britain. Then the daughters complain to their dad, Niger, who takes them across the seas to all these places in search of Britannia. There's poetic words used that basically mean they went to France and they couldn't find beauty there, went to Spain, across Europe—just cussing out all these other countries in an attempt for England/Britain to be seen as some kind of kings of the west. Then they finally arrive in Britain. What makes the masque even more of a joke is that they then say that Britain's sun will make you lighter, but obviously the sun makes you darker! It's almost too much when you're reading it! Another real crux of the racism of this masque was that the queen really wanted to perform in blackface. What happens is she cast herself as one of the daughters of Niger and therefore wore blackface, which was meant to be washed mid-masque to show that they were cleaning the faces of these three sisters like the king and queen would continue to cleanse society as part of England. As part of English national legacy, and now Britain's national legacy. The white supremacist ideal is upheld once again.

Cleansing is a theme that comes into my work as mentioned earlier with the cleaning of the land alongside

this racial cleansing spoken of here. This all came into thinking about performance with identity, and what does that mean for someone white to want to perform your Black identity? Social media has this all over. Further, what does it mean for me to be performing my own Black identity? Do I perform that I like chicken, which goes into an ontology of Blackness and a version of what I'm "meant" to be?

That was all at play in my mind throughout the research of the opera. I was grateful to be in conversation with Elaine Mitchener, who is a classically trained singer and performance artist, and also Simone White, who's a poet from the US. Both women I've admired greatly from afar and cold-emailed to be in conversation with me. We were looking into linguistics, opera, operatics, see Nathaniel Mackey's brilliant *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate* [2010].

I was thinking about repetition and placement affecting identity: my studio is in central London and I pass the Houses of Parliament every day to get there. I was thinking about politics architecturally, like the rooms in that building and these borders, boundaries, and territories that mean the activists out front every day cannot go inside, let alone thinking about the borders of nations. There's picketing and people speaking about their opinions on things along that stretch of road all the time, 24/7. When the Serpentine invited me to perform the opera there, I thought location-wise about Speakers' Corner, which for generations has been this place for freedom of speech in Hyde Park, where the galleries are also located.

The Western world itself is meant to be a place of freedom of speech, but we're obviously moving heavily into fascism and have been for at least the past, I'd say ten to fifteen years. It was really interesting to have that conversation in direct geographic placement of the performance itself through having these three women, whom I called "oracles," narrating the text I wrote that goes from a referential then formal to informal ring-down of politics to poetry to poethics.

Bringing your word into it, the work "embodied" the realities of what performance looks like, can look like, should look like, and will never be, in a way.

ALEX

It's interesting to continue with this thought of sound as a precursor to music. I wanted to talk about how you both think about "language" and "voice" in terms of understanding objects, your work, or these histories that you're touching on. I'm also thinking about rhythm and the relationship of images with text, voice, and sampling of music. Language is really personal for both of you, but the voice has such a gendered history, even mythologically—how a woman's voice has been characterized, and the extent to which she is able to speak and speak to what . . .

RHEA

How can we arrive at this?

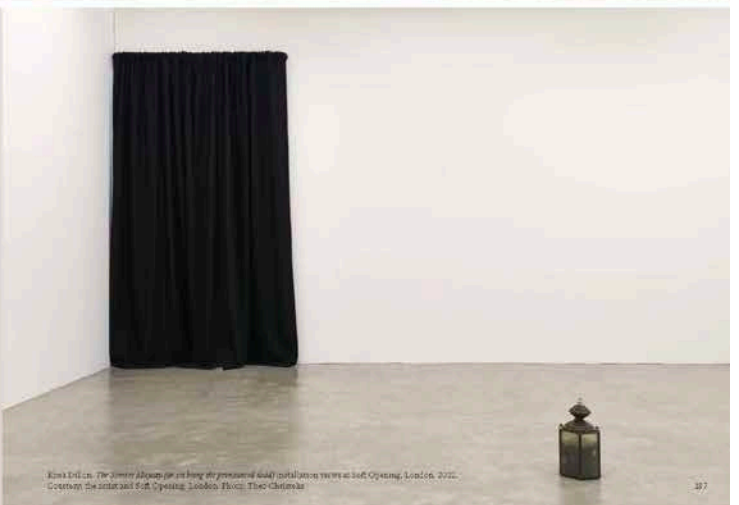
ALEX

Yeah.

RHEA

It's all so innate. Fundamentally, we're speaking about women's voices, but we can be direct and say that we're thinking about Black women's voices. Those voices haven't been allowed to be heard, let alone echo, and I think we're in this incredible place where we can really

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push for Black women's voices to echo in space(s). I only want that always and forever, for generations to come. We both talked of theorists and writers, many I know of, some I'm excited to look into, and these voices that, I guess, have echoed in our minds and also echoed how we have felt innately, places and feelings and existences that don't even need language but when provided with, how that echo really can fill the body and the soul, filling up the room and then yourself with the ability and the excitement to make more work and to respond and engage further. And that's something that goes back to the archive. I was teaching at Central Saint Martins, and one of the first things I say to students is to have respect for the archive that you are creating: "get your friends to take photos of you while you create!" It will help them build their own communities, but also will just help them respect and feed into the archive that is so important and needs to be so rich. I have such frustrations with the Black British archives sometimes, and like Ufuoma said, it hasn't been able to be given the space and respect physically or metaphorically to be part of the wider British history. When you think about an archive, you think about a locked chest or dungeon. But actually, the archive should be seen as a library. A space you are welcomed into to borrow, learn from, and absorb information. Always an opening door, quite literally so many libraries have automatic opening doors—to underestimate architecture's effect on experience is to be sorely mistaken. I would like to push for library to be the new definition of what an archive can be. Not a vault underground. I think that links back to Black women's voices, which have been vaulted—both the archive and Black women voices just need to be given the space and respect to be seen and heard.

ALEX

Can we also think of the archive as a portrait of sorts? UFUOMA

Yes, I think that's what it should be. There are so many grievances found in archives—across Britain and within England especially. It's really bad that the Black Cultural Archives is the only national archive dedicated to collecting, preserving the histories of African and Caribbean people in Britain. The UK needs more regional Black archives. There's not enough of that documentation. There's not enough of that preservation. There's not enough money, funding, or even just access. These other archives with collections being inaccessible in certain ways prevents lots of people accessing that information and resources. It contributes to the feeling of especially institutions that hold these archives as being a place that people don't think they can go into or even visit. And that's what really frustrates me about the archive. I think that's why I'm trying to de-invest from these kinds of formal institutions and looking more into community archives and my family archives. That's why I was so grateful for Black Cultural Archives, that they let me in, because these oral histories were in the archive. Me and Rhea both did the same residency with the Black Cultural Archives and Languid Hands in 2020. Their conversations were so rich and full, very much like they were speaking to a friend, and so getting to spend hours, listening to them whilst I was just even around the house, like not even with the intention to put this in a film someday. It was just like, "I want to know what they went through," but I just wanted to learn

from them in that way that we spoke about how Black women's voices are always kept in the vault.

The Heart of the Race [1985] has been such a foundational book, and being able to sit with Stella, Beverley, and Suzanne's voices, and sit with the archives, was just really important for me. When I knew I had the ability to create *From Where We Land*, that was the first thing I told the actors: "We have to all sit and listen to some. It might not be a direct reflection of your family or life, but it will be really important to hold these histories and hold these women in our thoughts whilst we think about this film, and think about ourselves and our place in Britain."

Sound is something that I think of constantly, sometimes I think of it before the actual image—I guess I work with sound, but I also work with a sound designer, so there are times when I'll do sound myself or I'll lead on the sound or I'll kind of defer to others, but it always feels like a collaborative process.

Last month I was in Philadelphia and I was doing lots of research, I was in archives, but the thing that I did every day, I would go out and I'd just do phone recordings. I'd just record people on the street. I'd just record people on the bus or on the SEPTA. And that, for me, was trying to build and flesh out this idea, document these spaces that I was visiting. I was really trying to record the different environments. That was just as important as the kind of research I was doing in the archives. And then I came back to London and I was spending time listening to the recordings. And so, sometimes it might come into the work. It might not come into the work, but it's just a starting point for me to be like, "Okay, what feels good? How does this sound make me feel? What does that recall from memories or from this place?" And so there were places that I had from memory where I was like, "Okay, I know what it sounds like when the train goes by at 5 p.m. and the kids are getting off from school." The thing that was really important to me, to locate these specific places that don't feel massively connected if you look at them just as spaces, but for me, they hold so much history and many personal memories and I'm trying to bridge them together. But yeah, sound is very much driving the research as well, but also the work.

ALEX

Sound is a connective medium and can be the channel through which you weave all of these seemingly disparate or dislocated places. That's just really fascinating. From sound, I was thinking about the polyvocal nature of both your practices. I'm thinking back to research and revisitation, that in return to past presences it's in the application of those resources that one creates different possibilities or envisions different futures. I'd like to touch on the idea of futurity, because I find it a very compelling quality in both of your practices. I wanted to ask how you think of time, and not necessarily conceiving a future in terms of envisioning something, but rather a radical sort of Black imagination.

RHEA

In coming up with "Humane Afrofuturism" in around 2018, it was really a rebuttal against this "impressed responsibility" at the time for Black artists to be speaking about Afrofuturism and to use the same aesthetic to be seen or heard in certain fields. It was a singular

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time for methods of telling stories about Blackness that I and a few others rebelled against.

In the present, I know that I have a great desire for when you are coming into the space (whichever space that the work is being exhibited in, because even a bus stop is a place of exhibition) that you are able to pause your own time.

I have a Post-it note that exists in my mind, and therefore the wall of every studio I've had, that states "great art exists in the conversation." That goes with the questions that people have around the work, or the things that are shared amongst the people who are in the exhibition with them at that moment, or when they go into the restaurant/bar/pub later or into the living room at their house. It's kind of what you are saying about this offering and ability to expand past the initial space that the work exists in for both of our practices.

So that is what I think about mostly with time: How to pause it more? We're in a very incessantly, intense period of time where people love to move on to the next thing immediately, and obviously social media does contribute to that. But we can also fight against that, because like what I stated at the beginning, we humans as the fillers of that digital space can control our time there. One thing I really appreciate a lot is that you're pausing time when you're in front of an artwork. You aren't necessarily cognizant of everything around you. You could be thinking about yourself and work and as you leave, ethics around work, ethics around the practice, whether a praxis is present for the artist . . .

UFUOMA

I'll always go back to the archive, although it is a frustrating place, but I spend a lot of my time thinking about the past and the present, and I'm always trying to bridge them as these two separate spaces or experiences. I look at the archive as something that informs the work I make, the way I situate the archive within my work, hoping the work speaks to the present moment or to how we live our lives now. But knowing that my work is also part of the archive is what I find very comforting, knowing that the work will have a life of its own, and the archive will go on beyond my own intention of the work.

We made a publication that was supposed to come out during the show, but it just got delayed— but now it's ready. Now this publication is almost part of the archive of the work; it's something that's now a record of the process of making the film. Actually, it feels nice that it's coming out now, that it is reflecting almost solely on the show and on the work, and makes me think about how I go forward, how I make work in the future, how I document the work, and how I'm thinking about the work beyond its exhibition. For me, time feels something that I'm almost in control of when I make work.

I'm deciding what I put in. I'm deciding how it will be, how it will appear, whom it's speaking for or whom it's trying to speak to. Using a range of materials from existing found footage to new footage to old VHS tapes to 16 mm. But I'm the one that's putting it all into this vortex and disrupting the notion of time and place, so that's how I've been thinking about time recently and how I can find my own agency within the work and how I'm putting things together and living in the present moment.

The past month I was in Philadelphia for a research trip, which was very grounding and informative. Although I was there pre-pandemic, initially I felt so many things had shifted in the time since I was last there in terms of the city, the culture, and energy, but actually maybe that was me trying to get comfortable, grounding myself back into the city in the midst of a global pandemic and how much time had passed since I was last there and then thinking about the work and about how I'm going to make it all be in dialogue. How I view time is also similar to how I look at the archive, in the sense of what I can piece together through what already exists and what I can create from what's absent and what I can pull together in the work. But also thinking about the life of the work I make beyond the final showing, the exhibition—its future as well, hopefully.

ALEX

I'm just going to check on time . . .

RHEA

Time. It's funny to think about the quote that "poetry is not a luxury." I think that in that, art is not a luxury. But also time is not a luxury either. They should all be intertwined.

RHEA DILLON (b. 1996) is an artist, writer, and poet based in London. She recently had a solo exhibition, *The Sombre Majesty* (or, on being the pronounced dead), at Soft Opening in London (2022). She was an artist in residence at Triangle—Astérides in Marseille and previously at V.O. Curations in London, which culminated in a solo exhibition (both 2021). The artist presented *Catgut—The Opera* as part of Park Nights 2021, Serpentine Pavilion, London. Recent exhibitions include *Love at Bold Tendencies*, London (2022); an online screening at the Kitchen, New York (2022); *Drawing a Blank*, London (2022); *Janus*, Soft Opening, London (2021); *Pressing*, Division of Labour, Salford (2021); *Dishwater and No Images* as part of Distant Peak, Peak Gallery, London (2020); *No Man is an Island*, Almire Rech, London (2020); and *Uchronia et Uchronia* online, External Pages (2020).

UFUOMA ESSI (b.1995, London) is a video artist and filmmaker. Her work revolves around Black feminist epistemology and the configuration of displaced histories. She took part in the artist development programme Syllabus VI – Spike Island, Wysing Arts Centre, Iniva, Studio Voltaire and Eastside Projects (2020–21). Recent solo exhibitions include *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, Public Gallery, London (2022), and *From Where We Land*, South London Gallery (2021). Recent group exhibitions include *Ata koia!*, TeTahi, Auckland, (2022); *An Infinity of Traces*, Lisson Gallery, London (2021); *Not Without Joy*, Galerie Rudolfinum, Prague (2021). Selected screenings include *17th Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival*, Berwick Upon-Tweed (2021); *Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival* (2021–20); *Prismatic Ground Film Festival*, New York (2021); *BLK Docs x Maysles Documentary Center: Instant Ancestry*, New York (2020), among others. Upcoming solo exhibitions include *Is My Living in Vain* at Gasworks in London (2022) and at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Auckland (2023).

ALEX BENNETT is a writer and critic based in London. He is coeditor of *Tinted Window*, and has been published in magazines such as *Flash Art*, *Art Monthly*, and *The White Review*.

THE ARTISTS' ARTISTS

THE ARTISTS' ARTISTS

Twenty-six artists reflect on 2022

To take stock of the past year, *Artforum* asked an international group of artists to select a single exhibition or event that most memorably caught their attention in 2022.



Rhea Dillon (Gladstone Gallery, New York)

I avoid openings. The neglect of the art that can occur is too painful. Yet there I was, staring at this object leaning tenderly against the wall, its wood grain perfectly exposed. African mahogany. A drawer. A frame. The spade with “hearts.” The work has such an intellectual and formal elegance that it quieted the entire room. Through Dillon’s stealth use of iconography, diasporic history expands. I haven’t been moved by a work like this in years. Three days after the opening, I spoke about the work at length during my therapy session.

A Critic's Guide to London Gallery Weekend

Sam Moore selects their top picks – from William Brickel's contorted bodies at The Artist Room to Garrett Pruter's reimagining of Alfred Hitchcock's 'The Birds' at Trafalgar Avenue

This weekend, 150 of London's galleries come together to offer exhibitions, special events and late-night openings. In the first of our two-part series, Sam Moore selects their top picks. To read Salena Barry's guide, click [here](#).

Rhea Dillon

Soft Opening

30 April – 11 June



Rhea Dillon, 'The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)', 2022, exhibition view. Courtesy: © the artist and Soft Opening, London

In 'The Sombre Majesty (or, on being pronounced dead)', Rhea Dillon finds multitudes in everyday objects and motifs, creating a new kind of space that invites us to understand it on its own terms. Her work represents an almost visceral confrontation with the racist past – and present – of the United Kingdom. *A Caribbean Ossuary* (2022), an ornate display cabinet presented on its back, becomes a failed vessel for the transportation of broken glass and a kind of casket, a colonial ghost reanimated by *Every Ginnal Is a Star* (2022), a nine-point star cut from a plastic shipping barrel. With her focus on contemporary historical objects, Dillon exposes how small the space is between past and present and asks if the encounter between them can help find a way to the future.

The Art Newspaper, 2022

London Gallery Weekend 2022 // Feature

London Gallery Weekend: Best shows for... discovering the hot new name

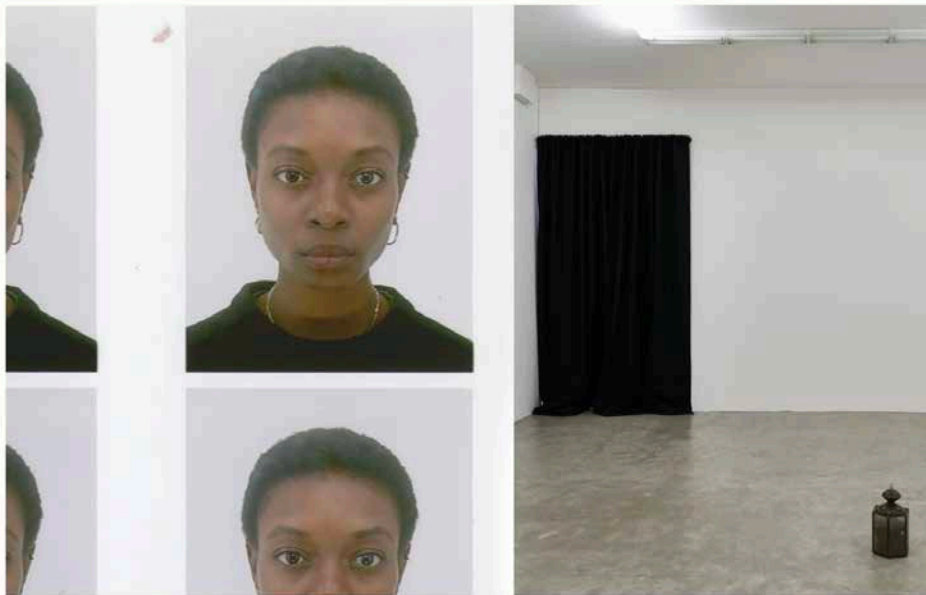
From the smell of Blackness to Tamil folklore-inspired ceramics—we pick out four exhibitions by the most exciting emerging artists

Kabir Jhala

12 May 2022

Check out The Art Newspaper's guide to [London Gallery Weekend 2022](#) for recommendations on the best exhibitions to see during the three-day event, top trends and commentary

An unseasonably warm May and an even warmer market for work by artists under 35 greets visitors to the second edition of London Gallery Weekend. Fittingly then, the event features plenty of exciting emerging artists, many of whom are staging their most ambitious shows to date in hopes of catching the eyes of collectors and curators looking to discover new names. To help finetune your search for the next big thing, we've chosen four young(ish) artists whose exhibitions are ones not to miss.



Rhea Dillon portrait; installation view of *The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead)*, at Soft Opening, London. Courtesy of Soft Opening, London

Rhea Dillon: The Sombre Majesty (or, on being the pronounced dead) [↗](#)

Until 11 June, Soft Opening, 6 Minerva Street, E2 9EH

A strange, unplaceable smell, containing notes of hair gel, pimento and skin oil, wafts through the second solo show of Rhea Dillon at Soft Opening. This scent—dispersed from a lantern top inspired by the artist's recent trip to Ghana—has been specially developed by Dillon as part of her ongoing artistic investigation into the ontology of race (in other words, the set of theories and stereotypes that are thought of when the words Black or Blackness are used). By creating a composite of identifiable smells that she describes as "typically Black" or having associations with Black culture, Dillon has formed something new and incomprehensible, revealing to us the "inability to pinpoint what race really is", she says.

The Art Newspaper, 2022

Dillon says she was inspired, in part, to create the work following a racially charged comment by the celebrity fashion reporter Giuliana Rancic, who in 2015 described the Black actress Zendaya as looking like she "smelled like patchouli and weed oil" due to her dreadlocks. The show also contains an overturned wooden cabinet, identical to one owned by the artist's grandmother, who belongs to the Windrush Generation that emigrated from the Caribbean to Britain in the 1960s. Inside, it is filled with broken cut crystal glassware shipped from Marseille, drawing comparisons between the transportation of goods across trade routes and the passage of souls from one life to another.

The Top 10 Shows in the UK of 2021

These are the best exhibitions of the year – from a chronically overdue retrospective of Paula Rego to a debut offering of obfuscated, sexualised sculpture by Jack O'Brien

This selection represents – in my opinion – a smattering of stand-out moments in a sea of exceptional insurgent, resurgent and staple practices. In a recent chat with my colleagues Chloe Stead and Terence Trouillot, we discussed how 2021 was a year of recovery for galleries and artists alike. As we teeter on the edge of remission, I invite you to look back over some of the shows and works that persisted, flourished, even, despite the odds – from a chronically overdue retrospective of Paula Rego to a debut offering of obfuscated, sexualised sculpture by Jack O'Brien.



Rhea Dillon, 'Nonbody Nonthing No Thing', 2021, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and V.O Curations, London

Rhea Dillon

V.O Curations

London

You may have deciphered that, in the last year, understated but reverent works have most compelled me. I think it's because they do something to

Frieze, 2021

communicate the economy of the present moment – where materials and resources are scarce or curtailed. As a result of intermittent isolation, we have more time, perhaps, to consider the objects around us and their attendant meanings and relations. Donna Marcus Duke – a participant in our inaugural Frieze New Writers programme – addressed the layers of ancestral energy imbued in Rhea Dillon's show (curated by Kate Wong) at V.O Curations: 'Affecting, abstracted and, at times, mystical, Dillon's family history becomes a tribute to the ignored and unseen manual work of the Windrush Generation.'



SEAN BURNS

Sean Burns is an artist, writer and *frieze* assistant editor based in London, UK.

Another, 2021

Rhea Dillon Delves Into Black Britishness and Her Debut Solo Exhibition

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY / FEATURE



Rhea Dillon Courtesy VO Curations. Photography by Adama Jalloh

Speaking to Sagal Mohammed, British-Jamaican artist Rhea Dillon shares the layered meaning behind her debut solo exhibition, *Nonbody Nonthing No Thing*

OCTOBER 15, 2021

TEXT Sagal Mohammed

As an artist, writer and poet, **Rhea Dillon**, is as creative as they come. The 25-year-old Central Saint Martins alum has been mastering her craft for years, swaying from one artistic outlet to another to convey a multitude of reflections of the world through her own, unique lens. Now, she debuts her first solo exhibition with a residency at London's [VO Curations](#).

Open from today, *Nonbody Nonthing No Thing* is a sublime series of deconstructions and reconfigurations that form a poetic exploration of Blackness through a total of seven paintings and sculptures. "People often ask me what it means to make Black art but to me, that is essentially asking

Another, 2021

me what it means to exist as myself," says Dillon. "Being Black British is part of my ontic and ontology so it's always present in my work because it is me." The exhibition explores linguistics as a means to understanding objects and the stories they tell. "I'm a poet so language is really intriguing and powerful to me."



Courtesy V.O Curations. Photography by Theo Christelis

In one particular piece, she unravels the idea of the words 'landing' versus 'arrival' and the stark difference in meaning between them for diasporic generations. "When I think of the word 'landing' it feels very much like you don't actually know where you are going, you are just plunged in a place. It's so relevant to the diasporic journey that many people with African or grandmother were part of the Windrush generation and even though they were invited to come and work in the UK, there was still a feeling of displacement when they got here. They landed in the western world and were pushed to the edges of society both figuratively and literally as they were confined to specific areas in London like Notting Hill and Brixton, where my family is from." She compares this notion to the idea of 'arriving', which feels more assertive and intentional. "Unlike landing, arriving feels like an act in your control. When I book a holiday or decide to go to LA for a month I'm choosing to arrive somewhere. There's a generational difference there because I've always had access to that even as a kid whereas my mum would always tell me that she didn't go on her first holiday until she was in her late twenties. I'm getting to arrive in places in a way that my parents and my ancestors never did and that's the message."

This type of profound metaphoric storytelling has always been at the core of Dillon's work, though the exhibition is a creative shift for the artist, who first gained prominence for her work in fashion photography and filmmaking. In 2018, while still studying fashion communication and promotion at Central Saint Martins, Dillon created a film in conjunction with Nowness titled Process – a cinematic exploration of the process of Afro hair. A year later, she

Another, 2021

premiered *The Name I Call Myself*, another multilayered film that provides a loving insight into the Black British Queer community. "I love fashion and filmmaking as a medium but I have always been more drawn to other forms of art," Dillon admits. "That's not to say I will never make film or photography again, I'll always do what feels right for me."



Courtesy VO Curations. Photography by Theo Christelis

That being said, Dillon, who is second-generation British-Jamaican, is aware of the institutionalised classism still prevalent in the art world. "As a Black, queer woman from a low socio-economic background, I'm well aware of the elitism and classism in this industry but I think it's also so much about confidence. I read a lot of work by Black authors and creatives who went against the status quo of their time to pursue what they wanted and they went on to become revolutionaries. I'm really inspired by that."

This is reflected in Dillon's work, which often blends mighty references to the likes WEB Du Bois, Vanley Burke and Audre Lorde, with her own modern experiences and observations of society and what Blackness looks and feels like today. In *Nonbody Nonthing No Thing* – a title inspired by American artist Robert Smithson's 1968 provisional theory of nonsite – Dillon employs abstraction as a strategy to resist objectification and what she describes as the "visible invisibility" of a Black woman's body. As rich in meaning as it is in aesthetics, the exhibition is not one to be missed.

Nonbody Nonthing No Thing by Rhea Dillon is at VO Curations in London from 15 October-11 November 2021.

The Best London Shows to See Post Frieze Week

From Rhea Dillon's reflections on labour to the best of Black British fashion, Frieze New Writers have selected the top shows to see this season



Rhea Dillon, 'Nonbody Nonthing No Thing', 2021, exhibition view. Courtesy: the artist and V.O Curations, London

Rhea Dillon

V.O Curations

15 October – 11 November

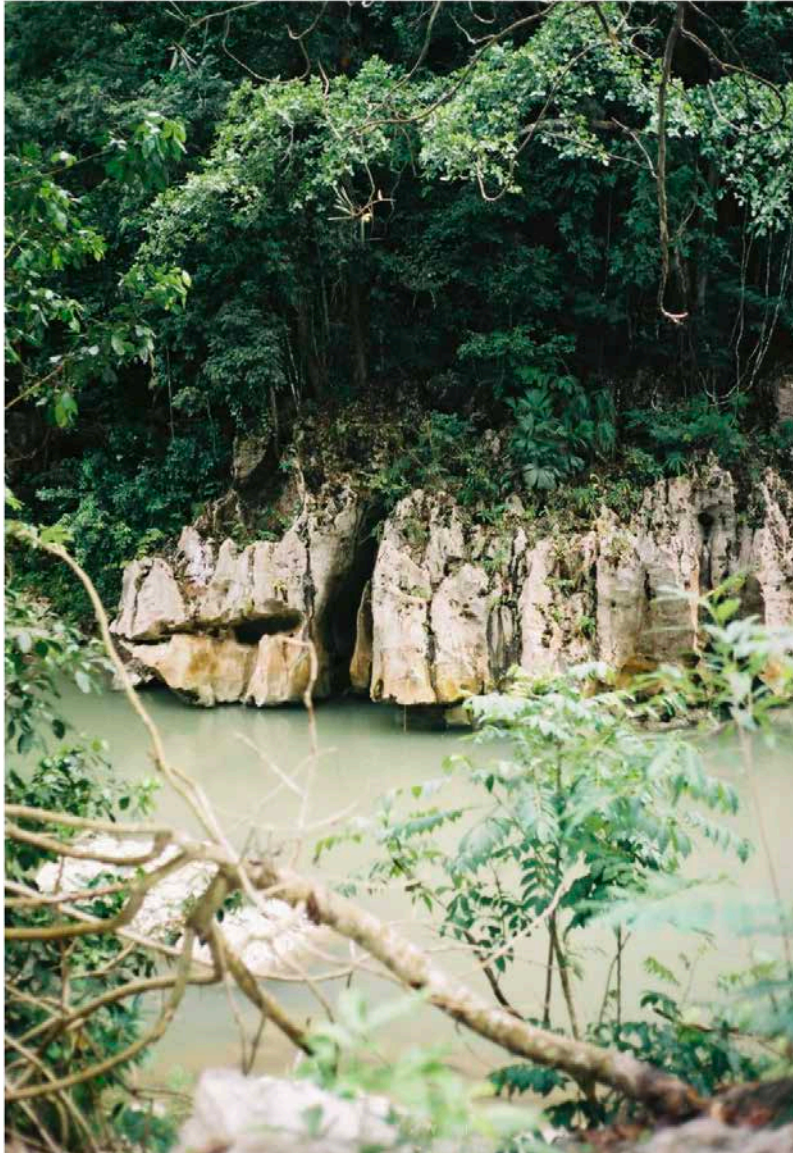
Do you know who cleans the seats on London buses? Ruminating on the erasure of Black British labour, Rhea Dillon fastidiously weaves together painting, sculpture and found objects in her debut solo exhibition, at V.O Curations. Playing with a material tension between durability and fragility, Dillon references members of her British-Jamaican family who have worked for Transport for London. She covers bus seats in ghostly translucent plastic and transforms framed seat backings into fragmented manuscripts. A glass heirloom passed down by her grandmother morphs into hands of service when precariously balanced on a broken breeze block, referencing the makeshift architecture of many Jamaican homes. Affecting, abstracted and, at times, mystical, Dillon's family history becomes a tribute to the ignored and unseen manual work of the Windrush Generation. In light of the dire lack of post-Brexit lorry drivers, the work is a topical reminder of Britain's unacknowledged reliance on immigrant labour. Dillon's consideration of Black Britishness lingers far beyond the bus ride home.— *Donna Marcus Duke*

ssense, 2021

RABID RABBITS AND POT LUCK

A Poem By Rhea Dillon

Text: Rhea Dillon
Photography: Rhea Dillon



The charm of Rhea Dillon's poem, "RABID RABBITS AND POT LUCK," is the form of faith that travels throughout—for luck to work, one has to believe there are possibilities beyond imagining. In all of her work, the London-based artist, filmmaker, writer excavates the unsaid nature of the world around us. Here we read about the earth below our feet: how it can contain the small shelters and tiny bones of animals, as well as all their outsized superstitions.

please cover up the rabbit hole
fill it
twitch your chubby fingers
prod it, suck it, clench a fistful of limbo lost limbo found
scramble out of the—

Dig
dive deep learning the subcutaneous
scraping the cross hatchings of your mothers careful harvestation
blood red raw
clawed down to the smooth bone

flesh eaten by loss of limbo
limbo lost
lost engrained
deep beneath the surface

pullover momentarily
(that lasts a lifetime)
a lifetime of,
'Where's the neck hole of light in the darkness?'

Carry me
carry me fill me up
to the rabbit hole seal
course, I wouldn't stumble and fall. I wouldn't do that to you.

remember:
Potholes are good luck.
step on every one to
hold down the darkness that bubbles below skirting

*Rhea Dillon is an artist, writer, and poet based in London.
Through her practice she examines and abstracts her intrigue of
the 'rules of representation' as a device to undermine
contemporary Western culture as well as seeking to continually
question what constitutes as the ontology of Blackness versus the
ontic.*

Face Everything & Rise: Rhea Dillon talks tracing histories & making space for caring critique on AQNB's Artist Statement podcast

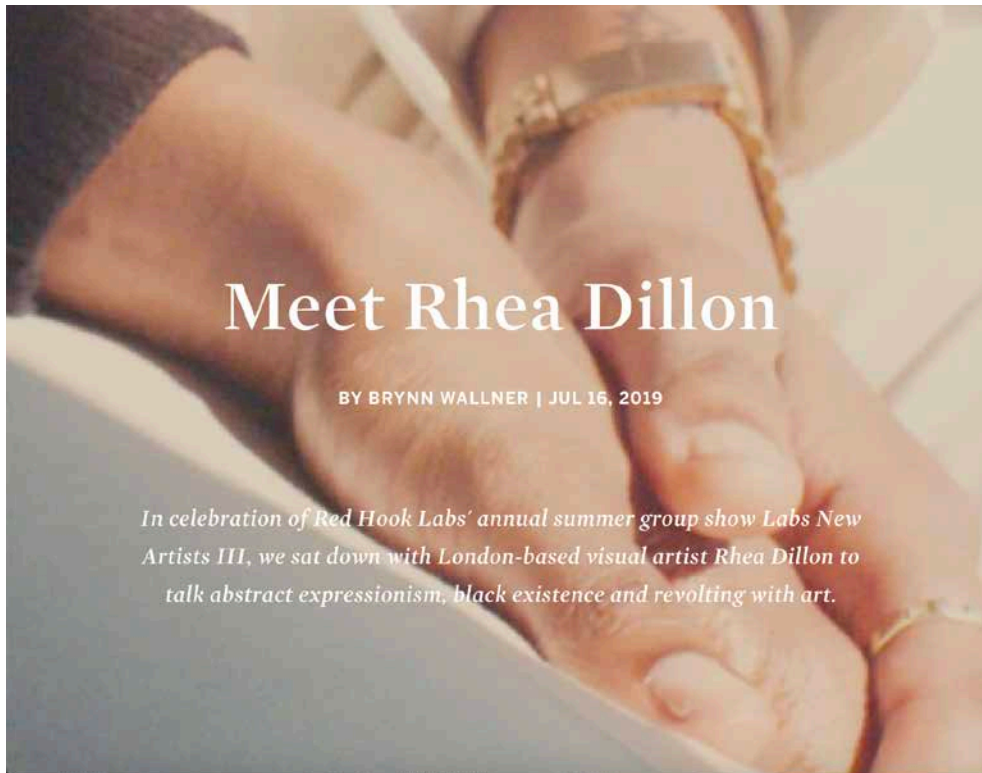
Aqnb, 3 March 2021

Focus

"We should be alert to the toxicity that everyone can have," says [Rhea Dillon](#), about the symbolic angels and demons that inhabit us all and inspire her multidisciplinary practice. "I think that there is space for critique. I think there's just a lot of fear." Speaking to editor [Steph Kretowicz](#) for AQNB's latest [Artist Statement](#) podcast, the London-based artist, writer and poet has made a name for herself with her photography and film work exploring, abstracting and undermining what she calls Western culture's 'rules of representation'.

Dillon has developed her own visual and conceptual language for tracing histories and advocating for "equality-led perspectives on how we visualise Black bodies" with her self-coined term of "humane afrofuturism". Her archival and research practice includes painting, installation, images, video and olfaction, and includes short film 'The Name I Call Myself' and her more recent net art piece *Uchronia et Uchromia*, exhibited online at [External Pages](#) late last year. The extensive questionnaire turns this instrument of governing, sorting and organising people in on itself, by compelling its audience to engage with and reflect on their own beliefs and values, in an act of what [Mandy Harris Williams](#) calls 'critique as care'.

'Face Everything & Rise' is the latest in our Artist Statement podcast series, with past episodes, featuring [Akinola Davis Jr](#), [Cristine Brache](#), [Zach Blas](#), [Legacy Russell](#), and more. The full episode is accessible to our subscribers right now on Patreon. Sign up now: www.patreon.com/aqnb.**



Meet Rhea Dillon

BY BRYNN WALLNER | JUL 16, 2019

In celebration of Red Hook Labs' annual summer group show Labs New Artists III, we sat down with London-based visual artist Rhea Dillon to talk abstract expressionism, black existence and revolting with art.

You work with so many different mediums – photography, film, writing and more. Tell us about your creative process.

I tend to choose my medium after I have solidified an idea. I could write a poem that actually evolves into a film or a photography series that then acts as research for a future piece. As ideas develop, I'll allow myself to bring in a medium that I haven't typically worked with before, for example the video installation I made this year – *The Name I Call Myself* – incorporated a scent being diffused into the space.



RHEA DILLON BY JUSTIN FRENCH

When did you get into art?

My first obsession was Salvador Dalí. The world that he created – it's so far from what I actually do now – but the fact that he was able to transport you into this crazy world... like, what the hell? This guy is a freak in the best way, he really knew what to say and he created such beautiful things around that world, which actually looked like a reflection of my brain at the time. I was

Sotheby's, 2019

probably 5 years old, all of those loopy things were going on in my mind anyway. That excitement at the idea that I could create my own world took shape then.



IMAGES FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: RHEA DILLON, LAMMY III, MOWALOLA III, FAVOUR I AND RHEA II, [FROM THE SERIES 'PROCESS'], 2017

Tell us about the work you're showing at the Red Hook Labs New Artist III show this month.

It's a selection of work from three different projects, one of which is ongoing. There's one called SISTAHS that I shot in Paris at a time when there was a lot of police brutality and murders of young black people across America and London, and it is never not intense to keep seeing that in the news. I was also thinking about what it means to have a girlhood and that kind of stereotype of how girls don't look after each other versus how boys do. Black girls especially have a stigma of being rude and argumentative, so I wanted to strip all of these ideas away completely.

Another project in the show is *Process*, which is in a sense the prequel to Process the film. I wanted to explore what it would be like to pull people out of their hair washing process and document that throughout. I want to highlight that black and afro hair can be beautiful, even the hidden states of it that you never really see.

“The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman. The

Sotheby's, 2019

most unprotected person in America, is the black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the black woman.”

MALCOLM X, THE FUNERAL SERVICE OF RONALD STOKES, MAY 5, 1962

The last piece is from a work in progress, a project I'm doing on girls – specifically black girls – who go to private school and/or are more affluent. Instead of a poverty-stricken image of blackness in society, I wanted to look at girls from a wealthy background. I got an art scholarship to my secondary school, and there were only two or three black girls max in my whole year. I went back to that school and chatted with some of the current black students and one of the girls said something brilliantly devastating: “When people think of private school girls, I don't think they'd ever think of someone that looks like us.” That really struck me, because it brings up this idea of representation and the allowance of that existence to be a more affluent black girl or, going even further back, to be an educated black woman. So often we see the ghettoization of blackness in the city landscape. I've never really seen black girls in fields, and South London, where I'm from, is full of them. I want to show that blackness truly is free.



RHEA DILLON, STILL FROM *THE NAME I CALL MYSELF*, 2019

Do you mostly rely on personal experiences to inform your artwork?

I do, but I'm not restricted by them. As the creator, my work will always be intertwined with my thoughts, feelings and observations (I made them after all); but as a young, black, queer female, my existence is already overlooked by much of the world. Something that always stays with me is when Malcolm X said, “The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America, is the black woman. The most neglected person in America, is the black woman.” (from a speech that Malcolm X gave on May 5, 1962 at the Los Angeles funeral service of Ronald Stokes, who was

Sotheby's, 2019

killed by the LAPD). It makes sense to revolt in a way that I can do best, which is through my art.

Tell us more about that drive to revolt.

When you're born, you're introduced to these memories of your ancestors and what they had to go through. As much as it is beautiful, memory is a heavy thing. It's important to not get swallowed up by the weight of this history despite society's constructs being a constant reminder of its existence. I revolt against this through my art – paintings I've been working on and sculpture I want to delve into – I've been leaning into the abstract space to expose the new stories that could be told, the new memories that should be made.



RHEA DILLON, STILL FROM *THE NAME I CALL MYSELF*, 2019

What excites you about abstract expressionism - as an artist yourself, and also as a viewer?

There's a series of black art retrospectives at the Tate in London that just started off with [abstract artist] Frank Bowling, which is so important because he's this artist who's been exploring color just for color's sake, getting lost in these worlds, blackness to the side. Only later did he realize a lot of the light that's in his work was because, subliminally, he was thinking of the light in Guyana, which is where he was born. It's always there, you know? [Your blackness] is always there but it doesn't have to be as apparent. We're Black and we know it. It's important for yourself as an artist to have these moments – to step away from that identity – I'm black, but that's not all I am. For example, I could have that Frank Bowling moment and then come back to fighting politically for rights. It's important for the artist to make that decision themselves now. Before, [black artists] almost had to express themselves that way because it was the only safe space for them to enter art in the 60s and 70s, but now we can be much freer and we have a greater scope to work within.

Rhea is one of the twenty-five emerging, international photographers, unrepresented by a gallery or an agency, selected to partake in the Labs New Artists III show from open call by a jury of industry leaders. You can view her work, as well as the rest of the

Sotheby's, 2019

exhibit at Red Hook Labs until July 28.

Red Hook Labs

133-135 Imlay Street

Brooklyn, New York

11231

About the Author

Brynn Wallner

Brynn Wallner is a writer and multimedia producer at Sotheby's in New York, focused on creating video and article content about culture, emerging artists, the internet and assorted topics orbiting the art world.

FASHION

This Visual Artist Is Challenging British Society's Perception of Race and Gender

BY ESTHER ADAMS ACHARA

April 30, 2019



Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon

It's hard to grasp that British visual artist Rhea Dillon is just 23 years old. Weighty references from W.E.B. Du Bois, Kerry James Marshall, and Vanley Burke surface within her multimedia shows, which set out to challenge racial stereotypes head-on. Opening in an intimate space on Bateman's Row in London this week is her latest project titled *The Name I Call Myself*, a multilayered film that provides a tender snapshot of the lives of those who identify as LGBTQ+ within the British black community. From a non-gender-conforming parent and child playing together at home to a drag king transforming into character, Dillon's deliberate lens lingers, documentary-style, over her subjects,

Vogue, 2019

while string instruments and the voice of African-American poet and speaker Audre Lorde provide ample accompaniment to draw the audience into their world.

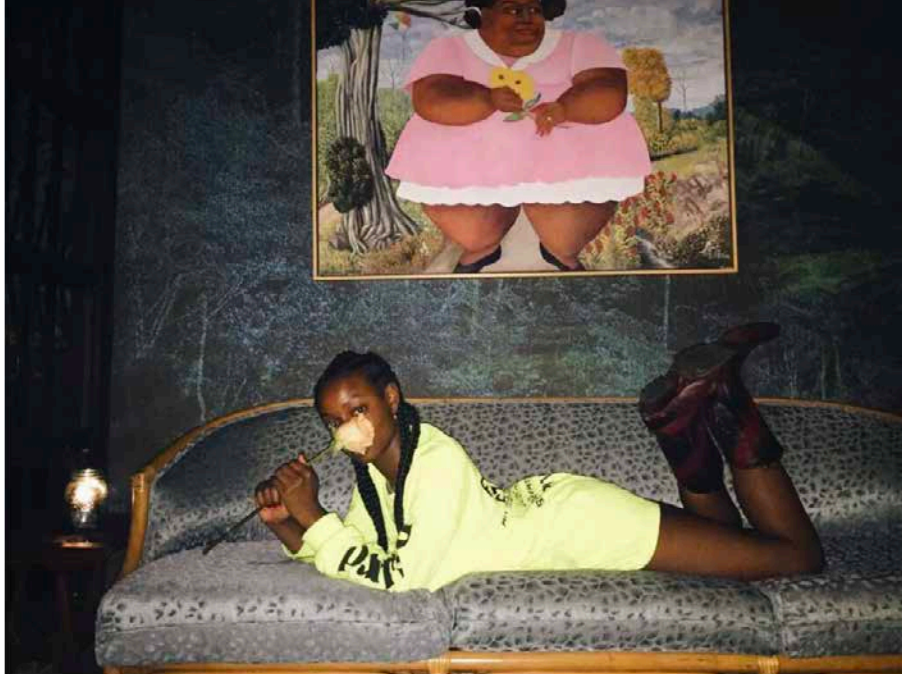


Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon

Making searing political statements through powerful art forms may seem like an unconventional m.o. for someone who is studying fashion communication and promotion at London's Central Saint Martins, as Dillon is (this latest film doubles as her final project). But delve a little deeper into her personal life, and the identity-defining forces behind her current trajectory are hard to ignore. For one thing, she's a second-generation Jamaican living in London navigating the racial tensions that unjustly come with that territory. And for another, she's part of a collective called BBZ, or Babes, a title inspired by Lorde's autobiography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. "Zami is the LGBTQ+ community, and BBZ stands for Bold Brazen Zamis," she explains. "We're a group of womxn—spelled with an x because it now includes trans folk as well—who create platforms for queer and trans folk

Vogue, 2019

of color in South London. We do exhibitions, throw parties, and curate for Afropunk and Glastonbury.”



Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon

But back to her current installation. While she’s clearly making waves out in the wider world, Dillon is determined to push the boundaries within her own work. In an unconventional move, she’s enlisted the help of perfume brand Byredo; their recognizably intense aroma *Bal d’Afrique*—a fusion of notes blending lemon and neroli with African marigold and Moroccan cedarwood—will fill the performance space to magnify the experience on a sensory level. This fragrance resonated with Dillon in particular because, she says, it reinforces “the idea of the African diaspora” that is a recurring theme in her work. While Dillon’s previous projects have challenged long-held stigmas surrounding the black community—“Sistahs,” a photography exhibition celebrating positive female relationships, and *Process*, a short film about natural hair, for instance—this latest endeavor aims to shine a spotlight on issues closer to home. “I was thinking about some of the problems within the black community that need to be addressed before pointing the finger out at the world,” she says. “As a stereotype, we don’t look kindly on those who

Vogue, 2019

identify as LGBTQ. This film is my response to that. It's a reclamation of myself."

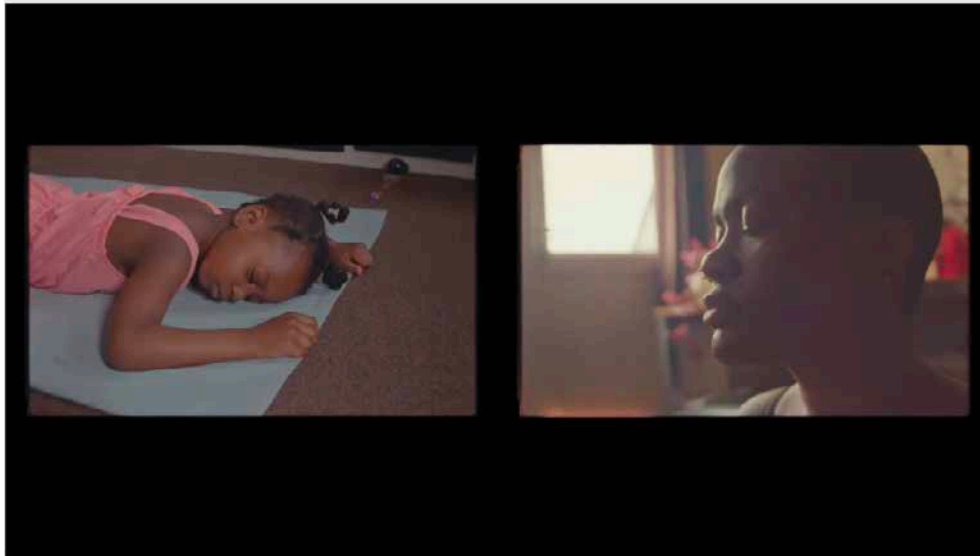


Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon

Here, Dillon speaks to *Vogue* about her new work, just ahead of its London debut.

What kick-started the idea for the film, *The Name I Call Myself*?

I went to Jamaica last year to meet my family for the first time. My aunt there is a police inspector, so I asked her if she could help me to meet up with a Gully Queen. I wanted to find out how life was for them following the shoot with Hood By Air years ago and even the recent [British] *Vogue* shoot with Tim Walker. I got to talk to an amazing person called Peaches, and they said life was so much better now; they could walk down the street hand in hand. Obviously, there are still problems—they are still labeled Gully Queens, and they still live in the gully. But I was thinking on ideas like that. Also, I'm part of the queer community in London. So all these things came into play.

Vogue, 2019

What is the main message of the film?

It's about allowing people space. Within my own queerness, it's a space to call my own where I don't have to present myself to society as one linear frame. When it comes to nongendered folk, that idea goes a little further; it's almost as though they don't want to be easily read by society—they want to be known by whatever pronoun they choose. It's about an ownership of something that you yourself know but that society doesn't always know.

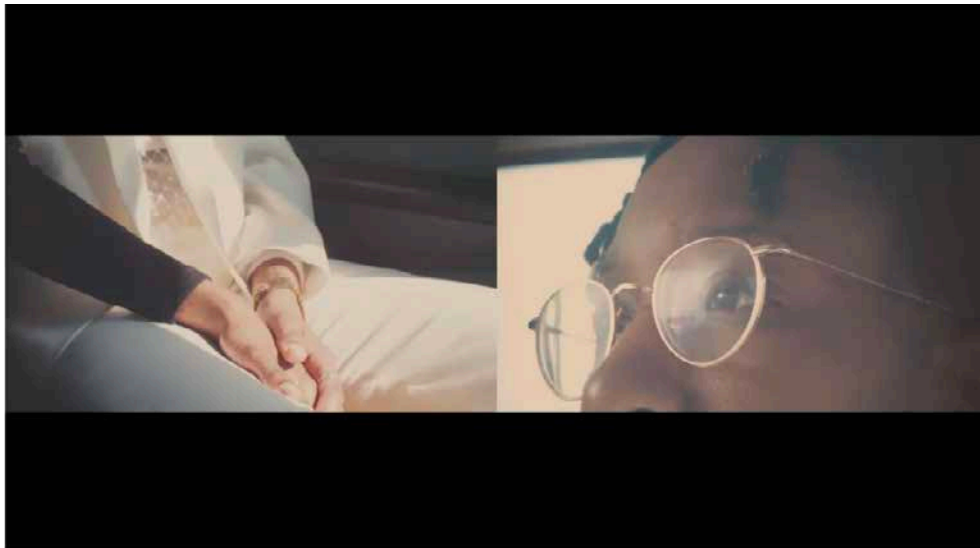


Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon

What is one of the most significant moments in the film for you?

In one of the first scenes, you see a child running, and that's an important moment for me in terms of thinking about how black children and black movement is usually portrayed. One of the references for that shot is Mammy Two Shoes from *Tom and Jerry*. She was the older black lady; you never saw her face, you only ever saw her hands and her plumpish body as she moved across the screen. With that in mind, I wanted to look at how black movement is thought of before you actually think of the subject as being an actual

Vogue, 2019

person. I'm trying to get the audience to reflect on that scene and think, *Okay, so this child is running; maybe they've stolen something, maybe they're running away from something, maybe they are running from the police*, which we are so used to seeing as a narrative. But then at the end, as we finally go through the process and the shots, they see that it's just a kid running down the street being free. So, that's one scene that could be viewed simply, but actually I'm trying to push a bigger reference.



Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon

Why did you choose to work in film rather than any other medium?

Where film here is exciting, particularly in this super-connected social media age, is that you can almost pause someone in time and really help the audience to delve into their world. The topics I'm referencing are often ones media and society don't have many visuals for yet. In my dissertation for my degree at Central Saint Martins, I talk about Humane Afrofuturism (where black people are depicted in normal, mundane situations), and although it's exciting, it actually further alienates black people from society. I feel like there are practitioners right now, like Kerry

Vogue, 2019

James Marshall and Arthur Jafa, even designers like Grace Wales Bonner, who are elevating black people in an everyday sense. For instance, one of Kerry James Marshall's super-famous paintings is of a girl walking a dog down the street. It's really just a girl walking a dog down the street, but why we're marveled by it is that the visual of a young black girl being so free in society has not existed until now, and that's the problem. That's also why *Process*, the film I did at the end of last year, is important. It asks, "What do you hope the future of beauty looks like?" And the answer for black girls, most specifically, is simple: It's where their hair just gets appreciated and respected.

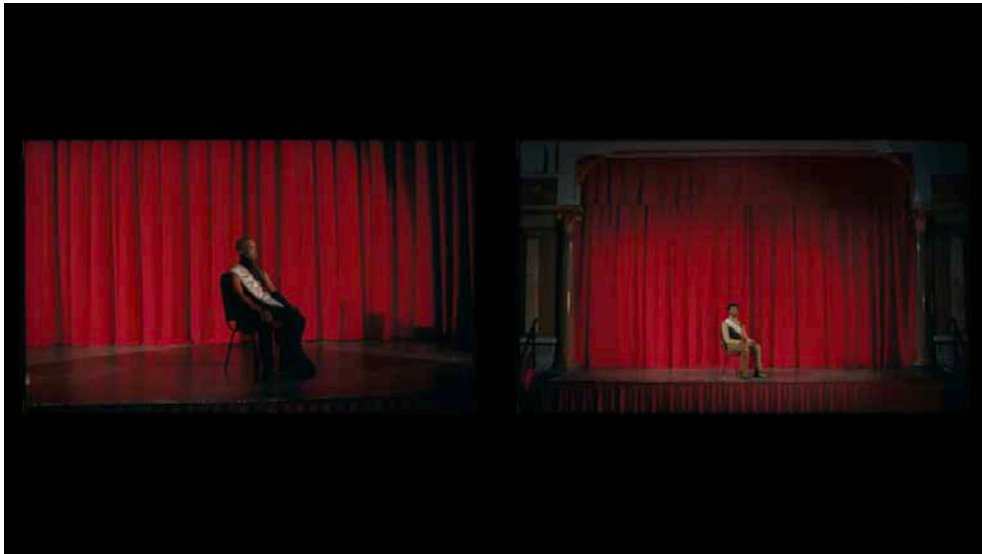


Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon



Photo: Courtesy of Rhea Dillon

Vogue, 2019

Talk me through the perfume element.

Scent is the strongest of our five senses and helps evoke the best memories. When you recall something with a smell attached to it, the memory comes to life in your imagination. I love when installations and pieces of work push you further, and scent helps make that happen. Much like sound, it can change how the audience perceives things. It takes an idea to a whole new level.

Bal d'Afrique is a perfume that mixes scents from Africa and Paris. It works perfectly with the idea of the African diaspora coming together. The other reason I love that crossover is that, in the show, the film is presented across two screens. Duality is a big aspect of this piece. I was looking at the idea of double consciousness put forward by W.E.B. Du Bois and how that could be applied to blackness.

What compels you to be an artist?

I think a common answer for most artists is that it is the one true expression. I don't think it's the only thing I'm good at, but for me it is a place where you can really conceive and pinpoint something quite special and create a moment.

The Name I Call Myself

Preview May 1; on view from May 2 to 4

RSVP for limited viewing slots as follows: May 2, 1:30 p.m.

and 7:00 p.m.; May 3, 1:30 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.; May 4, 1:30 p.m., 3:00 p.m., and 7:00 p.m.

rsuptnicm@gmail.com

Rhea Dillon explores black existence and politics in her art as a “means of bringing about change”



Date

19 November 2018

Words

Ruby Boddington

Unlike most creatives for whom concepts chop and change but means of communication often stay the same, London-based visual artist Rhea Dillon chooses her medium *after* she has solidified an idea. “I could write a poem that actually evolves into a film or a photography series that then acts as research for a future piece,” she tells It’s Nice That. Whether it’s photography, film, casting or even writing, Rhea’s holistic approach to creativity stems from a love of storytelling; uncovering pertinent, personal and collective narratives.

Having studied at Central Saint Martins, Rhea’s introduction to the power of rendering the real-world creatively came during her teenage years. “I think with photography it was the idea that I could conduct an image from my mind in an instant,” she explains. “I remember shooting at my school parties and everyone looking forward to the photos ‘coming out’ the next day on Facebook to live the night all over again. It was fun to be a provider of lasting memories and then, later, I realised I could take that further.” This understanding has now seen her working for the likes of Nike, ShowStudio, *Riposte* and *Rollacoaster* on a plethora of projects.

It's Nice That, 2018

In a recent film titled *Process* which premiered on Nowness, Rhea explored the often overlooked and misunderstood particularities of afro upkeep. “*Process* was all about never seeing black hair being washed and exposing those stages of a process that needs to be ‘diarised-blocked out-half day set aside’ for,” she outlines. “I am a planner as a black woman. As a person with afro hair, you can’t afford to not have it together.” An intimate depiction, the short explores the “crown” that the hair on your head represents as a black female: “this crown I hold on my head is heavy laden with politics and societal pressures,” Rhea adds. Through a combination of image and sound, the film “opens up the sensory experience of the hair ritual of a black person from start to finish. To provocatively push the audience to experience and therefore understand the weight of five little words, ‘Sorry, I’m washing my hair...’”



Equally as imbued with sentiment, Rhea’s photo series *Sistahs* explores the friendship that exists between a group of young black women from Paris. “I feel there is such a lack of images of this carefree nature of black girls in the art world from trawling through photo series after photo series depicting ‘youth’ and seeing a lack of young black people in these visuals,” she tells us, adding that, “Black girls have a stigma of being rude and argumentative so I wanted to strip all of these ideas away completely.” The result is a series upholding the freedom and playfulness that exists within black youth with compassion and a sense of allegiance.

Ultimately, however, Rhea’s choice of concepts and media reflects her want to transport others to new worlds in order to help the

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advancement of societal structures. “Surrendering to storytelling is so important for existence as I remember reading this quote: ‘art is everything we hope life would be,’” Rhea recalls, concluding that, “I think art is everything life *can* be, which is why I often use my art to explore black existence and politics as it’s my means of bringing about change.”



Above
Rhea Dillon: Sistahs

It's Nice That, 2018



Above
Rhea Dillon: Sistahs

It's Nice That, 2018



Above
Rhea Dillon: Sistahs



Above
Rhea Dillon

It's Nice That, 2018



Above
Rhea Dillon



Above
Rhea Dillon: Sunday Best



CULTURE

celebrate juneteenth with no sesso x rhea dillon's black angel film

The gender-blending label collaborates with photographer and filmmaker Rhea Dillon to release *Black Angel* – a meditation on themes of restraint, freedom and identity.

By [Tom Ivin](#) | 27 June 2018, 10:29am

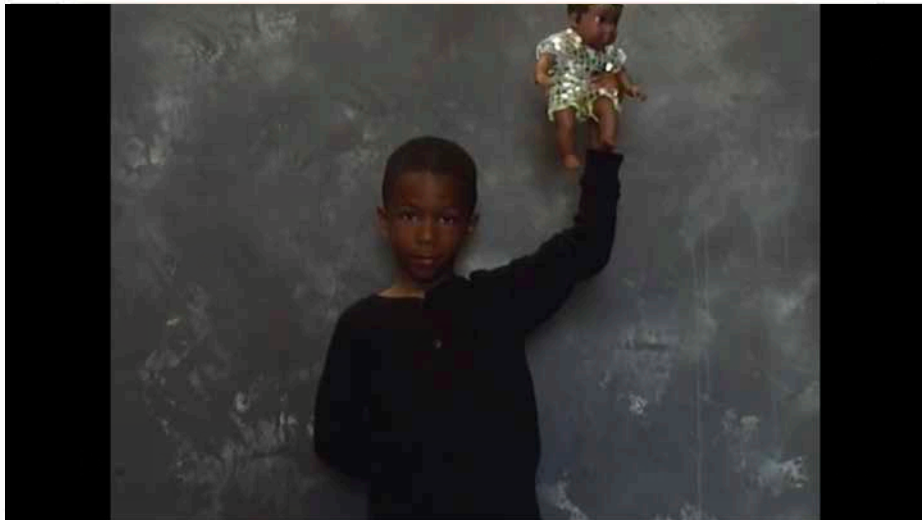
With a penchant for knitwear and a disregard for gender norms, No Sesso is the gender-blending label from 27-year-old Pierre Davis, quietly making waves in the L.A. underground.

To celebrate [Juneteenth](#) – a US holiday recognising the final emancipation of black slaves in Texas – No Sesso has collaborated with photographer and filmmaker Rhea Dillon to release *Black Angel* – a meditation on themes of restraint, freedom and identity. Premiering last week in L.A., the film is styled entirely in No Sesso's 'Gems of

i-D, 2018

Hoover Street Saint Dunn' collection and highlights the lack of innocence that black people are allowed in an increasingly right wing America.

Rhea looked to recent tragedies as a catalyst, questioning the very nature of liberty in the United States. "Too many times black people are unlawfully killed without even being able to put their hands up in innocence," she says. "Instead, they are instantly perceived as a threat to society from birth, especially for young black boys -- so tell me, is there any innocence for us? Are we all just angels on the land awaiting heaven's open door?"



In a series of vignettes shot on a mini DV camera, the visuals play out like singles on an album, a conceptual collection of shorts that unite for the same message. Each scene has the gorgeous intimacy of a home movie and the quiet political power of a silent protest. Rhea cast friends and family of the brand, as well as street cast contributors from surrounding neighbourhoods to provide voices unique voices in the film.

Rhea told us, "through No Sesso's garments there is no conforming identity. There's no denotation of male or female. You're allowed to just be who you want to be regardless of society's rules. This film will address and display the freedom of the black being, being allowed to just be."

Alert yourself to the positive power of non-comformity with Black Angel, and free yourself by just being you.

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