

BOOKS FROM THE SUN KING OF THE EAST

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BLACKITY

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FOREWORD

Taking care of contemporary art documentation and making it accessible for research and knowledge production is the foundation of our collective work at Artexxe. The development and production of Blackity are made possible through a relationship of trust and a shared questioning of the Artexxe collection holdings forged between Blackity curator Joana Joachim and the Artexxe staff since 2015. On behalf of everyone here, I would like to thank Joana Joachim for bringing her research to bear on the Artexxe holdings and for working with all of us to create a space to have difficult and generative conversations about the documentation, historicization and representation of contemporary Black Canadian art in our collection and within the knowledge ecology of Canadian art histories. In addition, I would personally like to thank Joana for staying the course on Blackity through a complex period of time during which the function and role of the exhibition had to be reconfigured.

This exhibition is a mapping and a call to action that takes stock of a field through the nature and scope of its documentation and sheds light on the important work to be done. I am extremely pleased that Blackity will live in our gallery until Spring 2022 and that the online components of the exhibition will share Joana's work beyond Artexxe's walls for many years to come.

In closing, I thank Artexxe's Board of Directors for their support of research and experimentation in the collection and our public and private donors of documents and financial resources who support Artexxe's work.

All best wishes and welcome to the exhibition,

Sarah Watson
General and Artistic Director, Artexxe

INTRODUCTION

Blackity delineates the trajectory of contemporary Black Canadian art as witnessed by Artexxe's collection between the 1970s and the 2010s. The exhibition gathers some key moments and people to consider the thematic, aesthetic or conceptual threads linking them. By placing these documents in relation to one another, curator Joana Joachim begins to trace a temporal cartography of Black Canadian art history. The exhibition is presented both on site and online. The digital space is conceptualized as a companion to the physical exhibition offering a glimpse into the Black Canadian art milieu beyond the borders of Artexxe's collection.

The vertical bands seen throughout the exhibition are a visualization of data pulled from e-artexxe. The upward motion of the disconnected stripes emphasize the fragmentary nature of this history echoing the trends around documenting Black Canadian art practices. Thinner bands represent a small number of documents during a certain time period in the collection whereas thicker ones represent an abundance of information. The digital exhibition includes audio clips from the curator as well as short notes and expanded annotations nodding to various people, projects, documents and videos from outside the Artexxe collection.

- Joana Joachim, curator

“BLIPS IN TIME” A CONSTELLATION OF BLACK CANADIAN ARTISTIC TRADITION FROM 1970 ON

The cyclical dis-remembering of Black Canadian artistic practices has long been characteristic of art institutions on Turtle Island [1]. Indeed, as Yaniya Lee remarks, “Black artistic achievement has consistently been edited into the margins, leaving the Canadian cultural imaginary overwhelmingly white [2]”. Yet, Andrea Fatona notes in an interview with Liz Ikiriko, there are clear periods, “blips”, during which Black Canadian arts practitioners’ work makes itself known despite this phenomenon [3]. Critical writing and archival documentation of these moments are crucial to the process of inscribing them into collective memory and into larger Canadian art historical discourses. What might such texts reveal about Black Canadian art history if viewed in a continuum?

Blackity delineates the trajectory of contemporary Black Canadian art as witnessed by Artex’s collection since the 1970s. The exhibition gathers documentation representative of some key moments and people to consider the thematic, aesthetic or conceptual threads linking them. By placing these documents in relation to one another, this exhibition begins to trace a temporal cartography of Black Canadian art history and interrogates the potential in viewing this history as a constellation rather than a linear canon [4].

Looking at some of the earliest documents that feature Black artists in the Artex collection, it seems that from the 1970s leading into the 1980s Black artists were making work exploring their interests and skill without thematically or conceptually centring around “identity” or “representation”. Tim Whiten for instance produced abstract drawings using graphite on paper as well as sculptures using raw, natural materials such as stone, wood and leather. Whiten’s work was focused on exploring phenomenological experiences of natural materials [5]. Russell T. Gordon’s renditions

of torn and frayed paper edges in acrylic on canvas were at once abstract and highly realistic, thus creating a visual tug of war between a representational reading and the formal and material qualities of paint on canvas [6].

The mid 1970s were characterized by retrospective exhibitions which were white male-dominated with the occasional Black male artist in the mix. There were also sporadically solo exhibitions which featured the same few artists: Tim Whiten; Stan Douglas; Michael Fernandes, Russell T. Gordon, and James Shirley. The documentation stemming from this period gives the impression that there were only a handful of Black male artists making work in Canada at the time because only they were visible in the art milieu. The narrowness of the documentation fails to bear witness to Kadejah McCall, for example, who had been showing work since 1967 [7]. McCall, like many other women artists by the late 1980s, became vocal about the political implications of both her gender and race through her work.

Towards the late 1980s these types of criticism of the art scene’s exclusion of not only Black people in general but of Black women in particular became more prevalent [8]. There was an increase in feminist and community art initiatives. As such, Black women artists used their work as a means to address how raceless, genderless approaches in the art scene made it such that they weren’t visible or being regarded in a serious manner. Some key exhibitions from this time include “Women on Site” (1987), “Sight Specific” (1988), “Fear of Others: Art Against Racism” (1989), and “Black Wimmin: When and Where We Enter” (1989). Writers were also contributing to the push for more inclusion by taking a critical look at art institutions and funding bodies in Canada. Indeed, Marlene NourbeSe Philip’s recurring arguments in *Fuse* are later echoed in Andrea Fatona’s PhD dissertation “‘Where Outreach Meets Outrage’: Racial Equity Policy Formation at The Canada Council for the Arts (1989 – 1999)” [9].

As the 1980s rolled into the next decade, the documentation shows an uptick in the number of Black women artists being featured in group exhibitions and the anti-racist arts discourse continues. By then, Canadian “multiculturalism” efforts were in full

[1] Nelson, Charmaine A. et al. *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, Resistance*. Concord, Ont.: Captus Press Inc., 2018. <https://e-artex.ca/id/eprint/29912/>

[2] Lee, Yaniya. “How Canada Forgot Its Black Artists” *FADER*. August 31, 2016. <https://www.thefader.com/2016/08/31/black-artists-in-canada> Accessed July 23, 2021.

[3] Ikiriko, Liz. “Speaking Ourselves Into Being” *C Magazine* 144: Winter 2020. <https://cmagazine.com/issues/144/speaking-ourselves-into-being>.

[4] “Commit us to memory: Black Women curators interrupting the canon” conference, Vancouver Art Gallery and The State of Blackness, May 27, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT1-vNh2Lfs&t=2s>

[5] Greenwood, Michael. Tim Whiten: Sculpture and Drawings. Art Gallery of York University.

[6] Brown, Sylvia. Russell T. Gordon: *Selected Works: 1978 - 1982*. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, 1982, 3-4. <https://e-artex.ca/id/eprint/32145/>

[7] Balz, Suzan Dionne and Bindner-Ouellette, Alison and Fuglem, Karilee and Werden, Dyana. *La constitution d’une nation = The Constitution of a Nation*. Montréal, Qc: Article, 1993. <https://e-artex.ca/id/eprint/6169/>

[8] Fatona, Andrea. “Claiming Space: The Development of Black Canadian Cultural Activism of the 1980s and 1990s” *Towards an African Canadian Art History: Art, Memory, Resistance*. Nelson, Charmaine A. Ed. Concord, Ont.: Captus Press Inc., 2018, 361-375. <https://e-artex.ca/id/eprint/29912/>

[9] Fatona, Andrea. “‘Where Outreach Meets Outrage’: Racial Equity Policy Formation at the Canada Council for the Arts (1989-1999).” University of Toronto, 2011.

swing and a multitude of exhibitions and initiatives were carving out space for Black voices within arts institutions [10]. Many of these efforts were punctual and event-based with what seems to have been little structural change accompanying them. This period also featured key exhibitions which later came to define Black Canadian art history as we know it. Chief among them would be CELAFI, an acronym for "Celebrating African Identity", created by the group Canadian Artists Network: Black Arts in Action (CAN: BAlA) and was one of Canada's largest international festivals of Black art. Other crucial exhibitions include "[T(he)re]" (1996), "Urban Fictions" (1997), and "Style Council" (1999). Black artists were also organizing and creating collective initiatives to enact change. The work of Buseje Bailey, founding member of DAWA: the Diasporic African Women Artist Collective (1984), is visible in documents throughout the 1990s. Notably, these moments and people were seldom taken up critically by writers and historians, leaving their archival traces limited to primary documents from the events themselves [11].

The video cassette recording of "Status of Canadian Women in the Arts: A National Panel Discussion," hosted by the Women's Art Resource Centre in 1994, reveals that the discourse and challenges faced by Black women artists at the time remain stunningly similar to the present day [12]. Documents from the 1990s make it clear that many artists brought their identities and social positions to the fore of their work as a way to push for social change both in and out of the art scene. Artists during this decade claimed cultural identity, representation, Blackness, sexuality and gender as specific experiences which needed to be acknowledged and engaged with directly.

The intersectional approaches of the 1990s continued to be a central factor in Black Canadian art practices well into the 2000s. The exhibition "Tribute" (2005), for instance, featured artists Jim Adams, Hollis Baptiste, Michael Chambers, Grace Channer, June Clark, James Dorsey, Dionne Simpson, Tim Whiten, and Neville Clarke, who also took up the mantle of curatorship in order to bring together Black Canadian artists and place them within a larger Canadian art historical context. Similarly, "Reading the Images: Poetics of the Black Diaspora" (2006), co-curated by Andrea Fatona, featured artists Deanna Bowen (who was also involved as a co-curator) and Michael Fernandes among others. The travelling exhibition engaged with issues around colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. This pocket of Black art practices in Canada was marked in part by a broadening of thematic concerns [13].

[10]NourbeSe Philip. "The 'Multicultural' Whitewash: Racism in Ontario's Arts Funding System" Fuse Magazine, 1987, Vol. XI, No. 3, 13-22; Fatona 2011; Ikiriko 2020.

[11]Ikiriko 2020.

[12]Anon. Status of Canadian Women in the Arts: A National Panel Discussion, 1994. Toronto, Ont.: Women's Art Resource Centre, 1994. <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/9669/>

[13]Lee, Yaniya. "The Women Running the Show" Canadian Art. October 2, 2017. <https://canadianart.ca/features/women-running-show/> Accessed July 23, 2021.

During this time, interdisciplinary research-based practices steeped in Black studies and archival research also began to emerge as one strategy to discuss the longstanding history of Black people and of anti-Black racism on Turtle Island. Artists Sylvia D. Hamilton, Camille Turner and Deanna Bowen are notable examples of these interdisciplinary approaches in action. Hamilton's films and multimedia installations bring together objects of material culture, poetry and archives to bear witness to the histories of slavery and Black subjugation in the Maritimes. Turner, for her part, used speculation and brought to life narratives pulled from Canadian archives through performances, videos and installations. In her practice, Bowen explored her family history from their roots of enslavement in the American South to their migration and settlement in the Canadian West. Her work also delved into institutional archives, critically examining the lineage of white supremacy in Canada's popular culture and media [14]. The volume of documentation in Artexte's collection seems to point to a plateau after the 1990s "Black cultural boom", so to speak. This may be linked to the stagnation of institutional interest and diminished funding [15]. As a result, several artists, curators and cultural workers seem to have faded from view, or at least documentary traces of their work dwindle. Fatona describes the phenomenon as follows:

"I have to say that erasure continues today, even though in a way there are these blips in time where the work [we are doing] is visible. I can give some examples. I just did an exhibition of Winsom's work at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) and there hasn't been much written about it. I think it requires a deep drilling down in the creation of critical discursive materials that will stand and that will circulate, to allow these works to actually reside within the discussion around Canadian art and Black Canadian art. Without the critical engagement with the work, when the work doesn't quite find its place in the archives, it seems to come and go" [16].

This long-standing lack of engagement, of aftercare, if you will, in relation to the cultural production of Black artists and curators in Canada is yet another contributing factor to the forgetting of these histories. It is important here to also mention that a collection such as Artexte's is a reflection of the individuals working within cultural institutions at a given time. The collection is greatly dependent on its network's attentiveness to the work of Black artists. The presence of mind of curators, historians, librarians and archivists to see the work

[14]Bowen, Deanna et al. Other Places: Reflections on Media Arts in Canada. Toronto, Ontario: Media Arts Network of Ontario; Toronto, Ontario: Public Books, 2019. <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/31632/>

[15]Fatona 2011; Ikiriko 2020; Lee 2016.

[16]Ikiriko 2020.

of Black arts practitioners as valuable and worthy of historical preservation is a crucial piece of the process. Without that step, these archival traces are inevitably lost. In other words, someone needs to have made the decision to create and place these documents in the boxes at Artexte, for example, in order for them to be present tomorrow. In short, the apparent dip in Black cultural action of the “post-boom” moment may be indicative of parallel institutional phenomena which converged to create an archival vacuum.

As the 2010s began, the documents in Artexte’s collection indicate a rapid increase in the number of exhibitions and events relating to Black diasporic art in Canada especially from 2014 on. This may be attributed to a series of initiatives including for instance the “State of Blackness: From Production to Presentation” conference (2014) and the creation of Canadian chapters of Black Lives Matter which were pivotal moments in Black Canadian history [17]. Of course, this increased visibility in the collection is also a result of the heightened alertness of Artexte librarians to the spotty record of Black art representation and documentation not only in the collection but also across Canada [18].

Further, during this decade, artists increasingly used their practices as a form of activism not just to inform/reveal/discuss social issues but to enact change and perform care within their own communities. Artist, educator, activist and Vanier scholar Syrus Marcus Ware’s practice for example used durational performances and community-based collaboration in tandem with his activist work. Similarly, artists Michèle Pearson Clarke and Charmaine Lurch work collaboratively with community members to create work. While Pearson Clarke explored the theoretical notions of ‘affective grit’, Lurch investigated the relationships between humans and the natural world [19].

[17]Ikiriko 2020; Ware, Syrus Marcus and Diverlus, Rodney and Hudson, Sandy and Riley, Randolph and Jones, El and Dias, Giselle and Khan, Janaya and Keleta-Mae, Naila and Turner, Camille and Jama, Sarah and Inkster, Dana and Opaleke, QueenTite and Dryden, OmiSoore and Galette, Paige and Arauz, Silvia Argentina and Massa, Gilary and Jordan, Anique. *Until We Are Free: Reflections on Black Lives Matter in Canada*. Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press, 2020 <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/31723/>. Diamond, Sara; Fatona, Andrea and Spicanovic, Vladimir. *The State of Blackness: From Production to Presentation*. Toronto, Ont.: OCADU, 2014. <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/24587/>; *The State of Blackness* <https://thestateofblackness.format.com/>

[18]Nolte, Victoria and Zhang, Tianmo and Harringa, Charissa Von and Larose, Delphine and Joachim, Joana and Harkness, Tamara and Lakhri, Tarek and Montpetit, Gabrielle and Colombo, Cindy and Wexler, Samantha. *EAHR @ Artexte: Uncovering Asian Canadian and Black Canadian Artistic Production*. Montréal, Qc: Ethnocultural Art Histories Research Group (EAHR), 2015.<https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/26218/>

[19]Cosbert Miller, Letticia. “A Habit of Tenderness: Michèle Pearson Clarke’s Investigation into Vulnerability and Black Visuality” *BlackFlash* August 26, 2019.

Amelia Jones uses the term “ethnic envy” to describe the “drive to incorporate works by artists of color in order to raise the status of the institution as culturally aware and politically on point” in the 1990s. I would argue that this “ethnic envy” continued to be the default mode of operation in the Canadian context well beyond the 1990s [20]. Indeed, with the 2010s came a renewed wave of very similar institutional interest and by extension long overdue funding and support for Black arts workers. In fact, this “ethnic envy” seems to have intensified with the explosion of testimonies of anti-Blackness from museum and cultural institution workers across Canada following the murder of George Floyd in 2020 [21]. Several accounts of cultural workers about their experiences of anti-Blackness within institutions over the years precipitated myriad panic-ridden reactionary statements, initiatives and hiring campaigns across Turtle Island [22]. I would be remiss not to acknowledge the double-edged sword that are such reactions which have the potential to both enact positive change and to place BIPOC workers in harm’s way within institutional structures ill-prepared to support them. It is also unfortunate yet unsurprising to find that in the year since these many statements were made and since the Parliamentary Black Caucus released 44 calls to action, no federal commitment has been made toward supporting Black heritage, arts or culture [23].

It is against this backdrop that Black Canadian artists’ practices continue to shift thematically, aesthetically and conceptually. These seem to have moved well away from “representation” and “identity” for their own sake to instead demanding for their work to be taken up rigorously within art historical discourses as opposed to the unfortunate tokenistic tendencies which have come to pass as “inclusivity” in some

[20]Jones, Amelia. “Ethnic Envy and Other Aggressions in the Contemporary ‘Global’ Art Complex” *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* 48, May 2021, 101.

[21]Jones 2021, 99-101; Gessell, Paul. “The Floyd Effect” *Galleries West*. June 29, 2020. <https://www.gallerieswest.ca/magazine/stories/the-floyd-effect/>; Morgan, Kelli. “To Bear Witness: Real Talk about White Supremacy in Art Museums Today” *Burnaway*. June 24, 2020.

<https://burnaway.org/to-bear-witness/?fbclid=IwAR1UHZCmaQfP-HhQODwsDywk6N5qhWknJ3BQRU0zWEMabi0CtiDPgzl-MI>

[22]Morgan 2020; Gessell 2020. Petz, Sarah. “Canadian Museum for Human Rights aware of racism concerns for years: former employee” *CBC Manitoba*. June 11, 2020 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/canadian-museum-human-rights-racism-former-employee-1.5608291> Accessed August 6, 2021. CMHR STOP LYING (@cmhrstoplying) Instagram.

[23]Thurton, David. “One year after Trudeau took a knee, is his government living up to its anti-racism promises?” *CBC News* August 5, 2021 <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-black-racism-1.6122821> Accessed August 11, 2021.

space. While intersectional analyses remain important facets of Black artistic practices in Canada, this work is also now being tipped back into the hands of institutions which need to be accountable for the necessary structural changes related to them. Thus, freeing artists to return to making art which maintains those critical underpinnings while pushing at the conceptual and aesthetic boundaries of Black cultural traditions on Turtle Island.

Whilst Blackity as a project aims to think through the “blips in time where the work [we are doing] is visible”, it also raises the question - what might establishing a Black Canadian art historical canon add to the conversation [24]? Looking at this documentation chronologically reveals certain trends in the Black Canadian cultural scene. However, all of these periods are also mixed and overlapping significantly. For instance, artist Denyse Thomasos’ practice bypassed the “representation matters” facet altogether in the 1990s. The painter dove straight into producing work that pressed at the aesthetic and conceptual boundaries of Black Canadian art by creolizing modernist abstraction in her expressive works reminiscent of the cargo holds of slave ships, of jails and of maps [25]. As such, rather than a formal linear canon or timeline, it might be worth seeing these “blips” as points within a larger constellation of Black artistic tradition in Canada [26]. That is, each of these moments and people constitute a key point within the astral cluster of Black Canadian art history. A configuration which might well transcend time and space given the ongoing nature of the issues with which Black Canadians grapple. Art historians, critics and curators have the opportunity to not only connect the dots to see the full picture, but also to continue to push for institutional change by picking up on these connections and adding to this history’s shape.

- Joana Joachim, curator

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Joana Joachim will join Concordia University’s Faculty of Fine Arts as Assistant professor of Black Studies in Art Education, Art History and Social Justice as of January 2022. Her research and teaching interests include Black feminist art histories, Black diasporic art histories, critical museologies, Black Canadian studies, and Canadian slavery studies. Her SSHRC-funded doctoral work, *There/Then, Here/Now: Black Women’s Hair and Dress in the French Empire*, examined the visual culture of Black women’s hair and dress in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, investigating practices of self-preservation and self-care through the lens of creolization as well as historical and contemporary art practices. She earned her PhD in the department of Art History and Communication Studies and at the Institute for Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies at McGill University working under the supervision of Dr. Charmaine A. Nelson. In 2020 she was appointed as a McGill Provostial Postdoctoral Research Scholar in Institutional Histories, Slavery and Colonialism.

[24]Ikiriko 2020; “Commit us to memory: Black Women curators interrupting the canon” conference, Vancouver Art Gallery and The State of Blackness, May 27, 2021.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT1-vNh2Lfs&t=2s>

[25]Verna, Gaétane and NourbeSe Philip and Franklin Sirmans. *Epistrophe: Wall Paintings by Denyse Thomasos*. Lennoxville, Qc: Foreman Art Gallery of Bishop’s University; Halifax, NS: Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, 2005, 7. <https://e-artexte.ca/id/eprint/17334/>

[26]“Commit us to memory: Black Women curators interrupting the canon” 2021.

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- Joana Joachim, curator

Artexite supports artists, researchers, curators through a collective effort that involves all members of our permanent staff and contracted specialists for each project. All the people in the list below contributed their knowledge and skill to this project. In alphabetical order:

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