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Joy Gregory image courtesy of Breath is Invisible and Pedro Lima'

HELLISH TREES AND PARADISE PLACES. THE AFRO-CARIBBEAN EPIC IN JOY GREGORY'S WORK AT THE DANIELLE ARNAUD GALLERY IN LONDON

RIELLO: "THE INSTALLATION IS MADE UP OF TWO VIDEOS MADE WITH THE COLLABORATION OF A COMPOSER AND AN ARTIST WITH A SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS. "THE DRAWING ROOM", IS IDEALLY DOMINATED BY THE PRESENCE OF 'MACHINEEL TREE', A SUPER POISONOUS PLANT..."

JOY GREGORY

Anglo-Jamaican artist **Joy Gregory** (Sydney Biennale 2010, Venice Biennale 2017, Diaspora Pavilion) boasts a robust curriculum also as a researcher and teacher (currently she teaches on the Fine Art Photography course at UAL in London).



A few days ago, she inaugurated **SEEDS OF EMPIRE: A little or No Breeze**", at the **Danielle Arnaud** Gallery.

The installation, with a commissioned text by Rohini Malik Okon, consists of two videos made with the collaboration of composer Philip Miller (South Africa) and producer Gary Stewart (London) and a series of photographic images.



This last part, "The Drawing Room", is ideally dominated by the presence of the **Machineel Tree** (*Hippomane mancinella*) a typical Caribbean tree that seems to come straight out of a story by Emilio Salgari. It is a super poisonous plant: not only its fruits (which resemble small apples, in fact the Spaniards had baptized it Manzanilla-de-la Muerte) are deadly, but even touching the bark can be fatal. The smoke given off by the wood is unforgiving. It is so toxic that just sleeping under its branches can be extremely dangerous.

MANCHINEEL TREE

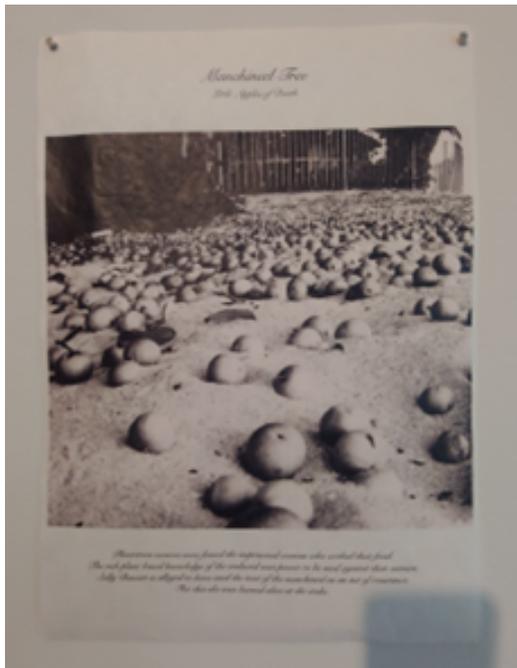


Currently these infernal plants are conspicuously marked with signs and red signs painted on the stem. In the past, during the British colonial rule, the inhabitants of these lands used their sap to poison arrows and there have been several attempts (even successful) by the enslaved to kill the owners of the plantations using the fruits of this tree. (mixed with real and harmless apples). Botany mixes closely with the events of an oppressed and exploited people.



Illustrated stories where Natural Sciences and History are intertwined through the research of an artist. An exemplary work of how Contemporary Art is working today: a choral exercise where intimate personal idiosyncrasies are no longer told, but instead the stories of peoples (and their torments). Come to think of it, Verdi's "va pensiero" aria could be the appropriate global soundtrack for the Visual Arts.

The first video (on the ground floor) mixes Jamaican beaches in a happy rhythm with corners and glimpses of Kew Gardens, the large botanical garden located just outside London. Controversial colonial memories together with the anxieties of post-globalization. A myriad of small speakers, interactively following the movements of visitors, spread the voices and sounds of people of Jamaican origin talking about their observations and first encounters with living in the UK.



Mysterious noises arise unexpected and threatening at the slightest movement. A double register that is constantly renewed, not without surprises. According to the artist, this pattern reflects, in some way, the uncomfortable identity of the many British citizens of Afro-Caribbean origin (who have emigrated here since the 1940s/post WWII).

It should be remembered that the slave trade in the Americas starts right in Jamaica (US cotton plantations will be a later phenomenon). In fact, already in the early 1600s, British ships left (full of weapons and / or junk of little value) from Portsmouth or Bristol to reach the coasts of West Africa where they exchanged goods with slaves who, in turn, they were sold in the islands of the Antilles in exchange for cane sugar and rum. The cycle ended with the return to England where these highly sought-after goods reached European consumers. This lucrative and abominable trafficking, with its rapid accumulation of capital, practically made it possible to finance, shortly after, the first phases of the Industrial Revolution.



The other video (occupies the entire room on the second floor) is directly inspired by Hans Sloane's travelogue, "A voyage to Jamaica", written in 1725. Sloane was a doctor, a naturalist (he was also president of the Royal Society). The texts in both videos are extracts from Sloan's travelogue.

But at the same time also a wealthy landowner who obviously employed enslaved labour on the Jamaican plantations and, precisely for this fact, a character today seriously questioned. The words of his diary continually resurface in the video. The interesting thing is that, more than a diary, his is an infinite and monotonous list of atmospheric annotations.

The word *Breeze* (breeze) occurs obsessively thousands of times. The fact is that on his journey he found himself, as a doctor, treating a maid named Rose who was (probably) suffering from depression. The ferocious and drastic treatment (imprisonment and beatings) that he gave to the poor slave did not (obviously) have significant results.



Rose's character, who continually resurfaces in the video, is played by Joy Gregory herself. The heavy and invincible stillness of tropical seas is the true figure of this work: a kind of frustrating inertia / sloth that seems to accompany the whole projection. You feel helpless.

These two videos could be (it happens quite often in this type of artistic situation) simply and didactically political. To be clear, two works are "linked". And to some extent they certainly are complimentary too. But there is more. The

construction / editing of the videos and the excellent sound part transform them into an experience of remarkable quality. It is not (fortunately) like reading a respectable political essay full of sacrosanct and erudite polemics, perhaps interesting but often long-winded (if not downright tiring).

Instead, it is the reading of a well-written novel in which the substantially true events are internalized by the reader in a natural and pleasant way (and in the end the process is almost imperceptible). In this case we could correctly speak of "intelligent emotion", one of the many forms through which Art loves (sometimes) to manifest itself.

JOY GREGORY

SEEDS OF EMPIRE: A Little or no Breeze

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