

ART

Monthly

No. 440, October 2020 £6 €8 \$9



Akram Zaatari

Interviewed by Omar Kholeif

**Anti-Anti-Semitism
or the 'Alt-Right'?**

Sarah James

The Absence of Presence

Mark Wilsher

Pirate Care Syllabus

Profile by Nick Thurston

participants to answer the prompt ‘There ought to be a word for’. Submissions include ‘the barrier between the mind and the mouth’ and ‘the exhaustion of looking at people you find very beautiful for too long’, which are reimagined as various, slightly discordant sounds: twanging strings, plonking piano keys, long phasing notes and rustling percussion. Visitors can write their own submissions in the gallery, driving home the point that we should consider the biases and other areas where languages are found lacking, such as the difficulty of expressing the type of embodied feelings we see in the submissions. It provides a suitable way of ending the show: a reminder that bodies and bodily issues can be difficult to communicate, and that it is hard for one person to understand another’s internal experience.

Tom Emery is a writer and curator based in Manchester.



Minia Biabiany, *Toli Toli*, 2018, video

one month after being known in that island

KBH.G, Basel, 27 August to 15 November

KBH.G, the new art and cultural centre in Basel, opens with the first-ever exhibition in Switzerland to survey the work of Caribbean artists. A co-production between the institution and the Caribbean Art Initiative, ‘one month after being known in that island’, along with its extensive public programme, seeks to advance CAI’s work promoting arts and culture from the Caribbean region locally and internationally. The indeterminate time and place of the exhibition’s title formulates possible opportunities for reinvention, individual interpretation and the potential of what or who Caribbean people are – as well as the sense of groundlessness, of having no time and no place.

Bringing together the works of 11 artists, this large exhibition subtly reveals the ties that bind the landlocked Switzerland to the numerous islands of the Caribbean Sea. On the face of it, the exhibition seems to be about alerting European audiences to the fact that the Caribbean continues to be a rising destination of artistic thought and practice. However, it is currently a place where, due to the pandemic, livelihoods have been seismically disrupted by a fall in tourism, the income from which normally accounts for up to 90% of the region’s GDP. But the exhibition raises the story of the hidden financial links between the Caribbean and Switzerland, of how money in foreign bank accounts in the Caribbean is not spent in the islands, and where luxury villas and private islands which typically house foreign elites or expatriates are left gated and unused.

Indeed, to fully comprehend the Caribbean region’s association with Switzerland beyond the business of tax havens and financial services, a sojourn to an often-overlooked past is necessary. On 22 July 1795, representatives of European colonial powers – Prussia, Spain and the French Republic – assembled in Basel, the German-speaking Swiss city adjacent to France, to resolve a conflict which formally ended the two-year War of the Pyrénées between the First French Republic and the Spanish monarchy. The agreements, The Peace of Basel Treaties, restored to Spain the northern provinces taken by France in exchange for Spain ceding to France what was then Hispaniola. Thus, on distant European soil, the Caribbean, which also included the West Indies, ‘discovered’ by Christopher Columbus, were divided and reallocated. Through language, inherited land and the interchange of cultures, commercial interests persist, mirroring and serving colonial territories today.

The exhibition, in part, relays these histories, often bringing together themes of tides and water. Multimedia artist Minia Biabiany presents her intimate film *Toli Toli*, 2018. First shown at the 10th Berlin Biennale, the film is projected behind a towering structure, which frames the viewer within woven-bamboo, a technique traditionally used to make fishing traps in Guadeloupe, from where the artist originates. The film adopts a painter’s process for its editing style and flow, with poems, tropical flora, fauna and visuals of waves gently rippling caught against the jeopardy of industrial destruction. The camera captures a pair of black fingers in a body of flowing water delicately performing the crisscross pattern practised by weavers. A voice lightly sings in Créolé: ‘*Toli Toli montré mwen chimen a ...*’, which translates as ‘Toli Toli show me the way to ...’, followed by the name of a town or a country that the singer knew, or imagined. The work revives these forgotten pasts, of abandoned systems of thought and making, with Biabiany trying to uncover the route between expansive sea and her homelands.

Venezuelan artist Elisa Bergel Melo now lives in Santo Domingo (having previously been based in Europe and the US). The peripatetic life of the artist is conceptualised through the floor sculpture *Final Forms*, 2020. On top of a low-lying plinth, the artist arranges small, white shapes cut into rough outlines of all 85 Caribbean island nations. Conjuring a puzzle, whose pieces can be rearranged at will, the work presents the possibility of coherence as a game. These same shapes appear nearby on a pair of serene cyanotypes, *Seasons*, 2020. Here, the wooden blocks become clouds caught against a cerulean sky; nation states in orbit seeking control over one another, or a reverie of an island aloft in a hurricane, or even rising water on the horizon.

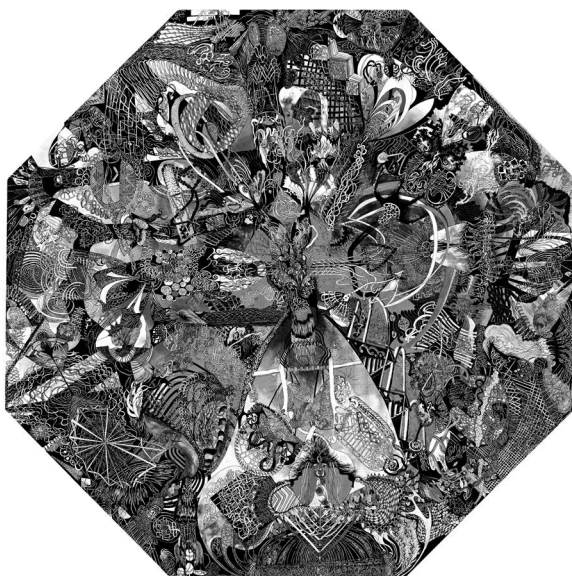
Haitian artist Tessa Mars’s contribution is valiant in scale, artistry and function. By picturing herself back in the time of 1795, *A vision of Peace. Harmony and Good intelligence I/II*, 2020, Mars presents a partially nude fictionalised alter-ego of herself in a supernatural creek-turned-surrealist cavern. Her paintings depict an elderly woman reduced by the drudgery that consumes her, while spectres lurk. Mars’s work incorporates real-life experiences and voices, muted or inaudible, to imagine the long undisclosed history of feminine revolution; as the poet Octavio Paz expressed it: ‘The bottom will eventually be the top, the way down is the way up.’

Santo Domingo native, painter and graphic illustrator José Morbán’s double-sided oil-on-linen painting

La Ola (The Wave), 2020, also captures the quiet before the storm. The artist envisages the essence of rising youth populations in the Dominican Republic, but also elsewhere, which are grappling with the fear and thirst for economic migration.

Édouard Glissant, the influential French writer and poet of Caribbean thought, understood water as ‘the blue savanna of memory and imagination’. Akin to the far-reaching oceans that swallowed souls and served as the gateway connecting a subjugated race to foreign empires, Glissant writes that ‘the belly of the boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out’. The exhibition ultimately failed to capture the intensity of the histories described by Glissant. Reading these lines again, which describe a life-world which endures in the blood of descendent generations of the people once enslaved, the overarching question remains, to whom is the exhibition speaking? The exhibition does succeed, however, in bringing together new and old routes to conceptualise and communicate the Caribbean beyond mainstream perceptions.

Emmanuel Balogun is a British Nigerian writer and researcher based in London. He is also the founder of VI / Visual-Ideation.



Ann Churchill, *Octagonal Drawing*, 1976

Not Without My Ghosts: The Artist As Medium

The Drawing Room, London
10 September to 1 November

After six long months that now feel like they flew by, I had time to consider the subject of the Hayward Gallery’s mothballed touring exhibition and catalogue, which explore the role of the ‘mediumistic’ – the channelling of outside influences – as an undercurrent to 200 years of art practice since William Blake. Entering the gallery I felt a jarring sensation caused by the disparity between my imagination and the real-life resonance of the works on show; the question of how to maintain ‘critical distance’ in relation to works realised through specifically non-conscious processes was overlaid with the memory of my anticipatory imagining of the exhibition over several months.

Such cerebral circularity bounced my vision round the space until I accepted the suggestion from George Bray at the gallery to approach the show with a ‘suspension of disbelief’. I was rewarded by a close encounter with Georgiana Houghton’s *Spiritual Crown of Mrs A A Watts*, 1867, and the unreality of its tiny overlaid circular rhythms, executed with ethereal speed and mathematical precision in the modest media of watercolour and gouache on paper. Its esoteric language of colour, symbol and number hypnotically drew out my inner vision into the same whorls and eddies of a mental dance. Attuned, I now drifted into the companionable state of being circled by a colloquy of diverse characters present around the room, all structured by a curatorial device that induced an atmosphere of absence like the silent presence of a cabinet of curiosities whose objects transmit what Walter Benjamin called ‘aura’ – ‘the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be’.

In the assembly, quieter works by historical figures – Victor Hugo’s *Dentelles et Spectres (Laces and Ghosts)*, 1855–56, and André Masson’s *Portrait of Benjamin Peret*, 1925 – sit alongside charismatically charged exegeses by lesser-known artists such as Madge Gill and 1920s French coalminer Augustin Lesage. The former was an orphan from London who experienced the loss a child in the 1918 flu pandemic and, the following year, a still-born daughter. During her subsequent ill health she turned for guidance to what she referred to as Myrninerest (my inner rest), a spirit who, she believed, drew her hand night after night in repetitive rhythmic mark-marking actions in coloured inks as in motions of sewing, weaving and illumination to reveal ‘abstract patterning’ of flowers, fauna and feathers. Jolting bereavement had also drawn Houghton to explore beyond the figurative Christian symbolism of her academic training, while for Anne Mary Howitt it was the trauma caused by the negative criticism of a family friend, the critic John Ruskin, of her 1856 painting of Boadicea; he told her to ‘paint me a pheasant’s wing’ instead, which led to the dissolution and resolution of the Marian or Christ-like iconography into billowing organic forms that echo those of Madame Fondrillon’s *Dessin médianimique*, 1909, that gave flight to early experiments in abstraction. Pertinent is the comparison of two untitled and undated Watts studies found by the curators Simon Grant, Lars Bang Larsen and Marco Pasi in the Watts’s archive in Cambridge; the pencil drawing mesmerically reveals the sense of guidedness that Hayward senior curator Brian Cass describes earnestly as ‘indexical evidence of another realm of existence’.

The ‘auratic’ charisma of disembodied colour splitting from its referent is seen in Barbara Honeywood’s gouaches made while part of the Watts ‘sisterhood’ and as a pupil of Houghton. Her 1864 drawing album of hallucinogenic ‘mediumistic’ journeys manifests ovoid forms, segmenting in a diffuse feathering of energy into merry-go-rounds of pure light, spinning like particles in a quantum soup that seems to foreshadow the séance explorations of Suzanne Treister and the Museum of Black Hole Spacetime last January. The show enters the next plane through this portal of oversaturated colour from the spiritualist-influenced Surrealist ‘automatic’ drawing experiments from the 1930s and 1940s by Ithell Colquhoun and Grace Pailthorpe. The guided line and shamanic embodiment of colour as animate