



## Visuals

### Piecing Together the Un/Seen: Collage as a Language of Being

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Gender Articulated – Visual Language and the Un/Seeable Self

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**Kashif Dennis**

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**Farrah Karapetian**

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**M. Florine Démosthène**

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**Mazaré Trim**

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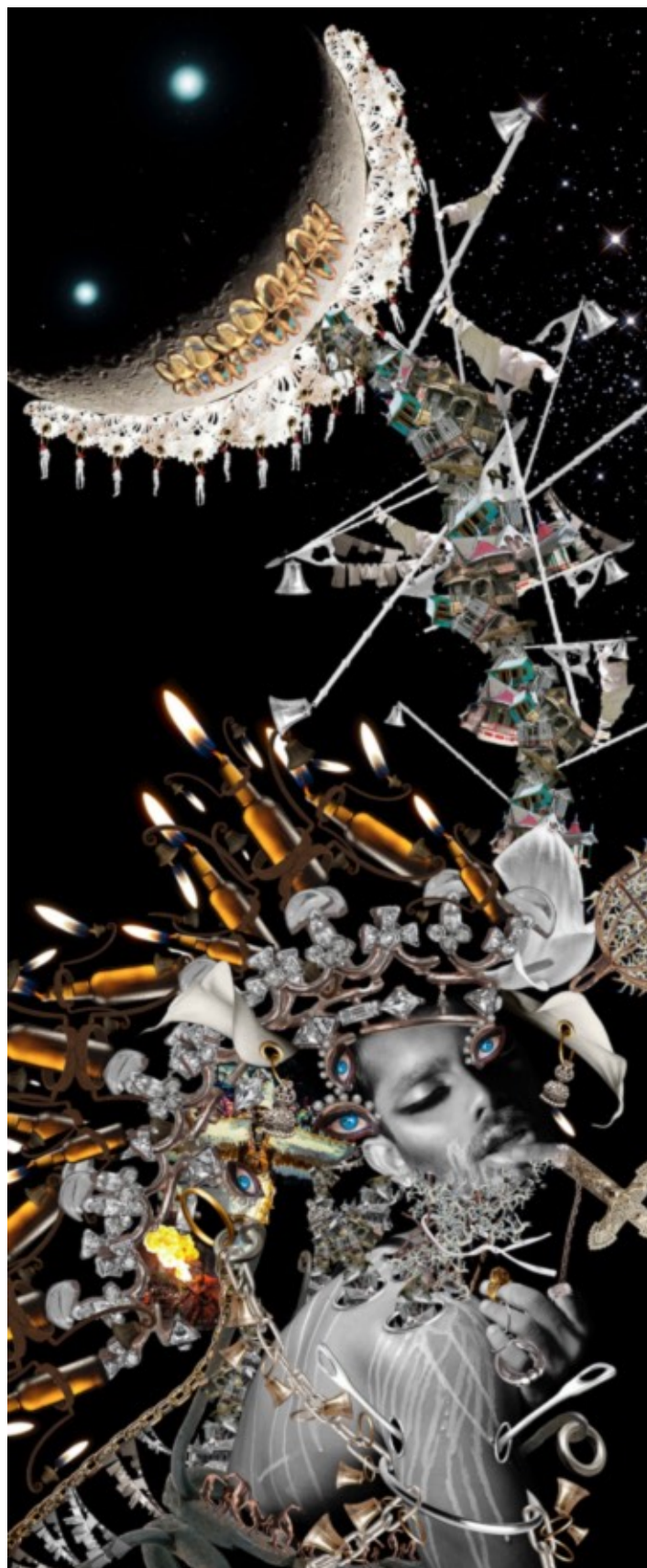
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## Kashif Dennis

My digital collage series, Sugar Dhaddy is part of a world building practice, erected upon performative portrait photographs. Each figure becomes an avatar through which the speculative narratives of my Afro-fabulous projects are expanded. The resulting images are a collection of thousands of appropriated objects, subjects and spaces that converge their many histories and connotations within the picture plane of my compositions. Images of slave shackles are re-coded as braziers, and sexual toys are transformed into gendered costumes that reflect the connectedness of race, gender and sexuality. Childhood practices of making toy cars out of Chubby-brand soft drink bottles are juxtaposed with imagery of the long nails my mother fashioned in her youth. Bodies are ripped, penetrated and fragmented across the visual space of my extravagant compositions, as a reflection of the conundrum of beauty, joy, yet spectacular violence that has shaped and is a continuous product of the Caribbean; a result particularly fraught for queer, femme and gender expansive individuals. Collage is a crucial framework for the formal, conceptual and methodological interventions and choices that feed my work. For Halberstam (2011): "Collage precisely references the spaces in-between and refuses to respect the boundaries that usually delineate self from other" (136). Not only does collage reorient the relationship between object, subject and space, the cut itself operates as its own space, its own theoretical, methodological and aesthetic sphere. I employ overlapping personal and cultural narratives to create and hold space for the various archives I excavate; the archive being a combination of oral histories, cultural traditions, as well as the photographic imagery I source for my work.

These works are a response to various systems of violence that seek to erase and invisibilise the actuality of queer and gender non-conforming folks, particularly with regard to the cultural significance of Carnival. Within the space of my compositions, categories of gender, sexuality, race, history, time and place are played with, bent, broken, and exaggerated into a spectacle that is both seductive and politically engaged.



Kashif Dennis,  
**Sugar Dhaddy 3**, 2023  
Digital collage/inkjet print.



Kashif Dennis,  
***Sugar Dhaddy 8***, 2023  
Digital collage/inkjet print.



Kashif Dennis  
***Sugar Dhaddy 10***, 2023  
Digital collage/inkjet print.

## Farrah Karapetian

Who is photographed? Who photographs them? If we are not photographed – if our life stories do not become lore beyond our families' conversation – does it mean that we have not effected change? Does it mean we never can? The images in this series are photograms from a digital collaging of archival materials associated with the Nardal sisters' lives and work in Martinique and Paris. Their contributions not only to the genealogy of Négritude, but also to language around exoticisation, decolonisation, and the enfranchisement of women, are underrepresented. I love Paulette Nardal in particular for a key moment: when she jumps off the steamship she has taken multiple times between Martinique and mainland France, because it is being torpedoed by Nazis. It is a literal moment of surrender and change. Her sister, Jane, was an inspiring writer who also incredibly transitioned in her own life to use an indigenous name for both her and the island she married into. Still, Paulette's jump at midlife into the dark, churning water below – a jump that crippled her and could have ended her – this is an unphotographed moment that begins, for me, the potential of legend. Paulette Nardal instigated and endured unique, globally significant circumstances, but she was rarely photographed or painted, and it is rare that her stories are celebrated. The value placed on her image and stories does not match the value of her life, but who determines value while a life is lived? Whose life changes when we re-release the image and the narrative of a life when it is over?

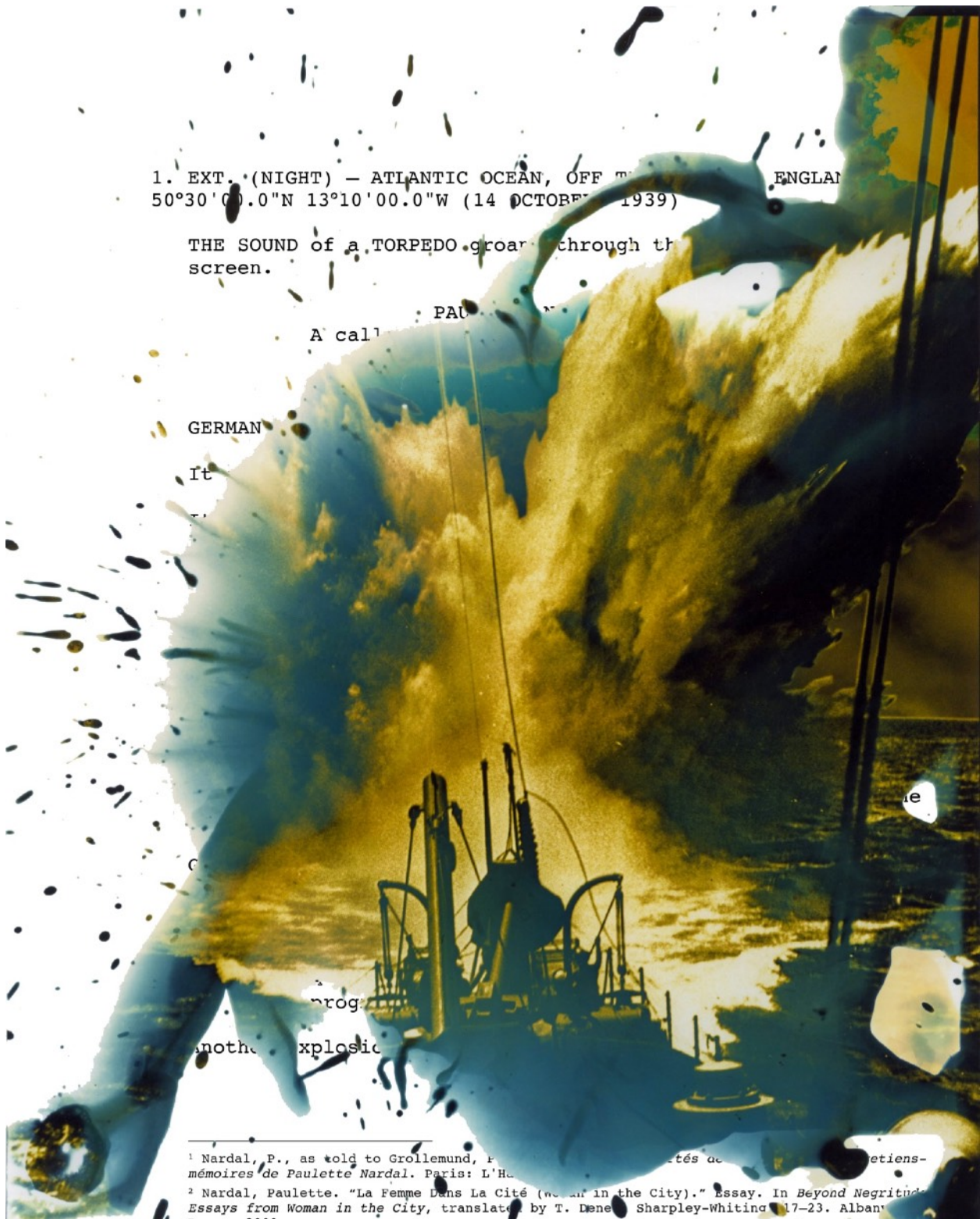
Paulette was a Martinican woman who studied English in Jamaica and was then the first Black student at the Sorbonne. She built community in Paris for the Black world throughout the 1930s, publishing texts in *La Dépêche Africaine* and founding a journal, *La Revue du Monde Noir*, with the singular purpose of uniting Black diasporic people across two colonial languages and all continents. She translated Alain Locke's *The New Negro* into French and tried to get it published, gave Marcus Garvey space to work, got Léopold Senghor a place at the

Sorbonne, and contributed to the publication *L'Etudiant Noir*, published by the younger Martinican man, Aimé Césaire, which also included Senghor's writing.

Her work had specific focus for Black women. She promoted the work of women artists like Augusta Savage and was supported by women writers like Eslanda Robeson, who wrote about her for *Challenge Magazine*. Paulette threw her weight behind the defence of Ethiopia from Mussolini, contrary to the support professed for the fascist leader by Josephine Baker. When Paulette experienced grave personal, political, and professional change, losing one sister to death and others to marriage, losing the milieu she had built, the use of her leg, and the freedom to enter mainland France, she persevered. She anticipated the need for women's vote towards Martinican citizenship in France towards the endgame of decolonisation. She also founded *La Femme dans la cité*, a journal for intersectional female communities in Martinique.

I wrote a feature-length film script about Paulette – trying to piece together her life experiences – and the women's lives with which hers intersected. The script is footnoted with citations, breaking filmic convention. I did not want to erase the primarily Black women researchers who have delved into Paulette's life before me. I am not Black, Caribbean, Francophone, or Catholic, but I identify with Paulette's caretaking, her belief in transnationalism, her slow climb, and her revolutionary support of peers. I then made visual artwork from the film script as an extension of piecing together Paulette's life. I created collages of images of Paulette taken from archives in Martinique, correspondence with her family, notes from the internet, and photographs I commissioned of sites from a former student living in Paris, to whom I gave a map. I converted the collages to transparencies and placed these on top of photosensitive paper. I exposed them to light and then tossed colour developing chemistry onto them, hoping to reveal some of Paulette's lived scenes but also to imply how much of them are lost to history. I printed these images on top of the corresponding pages of my film script. What I have produced is a speculative history, though, and impossible to completely verify. I, therefore, wanted the artwork to convey loss as well as recovery. None of the images is fully visible, nor are the words.

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Farrah Karapetian, *Scene 1: Atlantic Ocean, 50°30'00.0"N 13°10'00.0"W (14 October, 1939)*, 2021  
Unique chromogenic photogram; 10 x 8 in.

The scenes presented here are the bombing of the S.S. Bretagne; Josephine Baker's dance at the Revue, which I imagine the Nardals attending because of their reaction to it in their writing; a party that Sylvia Beach threw for activist Paul Robeson that I imagine Jane Nardal attending; the office of Martinican politician Joseph Lagrosillière, where Paulette worked; and the Colonial Exposition, what I imagine would have been an alienating experience for Paulette and her sister Andrée. This method of research, engagement, and collage has felt like an ethical way for an outsider to represent these women.



4. INT. (NIGHT) - LA REVUE NF  
OCTOBER 1925, OPENING NIGHT

JANE NARDAL (23), ALICE  
sit at a TABLE together

Jane accepts a DRINK  
then turns, cued by

TIGHT on JOSEPHINE  
and doing the  
JOE ALEX. She  
FEATHER between

TIGHT on JOSEPHINE  
with his long  
waist,  
where she

An ecst

We see  
standing

Jane scans

Pauline i

PAULETTE  
beautiful

JANE NARDAL  
is a puppet. An exotic puppet.<sup>5</sup>

PAULETTE NARDAL  
(shrugs)  
It's too easy, but somehow it's

Flanner, "The Greatest Refreshment," *The New Yorker*, March 11, 1972. Retrieved March  
11 from <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1972/03/11/the-greatest-refreshment>  
reference to Jane Nardal's "Pantins exotiques" in *La Dépêche Africaine*, 15 October 1928,  
translated in T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (University of Minnesota Press,  
, page #.

Farrah Karapetian, *Scene 4: Josephine Baker and Joe Alex at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées*, 1925, 2021  
Unique chromogenic photograph; 10 x 8 in.



Farrah Karapetian, *Scene 7: Eslanda Robeson, Jane Nardal, and Maurice Satineau outside of Shakespeare & Company feteing Paul Robeson with Sylvia Beach, 1925, 2021*  
Unique chromogenic photograph; 10 x 8 in.



Farrah Karapetian, *Scene 13: Joseph Lagrosillière, Paulette Nardal, and Achille René-Boisneuf at Lagros' Office*, 1928, 2021. Unique chromogenic photogram; 10 x 8 in.



Farrah Karapetian, *Scene 30: Andrée and Paulette Nardal at the Colonial Exposition, 1931, 2021*  
Unique chromogenic photograph; 10 x 8 in.

## M. Florine Démosthène

Black identity is a dynamic archive of knowledge, formed of flesh, spirit and memory. My work expresses the idea that we as human beings contain multitudes. My use of ink, glitter, and pigment forms figures that are at once earthly, yet suggestive of the cosmos. The fluid and fleshy bodies shift and transform, never alone, they hold space, they wash over, they embrace, they give life, and they tear apart.

In my most recent work, *Mastering the Dream*, I investigated the conflict between the traditional, ethereal, and contemporary ideas of love. The use of repeated figures in my work refers to the reverence of twins in West Africa and Haiti. Twins are thought to serve as intermediaries, straddling the mundane and the spiritual. Their position is traditionally ambiguous and paradoxical – two occupying one space, same but different, of this world and, yet again, not of it. I embrace this concept in my exploration of remembrance, conveying that as human beings we are both knowable and unknowable, to both ourselves and others and that we are living memories of our ancestors.



M. Florine Démosthène, *That Space In Between*, 2023  
Collage on paper; 38 x 50 in.



M. Florine Démosthène, ***The Struggle Makes You Beautiful***, 2023  
Collage on paper; 38 x 50 in.



M. Florine Démosthène, *The Dream Master 3*, 2023  
Collage on wood panel; 24 x 36 in.

## Mazaré Trim

When I started working on Say AHH, all I could think of was a sense of rebellion against what traditional masculinity is supposed to be. While I am now in a space in which I am a bit more fluid with how I present myself, that was not always the case. Growing up in a Pentecostal Christian home instilled a fear of tapping into my "Other." Anything that wasn't aligned with my gender at birth was frowned upon. The message was clear that boys don't do this or that. Unfortunately for family and the wider society, that couldn't hold me back forever. In this piece, I adorn myself with long acrylic nails – at that time, nails being painted and manicured was the highest form of femininity in my head. I would see my mother with her long acrylic nails, which exaggerated every move her hands made. That was magic to me; something I so longed for but knew it was not possible for that time in my life.

As I grew up, all of these things that seemed impossible started to come to pass quickly. The first time I had sexual relations with a man was a critical moment. The title of the artwork, "Say AHH," was what he said right before we engaged in fellatio. My "innocence" and curiosity were finally being explored, and the euphoria that came from that experience resolved the questions I have had all my life.

Two Black men from the Caribbean engaging in that activity on a beach at night is not something that many can wrap their heads around or even entertain as a possibility. They know men like us exist, but years of colonial conditioning have led to the suppression of one's self. Seen as a taboo, or even a criminal offence in some cases, this attraction that is perfectly human is considered the lowest thing a man from the Caribbean could ever participate in. "Say AHH" isn't just a sexual fantasy. It's a visceral rejection of the shame, and very often, the physical or verbal abuse meted out to men who show the "Other" in their manhood.

My Untitled piece continues my exploration of how to identify with my former life as a Christian. Accepting what was preached to me and just "believing in the Word" was starting to alienate me. There was also the fear-mongering – the homophobia – that I experienced. Interestingly, I still, to some degree, respect Christianity and practice some of its values. The push and pull of existing as a queer man while feeling guilty about my existence, due to Christianity, is the sensation pictured in "Untitled." This individual is trying to cut away from this previous way of living, but can't seem to get away due to indoctrination. The paper in this work is stained with inks and paints to show some kind of permanence, while there are disfigured hands and faces trying to show different emotions, but they are unclear. It is almost like a war with oneself – this internal struggle that I am sure we all can identify with, to some degree.

Bush Hall Superstar – Ricardo, is a visual memorial to my grandfather. It also looks at the opposing forces experienced in an area called "Bush Hall," in which we lived. In Barbados, Bush Hall is known for being a very "rough" or "ghetto" area, due to the violence, illegal drug trafficking and also prostitution. It is not the prettiest location, and within all of that, there is a strong display of machismo; a heightened/exaggerated sense of masculine identity. Being queer in such an area sounds like a nightmare, and to some extent, a safety hazard, but in reality, there's a very small community within Bush Hall that supports and protects the "dolls." I remember queer icons such as "Peppalicious," a very effeminate man who ran the streets of Bush Hall and was highly respected and feared by some. He was adorned in crop tops, sparkly boots, and never without his lip gloss. A true example of how duality exists day-to-day.



Mazaré Trim, **Say AHH**, 2023  
Collage, acrylic ink and watercolours on paper; 19 x 25 in.



Mazaré Trim, *Untitled*, 2024  
Collage on paper; 19 x 25 in.

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Mazaré Trim, *Bush Hall Superstar – Ricardo*, 2024  
Collage on paper; 13 x 18 in.



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