



What's Found in the Foliage?

Llanor Alleyne and Dominique Hunter in Conversation

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Abstract

This conversation explores Caribbean identity, the visual symbolism of the everyday, and feminism through the lens of Black women's "magic." Dialogue with artists Llanor Alleyne (Barbados/New York) and Dominique Hunter (Guyana) uncovers the aesthetic qualities, or markers, that denote "magic" in the use of flora in their artworks. This exchange of insights aims to understand how their natural environments inform, shape, and influence ideas surrounding power, in being seen/unseen, an oppositional gaze versus a Black gaze, and invisibility versus hypervisibility.

Keywords: Feminist art, queer feminism, female representation, Caribbean identity

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Introduction

I first learned of Llanor Alleyne and her work in the early 2000s, through a mutual friend who suggested we meet. At the time, Llanor and I were both living in Brooklyn, New York. At this meetup, Llanor talked about her creative endeavours, but it wasn't until I Googled her and started following her on Facebook that I began to understand the magnitude of her creative expressions. Llanor and I were in and out of touch over the years, but I was hopeful when I moved to Barbados in 2020 that we would connect again. She had been living there for a few years by the time I arrived. Unfortunately, I narrowly missed her as she moved back to the U.S., about one month after my arrival in Barbados.

While in Barbados, I learned about Dominique Hunter. In January 2020, I began studying at The UWI, Cave Hill campus. I quickly determined that my doctoral project in cultural studies would involve contemporary Caribbean women visual artists. Upon scanning the visual arts environment, I found Dominique Hunter. I was instantly reminded of Llanor's work. Dominique and Llanor share an attention to the female figure and the natural environment. In both artists' work, I am drawn to the use of flora to perform so many roles. Flowers, leaves, and plants are used to adorn and embellish, while also shedding, protecting, and repelling. Those same decorative elements also attract and call the audience through clever positioning and a keen articulation of botany.

This conversation is my first attempt to gain insights into the work with respect to ideas of womanhood, femininity, and Caribbean identity. We met via Zoom on February 9, 2024, with Dominique in Guyana, Llanor in South Carolina, and me in New York. We enter this dialogue with each artist explaining their creative process.

Bianca Moña: What brought me to your practices are the images with women's bodies in relationship to the natural environment. I'm curious about that. May you both talk about that combination of women's bodies, flowers, leaves and trees? Where did that come from? What was the catalyst?

Dominique Hunter: I've always been drawn to the natural environment. I started inserting the figure into nature without even really realising what I was doing. In 2016, I was doing a lot of subconscious work, without really knowing where it was about to lead me. We bought a farm in 2016. The first time I went there, the back was completely covered in beds of morning glory vines. People would typically see it as a bush, but it was just so striking to me. I started taking photos of it, getting up close. I took the photos, and then I forgot about them. In 2017, curator Grace Aneiza Ali approached me to make work for an exhibition about migration. I had the idea to use the same vine – the same flowers from the vine – as a metaphor. That's when I started developing my *Cusp* series. As I researched this vine, I realised that there are characteristics about it that you can liken to immigrants. There are a couple of types of morning glory vines, but there's one on the beach called the beach morning glory, and it acts like an anchor. It grows two meters deep. It's able to withstand these extreme temperatures. And it has this built-in defense mechanism to ward off insects from eating the leaves. I was thinking of migrants and their stories and how difficult it is to leave one space and get into another. You enter a completely different, unfamiliar space. I started to develop that series where I centered myself. In my personal life, I was practically participating in my own form of mini migrations. I would leave town and go over the river into the calm of the country. It wasn't until 2017 that I made a very deliberate shift to using myself in my work, with natural elements.



Dominique Hunter, *Here and Now*, 2019.
Mixed media collage on watercolor paper, 22 x 30 in.

Llanor Alleyne: An impetus for me even beginning to draw and enjoy the things I did as a child were the colouring books, and they were always about flowers, and so on. That's kind of a passive influence, but it's really interesting to hear you talk about migration, Dominique, because of the impact of my move from Barbados during my childhood. You go from a Caribbean context, as an eight-year-old, where you've lived 300 yards from the beach, where your daily walk included a gully full of trees, and birds and insects, to snow, and concrete and tall buildings. One of the things I remember telling my mom very early after we emigrated to New York, from Barbados, when I was eight – and this was in the 80s – was: "I'm not staying here; this place is ugly." And so, for me, where I came from, was always the most beautiful place. And what is the Caribbean? What is both the mythical and actual Caribbean? What is the actual Caribbean with its struggles,

its industrialisation in places like Trinidad, and even in parts of Barbados which are very urban? Overall, it's just intense beauty. For me, that's come into the work a lot. But also, Caribbean literature and queer black feminist literature play a big role in the subject matter I select and the context in which I choose to create the work. Toni Morrison's *Paradise* is very influential. There's a scene as a part of that book, where Black women gather in a convent garden to scream and cry and wail out their troubles in a rainstorm. Then you have Paule Marshall, who also talks about this immigrant experience, and you have Alice Walker and all her books relating Black femininity to nature. So, I think it's also about having access to this literature. I was a heavy reader as a kid. And then, queer feminism. I'm a queer woman. I think one of the things that is underrepresented in Caribbean art, especially Caribbean feminist art, is the queering of the Black female body. We're always set in the context of a number of other things, but never in relation to ourselves or from within ourselves. For me, it's very important to acknowledge that there are different kinds of sexualities among Black women. And there are many ways to express that and to showcase that without it being necessarily pornographic or supremely overt. Also, I think there's this notion for Black women in the diaspora, no matter where you're from, that we're so hard and we're so heartbroken that we don't have time to acknowledge the beauty around us. And that is a false notion. We make beautiful things. We see beautiful things. We want beauty around us. I think that's the power in my work, too. That's always the grounding factor. I use elements of nature, but I present them as abstracted because I want that language to be mine – that world is mine. It's a good way to engage my imagination. I am not always thinking about verbenas, or roses or lilies. I'm thinking of colours that go together and shapes that I like, and how they cover or expose or frame this figure that I'm trying to give a story to. All of that plays into how I approach my narrative work. Because I think – and Dominique does this as well – each series of artworks comes from different places, but they all have a connective tissue, which has this kind of naturalistic context. I try very hard not to make things look like actual nature, but rather to say: “Hey, we build a world here in the Caribbean that's completely unique.”

BM: You mentioned this idea of the Caribbean as a mythical place or a magical place, and then perhaps, the converse of that is another reality. Several writers and artists are intentional about creating a more robust narrative around the Caribbean and what it means to live here. Is this important to you? I feel that argument in what you just shared. What I also took from you is that there's a pride and an acknowledgement that the space you're from looks different. It just is a different environment. Are there any concerns that people interpret your work as a mythical representation of the Caribbean?

LA: I don't care. People have their own ideas. That's not the place I'm coming from. I don't really think of my collages as magical or mythical or doing any kind of spiritual work. If you get that from it, that's totally beautiful and okay. My latest series is the *Moonlight Series*. It's about serenity and intimacy. But it's in the dark. It's not in a lit beachy, palm-trees-swinging environment. There are no chattel houses in the back or things like that. It's really about these figures in conversation with each other and their environment. The "witchiness" of the Caribbean is a colonial construct, but we have also played heavily into that. To drive part of our culture is to bring those things forward. I don't think there's anything wrong with Obeah or Candomblé, or Santería. They are African-derived spiritual practices. Those are not the traditions I usually bring to my art, so I can't claim them in the work, but they are actual aspects of being from and in the Caribbean. I think it's very hard to get away from, and it does us a disservice to deny the otherworldliness of the Caribbean. The Caribbean is also genuinely a stunning place as a physical landscape. We can't take that away from it, and we shouldn't run away from that either.

DH: I agree with what Llanor is saying. Yet, I try to create spaces that could be anywhere; that could be read as anywhere. In a lot of my later works, I look at this whole idea of, if you're from the Caribbean – well, I don't know if I should say from the Caribbean, but at least from Guyana – you're trained to think anywhere else is better than here. And so, I consider this idea that you must leave the Caribbean to make it, or to make something of yourself. For the most part, the spaces that I create in my art are kind of empty. In some cases, they



Llanor Alleyne, *Pool*, 2022. Hand-drawn/painted elements on black watercolor paper, 22 x 30 in.

can literally be read as anywhere. And I like that. Another thing that is important to me, is the figures I describe are not distressed or, they are not wrestling with the natural environment. I think about the fact that softness is not something that is ever really extended to Black women. Like Llanor was saying earlier, you've got to be strong, you've got to be working ten different jobs and holding up the entire world. You can be anything but soft. And I found, when I was doing my research, you don't really see images of Black women being soft in whatever space they are in. So, I think about that a lot. And then there is the stereotypical idea of Black women in natural environments; the stereotype about Black people being savages, uncivilized, wild.

LA: That makes sense. I just want to piggyback on what you're saying. If we look at the canon of Black women in art – meaning the representation of Black women in art – we are always in service, or labour, right? The majority of the art has us in a field holding somebody's baby, bringing a plate of fruit to somebody as they lounge, being a subservient muse. If you were to talk about Black women across the diaspora and representation in art, we are very often not at rest. Rest is not often seen as an action that involves a Black body or Black female body. So, I think that's something that I also wanted to bring in my work: we can rest. I'm gonna lay my body down in this beautiful garden and chat with my girls. We can rest, and again, that's another literary reference. I remember reading one of my favourite books in the entire world, if not my favourite book in the world, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. After the main character has gone through many horrors – the men, the flood, the hurricane, the death – she goes back to the town in some overalls, with dirty feet, and knocks on her best friend's door. And they sit on the porch, and she tells of her experiences. It is such a beautiful moment of rest. In essence, it says: "I have laid my burden down, I'm going to tell my friend what I've been through." That is one of the most moving pieces of literature I've ever read. The woman has laboured. She has fought. She swam. And here's a moment where she gets to sit down and say: "I am so tired. Can I talk to you, my friend, about what I've been through?" I think that's an important thing to represent. We don't always have to be doing something to be represented.



Llanor Alleyne, *Respite of the Black Madonnas*, 2022.

Hand-drawn/painted elements on black watercolor paper, 22 x 30.

BM: I'm curious, what does the singular Black figure represent in your work? Or the singular woman figure? Does the figure say anything about actualising womanhood?

DH: As I mentioned, from 2017 onward, I made a very deliberate decision to use myself in my work. All the silhouettes are mine in the *Cusp* series. Prior to that, I was working with found material from different magazines. I felt like, although I was chopping and pasting all these different pieces from different magazines, I was telling other women's stories. I wanted to center myself. I wanted to tell my story. I'm mixed race. I identify as Black because all my lived experiences have been as a Black person. Every time I've had a racist encounter, it was literally because of my Blackness. So, my lived experience has been as a Black girl.

There are certain expectations of Black womanhood or girlhood. You got to look a certain way; you got to have a certain type of figure. And I didn't have any of that. But I was still holding on to this identity. I had to reconcile all of this. And I decided to start using my art. Most of the time, it will be one figure. When you start seeing multiple figures, it is different versions of me. I started to get into Freud, the id, and superego, but it's all me. It's me trying to unpack all those feelings. I'm addressing this expectation that Black women should look a certain way, and if you don't, then you're not Black. And you know, it's crazy to me because how can you tell me I'm not Black? It's been interesting, but the figures are all me, and they're all my stories.

LA: When I started doing collages – working with and tearing up my own paintings – and I started thinking about the Romare Bearden approach of creating your own pieces and doing your own paintings and so on, I had a jumping-off experience. There was a time when I was living in New York in the late 2000s, and I did not have health insurance because I was a freelancer. I had to go to the doctor, but Bellevue Hospital in New York, at the time, had a sliding scale policy for all treatments. I went to see a doctor because I had a rash on my back that I couldn't quite figure out the cause and it was spreading pretty rapidly. I saw a white, male doctor. It's a teaching hospital, and they didn't ask me what my name was. He decided to have my half-naked body displayed for his students, without my permission. He just walked them into the room and started talking to me as if I were an inanimate object. I was incredibly upset. I went home and immediately made a piece called *Finding Ghazal*, which is a kind of Persian poetic form. It was the first piece I made that wasn't found collage (in other words, not made from found images in magazines). I was tearing up something that I had made previously, which represented my body and reconfiguring myself in *Finding Ghazal*. That's the only self-portrait I believe I've ever done. I think there may have been one or two in the *Cameo* series that were based on me, but that was the first kind of singular, individual black female body collage I've ever made. And it spawned a series of work around that idea. But then, as it evolved, it became less about me and more about just Black portraiture, in general. So, the series with the heads that I

worked on for many years was just that representation. Again, when you see portraits of Black people, it's so rare; daguerreotypes from the 1800s, and so on. You have to be rich or have someone to fund those. They're now discovering a few portraits of Black people, not just Black women, but Black people in general, leading back to the Renaissance. Again, it's about representation. We exist. We have a gaze. We have a presence. We deserve to be immortalised as individuals, as portraits, at hanging galleries. Black skin, dark skin people deserve an art form that sees them as well. Again, I love abstraction. So, it's always this play of the figurative and abstraction together – something that I really love to see in my work and in other people's work. That's really the basis for the figure as a form in my work, but also as an intention. I am representing the presence, the serenity, the “we-are-here-ness” of the portraiture and the body.

BM: What is your favourite work?

LA: *The Moonlights* are my absolute joy now. They've opened a new way of thinking for me. It's very hard to see that from an external perspective because there is a consistent visual progression to my work. The work I really enjoyed making the most, though, was *The Inklings*. I love those collages. People didn't respond to them well. The thing that people say to me is: “I love how you use colour. I love how you think about colour.” So, when I took colour away with *The Inklings*, I think people were just really shocked. If I were to pick a favourite series, I really love those.

DH: I try not to have favourites. It is sometimes difficult to get attached to my pieces because you can feel like you've gone through hell to create them, and then you don't want to look at them. You need a break from seeing the work. One piece that I felt captured what I wanted to say was a piece I did back in 2019 called *Field of Dreams*. And it was very simple. It was a silhouette of myself laying on what appears to be a tile floor with vines covering the legs, and the figure was holding a single flower.

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Dominique Hunter, *Field of Dreams*, 2019.
Mixed media collage on watercolor paper, 22 x 30 in.



Llanor Alleyne, *Inkling No. 4*, 2018. Acrylic on paper, 12 x 18 in.

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Llanor Alleyne, *Inkling No. 9*, 2018. Acrylic on paper, 12 x 18 in.

LA: Dominique, what piece did you enjoy making the most? I think that's the context in which I would say that *The Inklings* were enjoyable for me. They were new. There was a new thought process. I was using a different part of my brain to make those. I was asking: What can happen when I take away colour from my practice? What will come out of that? I'm interested to hear what work – singular, or a series – did you enjoy making the most? It's how I understood Bianca's question.

DH: It's still a tough question. For me, I think, because of my process, sometimes I really go through hell. The composition might look simple, but it took me a while to get it to that point. It's like this puzzle, so sometimes, it's weeks and weeks of shifting things around. A piece that I enjoyed, *Everything Will Be Okay*, was made in 2020. That was my largest piece up to that point. And it was challenging, because the scale is completely different, and it was on canvas. I usually work on watercolour paper. I made that piece during the pandemic, in the midst of the George Floyd protests and the Guyana elections. It was just very chaotic. I was trying to hype myself up to keep working because I was looking around and seeing my creative friends hitting a ceiling. They couldn't work. I tried so hard to stay away from that feeling. And it worked up to a certain point. Eventually, I wasn't able to do anything because it was just too much happening.

LA: I had the opposite experience during the pandemic. I moved back to the United States from Barbados after living between Barbados and New York for seven years, going back and forth. I didn't know the pandemic was coming when I made the decision in 2020. I know I said, *The Inklings* are my favourite, and I stand by that, but the pandemic was transformative for my US-based development, because it was during that time that I made *The Fugitive Ecologies*. When the pandemic happened, I found myself in a state, not in the Caribbean, and in the context of an unknown disease. I started making *The Fugitive Ecologies* to remind myself that if there is no beauty externally, you can create it yourself. It was a way of giving myself flowers as often as I could.

Conclusion

The conversation with Dominique and Llanor lasted for almost two hours. They discussed a myriad of topics ranging from tools and techniques to inspiring albums and notable podcasts. Reflecting on what these artists shared, I have great consideration for the purpose and possibilities of the foliage. Alice Walker's writing comes to mind. Describing her mother's relationship with her garden, Walker writes, "My mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens" (Walker 1994). As if speaking about the figures in Dominique's and Llanor's artworks, Walker continues: "I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible – except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty."

Foliage can be a safe space where one grapples with anxiety, fears, and doubts. In the flowers, leaves, and vines, Black women are audaciously free. Radiantly free. Foliage is a refuge for defining self on one's own terms. It provides the rooting by which Black women can frolic, play and, most importantly, imagine. What's in the foliage? Planted seeds, the magic of sprouting ideas, and everything in the middle.

Reference

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