

Marsha Pearce, Tessa Alexander, Cydne Jasmin Coleby, Renluka Maharaj and Coralina Rodriguez Meyer: Beyond Glimpses in the Archive: Visual Narratives of the Land and Body



Visuals

Beyond Glimpses in the Archive: Visual Narratives of the Land and Body

Marsha Pearce

Visual Culture Scholar, Independent Curator, and Educator
Curator and Guest Editor CRGS Special Issue 16
Gender Articulated – Visual Language and the Un/Seeable Self

Tessa Alexander

Artist and Educator
Trinidad and Tobago

Cydne Jasmin Coleby

Interdisciplinary artist
The Bahamas

Renluka Maharaj

Visual Artist
Trinidad and Tobago

Coralina Rodriguez Meyer

Visual Artist, Mixed Media
U.S.A

Marsha Pearce

Keywords: Curatorial, curating, virtual gallery, online exhibition, Caribbean exhibition

Tessa Alexander

Keywords: Resistance, women's agency, divine feminine

Cydne Jasmin Coleby

Keywords: The tropics, desirability, consumption of body

Renluka Maharaj

Keywords: Memory, indentured labourers, exoticism

Coralina Rodriguez Meyer

Keywords: Monuments, violence, liberation mythology, fertility

How to cite

Pearce, Marsha, Tessa Alexander, Cydne Jasmin Coleby, Renluka Maharaj and Coralina Rodriguez Meyer. 2025. "Beyond Glimpses in the Archive: Visual Narratives of the Land and Body." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (16): 59–84.

Tessa Alexander

These pieces are from a series that looks at common plants found in the Caribbean region, juxtaposed with reimagined archival images of women, specifically old postcards sourced from several online repositories as well as the Michael Goldberg collection in the West-Indiana section of the Alma Jordon Library at The University of the West Indies, St Augustine, Trinidad. Having researched everyday ways that women resisted colonial oppression, yet found ways to survive and even thrive, these works give agency to these women. In her book *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence and the Archive*, Marisa J. Fuentes (2016) writes: "how do we narrate the fleeting glimpses of enslaved [and othered] subjects in the archives...how do we critically confront or reproduce these accounts to open up possibilities for historizing, mourning, remembering and listening to the condition of [these] women?" (1).

Scholars agree that active struggle against colonial and imperial oppression was part of everyday life in the region. Resistance took many forms, manifesting not only in overt rebellions but also in much more subtle ways. It is well-documented that many women employed their own agency in terminating unwanted pregnancies; pregnancies that were often the result of rape by plantation owners, overseers, and their friends; pregnancies which became part of the mandate to populate plantations when the triangle trade and the forced movement of Africans from the continent were abolished.

In the paintings *Resistance and Silent Witnesses*, I have juxtaposed the portraits with plants used to induce miscarriages: the Peacock Flower and Cotton. Both plants were readily available to women in the Caribbean. The paintings in this series are all rendered in watercolour with elements of collage in the photographs of the plants as well as in the screen-printed papers which make up their garments. The patterns chosen for the garments reflect a multi-heritage, with the use of both Afrocentric and Indo centric designs, as well as madras fabric brought to the Caribbean as inexpensive cloth for the workers. The

women are all surrounded by what can be seen as a halo, often painted in Eurocentric art traditions to show purity of the subject, but can also be regarded as the full moon, which in many cultures represents divine feminine energy.

In *Protector*, I have reinterpreted a postcard which presented a woman with her breast exposed, again highlighting the sexualization of othered women's bodies. I chose to keep the portrait as it was seen in the postcard but to surround her with what is known as the "boundary plant" in Trinidad. The use of this plant is meant to symbolize the need for us as a society to respect and protect women. *Nurturer* shows a woman surrounded by dasheen bush, brought to the Caribbean to feed the enslaved. The use of this plant in the portrait highlights the ability of the women who came before us to sustain and nourish, as the entire part of this easy-growing plant is eaten and is known to be very nutritious. These pieces reimagine narratives told to us in a way that adds nuance to the stories.

Tessa Alexander, *Silent Witnesses (Cotton)*, 2023
Watercolour with decorative speciality papers; 20 x 28 in.





Tessa Alexander, **Resistance (Peacock Flowers)**, 2023
Watercolour with decorative speciality papers; 20 x 28 in.



Tessa Alexander, **Protector (Boundary Plant)**, 2023
Watercolour with decorative speciality papers; 20 x 28 in.



Tessa Alexander, *Nurturer (Dasheen)*, 2023
Watercolour with decorative speciality papers; 20 x 28 in.

Cydne Jasmin Coleby

My work celebrates the captivating complexity of what it means to be Caribbean and, more specifically, Bahamian. By drawing on the aesthetics of Junkanoo, I construct vibrant images celebrating the resilience of my kindred. Named after “John Canoe,” Junkanoo celebrates Canoe’s successful defence, from 1708-1742, against European invasions in West Africa. Early Bahamian Junkanoo costumes were made using modest materials and have since evolved into a vivid display of materiality. Though the materials commonly used in the costumes’ construction are typically associated with “craft,” a subsection of art-making related to female labour and aesthetics, Junkanoo costuming is male-dominated. For those familiar with the festival, my work offers a recognisable homage to Bahamian cultural identity and African cultural retentions while subverting the masculine tone of this aesthetic language.

I use photographic archives as source material to give space to the reality of lived experiences in the tropics, as they exist within fabrications of paradise. I primarily use collage to layer various materials and imagery. My practice meditates on the difficulty in distinguishing between which experiences inform, rather than define, our sense of identity. Context is critical to understanding behaviours across lineages, and the lack thereof leads to misunderstandings of the behaviours in question. Speaking to these misinterpretations, a recurring motif in my work is the use of colour-manipulated ecological images as anatomical parts of the subject of work. For a viewer who is accustomed to the flora and fauna in my work, the transformations do not skew their knowledge of the image. But for those unfamiliar with the native flora and fauna, the snippets of soursop, sugar apple, and plums appear more insidious than delectable fruit. Moreover, for those with intimate knowledge of these images, I question the accessibility, desirability, and utilisation of the bodies of these subjects, and to what degree do our cultural attitudes shape the landscapes we inhabit, versus how much our environment shapes who we are.

The subjects of autonomy, intersectionality, layering/sedimentation, trauma-processing, and healing are central to dialogue prompted by my work, all while giving additional consideration to an intimate understanding of the historical and continued (inter)national exploitation of small, vulnerable nations. With this, the work serves as a path for me to question our capacity for healing as a region, in addition to cultivating individual and collective narratives and identities through intentionally centring personal and formative experiences.



Cydne Jasmin Coleby, *Can I Help You? Nah We Straight*, 2021
Acrylic, decorative paper, photo collage, silver foil, and glitter on canvas; 48 x 36 in.



Cydne Jasmin Coleby, *Dis All You Like*, 2022
Acrylic, photo collage, crepe paper, and glitter on canvas; 48 x 30 in.

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Cydne Jasmin Coleby, *Yeah I Biggity, And?* 2021
Acrylic, decorative paper, photo collage, and crepe paper on canvas; 48 x 30 in.



Cydne Jasmin Coleby, *Dawta VII*, 2024
Archival print on Rag Paper; 24 x 12 in.

Renluka Maharaj

My family's history as indentured labourers in Trinidad and Tobago has been a point of departure for ongoing dialogue and research. Interviews and archival research inform my mixed-media and video work. My art is autobiographical and influenced by the narratives, myths, and folklore born from women who migrated from India to the Caribbean. I investigate themes of history and memory and explore how these inform identity.

I started investigating my family's history when I came upon images of indentured women posed and recorded by a French colonial photographer who operated a studio in Port of Spain, Trinidad, during the nineteenth century. I grew curious about these "Coolie Belles" and wanted to know more, only to find out there wasn't more. These images were created for postcards (the label "Coolie Belles" appears on these postcards), which were then sold to entice European tourists to the island. I had more questions than answers: How did they come to be in his studio? Were they compensated? Did they willingly pose? They seem to all be wearing similar clothing and jewellery, almost as though he "dressed" them, creating a brand for the exotic woman that existed there. It was at this point that I decided to work on changing the narrative around them; to give them names and identities so they may be remembered differently, and to wipe away the "hand" of the original photographer.

My mixed media paintings represent different iterations, each time removing "access" to the audience. At the beginning of this work, it was important for the women to be confrontational: announcing their existence, insistent on you knowing they lived. They were wives, lovers, daughters. Since then, with each subsequent iteration, the women in my images have begun to recede. I allow the environment to envelop them, protect them, home them – going back to what was before the invaders declared them to be savage and uncivilized; before they wore the clothes and spoke the language of their captors; to begin again in the footsteps of their ancestors. In my most recent image, the figure

disappears altogether, only to reveal the magic these women were carrying within them.



Renluka Maharaj, *Lillah*, 2020

Acrylic paint, cotton paper, and rhinestones on canvas; 30 x 40 in.



Renluka Maharaj, *Zahra and Her Dragon*, 2023

Pigmented ink print, acrylic paint, acrylic markers, cotton thread, polyester/silk fabric on canvas; 63 x 48 in.



Renluka Maharaj, **Chandika**, 2022.
Pigmented ink print, cotton thread, cotton fabric, and acrylic paint on canvas; 43 x 55 in.





Coralina Rodriguez Meyer, ***Chiminigagua Oya Ogbun Thinker (Coralina Triptych)***, 2020-2022. Intimate waste, environmental debris, domestic construction materials in Mother Mould pregnancy cast of Katherine Ortiz of Liberty City collected after king tides, tropical storms and climate pulses including: charcoal, coral, sea sponges, chancletas, woven palm fronds, palm stamens, palm husks, wall insulation foam, building studs, floor resin, industrial adhesive, interior latex paint, landscape marking paint, spray paint, nail salon paint, synthetic hair weave, human hair, and fingernails; 76 x 36 x 24 in.

Coralina Rodriguez Meyer

Recalling liberation mythologies found in tropical spaces, my artworks consider the culture of procreation in the Americas – a complicated historical, political, and geographic context wherein conquering the wild landscape, reproductive bodies, and indigenous societies stems from a colonial Eurocentric legacy. Inhabiting its endemic environment, my fertility votives are made by combining intimate ephemera and environmental waste cast into a slurry of domestic construction materials. As monuments to the survivors of man-made and natural disasters, the Mother Mould effigy figures bear the burdens of internalised structural violence made in and of our bodies, our landscape and our movement.

Chiminigagua Oya Ogbun Thinker (Coralina Triptych) is a procreative effigy figure composed of materials arranged in sedimentary layers of bruised black and purple pigment. With the idea of liberation in mind, the work draws on Muisca and Orisha deities whose domain involves a life cycle of creation and destruction. More specifically, it conjures the Orishas Oya (who rules the dead, is involved with the ancestors, cemeteries, and wind), and Ogun (whose polarity is present in his healing and destructive abilities, watching over war, labour, children and families), and the Muisca Chiminagagua (creator god who made light and earth by sending two black birds into the skies to illuminate the cosmos). Woven coconut and Old Man palm fronds in the work reflect and archive the funerary and domestic architectural traditions of island nations ranging from the Caribbean to the South Pacific, where I first learned roof thatching membrane techniques that were also used as headstones to commemorate the transition of ancestors. The pregnant figure is a mirror image with two sides of itself (one pointing up, the other pointing down). This effigy is part of a triptych installation I created after collecting littoral litter for four years along the seashore in Miami Beach with my daughter. Dead coral, sponges, chancletas, palm husks, palm stamens, shells and straws are among the refuse ingredients in the sculpture. I refer to these items as “gifts from Yemaya”

reclaimed on Miami Beach after climate pulses, including hurricanes, tropical storms and king moon tides.

Valle Sagrada is a coffee and soil cast figure nestled among a coconut palm nursery. The work is a syncretic pieta between an exotic, synthetic mother and her endemic habitat. The natural and man-made materials, along with the title *Valle Sagrada/Sacred Valley*, refer to the translation between gendered geographies and spiritual traditions of Caribbean and Andean cultures.

In the work *Yemaya (Bermuda Triangle)*, a turquoise and cerulean pregnant figure appears washed up amidst excavated coralina stone. The figure represents those spiritual traditions that have survived the forces and spaces that were aimed at vanishing them from sight. The Bermuda Triangle is referenced as a metaphor of the threat of disappearance.

Coralina Rodriguez Meyer, ***Valle Sagrada (La Ciguapa de Pachamama)***, 2020-2021. Intimate ephemera, environmental waste, domestic construction materials in Mother Mould pregnancy cast of Katherine Ortiz of Liberty City including: neon floor resin, wall insulation foam, interior latex house paint, mica powder, phosphorescent pigment, plastic funerary plants, tropical foliage, discarded plastic bags, wood beads, cockroach, anise, cumin, cinnamon, coriander, black beans, egg shells, coffee slurry, gardenia perfume bottle, Peruvian Straight hair weave, bamboo fibre, and braided rope quipus from llama and alpaca fur; 54.5 x 41 x 21 in.







Coralina Rodriguez Meyer, *Yemaya (Bermuda Triangle)*, 2020-2021.

Intimate ephemera, environmental waste, domestic construction materials in Mother Mould pregnancy cast of Katherine Ortiz of Liberty City including: Guatemalan serape fabric, alpaca and llama quipus, braided bamboo fibre, cotton balls, nylon rope, iridescent film, Cuban "Colonia" perfume bottle, turquoise powder, salt, coconut powder, white quinoa, tropical flowers, plastic funerary plants, floor resin, building stud, wall insulation foam, and interior latex house paint; 43.5 x 42 x 16 in.



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