

MATERIAL FREQUENCIES: THE SCULPTURAL WORK OF TAU LEWIS

by Magdalyn Asimakis

For months and years on end, Tau Lewis will gather donated and reclaimed fabrics, leathers, shells, rocks, and other objects. These materials come from disparate contexts and gather in Lewis' studio. There, the artist lives with them, examines them, and eventually creates new relationships between them through her art works. In most cases, Lewis' works are made entirely of reclaimed materials from Toronto, New York, and Jamaica. This process is just as important as the final product to Lewis, who thinks of this up-cycling as revering both the environment and diasporic histories of resourcefulness.¹

But these works are far more than the sum of their parts. The material DNA in the works place multiple histories into physical contact with each other while grounding Lewis' objects in the living world.² These are charged relationships, and by bringing them together materially, Lewis creates works that exceed the symbolic nature of figural art; the embodied 'meaning' of the works do not rely entirely on the visible, chronological, or geographical narrativization. As many of the fragment's histories are unknown, they fuse to create a new manner of storytelling that is not dependent on complete knowability, and yet, they possess familiar elements that prompt our patterns of recollection and memory. Lewis turns canonized narrative structure inside out, literally and figuratively reimagining how we can engage with the past. This acknowledges, as academic and writer Katherine McKittrick writes, "uneasy geographies, signaling how place, or more aptly black places, are unfamiliar, layered, and without certain temporality."³ In gathering and recontextualizing materials to create these works - which Lewis calls time capsules - the artist creates new life from remnants of those from the past, mapping out diverse Black geographies opaquely, and eschewing the possibility for colonial readings of racialized experience through visual representation.

Through her process, too, Lewis subverts colonial and capitalist modes of art making that insist on a specific kind of legibility - one that assumes the absolute knowability of the 'other.'⁴ When making her figural sculptures, Lewis places materials, objects, and poems inside the bodies, where they will be hidden from sight. For the most part, only Lewis and the sculpted figure know the secret of what exists inside of them, and this private knowledge acts as a nod to ancestral knowledge and a reclamation of agency. In many ways, this aspect of the works' compositions also allows them to remain connected to the artist, no matter where they travel or live. This private act of nurturing is also one of refusal, whereby Lewis prevents the colonial desire to traverse, translate, see, and know a subject.⁵ The restriction of access to the internal, the ancestral, and the psyche resonates with the figures' exterior as well, as the material sources and histories are unknown. The fragments fuse together and grow into a kind of thick, embodied skin; a protective vessel for their interior knowledge.

It becomes evident when meeting Lewis' sculptures in person and reading her poems, one of which follows this essay, that she is deeply engaged in conducting the frequencies that surround her as a praxis of truth telling that eschews Western narrativization. Two of the sculptures in this exhibition from 2017, *Untitled (the cause and cure is you)* and *you lose shreds of your truth every time I remember you*, are casts from Lewis and her friend Julien. These works reference Lewis' lived experiences and images she grew up around. The former, for example, is the artist's interpretation of a painting in her mother's house that has left a vivid impression in her visual memory, though she does not know what the picture means to her mother. In recreating the image of a reclined woman through a bodily casting process Lewis implicates herself into the

image, probing the embodied nature of memory both familiar and unknown. And, as in all her works, Lewis explores her identity through the making process by charging the works with the emotions affiliated with these lived experiences.⁶

The sculptures in this exhibition from 2018-2019, *What in the water? (time capsule #3)*, *I the spirit conductor come to tell you we were here before this*, and *I'm gonna keep protecting the soul of the sea*, are mermaids. For the past two years Lewis has been reassessing spaces of erasure as sites of imagination, productivity and growth. One of these such places is the water. Lewis wonders if the expansive beauty and evolving mystery around the ocean is inspired by, or even created by, Black ancestors. She imagines mermaids as beings whose lives, stories, and languages were swallowed by the oceans and spat out again, becoming entities intelligible to undersea life.⁷ The three aforementioned works represent such ancestral mermaids who are dense with knowledge absorbed by the sea floor. Resilient, they are mutable vessels for Black diasporic genealogies that can transgress physical boundaries and can live on both earthly and aquatic spaces. As the artist writes,

*us the broad communion of the mermaid people
who travel between earthly and aquatic territories ...
walk around on big broad feet and...
were made to swim well
because of mermaid blood in our DNA.⁸*

Lewis' mermaids are a departure from her preceding figural works; they not only reimagine how we read and engage with the past, but also consider how imagination can be utilized to converse with ancestral knowledge through making. This act is potent in the face of the perception that the present is severed from the past; that we exist only in the contemporary; that we know better; that established structures work; that time is linear; that optics necessarily reflect deeper truths. Lewis eschews canonized methods of representation and historicization in favour of a materialist approach, both physically and conceptually, that at once activates fragments of the past and, in the case of her mermaids, envisages structures for the future.

*Old friend
How far will you let me in
I need to come closer for you to recognize me.
We both were different when last you found me here.
Dear spirit,
I have seen you lingering for three days
I found some messages you left me
It's hard to reach you in this place
Us spirits need appreciation now!
before we pack up and leave
There's a lot of good we can
give to this world*

*if I could paint a picture of you
so that you never leave me again.*

*A conductor's job is the bringing together of frequencies
A hard job that can have you feeling weighed down in this
place sometimes.
Black folks are like spirit conductors
on these earthly territories*

*It feels like I've been floating away
lifetimes and lifetimes
but I'm not a by gone!
and I'm countin' on you to ground me again.*

- Tau Lewis, 2018

Notes

- 1 Based on conversations with Tau Lewis, 2018.
- 2 Magdalyn Asimakis, *Tau Lewis: I bet this cave has been here for a really long time*, Brooklyn Rail, December 2018.
<https://brooklynrail.org/2018/12/artseen/Tau-Lewis-I-bet-this-cave-has-been-here-for-a-really-long-time>
- 3 Katherine McKittrick, "Keeping the Heartbreak," from *Don't Wear Down*. Pp. 21. <http://katherinemckittrick.com/wornout>
- 4 Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question" in *Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994. Pp. 66-84.
- 5 David Garneau, "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation," *West Coast Line* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2012), 29.
- 6 Lecture by Tau Lewis as cited by Rosine Sanginga, Queen's University, 2018.
- 7 Based on conversations with Tau Lewis, 2018 and 2019.
- 8 Excerpt of a poem by Tau Lewis, 2018.

College Art Galleries
University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, SK

Tau Lewis: *when last you found me here*
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Leah Taylor, curator

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