

**The
Intimacies
Between
Continents**

The Intimacies Between Continents

Sula Bermudez-Silverman
Danielle Dean
Africanus Okokon

Curator
Coleman Collins

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Contemporary Arts Center Gallery
University of California, Irvine

Emergent Intimacy

Coleman Collins

The Intimacies Between Continents brings together the work of Sula Bermudez-Silverman, Danielle Dean, and Africanus Okokon — three contemporary artists who work across video, sculpture, and installation to unearth the often-forgotten material traces of the historical processes that produced global capitalism. The show borrows its title from *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015) by Lisa Lowe, in which she ties seemingly private, individualized domestic tranquility to broader systems of extraction. In contradistinction to the dominant notion of intimacy as “being personally intimate”, (i.e. an emotional, typically romantic relationship between two people within/and in relation to bourgeois domesticity and marriage), Lowe associates the word with “residual” and “emergent” forms of connection: implied but less visible forms of alliance and affinity among variously colonized peoples upon which that dominant mode depends.

We might think of the difference as a matter of distance. Seen from a certain angle, the story of modernity is one of distance, of vast distances being collapsed, a story of obstacles overcome: space and time gradually made irrelevant by technological progress. Past events rendered eternally visible on screens viewed from the comfort of one’s own couch. Goods—manufactured, assembled, and sold on disparate continents—delivered with the merest gesture, a flick of a finger. These activities necessarily occur within the home, the place where intimacy *must* occur, between two lovingly possessive individuals. They nestle against each other, satisfied.

All this is further structured by desire, an acquisitive desire: to have and to hold. To possess. To defend, because such bliss is invariably fragile. The artists in this show shed light on the ways in which these dominant forms of intimacy and their attendant comforts of consumption are materially reproduced. They re-enact the construction of trading castles and re-purpose the sea chests that conveyed goods from continent to continent. They index the raw materials—rice, salt, sugar, gold—whose fevered exchange ushered in the modern era. Collectively, the works in this exhibition scrutinize the racialized and gendered structures of economic power that undergird idealized domesticity—and in so doing, perform and instantiate an emergent intimacy.

Danielle Dean's video work *True Red Ruin* (2018) takes as its departure point the construction of Elmina Castle, a Portuguese trading post erected in 1482 in what is now Ghana. The castle was the first prefabricated European building to be constructed in sub-Saharan Africa, with pre-made components shipped in from Portugal. With the help of her half-sister, Ashstress Agwunobi, Dean re-enacts the construction of Elmina by transposing the narrative to the housing community in Houston where Agwunobi lives. Expertly employing reality filmmaking techniques, Dean flips the story on its head: she herself becomes the colonizer, come to conquer the Houston apartment complex—an act symbolized by the construction of a red cardboard castle in the complex's courtyard. In Dean's present-day re-enactment, the locals are initially open to the castle's construction and concomitant opportunities for employment (in this economy, no one can turn down a steady job), but they eventually come to realize the insidious nature of her arrival. Within the gallery, the zig-zagging two-channel narrative is enveloped by an installation of cardboard cutouts, with the castle from the video making a second appearance in physical space. While formally, the cutouts mimic the materials used in commercial advertising displays, they also materially index the lifeblood of modern consumer convenience shipping, the endless drumbeat of packages dropped off doorsteps day in and day out. Through a complex series of double-moves, Dean juxtaposes colonial expansion with present-day mechanisms of gentrification, gesturing toward a critique of the domestic and the ways in which the built environment is determined by the conditions of its construction.

Where *True Red Ruin* traces the way that Elmina Castle provided a literal structure for colonial-era trade, Sula Bermudez-Silverman's work homes in on the commodities that were at its heart. A cast dollhouse, made primarily of sugar, sits upon a foundation of salt bricks. The house's fragility is manifest—and its material composition and translucency gesture to the substances and veiled mechanisms that produce domestic spaces. On the walls are several examples from the artist's *Peepholes* series, which offer further material links to the colonial encounter. Cast within one of the window-shaped frames, we see maize; in others, we see the non-native ladybugs introduced by farmers to spur agricultural development. Within several works, the artist has embedded images appropriated from horror archetypes, placing a particular emphasis on the ways that those archetypes rely on the construction of an implicitly racialized Other. In another work, the horror film stills are replaced by 16th-century depictions of Indigenous peoples. The two types of images are useful counterparts: for Bermudez-Silverman, it's instructive to examine the manner in which historical narratives and depictions from early European colonization left indelible imprints on our broader popular culture.

In the center of the exhibition is Africanus Okokon's *The Breadwinner*, a large-scale collage of a female figure made from advertisements for Royal Aroma shaved rice. Both formally and thematically, the collage echoes Romare Bearden's 1964 *The Conjur Woman*, a collage portrait of a spiritual healer. Okokon's woman carries a plate full of banknotes, cowrie shells, and other types of currency, all seemingly being expelled from the mouth of a snake which has wrapped itself around her. Though outwardly ambiguous, the serpent is a reference to a mythological snake who vomits cash—much sought after by present-day Ghanaian practitioners of *sakawa*, a type of online scamming that incorporates traditional African ritual. Elsewhere, Okokon re-appropriates 19th century sea chests that were the primary modes of transport during the British colonization of Ghana. On the wall, two sea chests hold the artist's trophy sculptures: combinations of elements of American basketball trophies and African wooden souvenir figures. After making assemblage wood and resin sculptures in the US, Okokon partnered with artisans in Ghana to fabricate copies of his works in the Akan style of lost wax brass casting. In this way, his composite sculptures gesture toward their historical use in Ghanaian trade: brass sculptures traditionally served as units of weight measurement for gold dust. In a floor sculpture (*Nsibidi Loops*), Okokon has installed two monitors within a third sea chest. On one channel, nsibidi symbols—a pre-modern system of pictograms developed by a secret society in Southern Nigeria—morph into each other in a hand-drawn animation. On the other channel, a mixture of found footage, digital animation, and sound seem to translate the symbols of the first channel into an advertisement for aspirational exchange and currency.

Though disparate in their formal execution, the works coalesce through a sort of relational poetics. They speak to each other through a visual alliteration, a conceptual rhyme and simile: house and house, Ghana and Ghana, salt and sugar and shipping. Images are repeated, merged or juxtaposed with their uncanny doubles across time and space. Distance—between the past and present, or the east and west sides of the Atlantic—begins to dissipate. The artists deftly illuminate the ties between new and old iterations of institutions and objects and desires that continue to animate the conditions of our existence. Yet the works do not—as Lowe puts it—immediately move toward recovery and reconciliation; instead, they “pause to reflect on what it means to supplement forgetting with new narratives of affirmation and presence.” Resolutely present, insistently material, *The Intimacies Between Continents* is a collective rearticulation of the narratives of the past, with an eye toward understanding what it means to be together, today.

Coleman Collins is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and researcher whose work explores notions of diaspora in relation to technological methods of transmission, translation, copying, and reiteration. His most recent projects examine the connections between things-in-the-world and their digital approximations, paying particular attention to the ways in which real and virtual spaces are socially produced. Working across sculpture, video, photography, and text, Collins' practice attempts to locate a synthesis between seemingly opposed terms: subject and object; object and image; original and duplicate; freedom and captivity. Recent exhibitions and screenings have taken place at Ehrlich Steinberg, Los Angeles; Herald Street, London; Soldes, Los Angeles; the Palestine Festival of Literature, Jerusalem/Ramallah; Larder, Los Angeles; Hesse Flatow, New York; Brief Histories, New York; Carré d'Art, Nîmes; and the Kunsthalle Wien in Vienna. His work is in the permanent collection of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. He received an MFA from UCLA in 2018, and was a 2017 resident at the Skowhegan School for Painting and Sculpture. In 2019, he participated in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Art at the University of California, Irvine.

*Sula
Bermudez
Silverman*



beetle of Our Lady, 2023

Courtesy of the artist, Josh Lilley Gallery and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles



White Zombie, 2020

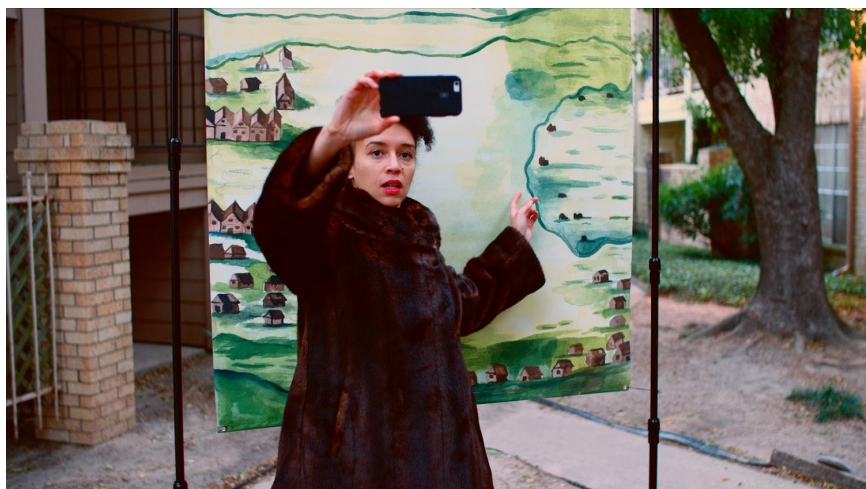
Courtesy of the artist and Angella and David Nazarian



White Zombie (detail), 2020

Courtesy of the artist and Angella and David Nazarian

*Danielle
Dean*



True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle) (film stills), 2018
Courtesy of Patrick Collins and Liv Barrett
Special thanks to the artist and 47 Canal, New York

*Africanus
Okokon*



Second Contact (Cage of Brass), 2024

Courtesy of the artist and von ammon co, Washington DC



The Breadwinner (detail), 2024

Courtesy of the artist and von ammon co, Washington DC



Nsibidi Loops (Plenty Money), 2024

Courtesy of the artist and von ammon co, Washington DC

Sula Bermudez-Silverman's sculptural practice is guided by the contextual origins and contemporary trajectories of her materials. With intensive research, she delves into mythological and historical narratives to examine their imprint. Materials such as sugar, salt, glass and resin often serve as physical homonyms, altering motifs such as the “ball and claw” through color, scale and translucency. Throughout Bermudez-Silverman’s catalog, objects that operate as a physical threshold — windows, saddles, staircases — are reintroduced to connect disparate epistemologies and question how history is camouflaged into the subconscious. She received her B.A. in Studio Art from Bard College and her M.F.A. in Sculpture from Yale School of Art in 2018. Solo exhibitions include *Bad Luck Rock*, Josh Lilley (London, 2023); *Ichthyocentaur*, Matthew Brown (Los Angeles, 2023); *Here Be Dragons, Micki Meng* (San Francisco, 2022); *Sighs and Leers, and Crocodile Tears*, Murmurs (Los Angeles, 2021); *Neither Fish, Flesh, nor Fowl*, California African American Museum (Los Angeles, 2020). She has also exhibited at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven; Mendes Wood DM, São Paulo; Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zurich.

Danielle Dean works with archives, video, performance, social practice, sculpture, and drawing. Dean investigates the recursive loops between the circulation of ideas and the material reproduction of global capitalism. Operating across media and with a variety of collaborators and participants, her work examines the fault lines within this seemingly closed circuit. Dean received an M.F.A. from California Institute of the Arts and is an alumna of the Whitney Independent Study Program. Recently completed projects include new commissions for Mercer Union, Toronto (2024), a solo show at Tate Britain, London (2022), and Performa, New York (2021). Other recent solo shows include: *Long Low Line*, Times Square Arts, NY (2023); *Bazar*, ICA San Diego (2023); and *True Red Ruin*, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2018). She participated in the Whitney Biennial in New York (2022). Group exhibitions include: *This Land*, at The Contemporary Austin (2023); *Freedom of Movement*, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Netherlands (2019); *The Centre Cannot Hold*, Lafayette Anticipation, Paris (2018); and *Made in LA*, at The Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2014).

Africanus Okokon works with moving image, performance, painting, assemblage, collage, sound, and installation to explore dialectics of forgetting and remembrance in relation to shared, cultural, and personal mediated histories. He received a B.F.A. in Film/Animation/Video from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) in 2013 and an M.F.A. in Painting/Printmaking from Yale University in 2020. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor in Film/Animation/Video at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Africanus has screened films at various festivals including the BlackStar Film Festival, the Chicago Underground Film Festival, True/False Film Festival, Ottawa International Animation Film Festival, the Eyeworks Festival of Experimental Animation and the Chale Wote Street Art Festival. His work has been exhibited and showcased at von ammon co, Sean Kelly Gallery, Helena Anrather Gallery, Microscope Gallery, the International Print Center in New York, Perrotin Gallery and The Kitchen.

1.

Sula Bermudez-Silverman

White Zombie

2020

Isomalt sugar, food dye, transparency

film, epoxy resin

45 x 20 x 44 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Angella and

David Nazarian

2.

Sula Bermudez-Silverman

Lovesick Grass

2022

Epoxy, resin, maize, transparency film

9 x 8 x 1 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Soho House

3.

Sula Bermudez-Silverman

beetle of Our Lady

2023

Lady bugs, epoxy resin, transparency film

9 x 8 x 1 inches

Courtesy of the artist, Josh Lilley Gallery,
and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

4.

Sula Bermudez-Silverman

Seven Sorrows and Seven Joys

2023

Lady bugs, epoxy resin, transparency film

9 x 8 x 1 inches

Courtesy of the artist, Josh Lilley Gallery,
and Hannah Hoffman, Los Angeles

5.

Africanus Okokon

Nsibidi Loops (Plenty Money)

2024

Two channel video, animation, sound,

found 19th century Ghanaian sea chest

24½ x 37 x 41 inches

Courtesy of the artist and von ammon co,
Washington DC

6.

Africanus Okokon

The Breadwinner

2024

Collaged found vinyl billboards.

silkscreen and inkjet on collaged found
vinyl billboards

135½ x 84 inches

Courtesy of the artist and von ammon
co, Washington DC

7.

Africanus Okokon

Bonny and Blithe, Good and Gay

2024

Brass, glass, found 19th century

Ghanaian sea chest

32 x 31 x 9½ inches

Courtesy of the artist and von ammon
co, Washington DC

8.

Africanus Okokon

Second Contact (Cage of Brass)

2024

Brass, glass, found 19th century

Ghanaian sea chest

26½ x 30¼ x 7 inches

Courtesy of the artist and von ammon
co, Washington DC

9.

Danielle Dean

True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle)

2018

Two-channel video installation, color,

sound, 9 min 39 sec, die cut digital

prints on cardboards

Dimensions variable

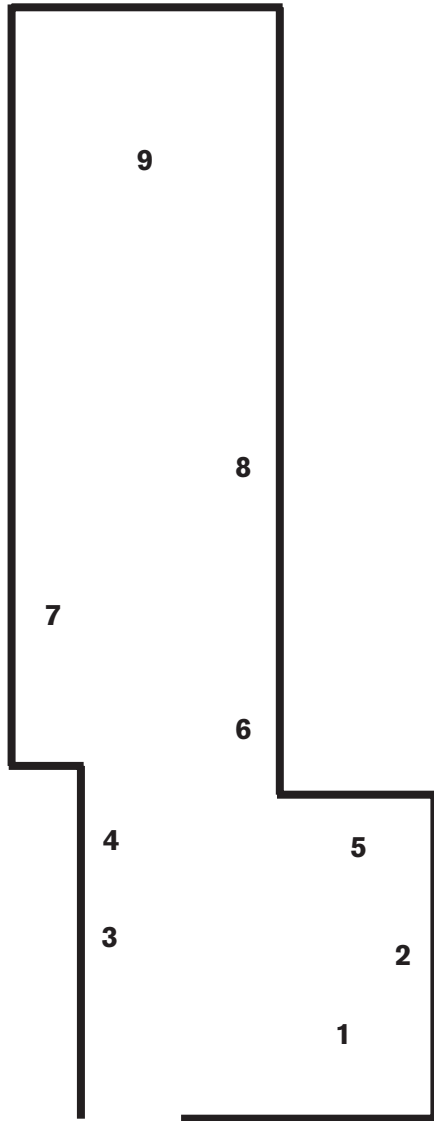
Edition 2 of 3 plus II AP

Courtesy of Patrick Collins and Liv

Barrett

Special thanks to the artist and 47

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P O E T I C J U S T I C E



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