

PRESS RELEASE

February 2022

The New
Art Gallery
Walsall

Karen McLean
Ar'n't I a Woman!
18 February – 5 June 2022



Karen McLean, *Silence me not...me ah rise* (detail), 2020, mixed media. Courtesy the artist.

Ar'n't I a Woman! is an exhibition of commissioned work by Birmingham-based Trinidadian artist Karen McLean. Through her artistic practice, she has consistently researched and referenced her Caribbean upbringing and heritage in evocative sculptural installations concerned with issues of identity, 'home' and post-colonial cultures.

The exhibition reveals her ongoing interest in the history, folklore and material cultures of Caribbean colonial history and its close relationship with slavery. Her ongoing interest in the roles of women within these histories is evident as she draws on a long tradition of gendered activities such as weaving, stitching and the dyeing of fabrics. Her powerful and complex works explore the symbolic and historic weight of materials and interrogates their relationship to British colonial legacies.

The title of the exhibition references Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech which was delivered in 1851 at the Women's Rights Convention in Ohio. Through her work, Karen platforms the role enslaved women of the Caribbean played in resistance, both in known rebellions but also through everyday acts of subversion. Taking centre stage is the figure of

Queen Nanny, leader of the Windward Maroons who, in the 18th century, fought against British colonisers. Also present is the folkloric trickster spider Anansi that survived the passage of slavery.

Karen has chosen hessian sacking for this project, known for its strength and durability. The material alludes to shipping and commercial exchange and also acts as a metaphor for the womb and its commodification. She has applied a range of processes including branding, hand stitching with animal suture thread, screen-printing, dyeing them with tea and coffee and embellishing them with cowrie shells.

Ar'n't I a Woman! has been created in the spirit of the women who used their strength and ingenuity to survive adversity and oppression. Drawing parallels with issues facing women today, Karen celebrates this ingenuity and vitality and (in the face of adversity) acknowledges the continued resistance of women for control of their bodies.

A digital exhibition guide is available with an essay by Gill Perry and an essay to be added by Emily Zobel Marshall.

Karen's exhibition should have opened in April 2020 but like many projects, was delayed due to the pandemic. She was able to show the work at Block 336 in Brixton who have generated a range of resources; <https://block336.com/exhibitions/karen-mclean-blue-power-arnt-i-a-woman/>

In Conversation

Saturday 2 April, 3pm

Join artist Karen McLean in conversation with Jessica Taylor

Free but booking essential. Please book at the Gallery Reception desk or

email: info@thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk

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Note to Editors

For further information and press images, please contact:

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About The New Art Gallery Walsall

The New Art Gallery Walsall presents, collects and interprets historic, modern and contemporary art in innovative and challenging ways, welcoming visitors from all over the globe as well as their immediate locality. The New Art Gallery Walsall is funded by revenue support from Walsall Council and Arts Council England.

For opening hours, visitors are advised to check with the gallery before visiting thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk | 01922 654400 | info@thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk



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