

Rhea Dillon,  
*The Sombre Majesty (or, on  
being the pronounced dead)*  
30 April–11 June, 2022  
6 Minerva Street, London

Whispered - at the top of my lungs  
piercing space and parting seas  
you rest on the lips of the  
broken, smacked and smothered.

Prayer.

Air. There's so much air in the word  
for wishes for, wishes of.

Wistful woes  
or wisdom wonder  
carried on the spirit air.

Heir.

Successor of The Work. New Wor(l)d.

More than that;

bestowed

Less than that;

perceived. -er.

E R

In emergence we find light for this dark room  
Rimmed with saints who expire at the touch  
of the living's breath, therefore,  
no holy in this spirit  
or, on being the pronounced dead.

Soft Opening,

Main Gallery (L–R)

*New Wor(l)d.*, 2022  
Sapele mahogany,  
oil stick and paper  
95.2 × 125 × 23 cm

*you rest on the lips  
of the*, 2022  
Sapele mahogany,  
oil stick and paper  
95.2 × 125 × 23 cm

*Rimmed with saints  
who expire at the touch  
of the living's*, 2022  
Sapele mahogany,  
oil stick and paper  
95.2 × 125 × 23 cm

*Every Ginnal Is A Star*,  
2022  
Plastic shipping barrel  
193 × 193 × 10 cm

*A Caribbean Ossuary*,  
2022  
Wooden cabinet  
and cut-crystal  
42 × 208 × 161.5 cm

*or, on being the  
pronounced dead.*, 2022  
Sapele mahogany,  
oil stick and paper  
95.2 × 125 × 23 cm

*Both Low Hanging Fruit  
And The Scavenged  
High Rise – Either Way:  
Suspension. So,  
Slackening The Hold  
Here I Ask Through The  
Poethics Of Suspense,  
'How Can You Rest  
When Still Strung Up?'*,  
2022  
Sapele mahogany  
crosier, bus seat  
moquettes and thread  
311 × 110 × 93 cm

*Heart Rock,  
Basket Case*, 2022  
Cut crystal, rock  
and wood  
15.5 × 15.5 × 31 cm

THE SOMBRE MAJESTY  
(OR, ON BEING PRONOUNCED DEAD)

Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet, 'power/knowledge'. But this kind of knowledge is internal, not external. It is one thing to position a subject or set of peoples as the Other of a dominant discourse. It is quite another thing to subject them to that 'knowledge', not only as a matter of imposed will and domination, by the power of inner compulsion and subjective con-formation to the norm. That is the lesson — the sombre majesty — of Fanon's insight into the colonising experience in *Black Skin, White Masks*.

—Stuart Hall in *Cultural Identity  
and Diaspora*, 1996

Working through personal reflections, analysis on language and poetry, developing the works in *The Sombre Majesty* while in study of Hall, led to an expansion of the words Race, Identity, Ethnicity and Nation. The exhibition takes Hall's writing on Caribbean identity as an organisational framework and proposes categories for understanding Caribbean diaspora culture. He writes "It is possible, with this conception of 'difference', to rethink the positionings and repositionings of Caribbean cultural identities in relation to at least three 'presences'... Presence Africaine, Presence Europeenne, and the third, most ambiguous, presence of all — the sliding term, Presence Americain." Presence Africaine, for example, for Hall, represents a site of a repressed people, "an origin of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation." This notion of repression, containment and simultaneous exclusion underpins the works in *The Sombre Majesty*: vessels of storing and transportation.

For the exhibition, Dillon adapts the final 'presence' to Presence Nouveau Monde in order to imply the inclusion of the United Kingdom by its broader language. To borrow Hall's words, for Dillon this final category of displacement "stands for the endless ways in which Caribbean people have been destined to migrate," who are continually silenced and suppressed in their hybridity and difference. The works in the exhibition at once track the movement of the Caribbean diaspora as mapped by Hall and sit in conversation with the intimate constellation of Rhea's familial ties and relationships.

Choosing the floor as a point of focus — or perhaps a point of arrival — *The Sombre Majesty* begins with four oil stick paintings of spades, each framed in an oversize sapele mahogany box. In recent history, 'spade' was a derogatory term used to describe black people, specifically those who arrived and formed the Windrush generation in the UK. By making these works on the floor of her studio, Dillon continues the conversation with the ground as a point of 'gestural poetics'. The wooden frames themselves resemble drawers from a dresser or cabinet: another reference within the exhibition of facilities for storage or movement. In repeatedly painting this form, Dillon attempts through painting to pull language to reclaim the spade and reposition it as a shield instead of an insult.

Next to these works stands *Heart Rock, Basket Case*, wherein a fragile glass basket cradles a piece of rock extracted by Dillon from the ground of Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. A number of Slave Castles stand along what

was formally known as the 'Gold Coast' of West Africa that through colonisation were ruled and controlled by different countries over time. Cape Coast Castle was controlled and conquered by the British in 1664; with most of the slaves from this castle landing in the Caribbean and the Americas. Dillon visited Ghana for the first time in December where she was confronted with the reality of being a westerner in the 'motherland', a reality she feels all westernised black people should feel for themselves. Returning to Hall briefly, in *The Fateful Triangle* and many additional essays, Hall discusses how disheartening it can be to 'go back' to Africa and still not experience a feeling of arrival at home. For Dillon, as a second-generation Black British citizen of Jamaican heritage, this feeling extends further. Perhaps cursed by Dillon's own ancestors, this highly charged work itself pre-empts a releasing of souls in *The Sombre Majesty*.

Above these works, *Every Ginnal Is A Star*, a nine-point star cut from a blue plastic shipping barrel overlooks the exhibition. These barrels line the streets and homes of Jamaica as families send back dried food and clothes to the country from overseas. The nine points of the star refer to 'Nine Night,' a party celebrated by Jamaican families where on the ninth night after a death, they bid farewell to the soul of the departed. A 'ginnal' is a Patois word for a 'trickster' and in this work, Dillon revisits the idea that Blackness must exist as 'trickster' amongst white supremacist society. These figures have to take up abstract and cunning forms in order to move and excel in what is a straight and simple world for white people, but a nonlinear, often unsupported world for Black people.

Alongside these works sits *A Caribbean Ossuary*, a cabinet exactly like the artist's grandmother's, leant on its back to symbolise both boat and casket. For the diasporic Caribbean community, this style of cabinet in a family home is quintessentially Caribbean. Traditionally, these cabinets hold cut crystal plates, cups and bowls only to be used on special occasions and even more rarely among lower class black families, with the view to elevate the household. The cut crystal was shipped unsupported from Dillon's recent residency at Triangle - Astérides in Marseille to the gallery in London, in a gesture Dillon calls 'performing objects'. The shipping company carried the boxes of glass and performed the labour of black movement, of soul movement, in an attempt to bring the pieces to London without damage. For the artist, this attempt failed, as did the 'movement' of black bodies from Africa and the Caribbean. Speaking to identity, nation and class, the cabinet acts as a casket for the number of souls who did not reach the 'Mother Country' (the UK) or the true motherland, which Africa is often referred to as. The decision not to package the crystal pieces sufficiently pre-empted their breakage and invites a releasing of these souls.

*Both Low Hanging Fruit And The Scavenged High Rise – Either Way: Suspension. So, Slackening The Hold Here I Ask Through The Poethics Of Suspense, 'How Can You Rest When Still Strung Up?'* similarly speaks to the transportation and movement of black people. Raised Roman Catholic, Dillon considers the pivotal role Christianity played in colonisation. This work comprises a sapele mahogany crosier, which is a stylised staff, a symbol of the governing office of a bishop or abbot that is carried by high-ranking prelates of multiple Western Christian churches, understood to represent the bishops as the shepherds of their "flock" of Christians, following the metaphor of Christ as the Good Shepherd. Here,

the hook reaches downwards from the celestial realm to continue to string up and suspend Blackness. Sewn-together moquettes lifted from disused bus seats extend the artist's use of 'contemporary historical' objects that evoke a post-Windrush generation. Much like Dillon's own family members, when these individuals were invited to the UK, the majority of jobs filled were in the public sector: bus, tube or taxi drivers, post office workers, nurses and more. Dillon asks, "Slackening the hold here I speak to the poethics of suspense: how can you rest when still strung up?"

Finally, moving into the rear gallery behind a set of black curtains, the viewer arrives at *NEGR-OID*. A found lantern emits a scent formulated by Dillon in 2020. The artist initially made this scent in response to an incident during a 2015 episode of Fashion Police, when Giuliana Rancic made racially charged jokes about Zendaya's choice to wear dreadlocks on the Oscars red carpet, saying the hairstyle made the actress look like "she smells like patchouli oil or weed." More recently, there was an incident in the UK news where a black teenage girl on her period was unjustifiably strip-searched by police at school because it was believed she smelled of cannabis. Dillon expands, "With both the Zendaya incident affecting me when I was younger, then the Child Q incident mere months ago; I was spurred to revisit this work that clearly needs continued discussion on the reality of olfaction's connection to society's perception of race." The compounding of the scent in *The Sombre Majesty* pushes and plays with racist stereotypes and therefore ontologies of Blackness in its very makeup:

Accord 1 is called Skin evoking milky, sunkissed 'brown' skin.

Accord 2 is called Oils speaking to shea butter and vanillin notes.

Accord 3 is called Food where Dillon compounded an allspice note, also called pimento or Jamaican pepper, and mixed it with rice notes.

Accord 4 is called Land where Dillon wanted to think on the sea breeze that surrounds being from an island country and black movement to land alongside the reality of the modern capitalocene where the 'land' is predominantly cleaned by Black and brown women, so bleach notes were employed.

Accord 5 is called Hair(gel) to speak to the metallic sweet scent of the black girls on the back of the bus to and from school with their hair gelled in incredible styles.

The lantern that houses the scent similarly carries a visceral memory for the artist:

"When I visited the slave castles (Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle) in Ghana for the first time in December of 2021 I was so struck by the reality of my history and heritage. I don't normally sketch upon reaction to things like a 'traditional artist' but in the cab on the way back I was suddenly woken from my nap and struck to sketch a lantern. This lantern I can only attempt to describe, post my body and mind's desire to sketch it, as being linked to the consistent darkness of the tight and small spaces of the castle affecting me, the number of bats (of whom I always see as spirits) inside the castle

rooms, and a desire to light the way for all the spirits that left the dark small door of no return. These castles and this lantern housed so many different bodies and people that were taken through and onto the New World to slavery. This lantern housing this scent speaks to the inability to shine light on all these different people who make up the Black race, no matter where in the world they landed.”

Once mixed, Dillon added Patchouli, a scent racially tied to Blackness and Cocoa that offers another obvious connotation. Returning to the title of this work, -oid as a suffix means ‘resembling,’ used in the formation of adjectives and nouns and often implying an incomplete or imperfect resemblance to what is indicated by the preceding element. This is the exact intention of this scent: it will always remain an ‘incomplete resemblance’ of Black women and Blackness, just as those terms can never fulfil or define a mass group of people.

*NEGR-OID,*

2020–2022

Scent, metal and glass

31 × 15.5 × 15.5 cm

Rhea Dillon (b. 1996) is an artist, writer and poet based in London. She was recently an artist in residence at Triangle - Astérides, Marseille and previously at V.O. Curations, London, which culminated in a solo exhibition, *Nonbody Nonthing No Thing* and the publishing of poetry chapbook, *Donald Dahmer* (both 2021). Last year, the artist presented *Catgut – The Opera* as part of Park Nights 2021 at the Serpentine Pavilion. Recent exhibitions include *Love* at Bold Tendencies, London (forthcoming); an online screening at The Kitchen, New York (2022); *Drawing a Blank* curated by Ben Broome, London (2022); *Janus* at Soft Opening, London (2021); *Pressing* at Division of Labour, Salford (2021); *Dishwater and No Images* as part of Distant Peak at Peak Gallery, London (2020); *No Man is an Island* at Almine Rech, London (2020) and *Uchronia et Uchromia* online at External Pages (2020).