



Grey Area: Locating the Artwork of the French Caribbean & Haiti

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In 1964, French President Charles de Gaulle visited Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana on an official state trip. Flying in an airplane over the Caribbean Sea, de Gaulle described the islands as “dust specks on the sea.”¹ De Gaulle’s famous quote evokes the almost otherworldly mystery of an aerial view of the Caribbean archipelago, while at the same time revealing a deep-seated hierarchical perspective of the region stemming from France’s history as a powerful colonizing force in the Caribbean. The French Caribbean is made up of two islands—Guadeloupe and Martinique—as well as the state of French Guiana, which sits on the north-eastern edge of South America. These Overseas Departments of France are officially governed by, and are economically and socially connected to, the European metropole. In the northern part of the Caribbean, known as the Greater Antilles, the nation of Haiti shares the island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. In 1804, after over a decade of combat led by rebelling slaves, Haiti gained independence from France and forever changed the

history of French sovereignty in the Caribbean.

Dust Specks on the Sea: Contemporary Sculpture from the French Caribbean & Haiti focuses on sculptural works by twenty-two contemporary artists from Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and Haiti. The exhibition presents various approaches to subject matter, sculptural materials, and process that speak to the contemporary practices of artists of this region, evincing their participation in an expanded, globalized art world and putting pressure on notions of who is at its “center” and who is on its “periphery.” Derived from de Gaulle’s observation, the exhibition’s title is used to challenge the perception that this region and its artwork are mere specks of dust.

Contrary to other recent exhibitions showcasing contemporary Caribbean artists, *Dust Specks on the Sea* creates a landscape that looks beyond regional categorization and gives attention to artists’ subjectivities as complex and rich, expanding past preconceived ideas of what art from this region can look like and what subjects it can address. The exhibition is unique in the physicality of its display: works

Rendering of proposed artwork, *Acta es fabula*, Marielle Plaisir, 2018

are positioned in close proximity and in direct conversation with one another, evoking a sensation of networked ideas amongst a mosaic of individual artistic approaches. The Martiniquan writer, philosopher, and poet Édouard Glissant is the most recognized theorist of Carribeanism, and his work helps clarify the complexities of the archipelago and its relationship to its governing metropoles (in this case, France). *Dust Specks on the Sea* looks to Glissant's proposition for "a world in which one is, quite simply, one agrees to be, with and among others."²

In *Dust Specks on the Sea*, the exhibiting artists from Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana are uniquely positioned between a Caribbean ideology and a European one. Tourists and travel guides have historically coined Martinique and Guadeloupe as a "Little France"—a place where one could buy a baguette equivalent in flavor to those from the finest Parisian bakeries. It seems undeniable that the islands' close ties to the metropole—for education and for culture—hold a space in the consciousnesses of the inhabitants of the Overseas Departments.

But in many cases, these artists look beyond cultural identity and colonial history for inspiration while making art. Half of the exhibiting artists (Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Kenny Dunkan, Nathalie Leroy-

Fiévéé, Audry Liseron-Monfils, Louisa Marajo, Ricardo Ozier-Lafontaine, Jérémie Paul, Tabita Rezaire, and Yoan Sorin) do not make work that obviously asserts where they are from; rather, they emphasize their identities foremost as thinkers and makers who draw from a vast range of conceptual and aesthetic strategies.

Audry Liseron-Monfils creates sculptures from branches found on the beaches of Martinique grafted to locally-sourced driftwood and placed on the ground. Though these materials are very literally Martiniquan, Liseron-Monfils's minimalism-influenced gesture restrains them from being visually associated with the "island." Louisa Marajo's photo, paint, and wood installations contain elements of construction barricades, referencing contemporary urban street scenes familiar throughout the world. Considered alongside the history of nineteenth-century landscape paintings of Martinique, Marajo's work functions almost as a post-apocalyptic version of a landscape experience, eliminating all romantic signifiers of "tropical" conditions. Tabita Rezaire works primarily in the digital sphere. Her work *Ultra Wet - Recapitulation* is a large pyramidal sculpture with projections of digital renderings her sci-fi investigation into identity, gender norms, and disjointed geographies. Here, Rezaire

proposes a future liberated from temporality and geography where technology prevails.

Topographically, Haiti is the most mountainous island in the Caribbean ("Haiti" meaning "land of high mountains" in the indigenous Taíno language), with rivers flowing throughout the country and aquamarine coastlines. The history of Haiti is, on one hand, revolutionary and pioneering, and on the other, a story of continual hardship and struggle. By 1825, only twenty years after Haiti became an independent nation—a feat won through the only successful slave revolt in history—the country had accumulated significant debt, owing millions to France in order to be "recognized" as an autonomous nation-state. In the ensuing two hundred years, Haitians have faced some of the most impoverished living conditions in modern times, exacerbated by a 2010 earthquake which resulted in over two hundred thousand casualties (death toll numbers remain inconclusive, a fact which itself signifies a lack of international humanitarian support).

Works by six artists from Haiti (Vladimir Cybil Charlier, Gaëlle Choisne, Jean-Ulrick Désert, Edouard Duval-Carrié, Adler Guerrier, Fabiola Jean-Louis) further the discourse around themes more commonly seen in exhibitions of work from this region: independence, identity, cultural influence, and

historical nostalgia. Fabiola Jean-Louis's fragile paper sculptures of Louis XIV-era shoes and Edouard Duval-Carrié's large resin head of a warrior-like figure play with history in ways that can be read as defiant gestures towards colonialism. In the form of a poetic memorial, Jean-Ulrick Désert highlights the story of a brutally murdered young Haitian girl, taking a critical approach to the hollow glamorization and exploitation of "Third World" catastrophe. Gaëlle Choisne takes inspiration from the Haitian landscape and pays tribute to its beauty and culture with her bronzed oyster shells and selection of music by the under-recognized Haitian composer Carmen Brouard.

In 1902, the eruption of the volcano Mt. Pelée on the island of Martinique destroyed the town of Saint-Pierre, killing approximately thirty thousand people in a matter of minutes. Poignant photographic images of the worst volcanic disaster of the early twentieth century show the volcano's dusty plume looming above the sparkling waters of the Caribbean. These beautiful visual documents of destruction point to the complexities of the archipelago: the French Caribbean and Haiti cannot be defined solely by their "exotic" beauty nor by their historical trauma. By locating Charles de Gaulle's dismissive quote front and center in our exhibition's title, we call attention to his

problematic perspective: it is detached and aerial, one that is merely “dropping in” on the Caribbean for state business. Images of the eruption of Mt. Pelée place us firmly on the ground in a specific place and time—Martinique, 1902—and bear witness to a historical event that, for the people actually occupying these so-called “dust specks,” was disastrous, even if its extent may not have registered four thousand miles away in the metropole. Through this exhibition, we aim for a perspective that is rooted in the specific approaches of these twenty-seven artists and looks outward in order to contribute to a contemporary, multi-layered understanding of artwork from this region.

As a visual experience, *Dust Specks on the Sea* creates a space that is not completely Caribbean, not completely European, and not completely independent either; the exhibition and its artworks live somewhere in the grey area between. This grey area is a nuanced space where history is undeniably present but not necessarily a driving force that burdens artists with the expectation of acting on behalf of a regional consciousness. The artists included in *Dust Specks on the Sea*—though from lush lands bearing Caribbean shorelines and the scars of colonial trauma—are not bound to make artwork that looks “Caribbean,” or that didactically

demonstrates the conditions of their landscape or their history. *Dust Specks on the Sea* is a platform where artists play all fields: expressing their personal relationships to heritage, navigating art-making inside the globalized contemporary art world, and looking beyond their cultural backgrounds for inspiration and ideas.

Hunter East Harlem Gallery (HEHG) is in the New York City neighborhood of East Harlem, a place known for its Caribbean population and its history as a home to displaced peoples, yet the narratives of the French Caribbean are still under-shared in Uptown Manhattan communities. HEHG is dedicated to creating projects that build on the complicated circumstances of being a human in today’s world, and to bolstering the voices of underrepresented creative people and thinkers. By presenting sculpture-based work in a distinctive way—in which artworks are displayed in close proximity, and, in some cases, physically interact with one another—*Dust Specks on the Sea* delineates a generative area in which traditional display methods and viewing experiences are not adhered to, thrusting visitors into networks of sculpture that feel uncomfortable and exciting at the same time. In doing so, it creates a visual argument for how artwork can be one of our most powerful tools for personal and political expression.

1 The story is recounted by Betsy Wing in her “Translator’s Introduction” in Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), xiii.

2 Glissant, 128.