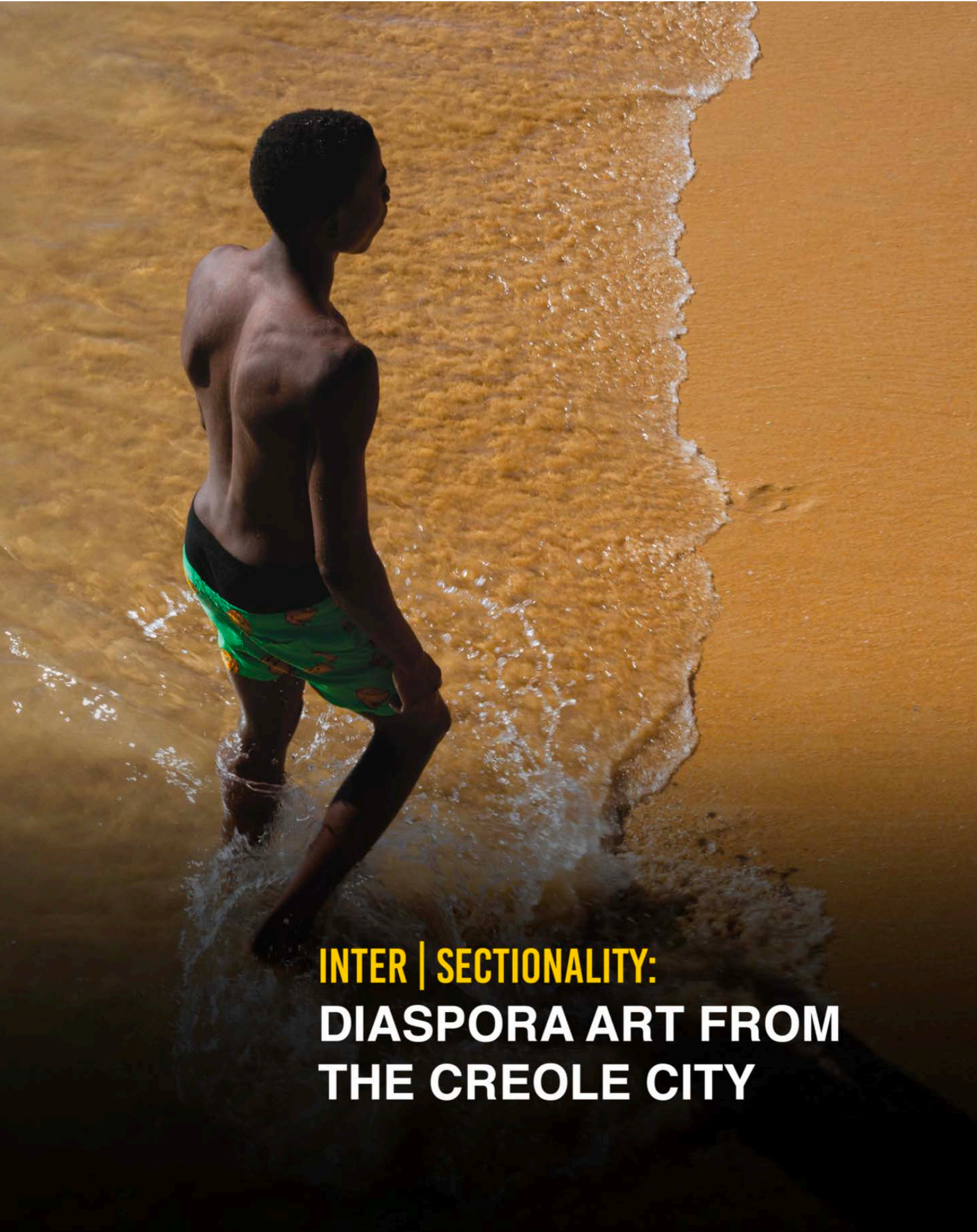

# INTER | SECTIONALITY:
# DIASPORA ART FROM THE CREOLE CITY

# Beyond the Surface:
# Multispectral Aesthetics in the Creole City

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I

The burgundy convertible *Cutlass Supreme* pulled up at the stop light; top down, leather seats, its exterior spit-shined. 24 karat gold rims spun on shiny tires treated with Amor-All. The driver, a sturdy black man wearing a white singlet tee, his hair in untamed dreadlocks, looked tired, as if this was an unusual time for the world to see him. He devoured a breakfast sandwich, cleared his teeth and gave a sort-of smile, revealing a full gold grill that perfectly matched his car rims in tone and shine.

Something about this brief encounter pushed against my usual tendency to underestimate Miami. In it, for the first time since arriving in this city, my experience penetrated and reached past the soundbite images and vacuous myths the state of Florida and the city itself use to portray themselves to the world. This man and his mirrored grills moved me past the imaginary of Walt Disney, the sheen of South Beach and Brickell, the curated hipness of Wynwood, and beneath the aspirational lawns of Coral Gables and Coconut Grove. He reflected the realities of Opa-Locka, Miami Gardens, Little Haiti, Little Havana, Overtown, Liberty City and (the Black) Coconut Grove lying just beneath the surface. His presence claimed space and exhibited the power of his humanity in the most democratic form— a self-actualized, Creolized aesthetic that forced one to sit still and observe in a city where people and things are quite literally always in motion.

*The Cutlass*, and the hip-hop artist I would later learn it carried, spoke to something that was living, real, organic, un-curated, yet deeply intentional. As the car silently rolled ahead, its very name held new meaning for me. As the work of Trinidadian artist Andil Gosine shows, in the Caribbean, the cutlass is an object with multiple conflicting characteristics. It clears paths. It is a useful work tool in the fields. It can be deployed to delicately peel sugar cane and open coconuts. It can become a weapon to lead resistance or kill. In car form on the streets of Miami, it slashed through the idea of oranges, sunshine and flamingos to uncover a mix of history and migration to and from a city experiencing spectacular growth and economic success, comingled with chronic economic hardship, racial inequality ,and gentrification.

Miami is a new kind of American city. Much like New Orleans in the nineteenth century, its birth and now vast growth has been spurred in the past half century by its direct relationship to the Caribbean and Latin America. A Creole city in every sense of the word, Miami has the capacity to surprise. It is much larger than the census suggests and its relentless flatness and intimacy with the sea are camouflaged by manufactured vistas of high rises, overpasses and airplanes. At times the city becomes a refuge, a place to journey in order to survive. Yet there is no nostalgia here. Miamians live with climate change in ways that might seem less urgent and quixotic from the outside looking in. There is a sense, however, that after doing all that can be done, the orishas and the lwas will secure the way, helping the city live on.

II

Rosie Gordon-Wallace arrived in Miami from Jamaica in 1979. At the time the city was more "Scarface" than "J-Lo". The now fabulous Dadeland Mall was better known for a massacre that occurred in its parking lot, and notorious figures with names like Griselda "La Madrina" Blanco and Pablo Escobar held sway. She arrived the same year Arthur McDuffie, a black insurance agent and former Marine, was beaten to death by police officers. She witnessed the city's eruption six months after McDuffie's beating, with the acquittal of the five white officers responsible for his death.

Despite Miami's limited prospects, Gordon-Wallace had a vision—one might even say a calling—that carried her and the city down a new path. She marveled at the sheer number of artists working in the city and noticed a lack of energy coming from this critical mass. Committed to changing this, she rooted her evolving project within a belief "in the arts and the artist's role in society" that remains at the center of what is known today as Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator. DVCAI cultivates a community of artists that have migrated to Miami, mostly, though not exclusively, from Latin America and the Caribbean. When Gordon-Wallace arrived, Miami was not on the contemporary art world map. In Miami, artists found a place to produce work, but they lacked a unified voice.

In 1996, Gordon-Wallace met the Miami-based Jamaican artist Gerald "Tall" Richards. He expressed frustration about the lack of opportunities for Caribbean artists in the city. Her response: "bring me some other artists like you and I will work with you." Richards gathered six other artists, and together they formed the Emerging Caribbean Artists Collective. Early on, she encountered difficulty obtaining a space to exhibit and work, frustrating the collective's efforts. Of the seven initial artists, two quickly lost faith in the project. Five remained and continued to work with her in forming a group. When a space became available in the Bakehouse Art Complex for a modest cost, she asked the five remaining artists to join her in splitting the rent. Only one artist took her up on the offer, the Miami-based Haitian artist Asser Saint-Val. Gordon-Wallace met Saint Val when he was still a student at New World. Twenty-five years later, his work anchors the exhibition Inter | Sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City.

III

Saint-Val's *The Philosopher's Stone* is a multisensory experience that consists of a centrally positioned, round, custom built, white leather bed. Aqua blue satin sheets and pillows of varying textures cover it. Above the bed floats a large, inflated form, whose surface imagery draws from the world of dreams. It feels as if the bed will take flight at any moment. The installation and the paintings that surround it draw on Saint-Val's interest in a particular Caribbean surrealism: a reality where flesh, spirit, and dream worlds gather. *The Philosopher's Stone* draws on the conceptual capacity of neuromelanin, a dark pigment found in the brain that is structurally similar to melanin, the polymer associated with and present in the skin of darker hued people. Critically, neuromelanin is found is everyone's bodies,

no matter their pigment or racial presentation. Though melanin is associated semiotically with negativity and subhumanity through its association with *blackness*, scientifically neuromelanin prevents cell death and preserves life. By engaging this duality, the work provides a pathway to a fuller understanding of our conscious, unconscious, spiritual and material realities simultaneously.

Saint-Val activated the work with an interactive performance by the artist Chivonnie Gius. Painted and styled, she appeared as a figure from a Saint-Val painting come to life. Gius' stunning appearance and movements through the installation broke through the wall positioned between artwork and audience, creating a dialectical experience akin to Brechtian epic theatre. Visitors moved freely back and forth across real and imagined thresholds, where they were simultaneously separated from the art and a part of the work itself. Gius invited the audience to explore every human sense as they laid across the bed, felt the various textures of the sheets and pillows, listened to the sounds, visually devoured the imagery, and sucked licorice off of the fingertips of her provocation. As viewers-turned-participants moved out of the experience, it became clear how the installation and performance stimulated a conscious awareness of the intertwined manner in which we navigate our worlds. The work's multisensory activation begs a reconsideration of flattened perceptions of "others," untethering these oppositions from human reality.

13. Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.
14. Cheng, Second Skin, 12.

While Saint-Val's attention to sensation, surface, and surreal vistas may seem disconnected from the matching gold teeth and rims of Miami's black hip-hop aesthetics, they are comingled in important ways that sketch the porous creolizing boundaries of this city. They both reimagine and problematize the depth of *Miami's surface* as image and texture. To draw on Ann Cheng's theorization of the surface, in this work surface interpolates with "the violent, dysphoric" term *"racialized nakedness."*[13] Here, the mirrored gold grill expresses an awareness of what Cheng describes as a "European Modernist aesthetic history of surface (that which covers and houses bodies)" that is in relation to what Saint-Val challenges when he deploys surreal surfaces as entrée to a "philosophic discourse about 'interiority' … that provide the very terms on which modern racial legibility in the West, what Fanon calls the 'epidermalization of inferiority' is limned."[14] The double grills of the *Cutlass Supreme* and Saint Val's work offer different and necessary critical depths of field in a Creole city whose levels of articulation have for too long lingered on the surface.

The multi-dimensional experience that Saint-Val's work conjures also emerges in the work of the textile artists Evelyn Politzer (Uruguay) and Katrina Coombs (Jamaica) as well as the socially based work of Anja Marias (South Africa) and Rosa Naday Garmendia (Cuba). Like Saint-Val, their works employ surreal realities through critical materialities. Their artworks draw on what I describe as a *multispectral language*, which Miamians have distinctly fashioned and now wield.

The implications of Politzer's *Every Drop Counts* shifts depending on its context of engagement and host landscape. In a city like Miami, facing droughts and rising seas due to climate change, the work enters a particularly symbolic register. On

the surface it appears as a literal screen of water droplets which, like the impending climate disaster, is a human creation. Beneath the surface, there is more. Water nurtures, cultivates, and replenishes. Its correlation to blood semiotically ties in to the politics of land, authenticity, nationality, race, and belonging which attempt to erase black people's claim to the land and, with it, the place of black people in Latin history. In *Every Drop Counts,* elements cascade down like a rain shower becoming a symbolic screen or barrier to/from whatever lies on the other side. For Politzer, material and abstract forms become a conduit for affective responses to social histories and willfully hidden narratives.

Katrina Coombs' delicate use of fibers as primary material in her work belie her oeuvre's pain. *Void* and *Invasion* are large, immersive sculptures that recall cellular forms. Blood platelets, sickle cells, and womb-like walls are spaces made unfamiliar by their sheer size and materiality in sculpture form. The symbolic capacity of these works is in tension with their ostensible fragility, allowing the art to engender grief, loss, and the unspeakable. Coombs' intimate, feminine approach and the poetics of abstraction present in her work unbury feelings of trauma that deny forgetting, calling on memory to navigate a way forward.

In a poignant act of memory, for *Rituals of Commemoration* Rosa Naday Garmendia gathered more than 400 bricks, first as found objects. Extending the political reaches of her work, she began manufacturing and etching the bricks in Hialeah, a largely Cuban municipality in greater Miami. This ongoing project began after the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO in 2014. Garmendia wanted to produce a work that spoke without subtlety to the growing degree of state violence enacted against black and brown people in the United States. As a Cuban migrant, she is particularly aware of how ignoring this violence and forgetting the humanity of those that are killed takes a toll on a society. Each brick is incised with the name of a person who fell at the hands of police officers through active murder or neglect since 1979, the year the aforementioned Arthur MacDuffie was murdered in Miami. The bricks are arranged differently in each installation. In Inter | Sectionality they take a hollow, chimney-like form. Each incised name serves as an intentional trigger and plea: may the individuals they honor and the circumstances of their deaths not be forgotten. Garmendia's initial instinct to gather materials and reinvent and redeploy objects that were discarded, used, or deemed too ordinary for preservation is aligned with the work of other diasporic artists such as Chakaia Booker, Nari Ward, and Ricardo Brey. Garmendia, however, explicitly positions her work in the realm of social activism. Her shift from the found to the manufactured speaks clearly to the institutionalized nature of these killings, and the ability of officers who murder to walk free because of systemic racism.

The use and redeployment of found objects is also central to the work of Anja Marais. The intentionality of her work circles back in a conceptual manner to that of Asser Saint-Val. Marais seeks to challenge our assumptions of the world around us and the individuals and situations that mark it. She has stated that our experiences suggest that "we don't see things as they are, but … we see them as we are," and her use of found objects works to evoke the spiritual reality of the surreal in creolized spaces. In *Once Upon a Time, When We Exhaled the Sky*, Marais draws on the ancient form of

the *cairn*, heaps of stones used by ancient people to mark and memorialize events, individuals, and places. The sculptural installation consists of seven found object cairns whose primary surface is treated with lime, a material used in construction as a stabilizer of concrete and soils and to remove impurities in steel production. Here Marais draws on its ceremonial use in rituals of healing and spiritual transcendence in Haitian Vodoun, Abakua and Afro-Cuban religions. The objects comprising the cairn were sourced from various places in the city, including the artist's studio. Their use value has been completely obliterated by the uniformity of their white surfaces; each pile is crowned with an untreated object associated with migrant labor and ritual practices, including a hatchet, broom, shovel, and rake. By drawing in these objects from her community and harnessing their spirit and histories, Marais, like all of the artists discussed in this essay, fashions Pito Mitans to a higher consciousness enabling us all to see ourselves and our humanity in the mirror of another.