

Contemporary Caribbean artists must at once contend with a long history of misrepresentation of the Caribbean and ignorance of local artistic traditions, as well as an art market primed to consume readymade images of Caribbean fauna and tropical objects. Likewise, queer artists negotiate erasure from the Art historical and popular record, or staid figuration as either monstrous or easily consumable trends. Kearra Amayra Gopee defies these limits. Their beautiful and generative work, “Tutorials on Radiance” presented at Diaspora Vibe’s historic exhibit, “Inter|Sectionality: Diaspora Art from the Creole City” demonstrates what can happen when artistry is invested in interiority and complexity, rooted in experience. The multimedia artist has provided us with a bit of a primer: “Thus far, I have manifested ... a series of environmental portraits, where those imaged perform a calculated refusal of the lens, both in form and in gesture. Working in this way shifts the viewer's’ focus from the singularity of the oft (de)sexualized queer Caribbean body and allows for consideration of the elements that surround and subsequently constitute parts of their lived experience as well.”

The first portrait in the triptych, *kim (blue mountain)* greets you with a benediction. A brown-skinned figure wearing a pale pink polo knit shirt, nearly fills the image frame. They wear a necklace that appears to be a thin, organic cord, with dark sunglasses with oval lenses and aviator style bars placed on the button placket. The figure (is this “Kim”? we do not know for certain) appears to be speaking—their neck slightly stretches as if emphatically making a point. But we cannot hear them, of course. This representation of the torso refuses access to the conversation; and denies the viewer/would-be listener facial expression clues or posture of the lower extremities. We can tell, however, that environmental ruination may be imminent here. The figure stands against deep green leaves—perhaps soon to be overtaken by them? Perhaps having emerged, fresh, from this thicket? Vines on the right side of the image reach toward them, perhaps beginning to entwine the hand raised in benediction to the viewer, saying as in classical figuration *God be with you/God help you*. It is not only in classic portraits of Christendom in which this hand gesture communicates without speech. The pose reminds one of *katari mukha*—a

hand gesture of classic Indian dance, in which the hands are as communicative as the music and the body and the eyes.¹

Natural disaster and everyday “ruination” in the tropics — environmental fecundity, vulnerability, and decay — points to our shared precarity, experienced especially by those with less resources who are thrown most immediately in harm’s way of not-so-natural ecological environmental “disaster.” Yet ‘ruination’ is multifaceted. Michelle Cliff writes:

“Ruininate, the adjective, and ruination, the noun, are Jamaican inventions. Each word signifies the reclamation of land, the disruption of cultivation, civilization, by the uncontrolled, uncontrollable forest. When a landscape becomes ruinate, carefully designed aisles of cane are envined, strangled, the order of empire is replaced by the chaotic forest. The word ruination (especially) signifies this immediately; it contains both the word ruin, and nation. A landscape in ruination means one in which the imposed nation is overcome by the naturalness of ruin. As individuals in this landscape, we, the colonized, are also subject to ruination, to the self reverting to the wildness of the forest”.²

What reclamations are the artist making in this work? How do their refusals disrupt the “cultivation” of a certain sort of young person to become a certain sort of man or woman who can be properly “civilized” and “controlled” by the nation, the family, religion—all imposed by empire? Kearra Amaya Gopee gives us a queer Caribbean visuality of ruination that intersects race, nation, region, gender, and sexuality, but also exceeds that crucially important spatial metaphor by asking us to consider our shared vulnerability to the natural environment. This is quietly and ably demonstrated by the state of potential ruin— by the rusting of the images themselves. There is a small—perhaps half inch—of rust framing the sides of the image printed on iron, and nearly two inches on the top and bottom. Rust/brown intrudes on brown skin. It seems to begin to eat away at the pale pink shirt. Alas, perhaps “self reverting to the wildness... .” Thus, we can also sense a warning against impending ruin of already vulnerable memories, representations, and places.

The center portrait in Gopee’s triptych—Lis (belly crease)-- seems to be in the most

¹ “the Kartarimukha is used to symbolise many things like separation, distress, death or disagreement.” <https://stylesatlife.com/us/>

² See Cliff, Michele. “Caliban's Daughter.” *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003, pp. 157-160.

advanced state of natural ruination. The beautifully lit person at its center/midpoint smiles— gracefully posing in a way that denies the viewer a full picture of their face. There is no place name for this piece. Perhaps this is because the relatively expansive vista already suggests a place that was rationalized and ‘civilized’—the forest beaten back to be *of use* for some man-made purpose. Still, signs of the everyday process of ruination are evident. Trees align and form a barrier/hedge to what is just beyond. Green from this barrier continues to the midpoint, where a sort of horizon begins to create a green-brown-rust ombre affect in the composition. Light and dark are striated, from the sun lit tops of the trees, to the dark shade green, to the stream of afternoon light that the figure (Lis?) seems to regard approvingly. The texturally rough rust patina on the iron is in constant conversation with the blues, greens, browns, and rusts of the portrait. One can imagine that as this work decays (if it is allowed to decay); we will be left with the lovely classically posed figure — some would say Rubenesque, not only apropos of the curves of the subject, but also the lovely painterly play of light here— their wine red hair complementing a berry/magenta colored décolletage revealing v-neck, and berry/magenta dolman-sleeved light sweater with flecks of sparkle, worn asymmetrically to show off the eponymous “belly crease”. To this observer, this is more accurately a belly/thigh crease, accentuated by their dark denim pum pum shorts (or perhaps these cute bottoms are batty riders?). Long legs give way to white tennis shoes—left foot slightly pointed while the right hand rests, fingers in tension pointed down. The left hand showing freshly enameled nails lays, commanding, on their left hip—akimbo. These details may seduce one into thinking that this is the most informative or “revealing” of the three images, but this is a purposefully contradictory image and I have no desire to attempt to demystify. Sylvia Wynter’s “speculative decipherment” calls us to “identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to mean but what they can be deciphered *to do*,” as well as the “illocutionary force and procedures” with which they do it.³ Consider the enigmatic smile—face turned just far enough from our gaze to suggest what we might be missing by not knowing the fullness of their visage. Grass cut closely and carefully, rust-colored and matching the oxidizing, “disrupting”, organic frame. A saw palmetto palm

³ Sylvia Wynter, “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes towards a Deciphering Practice,” in M. Cham, ed., *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1992), 266, 267.

that evidently has not been trimmed in many years on the same midline as the posed subject of the portrait. Consider too my unsubstantiated view that the smiling figure is the subject, simply because they are the human! The artist's intention might easily be otherwise. The top of another tree (perhaps an out-of-place and out-of-time brown evergreen?) that is preternaturally rust colored and sun lit. Fronds laying dry and dead on the field; brown fronds intruding on the blue sky on the top/right side of the composition, seemingly emerging from the rusted matting. These artistic choices force the viewer to ask questions and to situate their curiosity in a deep looking practice. It engenders compassion for the subject(s)—whether (human) fauna or flora.

The final portrait, keisha (curepe) features a red adjustable (dress) form used by designers and sewists to drape and fit clothing. The long vertical split allows a peek at the internal adjustment mechanism—one at the bottom of a narrower horizontal divide to adjust hip width and one at the top of it, at waist level. Another, on the upper side of the divide, can be found at the middle back level to adjust chest width. There are likely dials on the other side, controlling how much the object can *transform*.

The form sits at the intersection of two walls. One, to the left of the figure, is dark—bathed in shadow. The right side is lit by the sun—creating a shadow of the form/figure. At the intersection, or crossroad, of the wall sits what looks like a security camera trained on the adjustable, trans-formable red figure, recalling the panopticon first rehearsed in watch towers on plantations on which enslaved people worked, throughout the region. Forming the background, a densely wooded mountain rises above the wall's, above the intruding, or enabling, camera. Is the figure under surveillance—hiding its intrinsic, intentionally built-that-way adjustability? Or staging a selfie moment, showcasing their inherent ability to fashion their own fit? Is the tower, whose antennae/spires we see interrupting the blue sky spying, or for communication—a BMobile or Digicell tower connecting Trinis to far flung loved ones, and currency, perhaps beyond the verdant hills rising above the wall?

There is also a haunting presence. Consider the petite shadow figure. Though (only) a shadow, it presents as solid against the wall. Dark, saturated, and seemingly unalterable.

That is, this presentation seems ‘true’ and unambiguous: wider shoulders, small waist, thin hips. But, to whom does this representation ‘against the wall’ refer? What is its relationship to the red form? Can we read either as the “true” or real? Is there a measure of safety in this shadow or *as* a shadow? Who or what is haunting the image in shadow (is this Keisha)? The hunched figure contains places of more or less saturation—with light and dark shadows of what we can guess is hair, and what might be a shoulder, a knee. Of course, we cannot be sure. Is this a Soucouyant who has landed here after roaming the thickly green hills that frame Curepe’s old, storied crossroad?

Speaking of light, the artists medium, UV-curable ink, is in effect adhered to the iron substrate through a high-intensity blast of ultraviolet light that cures the ink instantly. It can last “indefinitely,” the manufacturer tells us, if it is not left exposed to the sun. But what about air, feeding the already encroaching rust? Gopee is interested in radiance, interiority, transformation. They want to hold visibility and invisibility as twin strategies available to individuals and movements and representations of the same. This work therefore eschews easy definition and preservation of one state of being. It is made up of light and shadow that is both made out of exposure (visibility) and moves, refuses, blesses, and stands akimbo, away from forms of (mis)recognition that may call names and genders and positions that do not fit, or promise to preserve or cultivate what may be best left ruinate. In this triptych, Kearra’s intervention offers the Black Caribbean queer figure, visually represented in environments that are “dangerous” and “vulnerable” beyond the easy surface reading of ‘homophobia’, portentously speaking to and for our planet at the cusp of ecological collapse, and in the throes of ruination.

