

THE LAST PLACE THEY THOUGHT OF
April 27–August 12, 2018

Torkwase Dyson
Lorraine O'Grady
Jade Montserrat
Keisha Scarville

PROJECT SPACE

The Last Place They Thought Of

“... the stories of black women contain in them meaningful geographic tenets [...] a way to think about the histories of black women as they are wrapped up in a legacy of unprotected public bodies situated across the logic of traditional spatial arrangements — on slave ships and auction blocks, in garrets, under a white supremacist gaze, in white and nonwhite places. The very close ties among and between geography, race, gender, class and sexuality become apparent through this history, and consequently develop new questions for our present social organization.”

—K. McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis and London, 2006, pg 45

The Last Place They Thought Of explores how geographical, ideological, and spatial paradigms determine and reproduce uneven social relations. Four artists — Torkwase Dyson, Lorraine O’Grady, Jade Montserrat, and Keisha Scarville — take very different approaches to this phenomenon, deeply considering how histories of racial, sexual, and economic exploitation shape our understanding of geography, habitat, and environment. The exhibition seeks to explore the possibility of different, critical engagements with geography through the lens of black female subjectivities and feminisms, and the contextual specificities of black women’s locations and displacements throughout the diaspora.

In Katherine McKittrick’s influential *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006), from which the exhibition title was borrowed, she references the narrative of Harriet Jacobs, who escaped slavery by secreting herself away for seven years in “the last place they thought of”; the crawl space of her grandmother’s attic. Here Jacobs’s garret acted as a space of simultaneous confinement and emancipation; captivity and concealment. In the black diaspora, in the wake of the transatlantic slave trade, this could be said of many landscapes, architectures, and spatial arrangements; beginning with the hold of the slave ship. The paradoxical potential of space is similarly explored by the artists in *The Last Place They Thought Of*.

Literal and rhetorical marginalization, *being in the last place* is an experiential geography of black gendered bodies. Questions of miscegenation, hybridity and the contours of a black female body as landscape deemed, for all intents and purposes as “ungeographic” (after all, where is “black”?) arise in Lorraine O’Grady’s video *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2010–2011. These cartographies sit alongside those of the water table, transatlantic slave trade, and Underground Railroad in the paintings of Torkwase Dyson. Mythology and alternative narratives of the land emerge through a study of nocturnal topographies in Keisha Scarville’s *The Placelessness of Echoes (and kinship of shadows)*, 2016–2018. Literary histories of the landscape and their intersections with the black Atlantic comingle with corporeal materials in Jade Montserrat’s performative and ephemeral wall drawings, *Untitled (The Wretched of the Earth, after Frantz Fanon)*, 2018. Literary traditions, historical testimony, and a concern for the ground, the land, the earthly underpinnings of our geographic condition reveal themselves throughout.

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue create a discursive space to reconsider geography; as it pertains to the environment and our changing climate, as well as how it regulates the production and performance of identities, and continues to uphold material and metaphorical borders and boundaries.

The Last Place They Thought Of is organized by 2017–2018 Whitney-Lauder Curatorial Fellow Daniella Rose King. A fully illustrated catalogue featuring essays by McKittrick and King will accompany the exhibition.

EXHIBITION READING LIST

Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, 1861.

Wilson Harris, *Palace of the Peacock*, London: Faber and Faber, 1960.

Lorraine O'Grady, *Olympia's Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity*, 1992.

Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*, The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

TORKWASE DYSON

Water Table 02, 2017

Acrylic on canvas, 36 × 36 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Davidson Contemporary, New York

Water Table 03, 2017

Acrylic on canvas, 36 × 36 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Davidson Contemporary, New York

Ecology of Everything (Water Table 12), 2017

Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 60 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Davidson Contemporary, New York

Ecology of Everything (Water Table 14), 2017

Acrylic on canvas, 72 × 60 inches

Courtesy of the artist and Davidson Contemporary, New York

Torkwase Dyson (b. 1973; Chicago, IL) describes herself as a painter who uses distilled geometric abstraction to create an idiosyncratic language that is both diagrammatic and expressive. The works are deconstructions of natural and built environments that consider how individuals negotiate and negate various types of systems and spatial order. Dyson lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

Dyson is invested in how line and shape, in their delineation and division of space, can transform bodies. Her work attends to these paradigms, and the intuitive logic demonstrated by (known and unknown) black subjects who have maneuvered, transgressed, and self-emancipated along these lines. In her paintings, spatial configurations are abstracted into a lexicon of forms, dispersed, and layered on the canvas in a color field of sharp, inky, and dilute blacks, greys, and silver. The larger *Water Table* series, four of which are on display here, considers geographies of water and historic spatial narratives — including chattel slavery, industrialization and colonization — that have reconfigured their ecologies. Part of Dyson’s practice includes diving in the Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico and the shores of Cape Town and personally surveying natural environments riddled with histories of extraction. The combination of expressive marks and diagrammatic lines in the paintings suggest that technology and sociality are both needed as we create new systems for more livable futures.

LORRAINE O'GRADY

Landscape (*Western Hemisphere*), 2010–2011

Single-channel video, black-and-white, sound, 18 minutes

Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Lorraine O'Grady (b. 1934; Boston, MA) has since 1977 used multiple media such as installation, performance, video, texts, and a variety of themes such as diaspora, hybridity, and black female subjectivity to uncover what has been hidden—politically, socially, and personally. O'Grady lives and works in New York City.

Lorraine O'Grady's *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)*, 2010–2011, approaches the body as a site of experience and shared history. The video combines close-up footage of the artist's hair as it is animated by a silent wind, accompanied by a plethora of soundtracks originating in rural and urban locations across North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean. *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* suggests parallel processes enacted on both the body and the land—racialization and gendering—that sanctioned centuries of exploitation, domination, and violence perpetrated and performed upon them to the advancement of capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. These afterlives and their paradoxical spatial compositions are embodied by the image of the artist's hair; an overburdened signifier of ethnicity, race, and difference. Transforming her hair into an abundant, fecund ground acts as a relocation and re-centering of the black female body and its subjectivities, while conjuring the hiding places, cover, and camouflage the natural habitat provided for emancipatory journeys. For the artist, mixed-race hair is a metaphor for the miscegenation of the western hemisphere—its objective correlative—and her practice is ostensibly concerned with the history of hybridization specific to the Americas. In *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* O'Grady creates an irrefutable account of the historic, intersecting schemas of geography, race, and gender.

JADE MONTSERRAT

Untitled (The Wretched of the Earth, after Frantz Fanon), 2018

Site specific charcoal wall-drawing, dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Jade Montserrat (b. 1981; London, UK) works at the intersection of art and activism, progressing through performance and live art, works on paper and interdisciplinary projects. She is the Stuart Hall Foundation PhD fellow at The Institute for Black Atlantic Research at The University of Central Lancashire. Montserrat lives and works in Scarborough, UK.

In this new site-specific commission, Jade Montserrat will spend a number of days drawing in charcoal onto the walls of the ICA's ramp space, creating an installation that borrows equally from practices of protest, public murals, performance, literary traditions and testimony, and drawing. Culling fragments of texts from diverse sources, including singer and activist Josephine Baker, psychoanalyst Frantz Fanon, author bell hooks, and theorist Donna J. Haraway, Montserrat plays with abstraction and amplification to create a transatlantic (literary) geography that speaks to how legacies of racism and sexism converge with the land.

Montserrat's rural upbringing in the north of England provides a lens through which she has experienced and appropriated textual histories, and has been a factor in her exclusive use of specific hand-made charcoal. Montserrat is particularly invested in debates around the planet's changing climate, and considers charcoal a capacious material to think through our physical relationship to others, the land, geography, literary histories, and visual art.

KEISHA SCARVILLE

The Placelessness of Echoes (and kinship of shadows), 2016–2018

Archival inkjet prints, dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Keisha Scarville (b. 1975; Brooklyn, NY) weaves together themes dealing with transformation and the unknown. Working across media, but with a grounding in photography, her work deals with issues of place, memory, and subjectivity. Scarville lives and works in Brooklyn, NY,

Keisha Scarville presents a photographic study of a number of unnamed northeast US landscapes at night, utilizing mostly natural sources of light — the moon and stars — and capturing glimpses of a similarly unknown female form. This shapeshifter appears throughout, inspired by Wilson Harris’s richly metaphorical first novel, *Palace of the Peacock* (1960). The book is a non-linear postcolonial fiction that describes an unscrupulous, multi-ethnic crew aboard a ship in Guyana, as they hunt for cheap indigenous labor. The journey takes on a spiritual significance, and explores themes of transformation, territory, belonging, and sanctuary. The quest or odyssey as a process of subject formation is mined also by Scarville, who describes the experience of reconfiguration and consumption by the landscape at night as “being absorbed by space... and not being able to distinguish between your body, the landscape, and the night around you”. Borne out of a practice of walking, camping, and performing repetitive, ritualistic gestures Scarville is interested in a specific literacy — a language of the landscape that is both practical and ideological — necessary to negotiate and navigate rural, nocturnal, remote terrains.

RELATED PROGRAMMING

FRIDAY, APRIL 27

- 5 PM Members Preview
*Suki Seokyeong Kang: Black Mat Oriole,
The Last Place They Thought Of,
Open Video Call*
- 6:30 PM Public Opening Celebration

WEDNESDAY, MAY 2

- 6 PM 卐 Curator-Led Tour of *The Last Place
They Thought Of*

WEDNESDAY, MAY 9

- 6:30 PM *The Last Place They Thought Of:*
Keisha Scarville Presentation

THURSDAY, AUGUST 9

- 6:30 PM *The Last Place They Thought Of:*
Katherine McKittrick in Conversation with
Daniella Rose King

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