

The Many Afterlives and Expressions of the African Diaspora

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Edouard Duval-Carrié "Justicia" (1998), detail view (all images by the author for Hyperallergic, unless otherwise noted)

OBERLIN, Ohio—The "Black Atlantic" is a cultural and geographic concept coined in 1993 by [Paul Gilroy](#), and proposes a theory of the

African diaspora that addresses points of origin obscured by slave trade and forced displacement, drawing identity from the bonds formed in the course of transport across the Atlantic Ocean. As Gilroy would have it, this produced “a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once, a black Atlantic culture whose themes and techniques transcend ethnicity and nationality to produce something new ...” In a show that opened earlier this year at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, *Afterlives of the Black Atlantic* teases out aesthetics and individual visions that arise from this context. The show was co-curated by Andrea Gyorody, Ellen Johnson ’33 Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Matthew Francis Rarey, Assistant Professor of the Arts of Africa and the Black Atlantic, and Oberlin’s first African Diasporic specialist.



Afterlives of the Black Atlantic, installation view.

“We met shortly after I was hired in 2017,” said Gyorody, during a gallery tour with Hyperallergic. “And [Rarey] mentioned, sort of offhandedly, that 2019 would be the 400-year anniversary of the arrival of [the first] slave ships in the United States.” This sparked a discussion that evolved into the mounting of *Afterlives*, which brings together works from the United States, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, drawn mostly from the AMAM collection, and supplemented by several loans and a site-specific commission by José Rodríguez. This work, titled “ʌsə-kərʌ” presents as an 12-foot *Virgin of Regla* — patron saint of the city of Havana and an adaptive form of the Orisha Yemayá, who protects the seas — identifiable by her regalia though the garments have been hollowed out to create a kind of open teepee, and the face has been replaced by a mirror that captures the visage of the viewer as she approaches.

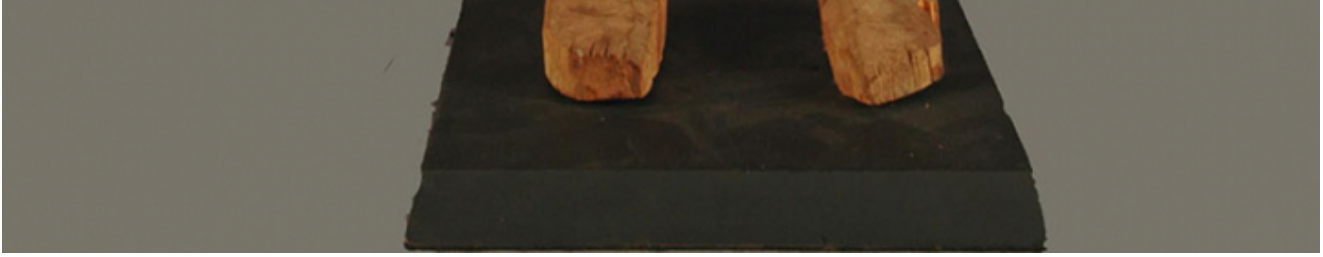


Installation view of José Rodríguez "Isə-kər\'" (2019)

"I chose the phonetic spelling because it alludes to that space between and can be read as both 'sucker' and 'succor,'" Rodríguez told *The Oberlin Review*. At the feet of the structure's opening, an elaborate arrangement of pennies forms the threshold to the interior space, bedecked with the spiritual tools of Santería practitioners. Santería is a prime example of the African diasporic evolution of culture, as it represents an adaptation of Yoruba spiritual practice to enable its survival under Catholic colonialism in places like Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and other places in the mainland Americas. Rodríguez's virgin seems to watch over the exhibition, while a twentieth-

century Bocio figure by an unrecorded artist or workshop, attributed to the Republic of Benin or Togo, stands as a kind of sentinel as one enters the main gallery space. The figure is reminiscent of the Congolese/Central African nkisi, but where nkisi are objects inhabited by spirits, Bocio translates as “empowered cadaver” and exists in connection with Vodun spirituality, a set of practices that fused with outside influences under colonial rule and the slave trade, making its way from its West African origins to its expression as Vodou in Haiti.





Bocio figure (20th century) from the Allen Memorial Art Museum collection, by an unrecorded artist or workshop, Republic of Benin or Togo. Image courtesy of the AMAM.

In addition to works like these, that find roots in specific African traditions, there are a number of contemporary works that grapple with the more ambiguous aspects of identity wrought by slavery and involuntary relocation. “Untitled” (1999) by [Leonardo Drew](#) presents an abstracted geography, with one half of the large-scale wall hanging constructed of hundreds of cell-like openings stuffed with cotton, and the other half comprised of mirroring cells made primarily of discarded wood and rusty industrial materials of indeterminate origin. It is not a stretch to imagine this landscape as an abstracted picture of the labor history of Black people in the United States, where North-South divisions have merely offered enslaved and freed Black people different flavors of limiting and exploitative conditions.



Leonardo Drew, “Untitled” (1999), detail view.



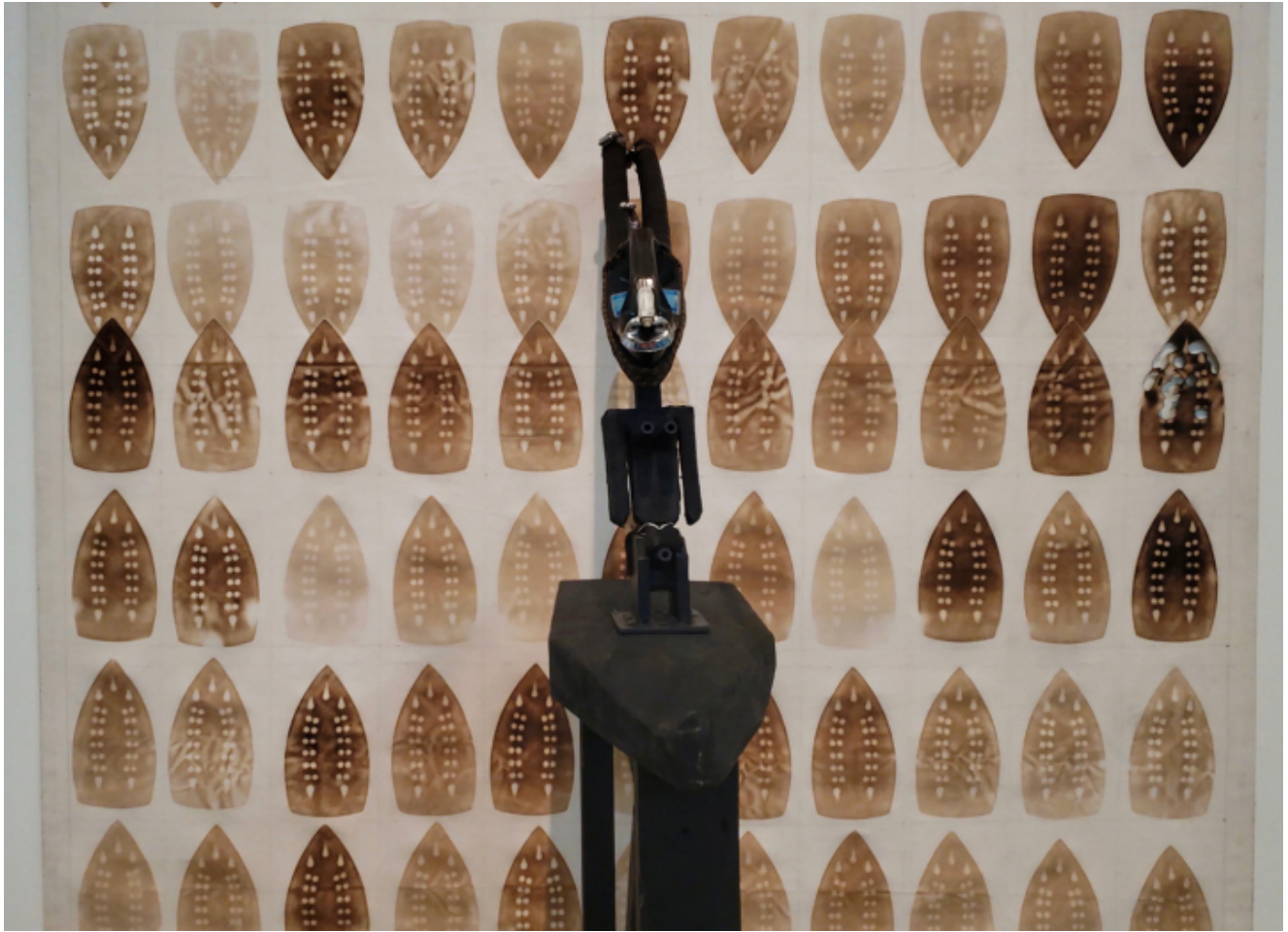
Installation view of *Afterlives of the Black Atlantic*

This hangs adjacent to a bright blue candy spill by the late [Félix González-Torres](#), which likewise transforms the floor space into a sort of proxy-ocean — one which directly implicates the sugar industry responsible for stoking demand in the slave trade, as well as any viewer who responds to the explicit invitation to take a piece of candy. In his lifetime, González-Torres oftentimes dealt with his own HIV-positive status and the condition of others living with AIDS, represented here by the slow disappearance of a sculptural work via audience participation; that the meaning of the work can be so readily adapted to the erosive and gutting power of disappearance and dislocation enacted by the slave trade acts as a powerful illustration of the way contemporary artists of color have responded either literally or thematically to this violent history. This point is echoed in a number of other works, including those by [Alison Saar](#), [Fred Wilson](#), [Wangechi Mutu](#), and [Dawoud Bey](#).



Installation view of works by Fred Wilson, from his 2017 [collection intervention](#) at the Allen Memorial Art Museum.

Afterlives of the Black Atlantic hits all the right notes, bringing a stunning variety of media, sources, and perspectives into dynamic conversation. Each work carries its own weight, but moving through the gallery creates a number of arresting tableaux. In perhaps the most startling reveal of the show, "For Proctor Silex (Evidence and Presence)" by [Willie Cole](#) appears, from afar, to be an African figurine displayed against a backdrop of thick patterned cloth. Drawing closer, the figure transforms into an industrial iron, the very implement used to burn the motif into the canvas. This optical shifting between sacred figure and labor implement, decorative adornment and burnt offering, encapsulates the polarities of diasporic experience, and provides one of many moments that will linger in this space of examination.



Willie Cole, "For Proctor Silex (Evidence and Presence)," installation view



Willie Cole, "For Proctor Silex (Evidence and Presence)," detail view

Afterlives of the Black Atlantic remains on display at the Allen Memorial Art Museum through May 24, 2020.