

# disillusions

Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and its Diasporas

Edited by TATIANA FLORES



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Gendered Visions of the Caribbean and its Diasporas

Curated by TATIANA FLORES

Studio Theatre Gallery, Middlesex County College, Edison, NJ  
September 27 - November 8, 2011

Sylvia Wald and Po Kim Gallery, New York, NY  
November 22 - December 31, 2011

this page detail: Firelei Báez  
*Questions for Doig in Trinidad, from the series  
Geographic Delay*, 2011  
Mixed media collage  
120 x 36"

cover: Ana Patricia Palacios  
*Faltantes 2*, 2009  
Pigments on canvas  
46 x 44

detail back cover: Sandra Stephens  
*Intangibility*, 2009  
Single-channel video, tire  
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ALTHOUGH EACH OF THE ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION HAS A PARTICULAR VIEW OF THE CARIBBEAN RELATED TO HER OWN LIFE EXPERIENCE, THEY SHARE A COMMON SENSE OF OVERARCHING NARRATIVES, AN EMBRACE OF HETEROGENEITY, AND AN ATTITUDE OF DEFIANCE TOWARDS CONVENTIONS THAT WOULD SEEK TO CONTAIN THEM.

- Tatiana Flores

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# Nicole Awai

Interview by Allison Harbin

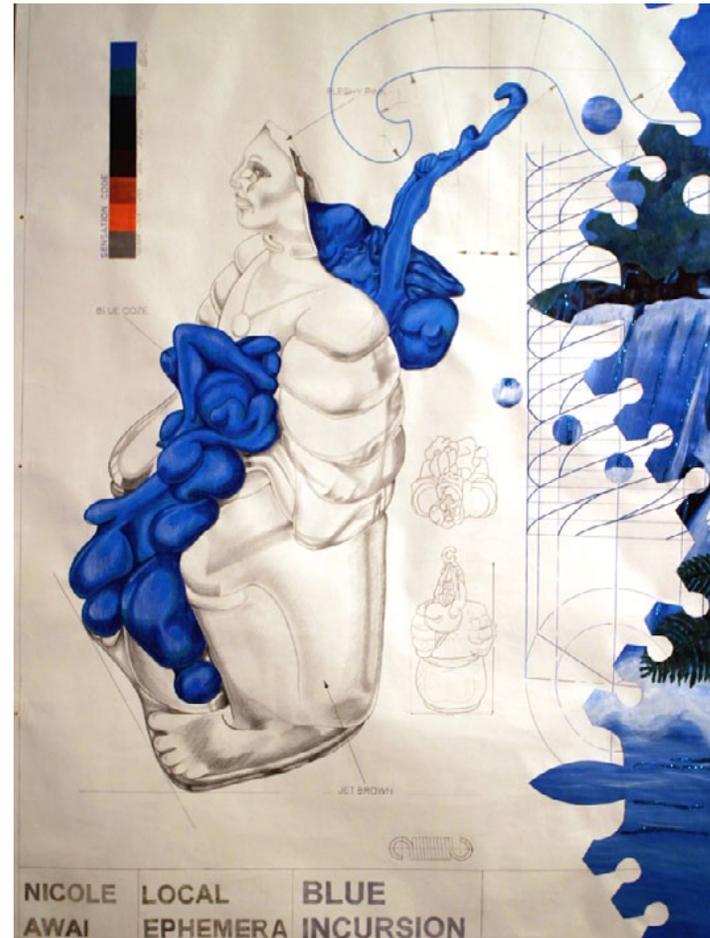
Allison Harbin: I'd like to begin with a comment you made during your presentation at the *Disillusions* symposium. You said that upon immigrating to the United States you found yourself an "object of expectations" of what it is to be Caribbean. How has your perception of your identity as an object of external expectations shifted, first from your move from Trinidad to Florida, and then from Florida to New York? How have you changed or challenged your work as a result of these experiences?

Nicole Awai: My practice has always been responsive. When I came to the US, the situation in the southern United States was something that I couldn't ignore; it affected me deeply. This was 20-something years ago in central Florida, around 1987. Things have changed there to some extent, but that particular landscape and the interactions that I was having with people there at the time were challenging for me. In Trinidad, issues of race and color were not the same. For the first time in my life I was really the "other," and the way that people interacted with me was something that I could not anticipate. It also had a lot do

with age; those who grew up in the 1950s had a certain expectation of people from the Caribbean, which was slightly different from younger people, who assumed we were all ganja smoking. While the reactions were varied, my experience of people's expectations of me as a Caribbean woman was often hyper-sexualized.

AH: Did you feel this need to deny or fulfill these expectations?

NA: No, I channeled this into the work. I'm a responsive artist and that was the time when a lot of crucial immigration issues in Florida were happening, so throughout the state there were these ongoing conversations about expectations and responsibilities. The work I made during this time responded to those issues. For instance, I was struck by the way people from here saw the Caribbean as a destination vacation spot and as a repository for sexual fantasies. You had white and black Americans who had a very specific history to each other, and, of course, you had me observing and responding to this relationship as well. That is a particular



Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Blue Incursion*, 2002  
Graphite, acrylic paint, nail-polish and glitter on paper, 72 x 53"

culture that is different from, say, the way things are in New York. It's very interesting; African Americans in Central Florida at the time were often guarded and suspicious. And maybe they have a right to feel so, given the history of Florida and racism. One African-American person said to me regarding the whites there that "you can't trust them, they are recently renovated hicks." My work became both about the experience of being acted upon in this way in certain situations and also about observing. It was a very strange and interesting dynamic. And I was moving around and in it, and people were reacting and responding to me. I was paying attention to that, and, depending on whom I was interacting with, the expectation for me as a Caribbean woman would be different every time. And they wanted this expectation to be fulfilled. As human beings we all have these expectations.

AH: This amorphous and overwhelming aspect of being "an object of expectations" takes on interesting visual forms in your work, and I think your bringing together of painting, drawing, and mapping speaks to an attempt to resolve some of these exterior expectations on your own terms. Would you agree?

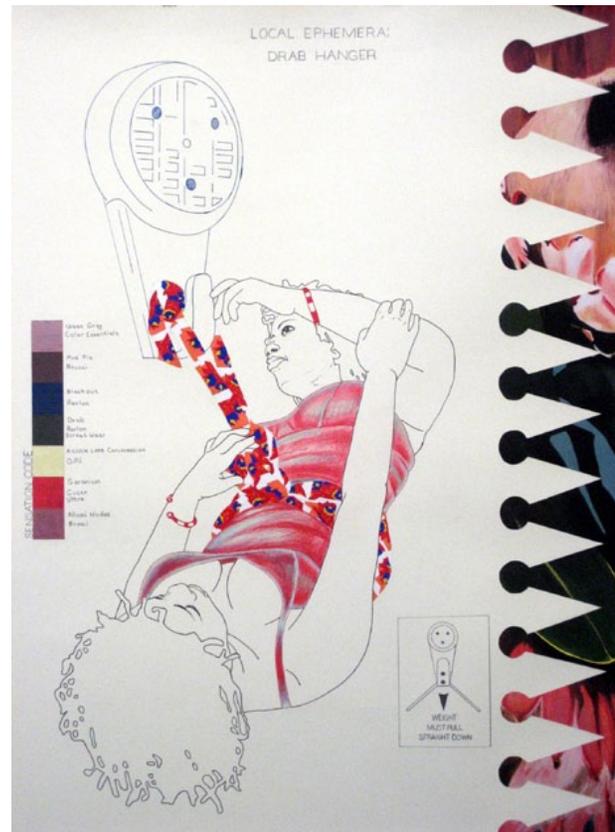
NA: The work that I showed in the panel discussion, I made in New York, but I was trying to give you a history of the effects of moving out of that space (central Florida) and that experience and how it informed an initial vision of things. I sometimes wonder if I had just come to New York directly, what my work would look like. Would it be different? I suspect it might have been, but I don't know how exactly. I'm aware that the work I made in Florida had an effect. Exterior places and experiences can really shape an artist's vision. Depending on where you are, interactions and experiences are going to shape things in you that you cannot anticipate.

Those drawings in the show are from a drawing series that I've been doing since 2003 called "Specimens from Local Ephemera," which is 'the world of in-between'. Those drawings are about the experience of being in that world and the occupants of that world. That drawing series started because I had to make some drawings for a sculpture installation that I wanted to do for the 2003 Biennial of Ceramic in Contemporary Art in Italy. When I did these drawings, I realized that nothing ever leaves you (my high school Technical Drawing classes), and that they seemed like blueprints, and I found those drawings fascinating. Then, I did a painting series, "Identifying Desire" that was actually my first foray into the idea of

this parallel world. When I look back on it now, what I think I was doing at the time was trying to find a device to move beyond an explicitly political critique of my work, which happened especially upon coming to New York, where people reacted to my work and classified it as "political" in the late 1990s and early 2000s. So I started wondering about ways to engage the viewer without being political, without letting them automatically negate the content as just political. I found that people bring their own history to things, and I know that as an artist, and I've always wanted to use that as a device, so I started using this more and more.

AH: Can you speak more about your conception of an audience, either specific or general, when you make your work?

NA: The one thing all artists want to do is to communicate and let everyone have an experience with the work. While as the artist you take ownership of what's going on in it, you also have to realize that the viewers bring their own histories to your work. So, I thought of this parallel world as a way to look at these same issues in a way that would not automatically impede these histories but, rather, let them be incorporated into the viewer's experience of my work.



Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Drab Hanger*, 2007  
Graphite, acrylic paint, nail-polish and glitter on paper, 50 x 38"

AH: So you see this parallel world as a commonality, as a position between the viewer and artist, that we can all approach the work with our experience?

NA: Yes. I was using cultural artifacts, that were given to me or that I would find. People kept giving me decorative rum bottles from Trinidad that they thought I would want them because I was from Trinidad. I have about three or four that were given to me by American friends, so, therefore, if someone gives me something like this, I need to utilize it in my work. So initially, I used the Angostura Rum bottle and a Disney Tarzan action figure to create a physical and visual conversation between these objects. These characters were the occupants of this world but a referent to this world. They could come together as an amalgam that served as an investigation of a socio-political reality.

There was a conversation going on between these tropes in a 20th century context - Tarzan as this white dude who grows up in Africa and becomes leader of a tribe and the grinning Limbo Drummer Angostura Rum bottle. This can mean many things to many people depending on who and what you are. For example, in Trinidad we thought of the Angostura Rum bottle as something innocuous, but in the US there is the history of these

representations as being intentionally derogatory. I'm always fascinated by the multiple perspectives and interpretations of these cultural artifacts.

AH: In your series, "*Specimens from Local Ephemera*," of which there are two pieces in *Disillusions*, there seems to be the recurring trope of map legends and an attempt to locate oneself as well as one's identity externally. I have several questions about this, but to begin with, I'd like to ask you about your nail-polish legends. They seem to be an explicit set of feminine codes, as in only women are concerned with cosmetics or are aware of the titles. They themselves are playful phrases that you have taken very seriously in your work. Take, for instance "Drab," which is a Revlon nail color title, in your piece "*Specimen from Local Ephemera: Drab Hanger*."

NA: It's interesting you would say that, especially in relation to how men look at my work. I gave a talk at the Vilcek Foundation in New York during my solo exhibition there, and a male curator friend commented that he never noticed the naming of nail polish. It was something that men do not really pay attention to, and he was fascinated by it.

AH: Nail polish is a cultural object or something that only really women access or deal with. I see it as a very specific way into your work, so to speak.

NA: For all you know it might be men naming these things; that becomes another interesting thing as well. In more recent work, I've been very interested in OPI's nail color "Jade is the New Black," especially in the context of my work and its inference of the Afro-Asian experience in the Americas as my identity specifically. When I first came to New York, *The New Yorker* magazine did an issue called "Black in America" and there was an article in there by Malcolm Gladwell in which Anglophone Caribbean folks were referred to as "the good blacks." I began thinking about the sociopolitical implications of that, but also as a way to look at what is a "good black" in art, in painting, in sculpture. I found many ways to look at this phrase. It's interesting because it's still very much an issue.

AH: The "model minority" phenomenon?

NA: Yes, and the nail polish color continued to re-inform my examination of that term.

I was never trying to be didactic in my use of common objects; I was aware of their accepted meanings, and I wanted to add to those meanings and further complicate them. Initially, I was physically using symbols from technical drawing, such as machine parts and other symbols for mechanical functions. For instance, there is an international symbol for a tension spring that I would incorporate. These symbols act as visual and linguistic



Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Mix More Media!*, 2009  
Graphite, acrylic paint, and nail polish on paper, 30 x 50"

connectors. In my drawing *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Tension Springs* there is the rum bottle that looks like it's splitting in two, or mirrored, and there is this white ooze coming up, and from it several Tarzan action figures spring forth in such a way that it looks like something under pressure or tension. So there is the language of blueprints and the nail polish legends. These are both familiar canons. They don't really mean anything, but I know that viewers can draw a narrative of their own partly from my inclusion of these universal symbols or nail polish titles and colors.

AH: Do you see these legends with the nail polish colors as keys to beauty, especially since most cosmetics are made for white women, as an exterior prescription of identity? Since these colors you use as legends next to portraits of yourself weren't made for you, for your skin tone, it makes them very loaded and problematic, to say the least.

NA: I have worn just about all the nail polish colors that I used in the work. I've also used foundation, but I only used it in the *"Identifying Desire"* paintings because it was really hard to stabilize on the canvas, which is why I discontinued its use. The foundation didn't resonate long for me; I was more interested in the idea of false or implied narratives that the nail polish names provided, as well as how those colors

resonated with a palette I might use or relate to in the drawings.

AH: So it was technical, your switch to nail polish?

NA: Yes, it's not as transient as the foundation was, but I used the nail polish first with the makeup. I don't wear foundation now, but I did at the time, I did find one foundation color that wasn't too bad on me by Revlon, their "Color Stay" stuff, and the color was called "Toast," which always kind of amused me, that my skin was the color of toast. I think a lot has changed in this last decade, but, for me, 10 years ago things were very different. It's really poignant to see how we process these things. There was always the idea of the way things are codified. Eventually, the nail polish names became more interesting to me than the colors themselves, and what those names did when they were assembled into this cosmetic canon in terms of a legend or as something to guide you. I started referring to the legend as a "Sensation Code."

AH: It is so interesting to look at material culture and how it changes amongst socioeconomic pressures.

NA: Yes, absolutely.

AH: Are you critiquing this system of codes and representation, or are you embracing



Nicole Awai, *Go Go Gone*, 2011, Acrylic paint, polyurethane, nail polish, graphite, cotton lintens fiber, wire form, wood, and construction foam, approximately 60 x 48 x 72 in.

them as a construct, as one would a legend for a map? Are they useful for you and your practice, or do you include them because they are problematic to you? I'm asking because they seemed removed, distant from and separate from the figuration of these pieces. They are off to the side, and often the colors in the legends don't reappear in the figures, at least not exactly. There seems to be a mismatch, as if the legend were arbitrarily placed and does not, or cannot, explain the figuration going on at the center of the image. But on the other hand, their relationship to each other spatially and visually is absolutely undeniable.

I'd also like to ask you more about the idea of the topsy-turvy doll that you embody by depicting yourself as doubled, as joined literally at your core. Yet, the traditional topsy-turvy doll, one of plantation mistress (wife) and the other of plantation 'mammy' (black slave servant that raised the mistress' children) are completely and diametrically opposed. Yet, in your works, they are the same person; in some cases, they are you. How do you resolve this in your work?

NA: Just like the rum bottle, the topsy-turvy doll was given to me, it's already an amalgam of something, and it's just so messed up it screamed out to be in another world. Prior to that I was engineering conversations to create amalgams, but this was a ready-made amalgam for me. Implied in those dolls

is mirroring so I was quite aware of that in this as well, because that is the conversation that they're having.

For a short time I was using the two different sides of the configuration. This was part of the conversation that I wanted to imply and what slowly happened is that I realized I wanted to take it out of the antebellum dress. I knew its specific history, but beyond that I didn't want to have that history implied. I started to tear down that outfit so it didn't speak of that period. The doll began to transform itself in my work, and, eventually, it was just about this mirroring, and the antebellum references associated with the original object were gone. And at that point I started to use myself on one end and another person at the other, so I changed the tops, they became simple tops or lingerie. Then I realized after a certain point, it was opposites or other sides of me. That it was really about the idea of duality within yourself, the aspects of female duality, the aspects of the troubled place of feminism at that time. Then, it moved out of that conversation because that was not the conversation I was trying to have anymore. It came to the simple place of being about the two sides of me. It is still the doubling, but it's unified. We all walk around with two sides of us.

AH: There's also the element of the horrific past of the plantation that the topsy-turvy



Nicole Awai, *Tourist Dangle*, 2011. Wall drawing, size variable

doll embodies that is oppressive to both the racial body as well as the feminine body. There is no way outside of this oppression, but in engaging in these terrible dichotomies of the past, do you see a potential for overcoming them in your work, for moving beyond being “an object of expectations”?

NA: *It is so horrific it belongs in another world, which is why I placed it in Local Ephemera. This was already an amalgam; I didn't need to create one. It already part of a specific conversation, but then I was interested in continuing that conversation, for it to evolve into something else. And I think for me, the antebellum form only showed up in one or two drawings, in the one called “Specimen from Local Ephemera: Resistance with Black Ooze.” I wanted to amplify the connection to that title, this idea of a resistance, as elements being opposed to each other – the ooze coming out, the two Tarzan action figures emerging and bursting out of this thing. It was just a hot mess; it literally is what it was, a hot mess. I became more interested in the duality of the form, less specifically about that horrific past, just to move into a conversation of duality and to a lesser degree, the state of contemporary feminism. At that time I was often hearing about the shortfall of the feminist movement because, ultimately, it helped white women the most. It's interesting, this whole generation of young white women who resist*

*it, because really and truly the feminist movement helped them primarily. The same things are said about the civil rights movement in terms of women of color. For a short time, the topsy-turvy dolls referred to those conversations.*

AH: You also have described these pieces as “preparatory drawings”. Are they preparatory in that you see your work along a linear trajectory, and that you are in this state of becoming closer and closer to what it is you want to depict in your work? Or do you mean “preliminary drawings” in the sense that everything is preliminary, everything is in flux, in this state of becoming a future, of becoming a virtual reality that we cannot foresee?

NA: *An artist is always evolving; an artist is always responding. I think of myself as a perceptual, rather than conceptual, artist, in terms of process, in being responsive, listening to the work and letting it tell you where it wants to go next. You must be open to that and see that; you become open through the process of it.*

AH: Can you speak more on that? Being a perceptual rather than conceptual artist?

NA: *I am not a conceptual artist. I am a perceptual artist. I am aware of what is going on around me in the process, of making and of thinking. I am always evolving as an artist. It's not that there aren't things in your experience*

*that won't come back, but rather things change. I definitely think of myself as being a far better artist than I was 10 years ago. I am synthesizing things better.*

AH: When I think about the process of becoming, I think of the question of how to utilize the past to reinvigorate or reconfigure the present. How do you see your past work as a Caribbean artist as informing your current practice, if at all?

NA: *What I'm working on now doesn't have anything to do with the Caribbean in particular, but only in the sense that it is a part of me. Right now, I consider myself as having a responsive practice to the American landscape/experience that I live in everyday, so that is what probably stays most consistent in my work. I am a little hesitant to be labeled singularly as Caribbean, I see myself as reacting to issues in the United States and New York, in particular. While I will always be from the Caribbean, I don't see the need to constantly define my work as being of the Caribbean in this sense.*