

## **BLUE POWER and Trinidad's shifting social history**

**Candice Nembhard**

In 18th century Trinidad, Spanish colonists successfully increased plantation societies following The Cedula of Population edict in 1783. The immigration policy incentivised Roman Catholic settlers with land grants and tax exemptions, leading to increased cheap labour from French colonies Dominica, Grenada, Guadeloupe, and Martinique. In 1797, Trinidad was ceded to the British. Anglican Protestants trumped Roman Catholics and droves of enslaved folks from West and Central Africa populated the island. While many maintained traditional Yoruba customs, a missionary conversion culture ensued to subjugate the newly-formed working class. Neighbouring Tobago would also toil under Spanish, British, Dutch and French missionaries. By the 1830s, calls and orders for abolition were underway. British powers in Trinidad sought indentured labourers from India and China. Such arrivals brought about Hinduism and Islam, which not only complicated Trinidad's religious composition but further agitated ideas around race, class and economic power through a burgeoning syncretic culture.

In *BLUE POWER* at London's Block 336, Trinidad-born, Birmingham-based artist, Karen McLean explores this conflict between overt religiousness and ritual practice. Initially presented at ORT Gallery, Birmingham in 2018, the work is revisited at Block 336, expanded to double its original size. The impact of this impressive installation in the underground bunker-like space is striking, bringing a stark analysis of colonial legacy and the sustained socioeconomic displacement through historic raw materials and Christian iconography from McLean's homeland.

Grounding the exhibition is a memorial site featuring 80 wooden crucifixes bathed in blue light and adorned with bars of blue carbolic soap; giving the show its namesake. Surrounding them are 12,000 origami paper boats; each one individually made and hand-folded by McLean and her assistants, and installed by local young people. In the construction and presentation of

these objects, McLean asks viewers to reckon with the long-term impact of the British empire on health, faith and infrastructure in Trinidad and the Caribbean at large.



*BLUE POWER*, 2019 - 2021

480 cakes of blue carboloc soap, plasterers laths, 12,000 hand folded origami boats. Wax, blue pigment, cosmetic glitter, clear nail polish, bead along wire, silver spacers, blue beads, silver hooks, crystal clear glass

Unlike other English-speaking Caribbean countries, Trinidad's economy was not tourism-based but driven by oil and gas reserves. Following the decline of agricultural production in the early 20th century, job security became scarce among working class islanders. While some migrated overseas to find employment, others remained to work in the growing industrial economy. Even so, the service industry still accounts for a large percentage of the country's labour force today. Despite comparatively low unemployment rates (around five percent), violent crime remains a huge cause for concern. According to a 2019 Crime and Safety report by the U.S. Department of State Overseas Security Advisory Council (OSAC), 'the majority of violent crime (e.g.

homicides, kidnappings, assaults, robberies, sexual assaults) is gang/drug-related.' This is largely on account of the island being a 'major transshipment point for illicit drugs.' The report notes 'drug trafficking and gang-related activities continue to fuel the demand for illegal weapons' leading to increased incidents of violent crimes. In 2018, there were 517 reported murders in Trinidad with around 80% involving firearms. In that same year, neighbouring Tobago only had nine.

*BLUE POWER* probes us to question how faith plays a significant role in and among working class communities, especially when faced with an unfair capitalist system that leaves little room for upward economic mobility. The crucifixes and paper boats serve to remind us of both past acts of violence brought about by the slave trade and continued violent systems that disproportionately affect poor people, such as classism. Blue, the colour of the working man, highlights the class struggle for true economic stability and its link to syncretic rituals tied to civility, humility, duty and service. The use and appearance of blue soap serves several functions. Traditionally, it was used to wash white laundry but more spiritually-minded persons promote its cleansing properties. For the latter, the soap can be used to physically wash the body or hang above doorways to protect the home and its inhabitants from bad omens and unwanted spirits. This is referenced by the soap curtain upon entry to the main gallery space. In blending both historical and cultural signifiers of faith and spirituality, McLean subverts the meaning behind the historical material and how it can be perceived. The artist is particularly concerned with poverty. In her words, 'the most persistent of all the legacies of colonialism across the Caribbean.' Poverty has not only aided the development of subcultures, as a form of resistance but has pushed these groups and cultures to inevitably be co-opted by dominant belief systems in order to survive. This is most evident across the Caribbean and South America in the merging of AfroIndigenous beliefs with Christian praxis.

In Afro-Cuban culture, the Orisha Yemayá (in Yoruba: Yemaja) is syncretised with the Black Virgin, Our Lady of Regla and Brazil's Our Lady of Navigators. In Haitian Vodou, Loa, or spirits, are syncretised with Catholic Saints; Papa Legba with Saint Peter. In Jamaica, the creolisation of African religions led to the maintained practice of Obeah and Myal through Christian Revivalism.



*BLUE POWER*, 2019 - 2021 (detail)

In light of this, it is worth considering the true social value of Christianity in postcolonial Trinidad. That is to say, does its violent, colonial past continue to impact believers and their financial subordination today? One could argue that while a valid question, the materials used within the show—crucifixes, blue soap, and paper boats—beyond their primary symbolic functions, speak to the wider influence of mythology, folklore, migration and oral traditions within the Caribbean.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that *BLUE POWER* is fashioned as a memorial. The people may not survive but their customs do, through conversation, collective conscious archiving and imagery. It is almost impossible to discuss the legacy of colonialism without acknowledging what was taken and what survived. As such, one might ask viewers what they are choosing to remember and what they opt to forget when engaging with *BLUE POWER*.

Though syncretism has amalgamated the better part of several religious practices, their merging is a matter of continued resistance in the face of growing frustration, economic uncertainty and shifting social history.