

## Karen McLean

Interview by Tess Charnley

10th July 2020

*Due to COVID-19, Block 336's scheduled programming has been postponed. As part of our effort to recalibrate and find new ways of working, we are presenting a series of interviews with artists that we were working with before lockdown.*

*For the fourth interview in the series, Tess Charnley, Block 336 Programme Coordinator, interviewed Karen McLean about the subject matter of her work; its materiality; how her practice has shifted during lockdown, and more. Karen McLean's multidisciplinary practice is informed by her experience of growing up in the Caribbean during the 1960s. Through a variety of media, she explores themes of displacement, identity, capitalism and ethics, home, ideologies, modernism and globalisation. McLean has shown work at ORT Gallery, Birmingham; Lewisham Arthouse, London; BNP Architects, Birmingham and more. Block 336 was planning to present an exhibition by the artist in October 2020. Due to the impact of the pandemic on our funding, this show has been postponed. We are very much looking forward to working with Karen McLean in the future.*

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**Your work explores the vernacular architecture of the Caribbean and Chattel houses, especially. This is particularly evident in *The Precariat* and *White Shadows: Presence and Resistance*. Can you expand on how this architecture has influenced your work?**

The vernacular architecture of the Caribbean is a persistent form in all of the islands and a part of my childhood memories. I grew up in Port of Spain, Trinidad during the 1960s, which gained Independence in 1962. As a result, the architecture was part of my visual landscape. As time progressed and Modernism became the preferred style for housing, the old colonial structures began to disappear. Concrete became the new norm with its cold, brutal aesthetic. In the 90s, however, there seemed to be a revival of the old and people began to realise that they needed to preserve it, recognising how critical it was to keep one's heritage intact.

I moved to the UK at the end of the 90s and went back [to the Caribbean] every year. I began to observe the vernacular architecture, and in particular the small homes, usually occupied by the economically displaced, were disappearing rapidly. These homes were fashioned after the colonial masters' grand houses and had lovely details such as fret work and porches. I began to photograph them as a means of preservation, but I also became curious about the language of the architecture. I started to question why this form, which was so evident everywhere, was continually represented by other artists as nostalgic and utopian, when in reality these houses were commonly built by persons still experiencing the negative impact of colonialism and the structures that kept them in poverty.

For me, it was important to find out the real reasons behind its continued persistence and infinite regularity. These shacks appear throughout the Caribbean and, as the old forms disappeared, the newer homes were constructed from found materials as well as wood and concrete and created according to need and economic capacity as time went by, constantly in a state of flux.

My research took me to the Chattel houses of Barbados; a symmetric, aesthetically pleasing form that adds to the visual landscape of this tourist destination. My interest lay in the mimicry of the Georgian architecture that is widespread across the island and was the chosen form during the 17th century. Many plantation owners who were English used this style for their plantation great houses. In Barbados, where the Chattel house is best observed, the mimesis is evident, with them following the perfect symmetry and using similar windows and doors. Usually painted in lovely pastel colours, the Chattel house is very attractive and harmonious with the landscape. A form made from its inception by the slaves on the plantations, it has survived to date. Again, my interest lay in the juxtaposition between this mimicry and its connection to its creators who regularly live in poverty and continue to experience the detrimental consequences of an oppressive society.



In arriving at an understanding of these matters, Homi Bhabha's essay *Of Mimicry and Man*, which is rooted in postcolonial discourse, proved critical. Colonialism was based on the point of view that the indigenous were a savage people in need of civilising. The mission therefore was to 'create a reformed, recognisable 'Other', as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.' A process that was delivered through the projection of European culture, religion, architecture, education and language onto the indigenous. This forced culture was projected onto the subjects of the colonies, so mimesis was an inherent characteristic in the structure of Imperialism, and one that was needed in order for the coloniser to reflect his values. However, what was also needed

was for that mimesis to slip. A difference, an excess, had to occur; one that could exhibit that the reformed 'Other' was not an exact copy.

The façade of the house is critical. The Oxford Dictionary defines façade as an artificial or deceptive front, a skin that is supposed to convey power or something epic. The idea of conveying power through mirroring is theoretically not surprising and Bhabha addresses this in his essay. He refers to Jaques Lacan's theory of the gaze: 'The effect of mimicry is camouflage... It is not a question of harmonising with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled - exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare.' (Bhabha, 1994, pg. 85)

In reviewing the writings of Bhabha and Lacan, it seems to me that the builders of these houses were influenced by the mimicry as described and, perhaps more importantly, sought to establish a semblance of control in a society that continued to devalue them.



Karen Mc Lean, *White Shadows: Presence and Resistance*, 2015, detail, Goldsmiths MFA show.

In my works, *White Shadows: Presence and Resistance* and *The Precariat*, I have attempted to describe the insecurity and fragility of this position. The sugar houses which make up the works, start off like the pink house pictured above. As the external elements affect them, they begin to melt and distort. If mimicry is a double articulation within the context of a postcolonial society, slippage must occur. Slippage is always precarious; it becomes a danger, it represents the uncontrollable. So this is what happens when the natural elements hit the sugar houses. Once they're installed, I usually leave them for a week so that the process can begin. This is where I abandon artist's control, this is where the danger lies: in the uncontrollable. When I return, I am often pleasantly surprised. Each house usually has its own personality, a hybrid. 'Almost the same but not quite.'



Karen Mc Lean, *The Precariat*, 2017, installation view, Lewisham Arthouse, London.

**As a multidisciplinary artist, materiality is essential to your work, whether that material is the Tate and Lyle sugar used in *White Shadows: Presence and Resistance* or the hessian sacks used in your new exhibition *Ar'n't I a Woman!* at The New Gallery Walsall. Both of these materials are inseparable from the legacies of slavery and colonialism which you explore in these works. Does the discipline / material that you choose to use for each work enact a performative role in the work, moving beyond a means of representing an idea and becoming a manifestation of the idea itself?**

Yes, absolutely. I think this is evident immediately in *White Shadows: Presence and Resistance*. From the moment I hang the sugar houses, they become performative as they begin to melt. Some were made a long time before. When I did *The Precariat*, which was a much larger exhibition than my MFA degree show, I had been making the houses for weeks before. It was extremely hot the week we installed so they immediately began to melt. The difficulty is always getting the work to visually communicate what you are trying to express. The challenge for me is to get the material to do the work.

For my upcoming exhibition *Ar'n't I a woman!* at The New Art Gallery Walsall, the sacks that I am using are a critical material. Alongside the associations of the sack as a vessel for trade of commercial commodities, the sack as a form contains many metaphors pertaining to the slave woman, particularly in terms of her uterus and its commodification. The hessian itself is so durable and resilient that I felt it was perfect as a metaphor for the robust and strong nature of the slave woman.

In the Caribbean, women are far outdoing the men in terms of their educational achievements and careers. A large percentage of these women are the descendants of slaves. They have overcome years of oppression and I wanted to celebrate them. As Deborah Gray White wrote in her book *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*: 'Slave women were everywhere, yet nowhere.' There has been so little written about them until recently. Currently, there is significant focus on the difficulties and successes of women but the successes and achievements of slave women have been neglected. It is necessary to give them a voice.

The resilience of the sacks was critical as I was able to work with them in different ways, even branding them... This feature of the material is something I really wanted to express with the work. I think this actually answers your other question about colonial history and the resilience of female slaves within captivity.

It is important for me to comment on the laborious nature of my work which also reflects the subject matter. Colonialism and the African Slave Trade was all about labour. Process and labour are deeply embedded in my practice. For *Ar'n't I a Woman!*, the laborious nature of the work was fundamental. I used every opportunity I had to produce the work in a manner that was similar to how it would have been created by the women in order to validate the language.

### **Can you talk about the significance of Folklore in your work?**

Folklore and mythology have been creeping into my work, including how it has influenced Carnival. Again, these themes have emerged from early childhood memories and my upbringing in Trinidad, where folklore and mythology are staple ingredients of our culture. These are the stories that have formed me. The 'Blue Devil', for instance, which I plan to incorporate into my upcoming exhibition at Block 336, is a character I was so scared of as a child. We would often go to the seaside for Carnival as a family and the Blue Devils would come to the house on the Monday morning of the festivities, just at the break of dawn (J'Ouvert), wielding their devil forks, demanding money. I think it is impossible to separate them from *BLUE POWER*, as they are apt metaphors for what I am trying to say in the work - the struggle of good versus evil.

My work *BLUE POWER*, which I plan to expand at Block 336 (it was originally shown at ORT gallery in Birmingham in 2018) began with an interest in the syncretic religious practices found across the Caribbean. These practices are frequently employed as a form of defence against the high incidence of murder due to drug trafficking and turf wars. In Trinidad we seem to be losing a generation of young black men because of this, but we have become accustomed to the violence. The banality surrounding the subject and the easy dismissal of the fact that so many are dying such brutal and senseless deaths is visceral. I guess there is a frustration with the inadequate responses from the government, so people pray relentlessly. Going back, I am often amazed at how much everyone, no matter what class or race, pray in response to the situation, alongside the other myths and beliefs that they are additionally invoking.

My concerns in this work lay in understanding how it is that people continue to have confidence in such rituals, as a way of stemming the flow of evil, despite the fact that the murders, violence and drug turf wars continue unabated. My work *BLUE POWER* seeks to describe the conflicts inherent in this question through its use of material embedded in Caribbean folklore and the items I create.

The materials used in *BLUE POWER*, and the multiple associations they generate are critical. I look to activate materials from history and memory so that they become the agents of the project. I've used material signifiers to explore historical construction

methods as well as the evolution of syncretism, and in so doing created a number of historical and political subtexts. In mixing both historical and cultural signifiers, I am in effect subverting historical material and its conventional modes of delivery. This places the onus on the viewer to bring their own interpretations to the work.



Karen Mc Lean, *BLUE POWER*, 2018, installation view, ORT Gallery, Birmingham.

An example of these signifiers is the Blue Soap used in *BLUE POWER*. Blue Soap is a carbolic soap and originally used as a disinfectant. It is widely used across the Caribbean for a plethora of reasons. In Trinidad it is now used for almost every ill and believed to wash away bad omens. In the small shacks in Tobago it is frequently used just over the door to cleanse you of any bad spirits you may bring into the house.

Similarly, the Blue Devil (or Jab Molassie as it is also known) is an effective metaphor for the struggle of good versus evil, as it is a fearful and aggressive expression of evil, yet a creature of entertainment and humour.

A little excerpt about J'Ouvert (the activity that commences Carnival):

The origins of street parties associated with J'Ouvert coincide with the emancipation from slavery in 1838. Emancipation provided Africans with the opportunity not only to participate in Carnival, but to embrace it as an expression of their newfound freedom. Some theorise that some J'Ouvert traditions are carried forward in remembrance of civil disturbances in Port of Spain, Trinidad, when the people smeared themselves with oil or paint to avoid being recognised.

The Blue Devil is a character that emerges in the early morning when Carnival first begins. Here is an abstract taken from a Trinidadian website:

The Jab Molassi or Molasses Devil is one of the oldest forms of Devil Mas. He wears wings, horns, has a wire tail and carries a pitchfork and usually strikes fear in the hearts of both young and old.

He was usually covered in a sticky black substance, which was in the old days, molasses. Its origins date back to days of the sugar estates, when freed slaves, who formerly toiled on the sugar estates, daubed themselves with the familiar and readily available molasses (a direct by-product of sugar cane) as a means of disguising themselves and playing a cheap mas. Today, the Jab Molassie has evolved to include blue devils, red, green, white, yellow and even Jabs covered in mud, and chocolate syrup.

The Jab Molassies will throw themselves to the ground and run around trying to intimidate and frighten people in the hopes of getting paid a dollar or two.

To avoid contact with him, many bystanders are willing to 'Pay the Devil'

Poverty, the most persistent of all the legacies of colonialism across the Caribbean, continues to enable subcultures to develop. Ineffective governments leave citizens with little choice but to look for hope from the gods. My work, *BLUE POWER* seeks to open up a new conversation. Does religion work, or have we become so oblivious to the murder statistics that we are like the carnival bystander: just willing to pay the price of losing a generation of young men - pay the devil and avoid contact with the issues?

**You have recently been working with studio assistants but lockdown has impacted on this. I'm interested in this shift in your way of working, particularly when so much of your work is concerned with notions of 'home'. What impact has this intermingling of the domestic and studio space had on your practice, alongside a solitary way of working? Has it created a more introspective way of working for you?**

Yes, for the first time I have worked with four assistants to prepare for my exhibition at The New Art Gallery Walsall. As my work is so labour intensive it was really nice having extra hands on board. I don't know if I would have been able to get to where I am now without them. I like working with people and really enjoy the camaraderie and feedback, so I miss that a lot, especially as we all got along really well too.

The shift to working from home has been easy for me as it has been happening for some time. I have been working with domestic materials for quite a while and last year built a studio in the back garden. This was partly to provide storage for my work and partly because I had been working with materials like sugar and soap and found I needed to make these things at home where I could easily access a hob and a microwave oven.

So my practice has become one with my home life. I often take over the house when preparing for an exhibition and I am lucky to have a very understanding family. This way of making really works for me: I can blend the two easily. I like that I can put the clothes to dry and then boil sugar for a house. While the house is drying in the mould, I can then fold the dry laundry. It's a fairly seamless process now. My artwork adds to the continuous labour of running a house and taking care of my family; I don't think I need to separate them. Art is life and life is art. It is also synonymous with how I am using the materials of my childhood memories. When I think about it, this change in my practice has made it more introspective, without my realising.

As with many women, I have always combined my practice with my home life, which has been great for my son who has grown up here. I started studying when he was two and had to do everything part-time. He has witnessed my determination and dedication. We often discuss the issues I am dealing with in my work at the dinner table, so he has learnt a lot about Caribbean history from these conversations. You don't realise how much these

things are seeping in, but today at twenty-one he is a fierce critic and often surprises me with how much he understands my practice.

***Ar'n't I a Woman!* explores slave womens' continual resistance for agency and control over their bodies, with their bodies and their respective abilities to bear children used as a means of capitalist reproduction of labour. Now, art is often seen as a form of resistance and empowerment. Is there an element of resistance in your own art, beyond the subject matter which you are exploring?**



Karen Mc Lean, branding a hessian sack with an iron. Work in progress for *Ar'n't I a Woman!* at The New Art Gallery Walsall. Image courtesy of The New Art Gallery Walsall.

Yes, I have always had to fight to survive. I had four brothers and, as you can imagine, I had to fight for my space and food! When I was growing up, corporal punishment was still acceptable. I was always defiant and did not agree with these methods so it became very important for me to become independent in every sense of the word.

I believe it is really important for women to have complete control over their bodies and to always keep fighting for this. I am worried about what is happening in the USA as Trump rolls back abortion laws.. I was also struck by the billboards that were erected and directed at Stella Creasy, the Walthamstow Labour MP, last year by the American anti-abortion organisation, the Centre for Bio-Ethical Reform. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and women should not have to face such assaults. We need control of our bodies. Staying vigilant is critical. Does the state or any other organisation try to control mens' bodies? Why are we still being harassed about what we can and cannot do?