



Karen McLean: *BLUE POWER | Ar'n't I a Woman!*

20th May - 12th June 2021



Woven Bodies I, 2021

Black / gold screen printing and branding on hessian sacking dyed with tea and coffee, animal suture thread, 3D printed plastic spiders, cowry shells, snap fasteners, velcro tape

Panel 1: 528 x 300 cm / Panel 2: 528 x 300 cm

The textile work, *Woven Bodies I*, hangs in two long banners, installed as a tunnel to be entered. The patchwork of branded, printed and stitched hessian sacking is replete with corporeal and symbolic references to the harsh lives of enslaved women who are remembered across its surface. Screen printed images of an iconic female figure references Nanny of the Maroons, the Jamaican revolutionary who led formerly enslaved Africans to fight against the British colonists in Jamaica.

There are uteruses, the imprints of which were produced through the very physical and violent process of branding. Burnt into the hessian, the artist constructed a bespoke iron which could be heated to temperature for this purpose. McLean refers to the reproductive systems of enslaved women as a colonised space, and highlights the role of the female body as a site of resistance. Subtly appearing across the sacking are small 3D printed plastic spiders that reference Anansi, the trickster spider who is well known in Caribbean folklore.

The names printed on the sacking above the wombs are selected from indentures from the Gale Plantation that McLean came across while researching in the Black Cultural Archives (BCA), in which enslaved people were listed by first names (and as male or female, distempered, midwives, boilers, etc.) as part of the owners' chattels. The names are printed in Helvetica Neue, a popular typeface on the original plantation sacks and a signifier of their commodity status. Many enslaved women were given anglicised names (such as Sophia, Charlotte, Grace, Priscilla, Esther) as part of their absorption into colonial culture and the eradication of their African heritage. Others retained their African names, or hybrid versions (such as Phibbah, Betty Bah), an indication, perhaps, of resistance to acculturation. McLean seeks to reinstate some status originally denied to her subjects by adding the prefix 'MISS' - a title formerly denied to Black women.



Woven Bodies I, 2021 (details)



Woven Bodies II, 2020

Gold and black screen printed womb, branding on hessian sacking dyed with tea and coffee, laser cut aluminium, animal suture thread

232 x 157 cm

This wall based textile piece also makes use of hessian and its complex history. Alluding to the commercial history of slavery, hessian is an ancient material derived from jute and is famously durable. Hessian sacks were used to carry produce from the plantations, such as sugar, coffee and tea; they were the vehicles of distribution to the colonial capitals and symbols of the accumulation of wealth that ensued. McLean sourced the hessian in her works from various modern suppliers, including eBay, Brick Lane and an outlet in Hastings, combining different textures, tones and weaves. Each was dyed using tea and coffee, turned inside out to hide old lettering, and cut in half. She then stitched on new hessian backs, creating her own reclaimed and recoloured sacks, imbued with laborious practices that echo those of the past.

Imitating the gendered activities of dressmaking and quilting in enslaved societies, McLean laces them together in her *Woven Bodies* works, with animal suture thread, another corporeal reference to the wounded / sutured bodies of enslaved people, especially women.



Anansi, 2020

Welded Mild Steel

180 x 130 x 40 cm

An oversized black steel spider, *Anansi*, appears to crawl along the ceiling on Gallery 1. Smaller spiders also meander across the large wall hanging *Woven Bodies I*. These mischievous arachnids reference the cultural symbolism of Anansi, a character from Akan folklore. In West African, African American and Caribbean folklore, Anansi often takes the form of a spider and is an inventive trickster, or god of knowledge of stories. In the postcolonial Caribbean, Anansi is often celebrated as an historic symbol of individualism and slave resistance, a mythical figure that had enabled enslaved Africans to establish a sense of continuity with their African past. For an audience schooled in European art history, they may also evoke the French-American artist Louise Bourgeois' series of huge metal spiders titled *Maman* (first cast in 1996); oversized symbols of maternal power and protection.



Silence me not... me ah rise, 2020

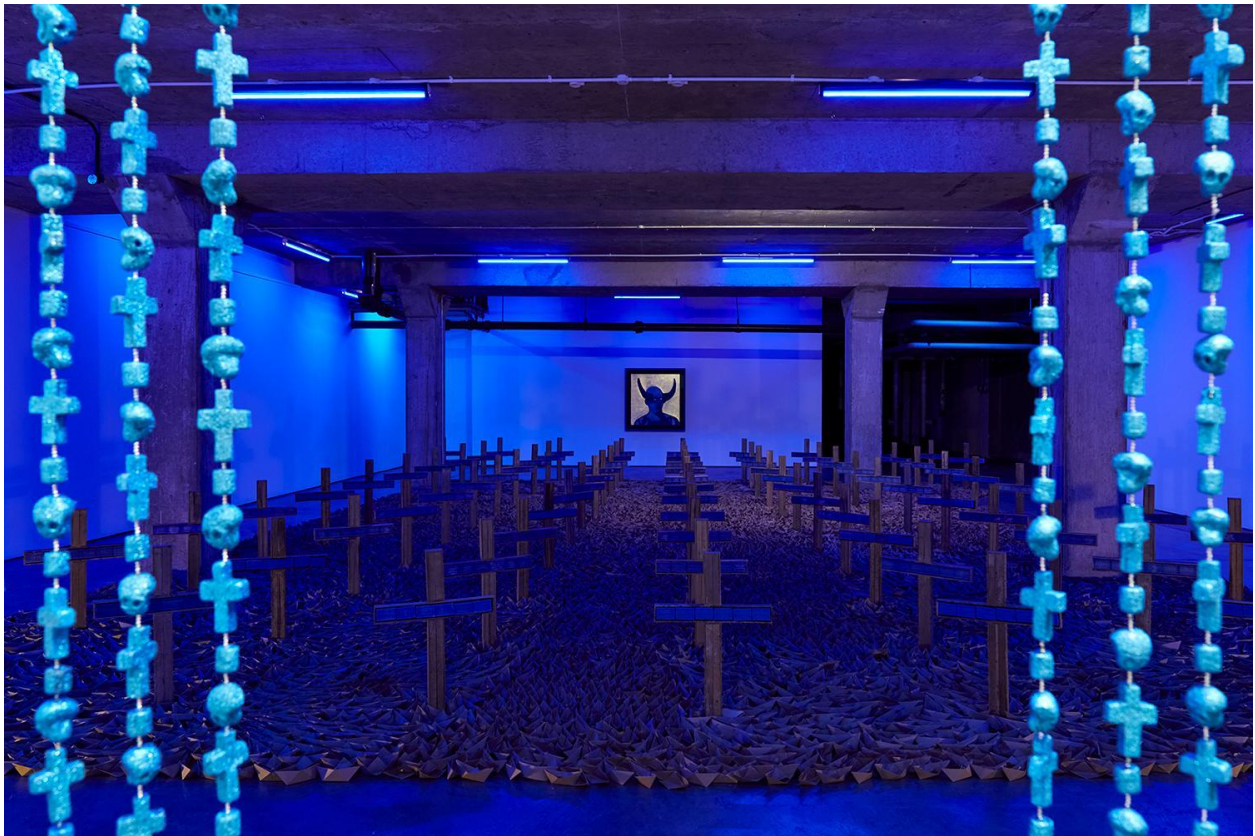
Hessian sacks dyed with tea, gold and black screen print, branding, brass strips, brass screws, dyed cowry shells, 22 and 24 carat gold plated beads, beadalon gold wire, waxed metallic gold thread and acrylic

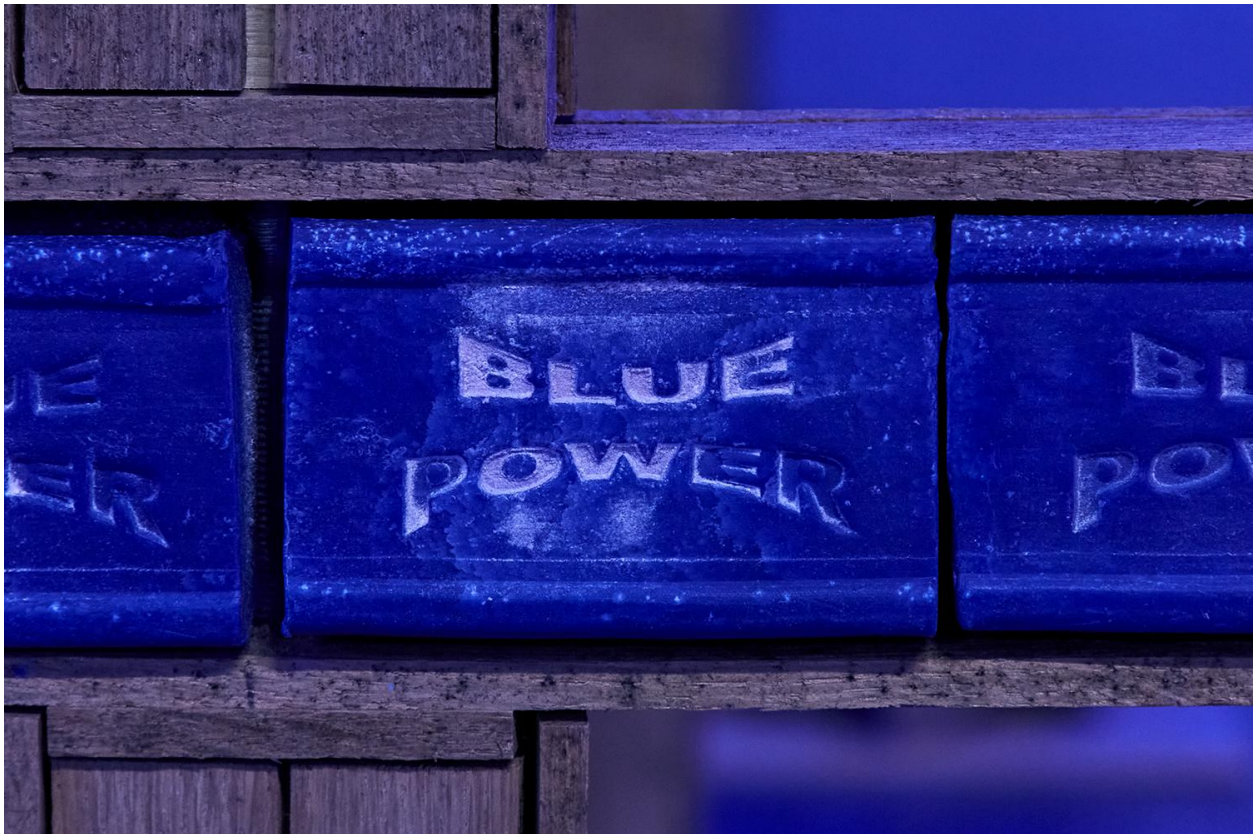
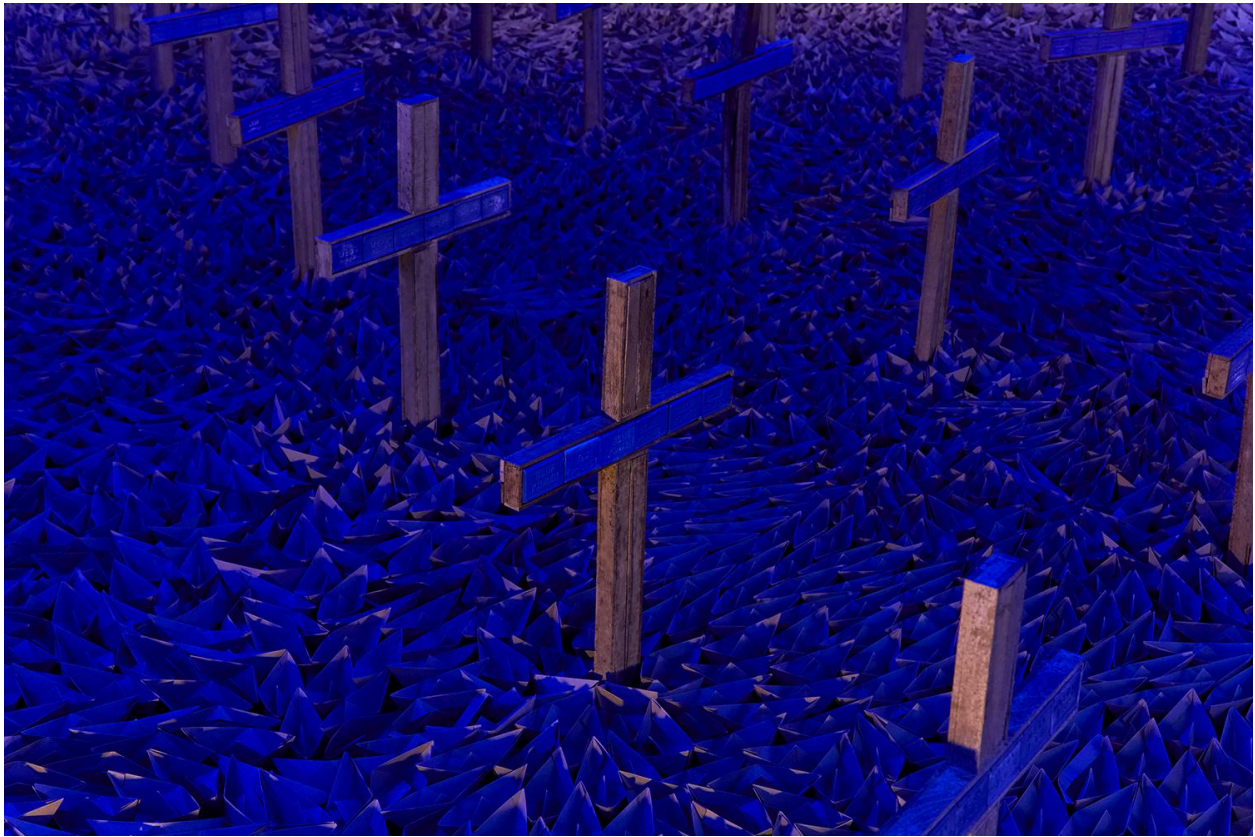
Variable installation

Silence me not – me ah rise! comprises 3 hanging components, elegantly suspended from the ceiling with strings beaded with cowry shells and 22 and 24 carat gold plated beads. Three pieces of hessian, featuring wombs are presented; branded black on one side, they glisten with printed gold on the other. The cowrie shells are abundant with symbolic resonances: a substitute for money in some parts of Africa, as jewellery when threaded into bracelets and necklaces, and as charms and symbols of the feminine. Cowries were a key currency in the eighteenth and nineteenth century trade for both people and gold, an historical omission that is referenced in McLean's work.



Silence me not... me ah rise, 2020 (reverse)







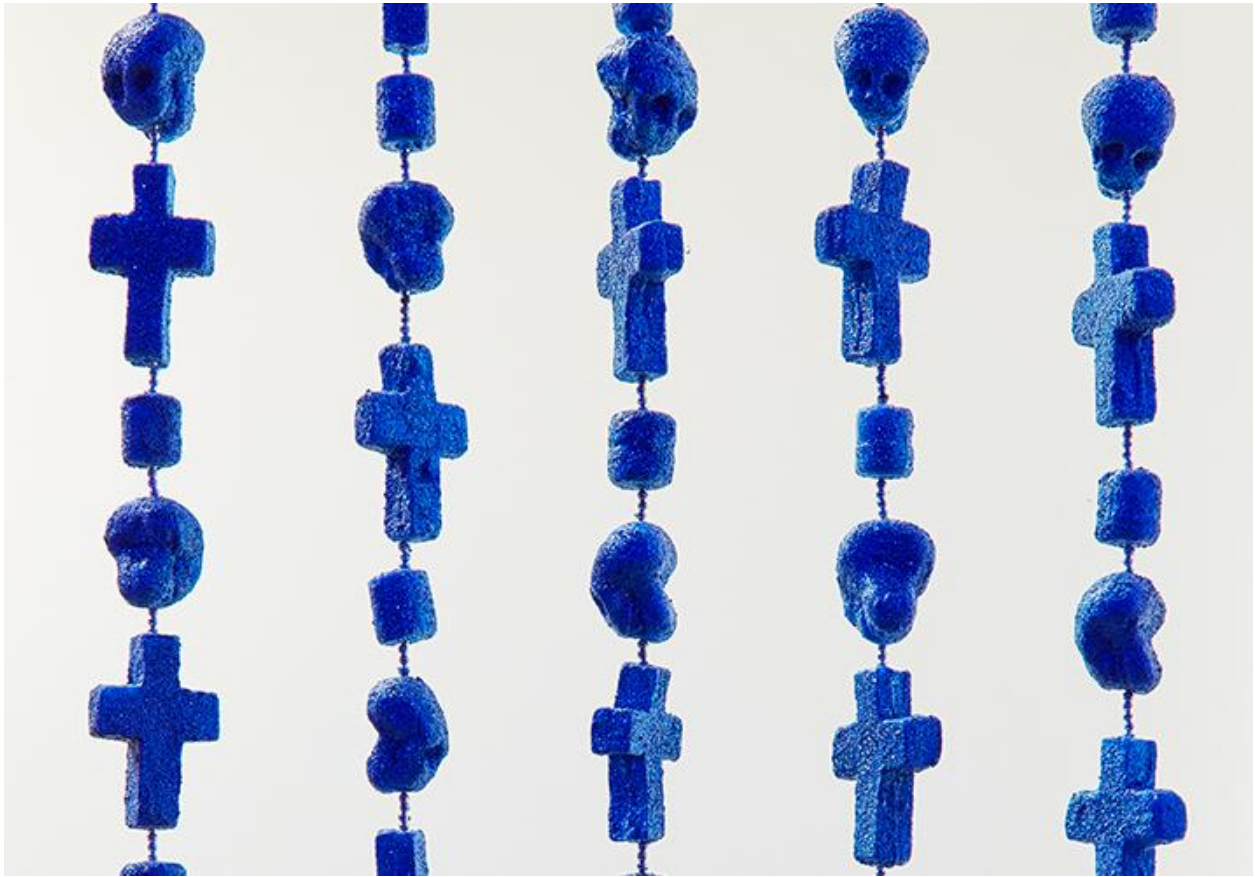
BLUE POWER, 2019 – 2021

BLUE POWER comprises a number of elements including a large-scale installation made up of 80 wooden crosses that hold 480 bars of blue carboloc soap and 12,000 hand-folded origami boats. Overlooking the crosses and sea of boats is *Blue Devil*, a framed work on panel created with a beeswax surface which was perforated with holes, with crown reekitts and ultramarine blue pigment worked into the surface.

Blue Power and Mega Blue carboloc soap, plasterers laths, paper, plywood, bleached beeswax and studio safe solvent

Variable installation

BLUE POWER, presented in the main gallery space, is a large-scale installation. The work references the folklore, superstition and syncretic religious practices invoked in the Caribbean for the purposes of protection against 'evil', such as the islands' growing murder rates, which are underpinned by the sustained inequalities in Caribbean societies. Eighty wooden crosses are displayed in the midst of twelve thousand origami boats, each one individually made and hand-folded by the artist and her assistants, and installed by local young people. The boats not only reference displacement and migration but also the thousands of enforced voyages of the transatlantic slave trade. Each cross is filled with bars of carboloc soap, the work's namesake, traditionally used to clean clothes as well as being hung over doors to rid people and places of bad spirits. Memorial-like and monumental in its installation, the work references the lost lives of young Caribbean men, to the drug trade in particular. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement and COVID-19, *BLUE POWER* takes on new layers of meaning.



Leave Yuh Bad Vibes Outside!, 2019-2021

Soap, blue pigment, cosmetic glitter, clear nail polish, bead along wire, silver spacers, blue beads, silver hooks, crystal clear gloss

Variable installation (16 strings each measuring: 177cm)

McLean's, *Leave Yuh Bad Vibes Outside!* which hangs in the entrance to the main gallery space at Block 336, references the symbolic use of carbolic soap in the Caribbean. The soap is traditionally used to wash white laundry but its cleansing properties are sometimes invoked and it is hung in bars above doorways in order to protect the home and its inhabitants from bad omens and unwanted spirits. For *Leave Yuh Bad Vibes Outside!*, McLean created moulds and cast individual beads in soap to create a beaded curtain. In *BLUE POWER*, visitors pass through the curtain, experiencing its supposed purifying qualities.



Blue Devil, 2021 (Included in BLUE POWER - not sold separately)

Plywood, bleached beeswax, studio safe solvent, reckitts crown blue, sunshine ultramarine blue, 22 carat gold leaf

114 x 112 x 8 cm

The Blue Devil captured in this work represents the devil character that emerges in the early morning at the start of the Trinidad carnival referred to as J'Ouvert. They capture the spirit and movement of these characters, as well as embracing the texture and layers of these iconic figures. 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. The Blue Devil is one of the oldest forms of masquerade and originates from the sugar plantation when the slaves used molasses, a by-product of sugar cane, as a way to disguise themselves and play a cheap mask.