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Shannon Lewis

Not Only Over Seas but Soil

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the sea, sand, & soil

by leaf jerlefa

Shannon Lewis' *Not Only Over Seas but Soil* (2022) features more than thirty collaged tableaus printed on silk chiffon. Suspended on horizontal white cords, the works are of varying lengths and depict arrangements exploring migration and layered histories. Across the works, a faceless, bronze figure poses and plays, surrounded by various decadent imagery from marble and gold to cocktails and Christian Louboutins. Using a visual language that is familiar to an audience over-saturated by media, Lewis offers us assemblages of high-fashion, social media and shifting portraits to construct narratives. Gleaming bodies reminiscent of magazine covers, and vignettes like designer

advertisements, these elements are familiar yet foreign. As the viewer attempts to read the images, they find a narrative that is chaotic, comforting and nostalgic.

Diamonds and Dolce & Gabbana, elements we culturally identify as markers of wealth decorate the compositions. Alongside them, we find images that evoke water, from fossettes to drinking glasses to rudder pintles. Water imagery is used to symbolize migration and transience, illuminating the subject's diasporic voyage from one context to another. Yet, each symbol rewrites itself taking new meaning in different compositions. Cocktail glasses embody coming-of-age, freedom and religion, the notion of being love drunk and in the spirit juxtaposed by ideas of gospel and being moved by the Spirit. The water imagery is both baptismal and transformative. While the artist claims the role as narrator, the viewer is invited to navigate these layers physically and metaphorically as they forge their own pathways for exploration.

Performed on a sumptuous fabric, the figure transforms before the viewer, mapping itself within the space. Architecture and landscapes set the scene by crafting luxury interiors in which Lewis' characters shape-shift and adapt in order to fit. Lewis' compositions are like code-switching for the body, and only certain limbs find a place in the frame. The fashioned figure becomes a metaphor for mimicry. Clumsily navigating a space and finding that certain movements are no longer permitted, certain gestures have become exaggerated and profane. The body must navigate new rules in new locations, adjust— though never adjusting fully. Our bodies twisted, our tongues tied, how must our muscles contort in order to fit?

the body becomes a map

our bones

the road, the soil, the sea, the stories

lost and uncovered

our muscles

our journeys, our joy, our migrant dreams

naive and optimistic

how much can the body hold?

We suffer for fashion to walk in heels that are uncomfortable and do not fit; we adorn—sometimes painfully—piercing ears, curling lashes; we spend a fortune on status and prestige in order to project images of wealth and success: this is the labour of luxury. British-Australian scholar Sara Ahmed writes, “Bodily transformations may also transform what is experienced as delightful. If our bodies change over time, then the world around us will create different impressions.” As our cultures evolve so too do our bodies, we acclimate to new geographies, relationships and routines.

In viewing Lewis’ compositions, we begin to contemplate culture, luxury and labour. How do we connect to our layered histories? How do we recall the past? In one attempt, we co-opt gestures and practices that our ancestors once viewed as chores, and renew them as tradition, evocations of a simpler time, routines that remind us of the journeys before us. Suddenly, hanging your clothes out to dry and baking bread become elements of luxury. You’ve managed to escape or resist a culture of rise and grind to slow

down, nestle into nature and enjoy the fruits of life. This stillness is a privilege in a capitalist society obsessed with productivity. As the body navigates the labour of luxury and the luxury of labour it finds itself in murky, chaotic waters.

The promise of happiness embedded in the narrative of migration is contested by the reminder that transience is not always a state of privilege, and the realization that to go also means to leave. These are porous boundaries.

Without a doubt, navigating a space for the first time is a sensory experience. Lewis' installation calls to our senses using shadow-play, sound and tactility. Printed on several of the works are the shadows of vegetation, farmhouses and rot iron gates from the Woodbrook district in Trinidad & Tobago. Layering foreign shadows into the composition tricks the viewer's eyes, prompting them to look again. The eyes then become unreliable narrators, thus tempting the viewer to explore the works using other senses.

Sheets of white silk chiffon hung on a clothesline remind us of childhood and laundry. Washing, and drying and washing again, every wash leaving a trace of the last wear. *Not Only Over Seas but Soil (2022)* maps our journey through chaos. As you read through the works, each tableau becomes a trace of the last. The narrative evolves, multidirectional and unfinished.

*your body breathes,
past, present and future
how it navigates
with unbridled confidence
hesitant, still deciphering the
memories
messages
written in muscle
what the mind forgets, the body remembers
the sea, the sand, the soil
have salted your skin*

- leaf jerlefa

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." *The Affect Theory Reader*. 2010. 29-53.