

PHOEBE COLLINGS-JAMES

The Amount of Love You Have to Give is More Than I Can Stand

November 17, 2018 - January 26, 2019

GINERVA GAMBINO is pleased to present Phoebe Collings-James' first solo show in Cologne, titled "The Amount of Love You Have to Give is More Than I Can Stand." The exhibition takes three large, vitrine-like wall works, as architectural parenthesis for a new body of drawings (colored pencil on yellow tissue paper, various dimensions, all 2018). The two series juxtapose the global and the personal: Images symbolic of trade – the trade of goods as well as the trade of people as bodies – and mystical symbols out of dreams or the ancestors' tales. The title of the exhibition acts as reflection on the intimacy within the histories the artist references, as well as the intimacy within the materials used in these works.

In 2016, Phoebe Collings-James (*1987 in London, UK) was part of a two-person exhibition with Jesse Darling at Company Gallery in New York. The show was titled "Atrophilia," a word the artists invented. "*Atrḗ'filēa*: conveys a "desire for collapse or stasis," the press release stated. Or, as Laura McLean-Ferris added in her review for Artforum, "a fall into rest or hibernation, then, rather than anarchy [1]." The exhibition engaged, the press release continued, "comparative mythologies and theologies as a way to imagine both a counter history and an alternative to accelerationist narratives of technology and progress." One such alternative to accelerationist narratives of technology and progress was the "Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution" by novelist Ursula K. Le Guin, who, in her text, proposes that the first device human beings developed was likely "[a] leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a box a container. A holder. A recipient [2]." – An object to carry in what was gathered (oats), rather than an object with which to kill (mammoth).

Phoebe Collings-James showed three wall works: "Sentient sac [sentimental sac]", "Draw Back Your Bow" and "Bodied" are deep frames, two in the shape of a cross, the other a square, of an average size of 60 x 60 x 8 inches (150 x 150 x 20 cm). Their color is Pantone 485 C, the exact color of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent Societies. Their depth appears to be the same as said organization's shallowest vessels for transporting dead bodies. Displayed in the frames and secured with artist tape are polypropylene woven sacks: Remnants of food bags and ubiquitous PP transit sacking, made to bundle and transport accurately weighed quantities of goods, like fruits, vegetables or grains. "Detritus of the colonial project," as the artist refers to them, relating to the trading of people, their produce and capitalism. Displayed behind plexiglas, these objects are publicly exposed and yet protected against external influences. A resemblance with sacred relics or vanitas still lifes

comes to mind. Here, as well as in most of Collings-James' work, violence and beauty coincide. As do feelings of familiarity and distance. This cacophony relates to her exploration of identity. Her personal (being a queer, British-Jamaican woman) and the historical – the present day and the ancestral.

This ambivalence of the present and the ancestral recurs in Collings-James' drawings for this exhibition. These works are colored pencil on yellow tissue paper. Tissue paper has minimum thickness and low opacity and is often used as wrapping material for objects that have sensitive surfaces or are fragile. Yet here in the gallery, most of these works are unframed. Crudely stitched together and affixed to the gallery walls with red artist tape, they are exposed to their own fragility. Collings-James drew on both sides of the paper, which leads to images from the one side shining through to the other, mirrored or even upside down, also leaving unanswered which side is which. The transparency of the paper and shining-through of the various motives, coming from all sides at once, appears as a pattern in flux – a sort of gathering or becoming. Her long, narrow paper sheets show crows, spiders, snakes, ropes with different kinds of knots, eyes, a face, rain – or is it hair? Like hieroglyphs, these symbols are, for the most part, identifiable as what they depict: crows, spiders, snakes, ropes... Their symbolic meaning and the meaning of their squeals on each sheet might not. Édouard Glissant's definition of 'opacity' and 'transparency' [3] might apply here, as Collings-James' coexistence and convergence of various symbols of undisclosed heritage forms into a pattern of equally variable meanings, instead of at transparency – e.g. the reduction of a single meaning per symbol.

Phoebe Collings-James (*1987 in London, United Kingdom) lives and works in New York and London. Her work has been shown at the following galleries and institutions: Arcadia Missa, London (2018); 315 Gallery, New York (2017); Studio Museum Harlem, New York (2017); Norton Museum of Art, Miami (2016); Italian Cultural Institute & ARTUNER, London (2015); Mother's Tankstation, Miami (2015); Cookie Butcher, Antwerp (2014) et. al. Recent residencies and performances include: Sound as Weapon, „Sounds 4 Survival," performance and residency Wysing Arts Center, Cambridge and „Give Me A Minute," performance at Palais de Tokyo, Paris.

[1] Laura McLean-Ferris, "Phoebe Collings-James and Jesse Darling," Artforum, vol. 55, no. 6, p. 220, Feb. 2017.

[2] “Before – once you think about it, surely long before – the weapon, a late, luxurious, superfluous tool; long before the useful knife and ax; right along with the indispensable whacker, grinder, and digger – for what’s the use of digging up a lot of potatoes if you have nothing to lug ones you can’t eat home in – with or before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home. [...] [This theory] grounds me, personally, in human culture in a way I never felt grounded before. So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing, I never thought that I had, or wanted, any particular share in it. [...] If it is a human thing to do to put something you want, because it’s useful, edible, or beautiful, into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you, and then take it home with you, home being another, larger kind of pouch or bag, a container for people, and then later on you take it out and eat it or share it or store it up for winter in a solid container or put it in the medicine bundle or the shrine or the museum, the holy place, the area that contains what is sacred, [...] then I am a human being after all.” Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, Cheryll Glotfelty/Harold Fromm (Eds.), Athens/London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996, p. 151f. Le Guin’s essay is a response to feminist Elizabeth Fisher’s “The Carrier Bag Theory” of human evolution covered in *Women’s Creation*, McGraw-Hill, 1975.

[3] “If we examine the process of ‘understanding’ people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought we discover that its basis is this requirement for transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale of providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments, I have to reduce. [...] Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. [...] To be opaque is not to be obscure, though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence.” Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity” in *Poetics of Relation*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 189-191.