

176 PORTRAIT PHOEBE COLLINGS-JAMES

TEXT BY
RINDON JOHNSON

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Collings-James works along the vast planes that separate the forms of geological time manifest in her ceramics and the fleeting fugitive pace of her performances. With these two poles as anchors she proceeds in a long stretch of possibility creating objects, paintings, videos and live works which simultaneously offer, refuse, cultivate and spoil; she leaves a lot in the hands of her viewers, she sends us elsewhere only to find that we remain somehow near our origin. Through a myriad of mediums she allows fixed forms of representation and power to fold in on themselves. For Collings-James boundaries offer a falsely porous membrane, seemingly still pliable but actually impenetrable, and in this virtual space she constructs the possibility of another form of opening, one that floats like gauze through the viewer's mind, Glissant's opacity made manifest.

This gauze of opacity shrouds Collings-James's collaborative live work with Last Yearz Interesting Negro (Jamila Johnson-Small), *Sounds 4 Survival*. The two say of the collaboration, "[I]f life grows between the cracks of this current flesh." Premiering in 2018 at the Wysing Polyphonic Festival, *Sounds 4 Survival* is performance as anti-assimilation. Inbuilt to their initial desire of seeking refuge, the artists begin to undo the environment from which they flee, in that they are constructing a space for black people to heal, reorienting themselves through actions, performance, workshops, readings, healing sessions, otherwise; they make space to engage with bodies through intimate, contemplative, movements and acts. The questions that the artists tease out are filled with care and in that movement towards the calm elsewhere many limits are touched, embodied and relocated. How do we destabilize the system while still existing and desiring within it? How do we heal the wounds on the bodies of our ancestors, especially those that we cannot name?

The works that Collings-James presents on her own all seem to be thinking of the body, but not what it looks like, rather the other way that the body is familiar—catching a chill on your neck or the sun shining only on your bare shoulder—the impossible insides of being alive. As though she is throwing out the entire emotion, not an effigy or a proposition.

Her sculptural interest isn't figuring the body as much as it is figuring within the body. Or looking from within the tongue instead of upon it. To be the sinewy muscle pushing aside the hand which might attempt to enter, forming letters, somersaulting, demanding and determining a definitive uncertainty, free from anybody because the tongue is its own body. This very muscle is rendered in its full unruly shine in 2014 glazed ceramic, *Creep*, part of her exhibition *Choke on Your Tongue* at the Italian Cultural Institute. *Creep's* baby-red-orange tongue protrudes from a soft pink encasing, parabola shaped, flattening out as it moves downward. Somehow heavy and animate, *Creep's* tongue is mid sentence. Parabola sides dotted with some sort of sickened chartreuse, collecting light to form mirrors; viewing *Creep* from the side you might see the outline of a body falling forward either in anguish or the preparation of some quasi-familiar ecstasy. She'll do this again, in more sculptures playing with questions of dominance, hierarchy and in particular setting up a line of inquiry around voids. Who makes an opening, with what tools and languages? How does restraint map itself onto the body (for whom and why)? From what orifices are secreted those things that fracture our being and who was it that did the fracturing?

As Collings-James continues her long relationship with ceramics, she also maintains within her forms and color an urgent sense of transformation, a sense that manifests itself in both the "finished" works and in her process. She reminds me again on the phone that her ceramics "still pop when they come out of the kiln." Somehow they're still breathing themselves into being. Her sculptures in their finished state begin a dialogue with beings whose sense of time and space do not so readily match with our own—beings like rocks and mountains, quarries and beaches. In *And Know That Any Softness Is Strategic* (2018), Collings-James places four glazed ceramics on two white corner shelves, one above the other; on the higher shelf she revisits a familiar shape, the balanced cross or the four seasons or the peaceful cross or the four winds. Time and language are pushed in and out of their ideal form into something more. On the lower

shelf of *And Know That Any Softness Is Strategic* there are three gobstoppers, closed orbs, evidence of Collings-James going against the desires of the wheel upon which these works were rendered. The wheel would prefer to make a bowl, Collings-James would prefer something internal, closed, or closing, altogether slippery and multifaceted.

Over the phone, Collings-James says to me: "What does it look like to take control of precarity?" What does it mean either by nature of being black, or being poor or being something which is seemingly "unstable" and to then attempt to harness it as something that will never really bend to a harness. Precarity struggles to be held in the hand or mind, it moves through the body. Its subjects and dominion are in a state of errant destruction, a round object balancing on another round object or the long tremors of bodies past that dwell within us all.

Collings-James mends this sentiment to her film *Mother Tongue, Mother Master* (2018). Filmed from her shoulders up, the artist wears identical little bells tied to the red plastic of a bag to hold some sort of citrus. The bag lightly pushes her face inward, her neck balancing, she shakes her head and it becomes clear that there is a parallax between the soundtrack and her movements, yet somehow they feel completely connected. As she moves her head back and forth, forward and backward, moving the bells swinging in unsealed unison, it becomes hard to tell if she is drowning out the soundtrack or if it is drowning out her. She continues to let the bells move freely, opening and closing her mouth, feeling the weight of the bells and then suddenly, as the soundtrack wanes so too does Collings-James, until she takes off the instrument.

Whales communicate and find their way through the sea via echolocation. They send out a sound and it comes back to them, moving through a large mass in their heads. We know now that actually they possess a spare scent which is a form of emotional mapping. The sound that they send outward to receive or the sounds that they hear arrive in their bodies as a complete emotion: no translation. If someone calls your name you can feel the calling in toes, thighs, fingers and nose. They might say, "I call you, be in relation to me."







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Anna Wood: Things Learned At: Wysing Festival, The Quietus, September 4, 2018:web.

Things Learned At: Wysing Festival

In the countryside a few miles west of Cambridge, Wysing Arts Centre throws an annual one-day festival for a few hundred people. This year's is curated by Moor Mother, Paul Purgas and Donna Lynas, who have invited a network of musicians, dancers and visual artists to focus their emotional, political, spiritual and mystical powers. It is unlike (and better than) most other festivals, a rich little haven in bucolic England.

Dance like everyone's watching

Early on in the main room, Jamila Johnson-Small and Phoebe Collings-James lead a performance where five women (the others are Yasmine Akim, Onyeka Igwe and Katarzyna Perlak) dance in the centre of the main room at Wysing, in the dark, with disco lights and dry ice, and each holding an earthenware pod (made by Collings-James) the whole time, like a talisman or a bit of baggage. Over a tailor-made soundtrack that includes snippets of pop and soul and reggae, with snooker-ball noises and their own occasional yelps and calls, the five move fast and slow, together and apart. The audience stands around the edges of the hot, dark room; sometimes we feel like blokes watching girls dance in a club, sometimes it's like watching neutrons move around in an atom, or wriggling kittens nestled together, playing and tumbling. The performance is full of stories, little chapters of comfort, strength, being sexy, being playful, solidarity, solitude, being watched; there's a lot going on when you're a woman and some friends, moving in the world.

Wysing Polyphonic review - explosions in the sonic inventing shed

Wysing Arts Centre, Cambridgeshire Moor Mother and Paul Purgas curate an inspirational gathering where electronic artists, dancers and poets freely test the boundaries of expression

Ben Beaumont-Thomas

Sun 2 Sep 2018 12.50 BST

Noises of spoons!" I'm in an octagonal wooden structure that's half Grand Designs man-shed, half denouement to a slasher movie, in a field in the Cambridgeshire countryside. Elaine Mitchener is kicking things off at Wysing Polyphonic, delivering scat poetry that's as light, intricate and unmappable as rain falling on a roof. Alongside her is Neil Charles, tapping his double bass's body like a faith healer, a tambourine tucked in its neck. Mitchener's spoon mantra dissolves into stutters. She clicks shells and stones in her hands, as the bass fumbles and shuffles - the pair are trying to put something or other back in one piece.

This is one of the most valuable music festivals in the country - one that refuses, inspirationally, to put anything neatly together. Curated this year by avant-gardists Camae Ayewa (AKA Moor Mother) and Paul Purgas, it's a loose study of corporeality and groove.

One of the highlights comes early on from a group led by Last Yearz Interesting Negro (AKA artist-dancer Jamila Johnson-Small) and Phoebe Collings-James. Their contemporary dance performance may not be virtuosically athletic, but it is a universe of feeling. Five women, clutching odd egg-like totems, shuck and jive, a coven of witch-dancers. As the soundtrack builds - a study of club culture through reggae, house and R&B - a centrifugal force ties them together. Are they drawn by female solidarity, dance history, or dream logic? As Marvin Gaye's I Want You glitches around them, erotic and stumbling, they fall apart. This is a magical ensemble that deserves a bigger stage.

Ilaria Puri Purini: Phoebe Collings-James: Relative Strength at Arcadia Missa, Contemporary Art Society, May 18, 2018: web.

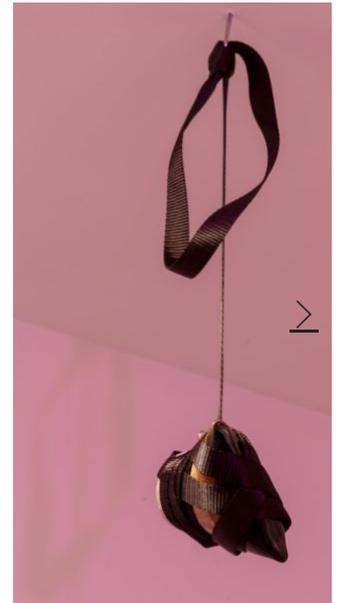
Phoebe Collings-James: Relative Strength at Arcadia Missa

18 MAY 2018 BY [ILARIA PURI PURINI \(HTTP://WWW.CONTEMPORARYARTSOCIETY.ORG/AUTHOR/ILARIA-PURI-PURINI/\)](http://www.contemporaryartsociety.org/author/ilaria-puri-purini/)

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Phoebe Collings-James, *Don't Knock Twice, I Will Eat You*, 2018. Installation view at Relative Strength, Arcadia Missa, London. Courtesy the Artist and Arcadia Missa. Photo: Tim Bowditch



Phoebe Collings-James, *Slew*, 2018. Installation view at Relative Strength, Arcadia Missa. Photo: Tim Bowditch

Pots filled with water, jugs with earth, cactuses coming out of containers, crosses and rounded shaped forms fill the room of Arcadia Missa's new space in central London. These small scale ceramics are the works of Phoebe Collings-James, an artist who encountered clay in 2014 while at NUOVE/Residency, a Ceramic Residency in Northern Italy, and developed this interest while at the Wysing Arts Centre in 2018. The artefacts displayed demonstrate a mastering of the skill of working clay and all its different stages, resulting in gloss glazed forms. It is a material that undergoes a specific process, one that deals with uncertainty, failures and trials.

The objects are displayed across the room, along the walls, hanging from the ceiling and placed directly on the floor; referencing the sphere of domesticity. The video sound piece *Mother Tongue* inserts the presence of the artist, her head moving swiftly with a net over face to which some bells have been stitched – referencing to the language we speak and the place we come from; an important question for this British-Jamaican artist.

The reference to the domestic interior is the first element of this show. Ceramics can be seen as middle class activity in Britain, with the proliferation of pottery classes across the country and the many ceramics pieces present in the English home. The focus on the small scale of these objects asks for a particular intimacy with them and the dramatic lightning of the show accentuates their metaphor and interpretation.

Nina Edge, an artist emerged in the late 1980s and whose practice has included ceramics, textiles, batik, sculpture, installation and performance is an important reference for Collings-James. Through clay Collings-James connects with what is

made by man; antithetical to the computer age era, where things are either digitally made or delegated. She enjoys the very direct experience with clay and understands her pieces as "live and active gut cultures or subaltern spirit guides or the detritus of devotional memorabilia."

Instilling life into artefacts, Phoebe Collings-James subverts the traditional functionality of pots and vessels and gives to these artefacts a magical dimension. These become linked with rituals of everyday life, reflecting upon the borders of personal rites and ceremonies – where the interior is in itself a container of occult activities.

Another important element of the show is the understanding of pottery production globally that plays a crucial role in defining identity in other parts of the world. Amongst this broader dimension of clay as material culture, there is a running thread between ceramics and the symbolism of soil. The title of the show – *Relative Strength* – is taken from a passage by Martinican Marxist philosopher and revolutionist Franz Fanon. In his book *Wretched of the Earth* from 1961, Fanon writes "colonisation and decolonisation is simply a question of relative strength", to contextualise and understand violence as a necessary mean for activists in conducting decolonisation.

Throughout the installation of the ceramics, Collings-James also refers to the struggle of decolonisation, its history and its impact. The strongest visual metaphor of this tension is perhaps the series of ratchet straps that hang heavily from the ceiling and to which fragile ceramic pieces are attached, creating a tension on what is actually being held. The fragility of clay is relative, and it could be that the strength relations we take for granted have other strengths and stabilities, subverting the order of things. Could it not be that the delicate ceramic holds the straps and the overall composition? Strength and weaknesses are subverted in Phoebe Collings-James powerful display.

Dr. Ilaria Puri Purini
Curator of Programmes

Arcadia Missa, 14-16 Brewer St, Soho, London W1F 0SG. Open Wednesday – Saturday, 12.00 – 18.00. Exhibition continues until 31 May 2018. arcadiamissa.com (<http://arcadiamissa.com/relative-strength/>)

Artist Biography

Phoebe Collings-James is a Jamaican British artist, born in London and living in New York. Her works take form in drawing, video, sculpture, text and music, with distinctly corporeal approach. She burdens ubiquitous materials with a process of symbolic layering, all in order to explore emotional connections to the politics and erotics of violence, language and fear. Recent exhibitions include *Relative Strength*, Arcadia Missa; *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Ginevra Gambino; *Harlem Postcards*, Studio Museum Harlem; *ATROPHILIA*, Company Gallery; *Just Enough Violence*, Arcadia Missa; and *Blood on the Leaves Blood on the Roots*, Preteen Gallery, Mexico City. In 2017, she was a Sculpture Centre featured artist and created an original soundtrack for two performance works by long time collaborator Jamila Johnson-Small, which toured Europe with locations including ICA, London and MAC, Birmingham. In 2018, she was artist-in-residence at Wysing Art Centre, Cambridge and presented the performance, *Just Give Me A Minute*, at Palais de Tokyo in Paris.

Phoebe Collings-James on Strength, Shame and Precarity

The Brooklyn-based artist talks us through her anti-assimilationist practice, as a new exhibition opens in London's Arcadia Missa

MAY 04, 2018

TEXT Maria Howard

Originally from London and now living in Brooklyn, **Phoebe Collings-James** is a British-Jamaican artist who describes her practice as "intentionally messy and sprawling". Deftly moving between drawing, video, sculpture, text and sound, she questions the relations between subject and object in a process of "symbolic layering" which aims to explore post-colonial anxieties and the problems posed by traditional Western neutrality and aid to the brass bells associated with shame and warning. As part of what she terms an "anti-assimilationist practice" she aims to give her objects - fragile, beautiful things, informed by centuries of craft - agency, removing them from the plinth and allowing them to disrupt the space they inhabit.

On madness...

"I'm interested in things being on the brink of something. I've been working with these ceramic objects that are mostly orb or bowl-type shapes and [in the show] some of them will be resting somewhat precariously full of water, while the crosses will be suspended by straps. They're in a balance, but it's precarious, especially when they have water in them. I think a lot about this feeling of vertigo, and being on the brink, and that's something that relates to being black, being paranoid, and feeling conscious of being close to madness and losing control - and wanting to lose control also. But also wanting to be held."

On the crosses in her work...

"I've been thinking about the cross a lot in terms of devotional objects and... how we feel in relation to them being sites for emotion. There are certain things that are allowed exclusively in that space that might not be allowed in other areas. I'm interrogating this shape of the even-sided cross and the Geneva Convention and the things that evokes for me - the confusion of the ethics of war."

On using ceramics...

"In terms of the aesthetic of the sculptures, my aim was to make them look and feel extremely beautiful, and to play with the thing that is most desirable about them - which is actually not really what's going on as a theme in ceramics at the moment, even though it's having a resurgence. I think people are definitely trying to use garish colours, and make things look quite shit on purpose. And so I think my reason for wanting to use what could either seem like rip offs of Japanese or [Bernard] Leach kinds of techniques, is that those techniques are based in care and skill and an obvious connection to the materials."

On the object and the gaze...

“Something that Jamila [Johnson-Small] and I have been talking about is what does an anti-assimilationist practice look like, what does anti-assimilationist work look, or feel, or sound like? I think that somehow ties in to not just thinking about the objects as only having an objecthood that is relational to representation and a gaze. I’ve also been thinking about that kind of mode of regarding the object as being a very Western thing, and how that isn’t the way that objects are considered in all places. For example, in Africa... there is a history of regarding objects and art objects as having a subjecthood and having a life.”



Installation View Artwork by Phoebe Collings-James, Photography by Tom Bowditch. Courtesy the artist and Arcadia Missa

Masha Calloway: On Phoebe Collings-James, UBIKWIST Magazine, February 2018:60-67.

OTHER THAN ANOTHER

Phoebe Collings-James by Masha Calloway
Photograph Brad Ogbonna

Thinker, tinkerer, womanist. The multidisciplinary artist, Phoebe Collings-James carries the surnames of both her parents, a Jamaican man and a British woman. Her artifacts are about vessels and voyages, the body, identity, and oppression, how folks come together and are parted. She is part of a lineage of Black artists communicating their experiences in a world dominated by White structure. She is also a model and an insomniac with a sweet tooth.

One of her influences, Ursula Le Guin, said of being called a science fiction writer, "Don't shove me into your damn pigeonhole, where I don't fit, because I'm all over. My tentacles are coming out of the pigeonhole in all directions." (the Paris Review)

In conversation, what comes across is a kind of 24-hour vigilance - an openness to be spoken to by the world, a sense that rather than having control over her concepts, Phoebe Collings-James allows them to reach out, metamorphosize, have a life of their own. Phoebe's ideas constantly accompany her - to the market, on the subway, in conversation, and during intimate moments with friends and lovers.

Books and corners are places ripe for encountering possibility and breakthroughs. Discarded items on the street become remnants of shipwrecks - warnings that you, too, can be cast aside, broken. Remnants hold a history, a spirit. Carried in PC-J's hands they become talismans, holding what was for what could be.

The sensual, tactile aspects of artmaking resonate with this artist: plaster, clay, paint, and wood. Voices as well as detritus represent how we live, survive, decay, or die. Phoebe has an interest in the morbid and in the mythological, especially those creatures which are composed of different body parts. They represent the extraordinary and illusion. They eat people and spit them out from all four of their heads.

"Most of it is instinctual," she says. "Creativity is a way of expressing myself and also a way of processing the world, a way of gaining greater understanding of the world and of myself. There's a material world, a spiritual world, and my own kind of inner world."

"I think about the act of noticing and contemplating our surroundings. Objects and what we are surrounded by daily have life, have an eloquence to them. I think about what it means to highlight those moments and sort of interrogate them a little further and push them further. There are layers of reference that don't fully connect, but they're there. It's like the idea of something making sense or working; there's a layer of gibberish to it. Gibberish and maybe even nonsense."



Does she think that the idea of making sense, that one imposes, that it has to have some kind of structure?

“Yeah, I think so. I think, especially as a Black artist, Black writer, thinker... I guess sometimes it feels that being messy is all we’ve got because we can’t... The structures are there, and we can try to break them down. We can try to break them down within our own community, but the overarching structures will not be broken down until they are either completely smashed down – which would require an almost unthinkable uprising and death – or we have completely given ourselves over to revolution. By saying we’re not going to sit here idly, we’re gonna tear the walls down, and we’re gonna take our lives back. In lieu of that, there is us being messy. Us saying, ‘Ok, well, this is what’s going on. These are the structures we live under.’ We’re gonna try and both kind of conceptualize ourselves out of some of the mental oppression that are weighted on us and also, at the same time, be creative.”

Young Phoebe “noticed and was interested in other cultures, even as a kid. These other places that we were all from but so few of us ever went to.” Her exploration of identity is as historical as it is personal. A feeling of distance and disembodiment throughout her work relates to the present day and the ancestral.

Collings-James’ scenarios offer the audience an opportunity to devise and answer questions on their own. She doesn’t provide answers; she provides a platform for discourse. An installation is concrete yet ephemeral due to her use of sound and found objects (particularly the trappings of cargo and commerce). It’s a navigation between object and subject, an immersion, a form of collaboration. There is a relationship. Sound brings unification across borders, across time. Migration and its paraphernalia are our heritage. We are the ancestors of others.

Expensive Shit/ Primordial Soup (315 Gallery in NYC, 2017): Blowing mylar curtains, speakers rigged up by cargo straps to plywood boxes emitting music, conversation.

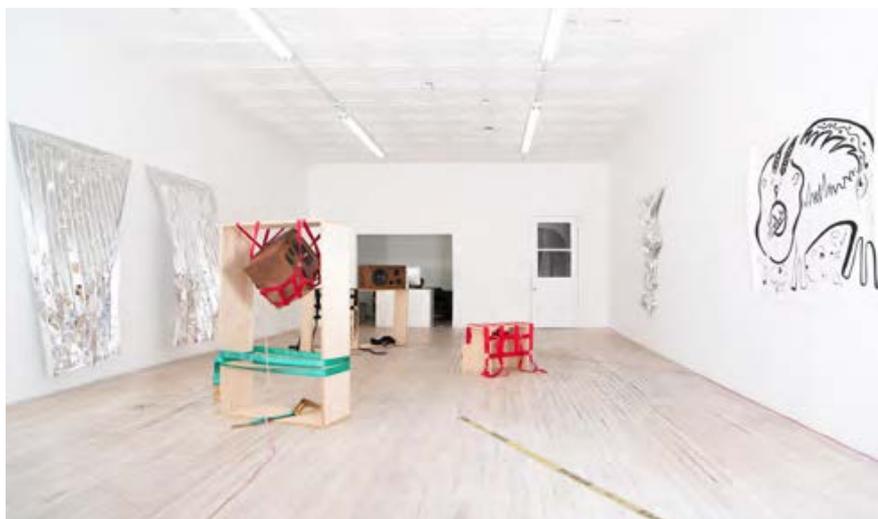
“I was at work thinking about roots and home and diaspora... and sort of like what we learn ancestrally. It was important to have elders speaking. Also, the way both of them speak – my White grandmother is from East London and has a very, very thick Cockney accent. There was my great aunt who was recorded in Jamaica. Still, after 50 years of living in the UK, she has this really thick Jamaican accent. I was just interested in both how similar Cockney is to a Jamaican accent in the melody of it, the way language is used, and the way this expressive kind of what could sound a bit rough and brash was also very beautiful to me... knowing that through me and my siblings both of those accents somewhat are gonna be lost. We’ve got just generic London accents, not quite one of anything.”

“I was interested in capturing their voices. Also, I was interested in gossip and the storytelling that happens among women and among generations of women. Most of the conversations were recorded when we were sitting around. One was in one of my

other aunt’s houses near Kingston, Jamaica, that was in the sun. You can kind of hear the fan on in the background and the other one (recording) was in the sitting room in my grandmother’s house. Neither of them knew that I was recording. It was just something I wanted to capture, to add to the layers that happened in that sound work.”

“There is witnessing, but there is also being actively a participant. I left my voice in a tiny little bit – asking questions. I don’t want to remove myself from being part of that. It felt like holding hands or something to leave that in, to be present. It’s almost like witnessing them and also like witnessing us together... looking at myself, looking at us together.”

EXPENSIVE SHIT - PRIMORDIAL SOUP, 2017



“I often think about sensory overload and how to engage the different parts of the senses, to think about the corporeal and have you speak about my body... and what it is to have a body in this world and to have this very fragile connection with it. I like there to be some tension and to speak historically to the position of the Black body as often a spectacle.”

The **Ivory Black** and **Tar Baby#** paintings were made by Phoebe’s feet, covered in ivory black oil paint, dancing about on linen. As an undocumented endeavor, she offers “the traces of that solitary performance for the viewer, for the audience to then explore for themselves, being able to get the rhythm from the marks that I’ve made.”

“**Murder by Chocolate**” is almost a full 20 minutes of reading dessert menus collected from all over New York (available on Soundcloud). The immigrant voices partner beautifully. From Belize, Mario’s silky smooth tone plus Phoebe’s British accent recite a description of desserts and their prices. There is some stumbling over unfamiliar words. It’s hypnotic and tantalizing. Desire and fascination transforms into ridiculousness and disgust. Before the end comes, you want to vomit from the “ooey goeey” poem of gluttony.



SENTIENT SAC, 2016

Choke On Your Tongue (Nuove ceramic residency, founded by curator Geraldine Blais in Bassano del Grappa, Italy. Works are exhibited here at the site of the residency in Italy and the Italian Institute, London) Parked on flat surfaces, these ceramic pieces of elegant lustrous color look like sea creatures or volcanoes – lonely, violent, still yet active. There are phalluses and pink eraser-hued tongues – amputated, discarded, or captive? Silent or screaming? An examination of the power of vocality – what do we gain or lose in speaking up or not?

ATROPHILIA ('atrə'filēə: desire for collapse or stasis) is a collaboration between Collings-James and artist Jesse Darling. It explores the historical importance of containers (boats and bags) to stimulate trade/exchange – the vessel carries the body (object), the body as vessel, the body during times of unrest. Using colors and shape which represent the Red Cross, it is the futility of humanitarian aid, the excesses of war, the impact of the Middle Passage taking humans/things from Africa to distant regions, the cost of global trade. Sacks are ripped open and hang as mementos – lost

onions, lost land, lost life. They reference hope or lost faith, in regards to what was left behind. (The concept draws from a conversation between James Baldwin and anthropologist Margaret Mead in "Rap on Race" and references Ursula Le Guin's essay regarding "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," 1986, a response to feminist Elizabeth Fisher's "The Carrier Bag Theory" of human evolution covered in *Women's Creation*, McGraw-Hill, 1975)

Calapso Chevalois: Another collaboration with Jesse Darling presents a photo of a 5-gallon bucket that contains a length of broken construction lumber wrapped haphazardly by "danger" tape and 9:25 minutes of sound: a musical heartbeat, shrieks, from jungle tempest to thunderstorm, a shipwreck, a parade? a building collapse? The dancehall beat, drip drop drip drop, an incantation, a spell? A body that is located elsewhere, at another time. Evidence that he/she exists as sound connects to this place where the art is installed... to bodies listening, walking now.

oKoKok (2013): These white plaster cones were born from the chemical reaction of powder and water which produces heat. First hung to dry upside down in clear plastic bags, when released, they became ghosts, their simple shape perfect for myth making. They might be bleached out bent thorns or the horns of rhinos, commodities for poachers who themselves are hunted by rangers. The cones also resemble capirotes that penitents wear hiding their sinner faces during Holy Week in Spain. Although these cones have a graceful fragility to them, they also remind one of hoods and hangings, the American Ku Klux Klan. Collings-James took into account the "ruin value" of monumental architecture, a theory held by Hitler's favorite architect, Albert Speer. As an extension of Nazi death cult philosophy, "ruin value" is the continuing beauty of structures as they naturally decay, commemorating the soulless power of the Third Reich long after its dead have been buried. "I have urges to smash them, kick in the holes or topple them over. The origin of this work was a material desire for the plaster to fall, catching the mix in motion, to freeze its cascading form."

People have different experiences of oppression and varying awareness of others' oppression. Through perception, oppression can be everywhere yet nowhere. The oppressed often adapt to and assimilate into the vertical structure of colonialism. "These are the hierarchies among Caribbean, West African, Pakistani, a Bangladeshi kid, having to behave in ways depending on the environment one was in... experiencing the weight of how little was expected of me. That, as a teenager, was quite prevalent for me and my friends. Anything that I did achieve was kind of good for a Black person. That kind of thing was definitely the lot of my school life. The main dangers were the more insipid kinds of oppression, the kind of top-down thing where it forces the violence to be happening between the people who were oppressed rather than from White people directly."

"I think I've always been interested in a kind of balance of the erotic/violence in my work and the personal experiences with family and episodes growing up that I've known and how they intertwine to make an essence of what it is to be alive... navigating those two things. Our sexuality and desires are the most potent elements of ourselves that we try to navigate, or not. What happens when you completely suppress those elements of yourself? What becomes of us then?"

"In the way that racism functions erotically, there's also like this deep hate for Black people. At the same time, there is a jealousy and admiration and sort of fetishization of Black beauty and Black ability." Phoebe is also aware of how questions of race affected her mother. "I guess, especially in situations where our Black and mixed race beauty was being fawned over, I was aware that she felt incredibly protective and uncomfortable in those moments, and it was never to the detriment of how beautiful she thought we were. She encouraged us to feel proud of every element of ourselves, and confident... She just wanted to make it clear that the superficial idea of what beauty is is not important."

PC-J explains that when she started modeling at age 13 or 14, skin color preferences were written out on casting sheets whereas discrimination is "happening more insidiously now." Although the modeling world seems to be embracing an expression of diversity, its system still favors pale skin.

Coined by civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, "intersectionality" is the study and recognition of where experiences according to class, race, sexual orientation, disability, and gender overlap within the social structure. Feminism is primarily discussed as a female/male concern; however, imbalance exists as an intersectional issue. Subjugation to White male supremacy in the form of social inequality, income disparity, sexual harassment/violence are even more pronounced for communities of color and many people outside of mainstream sexual orientation or gender identity. Alice Walker's term "womanist" is partially explained here as a Black feminist or feminist of color, as someone who loves women (sexually and nonsexually) and loves women's culture, who is a universalist committed to wholeness and survival for people entirely... loving herself, loving spirit and struggle. "A womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender." (extracted from Alice Walker's definition of a "womanist" from her book *In*

Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose, 1983.)

"Womanism is far closer to something that I hold close to me. I feel like feminism as a sort of term and ideology is something that's been increasingly kind of cut off for me, cut off for Black women, cut off from true intersectionality. I don't know if intersectional feminism is enough as a term - if it, in action, is strong enough. I don't know if it's living up to its meaning in reality. Especially, if White feminists are really willing to live by it rather than stick it on the end of a sentence."

"Also for me, most critique now has to include the fall of capitalism and colonialism. And if it doesn't, then I don't want to see women rise in the same structures where some are gonna be at the top and some are gonna be without anything - where the 1% is at the top, and everyone else is without anything. Unless there is a feminism that truly encompasses those ideals, I don't want equality with men under this situation."

"I was speaking with a friend recently about the idea of becoming. We were talking about it in the context of Stuart Hall, and how he speaks about identity. About identity being something that is a state of becoming. We were talking about the idea that maybe even though Stuart Hall's theory resonates

with the Diaspora and identity, especially in the Caribbean, that becoming should still feel like it has a kind of end point... that you become something, you know. And, that maybe the identity of being an artist, of being a Black woman, of being a Jamaican British woman - it's something that's more in flux. I think about that a lot, being an artist and what that means at different points in my life."

"At the moment, it feels very much like I'm in or on the periphery of a very odd career-like living, the rat race that is the art world. And, tentatively, do I want to be involved in this? Do I not? I have a gallery; I do shows. I'm part of this strange institution, but I don't know if that will be the way that I'll always be an artist. And I don't even know if it's the way I've always been an artist."

"Letting go of the work, letting it live and do what it has to do." Phoebe is learning to throw clay on a wheel and "likes being in the sun. That's always been a dream for me - to be naked in the sun somewhere, reading. That would be my hobby. If only I could have it for my life."

www.phoebecollingsjames.com



OKOKOK, 2014

Gabby Bess: Making Art as Immigrant Black Women in America
(Interview; w/ Precious Okoyomon), Broadly, February 12, 2018:web.

Making Art as Immigrant Black Women in America

Precious Okoyomon and Phoebe Collings-James sit down to discuss their work, locating a sense of home, and how male bees are useless.

Precious Okoyomon is a [poet](#) and conceptual artist living in New York, by way of Chicago, Ohio, and Nigeria, where she was born. Her most recent exhibition, [I Need Help](#), on view last month at Real Fine Arts, was created jointly with artist Hannah Black. Featuring somewhat grotesque, woolen dolls and shreds of text, the show consumes Black's old work—a book of conversations between artists on *The Situation*, which is actually the myriad situations we find ourselves working within, like racism, capitalism, and sexism—and gestures toward something new.

Phoebe Collings-James is a Jamaican-British artist and model who spends time between New York, where she recently moved, London, where she was born, and Jamaica, where part of her family is from. For [Expensive Shit](#), her first solo show stateside, which opened last fall at 315 Gallery, she created a tapestry of sound to capture the essence of this movement as place. In the press release, she called it a "diasporic fantasy," or a space that "lurks somewhere between the bricks and the sky I have known—and the other that I have longed for—like some sort of sad twisted romance."

Phoebe and Precious are friends. I met both artists for the first time at 315 Gallery in Bed Stuy for a reading curated alongside Phoebe's solo show, which we were all participating in. It quickly became clear that the two women were incredibly open, interesting, and committed to creating vital work. Their art asks questions like: How can I heal my trauma as a black immigrant woman in America? How do I resist commodification? How do I experience a sense of home and place? Violent, colonialist capitalism sucks, huh? I liked these questions, so I asked them to come up with more over lunch.

This conversation has been edited and condensed.

Phoebe Collings-James: I haven't seen your sculptures yet. Can you describe them?

Precious Okoyomon: For the Real Fine Arts show, Hannah [Black] and I decided to deconstruct her work from the [Chisendale \[Gallery\]](#) show. She made these books called *The Situation* [for that show], so our show was kind of the ending of it—"the situation" dying. The books are shredded and they're thrown all over the gallery. I made these giant balls of earth. They're clay and wool—and the wool kind of looks like my hair. It's very thick. It's sheep hair. You're supposed to process the wool after you shear the sheep, but I didn't really do that. I just got a bunch of really dirty sheep wool that has like, blood in it and dirt and I took the wool and I wrapped it around the ball then I put the shreds in there and compost.

I also made these raw wool dolls—they're kind of like Voodoo dolls. They're made with chunks of raw wool with raw thread that I wove and wrapped around the dolls. They're making different poses. Some of them are in a lot of pain. They're kind of like, melting into ground. The dolls have the shreds in them and dirt, so it's kind of like "the situation" is inside of them. It's like, everything has kind of exploded and gone to shit, but it's inside of you and you can't get out of it.

Collings-James: Wow. Oh my god.

Okoyomon: *[Laughs]*

BROADLY: Can you talk about what *The Situation* originally was?

Okoyomon: Yeah, it's a book of conversations between artists about "the situation" we're in. There's multiple situations. But the actual "situation" is blacked out so you don't really know what it is. You get a feeling that it's something really bad.

Collings-James: Reading the book, what becomes apparent is a sense of miscommunication and a purposeful lack of understanding. It's not just like, "Oh, I don't understand your position." It's a real intentional block. It's like, "I don't want to understand." It's funny that you talk about the layering in your sculptures. I often think about the situations that were in the book and the situations as they are, constantly, in real life. More energy is put into them—more words are put in—but quite often there's no point.

Okoyomon: Yeah, the show [at Real Fine Arts] was kind of the eruption of that.

Collings-James: Did you also make... cakes?

Okoyomon: Oh, I made a cake for the opening. It had bees and dirt—Georgian white sand—on top of it. At the end of the year, I guess around this time, all the female bees start killing the male bees because they become useless. in the hive. The female bees decapitate them and then they throw their bodies out of the hive. It's so brutal. *[Laughs.]* I was going around [my girlfriend's farm] picking up all these dead male bees. They deserve it! All they do is impregnate

the queen and after that they don't do anything for the hive except eat honey. It's like, you're completely useless now. Time to die.

Okoyomon: I really liked your show at 315. What inspired that?

Collings-James: Going back to Jamaica and thinking about Jamaica. I've only been like, three times in total, over three consecutive years up until now. The last time I went I met my great aunt and I went to her house. It was so blissful. She's a teacher and she had lots of art that she had made in the house. We sat in her front porch with one of her friends and my other great aunt and it was just like this moment of—I don't know—our body language being really similar, being connected. We were laughing and gossiping.

I had recorded the conversation and I wanted to do something with it. I'd been thinking a lot about the fact that I have a side of my family who are from Jamaica and a side who are from East London, who are very Cockney. Both sides have a strong identity that I feel are quite similar in a lot of ways, in attitude. The accents are quite similar—I think they can seem to other people to be quite aggressive and rowdy. I started thinking about [this project] as a research-type thing, but then I realized it wasn't really interesting to me to look at, in this dry way, the connections of why and how these two groups of people were similar. So I went back and explored those thoughts, but as feelings. I made this sound work and it just sort of came together. It ended up being moody and quite restless—in terms of thinking about "home."



Okoyomon: It felt kind of magical to me. When I saw it I was the only one in there. There's the sheet on the wall that was billowing. I really like that. And I like the material—what is that?

Collings-James: That's Mylar. I was thinking a lot about that because it's used mostly as a relief blanket. It's used for moments of crisis. I liked how beautiful it was, and how mesmerizing it felt to watch it while surrounded by the sound. But

it also has this poignance. When I'm in Jamaica the things that strike me as the most beautiful are textures and materials—even the dirt and things like tarpaulin—that are signs of distress. They're not actually positive things, but when the sun hits them in the right way everything is kind of beautiful. [I've been thinking about] what that is and where the fetish is in that, you know?



Expensive Shit. Photo courtesy of Phoebe Collings-James

BROADLY: Precious, earlier you brought up being born in Nigeria. Do you feel like being an immigrant influences your work?

I think a lot of my work—at least my poetry right now—is trying to understand where that places me, as a first generation immigrant child. I'm trying to find my tongue in that. It's like, I'm trying to assimilate into this western world but I also have a culture that I come from. I'm trying to figure out where I fit in all that.

BROADLY: Do you feel like you have a distinct sense of home?

I'm a little unsure sometimes because I come from so many different places. Both of my parents are Nigerian but I can't imagine my mom moving back to Nigeria anytime soon. My dad lives there now, but my mom is kind of like, "I'm American now." I don't think I'm really fully American, but I like the idea... but not really. I've been trying to struggle with where is this idea of home for me. I like to imagine that it's wherever my mother is. Do you feel like you have that problem, Phoebe?

Collings-James: Yeah, I guess that's what my show was about—locating home between these two islands, now three, living here. A lot of the music and sounds in the show were recorded while I was in transit, except for the live singing that was in it. You hear the sounds, and the car wheels, and the honks, and conversation. There's something about that—this feeling of constantly being in transit. I was working through that feeling—of not feeling rooted. I've been thinking about how an identity bound to where you're from is spoken about a

lot. It's interesting because so much of my thinking around blackness has developed here in America. (Thinking, as opposed to the emotional knowledge that has always been there.) But I'm not a black American. I'm not American. Stuart Hall talks about this idea of "identity as becoming" and at first I was quite intrigued by that idea. But now I'm like, no, I'm not becoming. I'm just here, being. I don't know.

I've been feeling quite homesick recently and I want to be closer to my mom and sister and dad. I've been thinking of what that means, in terms of home. I don't feel tied to London as a place. It's miserable. But anywhere where we are together is what matters. It's not quite about location.

Okoyomon: It's interesting to me because I am a black American—I do identify with that—and when I go to Nigeria all my cousins are like, "Oh, you've gone abroad now. You're not a Nigerian. You don't have the same identity as me anymore." They call it *Ajebota*. They're like, "She can't eat goat head. It will hurt her." *[Laughs.]*

Collings-James: But you're like, I don't actually want to eat goat head. *[Laughs.]* But it doesn't mean anything!

BROADLY: As black women artists, do you feel like your work is treated differently? I'm thinking about how a lot of art spaces are really white and the dynamics of exhibiting art about black identity for white audiences.

Collings-James: I think it's a confusing time because our artistry is now peak commodity. We're evolving new commodity positions. The racism isn't in the forms that you might have expected previously. I also don't spend that much time with white people and their ideas about my work. All the weird shit they're probably thinking about, I guard myself against it. I feel protective of myself and other people.

Okoyomon: I'm coming from a place where people who are drawn to my work have a similar experience. But at the same time, a lot of my work is about being a black woman... I'm not saying it's only for black women, but sometimes it is.



The Yellow Wallpaper

Ginerva Gambino, Cologne 10 November – 16 December

These days there is no shortage of exhibitions focusing on the body in general and the female body in particular. Yet this is to be expected, since the exploration of this issue is as urgent and topical as ever. Even so, this group show offers a different approach, connecting the works through references (some obvious, some not) to the eponymous 1892 short story by feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman – a tale that obviously hasn't lost importance for female artists since it was first deployed in Feminist Art Program's *Womanhouse* exhibition in Los Angeles in 1972.

In brief, Gilman's story tells of a female character confined to a room to recover from 'nervous exhaustion'. There she discovers a woman imprisoned inside the pattern of the room's wallpaper, which she begins to rip off, eventually hallucinating that the woman is herself, descending into insanity along the way. If the story is dominated by techniques for the pathologising of womanhood, the works here, by the five female artists, focus instead on the leitmotif of the madness-inducing incompatibility between self-image, the image of women and an actual woman. For example, in her sombre all-over paintings *Tar Baby #7* and *Tar Baby #8* (both 2015), Phoebe Collings-James has applied a wildly patterned black colour using the sole of her foot. The extent to which

she uses this Carolee Schneeman-inspired painting technique to create counterimages of female corporality becomes clear when contrasted with *Cunt* (2014). This insult is repeatedly written, in baby blue, on a dirty cleaning rag, summarising a misogynistic view of women as contemptible domestic workers.

A more humorous path is taken by Ebecho Muslimova, whose satirical ink drawings show her alter ego Fatebe, a naked pop-eyed corpulent, who variously uses her body and its orifices for her entertainment, for example as a human curtain clip in *Fatebe window curtain* (2016), wherein the curtain goes into her mouth and emerges again somewhere below her waistline. The raw activism of this cartoon character almost functions as an antithesis to the woman in Gilman's story, who is compelled to lie still as part of a resting cure, because medical science at the time related physical stimuli to female hysteria.

Movements of female flesh are also central to Vanessa Conte's *Polished Out* (2017). Constructed in panels like pages of a graphic novel, the drawing shows how a woman's dead tooth is violently extracted from her mouth. The flapping of cheeks after a slap to the face or the intrusion of fingers into the oral cavity are all exaggerated in the kind of pro-violence

fashion we associate with, say, Quentin Tarantino's films. This really is an orgy of demeaning brutality. Initially the combination of American pulp and sexualised violence seems highly problematic. Yet this concern largely disappears as soon as one flicks through Conte's short-story collection *Cures for Pouting Girls* (2016), also on display. These tales, inspired by the genre of corporal-punishment fiction (well known via *Fifty Shades of Grey*, 2011), also show female caricatures with enormous breasts and watermelon-size bums being sexually humiliated by angry men, as a punishment for... nothing much really. By means of this unrestrained, ultra-graphic amplification of casual sexism, in stories with titles such as 'Going Down' or 'Pamela's Hard Day', Conte forges a clever connection with Gilman's portrayal of a cure that was aimed at women's minds but intended for their bodies.

The dark, at times cynical humour in most works, especially in those by Conte and Muslimova, manages to remove the sour taste of moralism from this bitter topic. Nonetheless, it's a damning indictment of how women are viewed in our times that Gilman's story continues to be a reference point for young female artists – even if, as here, it's wittily mobilised. *Mortiz Scheper*

Translated from the German by Kevin Kennedy



Phoebe Collings-James, *Cunt*, 2014, oil on cloth, 50 x 53 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Ginerva Gambino, Cologne

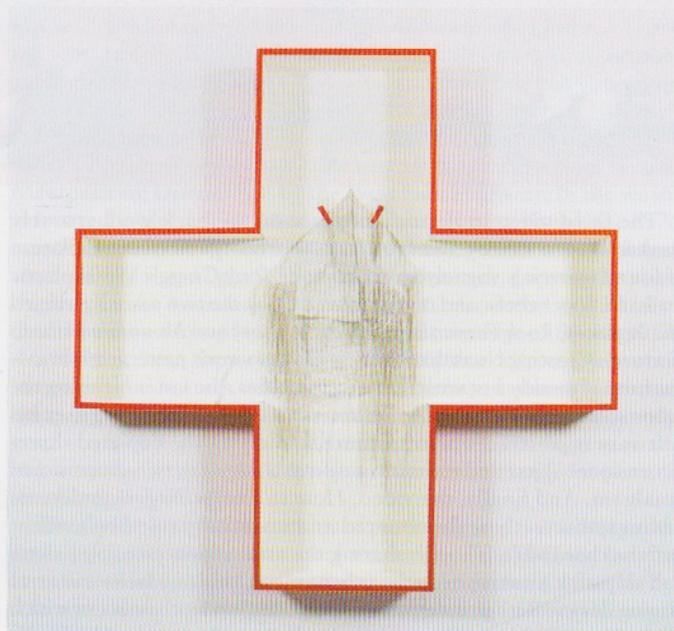
Laura McLean-Ferris: Phoebe Collings-James and Jesse Darling,
Artforum, vol. 55, no. 6, February 2017:220.

Phoebe Collings-James and Jesse Darling

COMPANY

One of the seven freestanding components of Jesse Darling's *Liberty Poles* (all works 2016) clattered to the floor at the opening of "Atrophilia" in late October, when someone brushed against it. So many signs are ominous in retrospect, but this incident felt especially preordained: The two-person exhibition with Phoebe Collings-James had taken its title from a word invented by the two artists to convey a "desire for collapse or stasis" (a fall into rest or hibernation, then, rather than anarchy).

Liberty Poles comprises several empty, upturned bags of Gold Medal-brand flour positioned atop spindly, uneven poles and a single crutch. Resembling a group of unsteady stilt-walkers, the sculpture—which is festooned with festive red ribbons—nods toward Juvenal's critique of Rome's commoners, who he said were interested only in "bread and circuses," or pacifying forms of entertainment. Yet the pathos of this sculpture—with its weak limbs and basic nutritional values—does not suggest the same scorn for today's distracted polis. Rather, these surreal figures appear like scrawny, ambivalent heralds who greet us at a historical juncture. Similarly elevated were *Valedictorian* (1), (2), and (3), a group of generic red classroom chairs whose legs had been extended to baby giraffe height, accentuating the sense of public bodies. It's uncertain whether we are watching members of an old world order buckling at the knees or a new one shakily assembling itself.



Phoebe Collings-James,
Bodied, 2016, poly-
propylene woven
sack, tape, poplar
frame, 70 × 70 × 7".

Both Darling and Collings-James's works are examples of a contemporary (and distinctly European) *Arte Povera*, in which ritual and mythology are coaxed from the poor materials of a globalized marketplace. In Collings-James's sculptural wall works, deep box frames display commonplace food bags. Finished in the glossy red of the International Red Cross and shaped like squares or the crosses associated with aid, the frames invoke a history of humanitarianism and its discontents: Each is as deep as the organization's shallowest vessels for transporting dead bodies. *Draw Back Your Bow* is a square box with a pair of red-mesh onion bags torn open, empty save for a flake or two of onion skin, and fixed to the back of the frame with yellow tape. The

sacks summon both Alberto Burri and David Hammons, but Collings-James's touch is more clinical (aesthetically and referentially). The bagging and shipping of foodstuffs are here aligned with the transportation and commodification of bodies, dead and alive. Collings-James's objects are markers of international struggle on a grand scale, so that the violence signaled by the rips in the bags is actually always elsewhere. In the work *Bodied*, however, things are more animated. The cross-shaped box brings to mind forms of medieval reliquary, with the masklike white bag at its center seemingly imbued with real presence—an acheiropoieta of global consumerism.

Suggestions of divinity are in fact the crux of the connection between the two artists. Other sculptures by Darling included *Border Sphinx 1 (boundary boy)* and *Border Sphinx 2 (boundary boy)*, featuring a pair of blue lion masks wearing hoods ripped from Champion sweatshirts over caps, and *Liberty Torch 1 (Ace of Wands Series)* and *Liberty Torch 2 (Ace of Wands Series)*, each composed of a scuffed torch cast from a vibrator-shaped mold and stuffed with fake flowers. The altarpiece-like *Votive* employs what is perhaps this millennium's heaviest symbolic object: an airplane, which has been fashioned into a small wax candle and swaddled in singed bandages, like a wounded bird or broken superhero figurine. The solemn treatment of this small damaged object transforms it into a work of fragile iconography—a prayer for grace in a time of collapse.

—Laura McLean-Ferris

Condo

Various venues, London, UK

BY HARRY THORNE



Phoebe Collings-James, 'Just Enough Violence', 2015–16; right and foreground: A.L. Steiner, 'Greatest Hits', 2016, installation view at Arcadia Missa. Courtesy the artists and Arcadia Missa, London; photograph: Lucie McLaughlin

Let me begin with a disclaimer: my experience of the inaugural edition of Condo involved a group of six people visiting eight galleries in six hours. Between them, these young London galleries are hosting 16 additional galleries, from as far afield as São Paulo and Shanghai, showing work by a total of more than 40 artists. It also involved Hong Kong-style noodles that induced tears, obligatory team photos and an unforgivable number of taxis for which I still owe someone a lot of money. So, apologies if I present highlights rather than a comprehensive account.

Initiated by Vanessa Carlos, director of Carlos/Ishikawa in London, Condo bills itself as a four-week 'collaborative exhibition' for the Airbnb generation: an alternative to today's dominant art-fair model, which aims to open a dialogue between young galleries and strengthen networks of support.

This collaborative drive is immediately recognizable in the southernmost depths of the city at Arcadia Missa, Peckham, where work by London-born Phoebe Collings-James is paired with pieces by Los Angeles-based A.L. Steiner, represented here by Munich gallery Deborah Schamoni. Across one wall, Steiner has plastered *Greatest Hits* (2016), a photographic autobiography of the artist's daily life that captures peaceful inertia, domestic space, performance, pets, nudity and everything in between. But while the collage shows Steiner from her own perspective – to use the artist's words, a 'skeptical [sic] queer eco-feminist androgyne' – an overlaid four-channel video work presents an alternative and, perversely, more conventional version of femininity, tapping into the media's tireless objectification of women. With the sound muted, the looping videos show Madonna gyrating, squatting and taking a riding crop to her crotch.

Collings-James picks up on these explorations of identity with her watercolour series of intentionally childishly-rendered beasts: *tfw* (all works 2016), a purple horse, rearing on its hind legs; *She-Wolf & Snake*, a confrontational Capitoline Wolf with a blood red and inescapably phallic serpent at its legs; *Out of Many, One People (She-Wolf Composite Small)*, an aggressive group of wolves – or are they cats? – baring their teats for all to see. (Cats would make more sense, collective noun: a glaring.) Communicating recognizable, almost-human personalities through animals, Collings-James removes notions of race, gender and sexuality from her portraits, safeguarding them against culturally over-determined definitions and offering a glimpse, both funny and dark, at what true identity might resemble. For all intents and purposes, let's call them spirit animals.

This marrying of likeminded artists lends the exhibition a focus and an ambition that, in their shoulder-to-shoulder presentations of disparate artists, galleries like The Sunday Painter and Supplement, who are each hosting three galleries in addition to showing their own artists, might have benefitted from. But, while an integrated curatorial approach was attempted to lesser effect at both Project Native Informant and Southard Reid, homogeneity was not the only option available.

At Rodeo, where New York's Callicoon Fine Arts has taken up residence, less obvious parallels are drawn between the works on show. In the first room hangs the work of brothers Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh and their childhood friend Hesam Rahmanian – roommates in Dubai since 2009 – each of which takes turns to playfully poke fun at scenes of supposed importance. A collage depicts a putto expelling a worryingly lurid stream of urine onto a bride, figures in military garb are overlaid with painted moustachioed faces, and footage of Femen's 'topless jihad' protests in 2013 is re-imagined as an LCD-tinged *Animal Farm* (1945).

Condo 2016 reviewed

Gabriela Acha, 3 February 2016
Reviews

Out of a conversation at LISTE Art Fair in Basel, a group of galleries decided to join forces and start *Condo*: an initiative led by Carlos/Ishikawa's director Vanessa Carlos, through which 32 international galleries come together on London ground. The aforementioned art space along with Supplement, The Sunday Painter, Arcadia Missa, Chewday's, Rodeo, Southard Reid and Project Native Informant –all based in the British capital –host works represented by 24 other galleries from around the world throughout a month, mimicking an annual project by dutch dealer Jeanine Hofland called A Petite Fair.

Rather than replacing something, *Condo* is a proposal in order to support the (art) community, promoting younger galleries through the networked London art scene. Its participants, which count with the support of some big institutional names, aim to highlight the fact that it is necessary to support one another in order to survive and succeed in the contemporary art ecosystem.

Like at any art fair, similarities between artists and works are mere coincidences, and while there is no thematic or aesthetic pattern to follow by the participant galleries, some analogies can be drawn.

In an era where humans are more aware than ever of their interdependence with other non-human entities, the relationship with animals seems to have become a focus of attention. Artists Lea Cetera, Phoebe Collings-James and Jala Wahid, or the trio composed of Ramin Haerizadeh, Rokni Haerizadeh and Hesam Rahmanian work around these topics, like the projection of humanity onto animals or the metaphors drawn out of their features.

Some of Cetera's works were left after her solo show at Southard Reid and seamlessly brought together with the works of artists Bruno Zhu and Tessa Lynch for *Condo*. The artist's practice turns around the anthropomorphisation of pets and the circulation of domestic animal imagery through the internet. In her installation 'Mirrored Gourd Triptych' (2015), a glazed porcelain pumpkin-like vegetable 'watches' a three screen TV, while sitting on a fake fur carpet. The edible is a gourd: a sort of calabash often used in asian cuisine that Cetera recurrently includes in her work. The TVs show a series of Youtube videos about people's pets getting miscellaneous care treatments, as if they were people.

In her installation 'Just Enough Violence' (2016) at Arcadia Missa, Collings-James develops an almost mythological imagery out of water-colors depicting cats and horses. They coalesce with A.L. Steiner's *Greatest Hits* exhibition: a collection

juxtaposed photographs and videos of pop culture figures, such as Madonna or [Boychild](#). Here, animal and human bodies merge and colonise the gallery walls and windows.

At The Sunday Painter, Jala Wahid's 'Soft Weaponry III' (2016) looks like two plaster bird talons coming out of the wall, near 'Coco': a sculpture shaped like two livers on top of a rosewater glycerin pedestal. The artist's works are surrounded by an *arte povera*-looking landscape consisting of pieces by [Rob Chavasse](#), [Ana Mazzei](#) and [Debora Bolsoni](#).

At Rodeo, Iranian born artists Ramin and Rokni Haerizadeh, along with Rahmanian, present *But a storm is blowing from paradise* (2014-15), a series watercolours and collages, where identity is erased and eventually transformed into rabbits and other animals. It's these crafty and DIY practices that seem to have taken over more sovereign formats and immaculate presentations. Small-scale works on fragile paper nailed on walls, or pieces of ceramics spread out over the place repeatedly emerge, whether it's in [Laura Aldridge's](#) coloured brick wall at The Sunday Painter, Cetera's take away coffee pot tops at Southard Reid or in [Ulrike Müller's](#) square painted tiles hung on the Rodeo wall. Multiple layers of watery pigment and more experimental materials such as dye, enamel or DIY jewellery take over the surface of [Tom Humphreys' 'untitled'](#) (2015), [Jeanette Mundt's](#) painting series 'Me as Patricia Arquette As the Femme Fatale' (2015), [Josh Kolbo's](#) constructed photographs and [Nicholas Cheveldave's](#) multilayered works, covered by friendship bracelet webs.



Meanwhile, Carlos/Ishikawa literally cut the space in three parts, in order to host its representative galleries: [Essex Street](#), [Matthew](#) and [Freymond Gruth](#). They reserve the hall for a sort of pop-up store where they sell "artists clothes". Among other great commissions, including [Puppies Puppies](#), [Darja Bajagic](#) and [Stewart Middleton -Ed Fornieles'](#) virtual alter ego of a humanised cartoon fox wrapped by contemporary anxiety is brought to the physical world in the form of a disguise.

According to [an interview](#) with Vanessa Carlos, the art world is "a microcosm of the world at large". That's why she hopes the *Condo* initiative will be taken as a model by other cities and countries in promoting collaborative work that is beneficial to the art community and the people working within it. **

Exhibition photos, top right.

[Condo is a collaborative exhibition running across London venues, January 16 to February 13, 2016.](#)

Christa Dee: Artist Phoebe Collings-James' explorations of identity politics and atrophy, Bubblegumclub, 2016:web.

Artist Phoebe Collings-James' explorations of identity politics and atrophy

UK-born visual artist **Phoebe Collings-James** spent some time in SA, so I caught up with her to have a chat about her work and her evolution as an artist.

Phoebe's desire to become an artist came from an impulse as a child. Being influenced by her dad who did photography at night taking pictures of bands, a lot of the work she did when she was younger was based around photography and filmmaking. She started studying art and textiles when she was 16 and continued to do a foundation in a Bachelors until 21. Although the specific intentions of each of her works are usually quite different, all of her work is connected by some sort of intersection with the politics of race and feminism, and influenced quite heavily by what has been happening around her and in the world at the time.

Drawing and painting on paper is something that underpins most of Phoebe's work, and the mediums she turns to do a lot of storytelling. Another part of her artistic practice is a more sculptural aspect and collecting objects that feed into those same narratives. The works for her current show, *Atrophilia*, showing at Company Gallery in NY with Jesse Darling, are from materials she has been collecting over the past few years. These range from fruit nets to vegetable sacks to woven sacking. Their made up word 'Atrophilia', meaning a desire for collapse or stasis, brings together the word atrophy and -philia. Phoebe explained that atrophy is something that she and Jesse have both been thinking about a lot in their work; this idea of the body in atrophy, our community in atrophy, the world in atrophy. They are also exploring how there is some sort of desire based in witnessing that collapse. The objects that have been discarded in the wake of that leads into the materials that she uses for this collection of works. These are discarded items which do not take on the idea of ready-made objects; their use date has now gone and they are immortal waste objects. Bringing atrophy and -philia together resonate with the actual materials and the intentions and ideas behind the works. For Phoebe, her ideas and the concepts she explores are becoming increasingly organically linked to the materials she uses to create her works.

In thinking about who she sees as her audience, Phoebe explained that, the way that things immediately appear to those who experience her artwork has always been incredibly important to her. "It's always been important to me, for it [art] to be immediately engaging with someone who doesn't have excess experience in academia or in the art world," Phoebe explains, "I guess that's partly a motivation from growing up with very working class parents, from the fact that I did not have a lot of interaction with fine art or high art, commercial gallery art until I was a lot older". Interested in creating work that involves a lot of research and thought but at the same time able to create an object or experience that anyone can understand, and on some level appeals to the foundation of what it means to be human. "I don't think the art [I make] is for everyone but more that the art is for a sensitive person and a thoughtful person," Phoebe expresses, "And to me that might also, potentially look more like a woman, a woman of colour, a woman of a certain class. But it really could be anyone."

Her work on her own identity has been coming through more and more in her recent production which coincides with more personal shifts in her life. Her father's family is from Jamaica and her mother's family from England. Being born in England she hadn't been to her father's home country before. Moving to New York and going to Jamaica for the first time last year opened up ways for her to understand her identity as a whole and had a big influence on how she is interrogating her identity.

Three years ago she was making work which was higher and wider than her body, and were just huge black voids. Now she feels that her interrogation of that Blackness becomes more apparent to her; it was so much about dealing with things she felt she did not have space to say at the time. An overarching theme in her work is that of communication, or a suffocation of communication; people who do not have the opportunity to speak or have a suffocated voice. "I have been making drawings for a long time called 'Choke on your tongue' and they are these sort of dog monster kind of things with red, bleeding big tongues in their mouths. And I think somehow now if I analyze it a little bit I think those works were some sort of interrogation of some sort of silencing I was definitely feeling and wanting to be as big and Black and loud as I possibly could". From those works, Phoebe moved on to ceramics and to painting delicate, brightly coloured watercolours full of expressive animals. Her interest in using watercolours came from a political impulse to use the lightest, most fragile material; something that would erode and wouldn't last forever, as a sort of "anti-work" in comparison to her large oil black paintings she had been making for a long time. She sees a strong theme of talking about her identity and experiences as a way to enter into talking about lots of other issues. Phoebe expressed that in being an artist, the most challenging thing for her is what goes on in the studio; just figuring out what you want to make, how you want to make it, what you want to say. The other major challenge is not letting the annoying, negative and exhausting things from outside into her studio. "The art market works in exactly the same way as every other system of white patriarchal supremacy...in terms of simultaneously fetishizing and excluding people of colour." For her, the trick is figuring out how to make work within that system and

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just enough violence: phoebe collings-james and the failure of representation

In a new exhibition of watercolour works by the young artist, the paintings' aesthetic grace is often a way to deal with the violence that surrounds us. Beautiful work that deals with ugly subjects.

Alongside A.L. Steiner at Arcadia Missa in Peckham as part of the London-wide exhibition CONDO, Phoebe's work continues to revolve around absence, with a series of watercolour paintings of symbol-heavy animals; horses, she-wolfs, a magical chimera that is part medusa and part Pegasus, a hydra, all of which stand in for human bodies, revealing and revelling again in their absence.

"A lot of the animals are sort of representations of ourselves," Phoebe explains, "they embody some of that violence in them. Like the first image I drew, the she wolf on its hind legs, coming towards you. I wanted to just make these images become a bit more human."

The title of these works, *Just Enough Violence*, hints at that violence that inescapably lurks all around us, contrasted here with the watercolour's lightness of touch and colour. One of the most powerful pieces, and the only in the exhibition to actually feature a human body, finds a Klansman atop a horse, a speech bubble appearing from out of shot, "Hey Buster, I ain't afraid of no ghost". That clash, between watercolour and subject reveals most about the themes the

The exhibition is called *Just Enough Violence*, what does that mean to you?

It came from something I heard on the radio when I was working in the studio. The way I was working at the time was by drawing and writing ideas, research, one liners, all that kind of thing, all over these huge pieces of paper. I don't even know what it was in relation to, the whole phrase was 'just enough violence for the whole family' said in quite a gleeful voice. I thought that it was quite poignant really, in terms of our relationship with violence and how thirsty we are for it whilst also being such a negative part of our lives, and how unconscious we seem to be of the reality of violence.

Most of the works are done in watercolour, are you interested in it as an idea, or as a material?

I guess initially it started off as a conceptual idea, wanting to move away from using oil paints in my works because of the inherent value of it. When I started making those paintings they became quite popular and I was selling quite a few of them, but they weren't about that, they were about a certain relationship with performance art and instead they had become valuable abstract paintings and became part of a different art history. I was a bit conflicted about including two of those older oil paintings in the show actually. So the watercolours were kind of

I like there's that this relationship in the works between the material of watercolour and the idea of watercolour, which I guess relates to the representation of the images, and what these figures represent.

Yeah and I guess obviously the history of watercolour is something that seems exceptionally dull and twee.

Do you you feel labelled, you know, as the model who's also an artist? Do you think it means you have to justify yourself in your work in a way that most male artists would never have to?

I think just as a woman I have to justify my work in a way that male artists would never have to. Like, how many mediocre male artists are there? The moment that I really realised that I stopped giving a fuck.

I feel very very privileged to be able to model, even though it's not particularly stimulating and it has loads of issues. You know like this morning I earned enough money to pay my rent for the next seven months or something, and that's a privilege I just wouldn't get anywhere else. It's also not like I hate fashion, I think there are elements of it that are wonderful, especially having So is it annoying being called and artist and model? Yes and no. I don't know if I mind as much anymore and I also don't ever want to be seen as being a victim, like this is some dirty little secret that I have. I wouldn't be doing modelling if I had money, but still sometimes it's relevant to not have it as a secret, because it might be important for the conversation.

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Your last exhibition was called *Choke On Your Tongue*. I'm wondering if that feeling and theme still comes up in the work, it's so loaded with the problems of communication...

Am I still feeling choked or restrained?

Yeah.

When I first started making those choking drawings I was very young, about 20, I was going out with a photographer and not... I don't know, I just hated him so much and didn't know how to express myself properly with him, with the world, and I started quite obsessively drawing

these animals that were choking on their tongues.

I think that's what kind of happens a lot, these things that might come out of something that's personal then actually transcend that into something that's far more about how all of us are communicating, about what's happening in the media or in the world. I think those concerns are pretty constant. So to answer the question, I do still feel like that, yes, but not all the time.

In your work I really like that relationship though, between how it communicates the idea of the difficulty of communication.

It's something that never really goes away. It's like that dream where you can't talk or can't scream. These feelings are triggered by going to a Rise Up march in New York and feeling like we're standing together, we are real, our bodies are real, life is real, and then Tamir Rice not getting justice and sitting my living room with my parents crying. But also, at the same time, sitting in the living room with my parents just feeling very lucky to be alive. One of the drawings deals with that actually, the horse saying 'can I live'. These things always hang in the balance.

Much of the work, even obliquely, deals with race. It's maybe less overt here though, than the last exhibition, which featured the KKK-esque hood sculptures.

I think that race kind of relates to everything I've been rambling on about, in that it's something that's constantly in my consciousness. Even when I was making these paintings you know, the starting point might've been my use of watercolours, and I'd been doing a lot of research into classical myths, but then when I was actually making the work a lot of it is quite automatic, drawing out of my imagination, and it was the same with those pieces. It's almost just like the materials matching up with the ideas you're thinking about.

When I started making those sculptures, I was really interested in the material and wanted to make something really beautiful and moving that was somehow representational of the feeling of falling, of vertigo and something being in flux. So I was using this huge icing bag to mould the plaster, and I made holes in it, and then after I'd turned the first one upside down it's form as a hood became apparent. It's not an accident, but it's almost like all my intentions at the beginning for the material only then kind of came through I guess.

It's not really related I guess, but it was something else I was thinking about recently, and just how much of a problem with race the art world has.

It's horrible.

It's only really been in the last year or two that I feel like I'm having more and more contact with the art world and it's a space in which I don't really feel comfortable. It doesn't reflect other aspects of my life, I think a lot of people feel like that. It's very much one class, mainly

heterosexual.. we're in a difficult position at the moment because actually to be somehow Other is what people want at the moment. So it's this real toss up, it's not the same conversation anymore, that people aren't interested in black artists, people aren't interested in queer artists – that's what they want, Otherness has such a high currency at the moment.

The problem in the art world is systemic and it is sort of exceptionalist in that there is probably room for one black artist at a time, or like, one per gallery. At art world parties we'll go into a space which will predominantly be middle-class, predominantly white, predominantly male, and the problem gets worse the higher up in the gallery world you go. It's not a space I really want to be in, and something I think a lot of artists don't feel comfortable with. The worst thing is that it doesn't really seem to be changing.