

Contours of the Interior

In her poem “Canary”, Rita Dove speaks to Billie Holiday with a gentle affirmation that she did not have to accede to the demands of the public for transparency about her life. Holiday carried experiences and histories in her body that cannot be summarized, infusing her voice with an affective potential that stimulated a well of emotional responses, overflowing from those who heard her. She rendered her soul, and yet so much was still asked of her, with little regard for her well-being. “If you can’t be free, be a mystery,” is a generous offering to Holiday, and one which extends throughout *Contours of the Interior*. This exhibition meditates on possibilities of withholding, opacity, quiet and mundanity, negotiating the expectation projected onto Black life, and Black femme life in particular, as always readily available to be consumed and extracted. Kevin Quashie engages quiet as, “a metaphor for the full range of one’s inner life- one’s desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness” (2012, 6).^[i] This potential permeates the work of artists Lola Ayisha Ogbara, Sasha-Kay Nicole and zakkiyyah najeebah dumas-o’neal, critically considering other possibilities for being, while reckoning with the intricate realities of the world.



Installation Image: (Left) Lola Ogbara, *Untitled*, 2021 and (Right) Sasha-Kay Nicole, *A Cultural Subject*, 2023

What does it mean to create work that is oriented towards the complexities and intangible aspects of the interior self? For Black artists, there is an assumed, limited perspective that one’s work must respond to the realities of navigating structural and interpersonal anti-Blackness and reinforce modes of resistance to inequity. The work is often measured against some notion of identifiable “Blackness”, as if this term has a meaning that is universally held. Elizabeth Alexander describes the Black interior as an, “inner space in which black artists have found selves that go far, far beyond the limited expectations and definitions of what black is, isn’t or should be” (2004, 5).^[ii] Nicole, dumas-o’neal and Ogbara delve into this inner world, releasing themselves of the constrictions projected

onto their practices. Working across photography, sculpture, sound, video, and drawing, the artists create pieces that are open to the experience of the individual encounter.



Installation Image: (Left) zakkiyyah najeebah dumas-o’neal, *a line into infinity (reaching for you), many mornings and many evenings*, 2021-2022 and (Right) Sasha-Kay Nicole, *Untitled (Her Truth Is series)*, 2022

With intimate detail, in *a line into infinity (reaching for you)*, dumas-o’neal transcribes lines from Lorraine Hansberry’s short story “The Anticipation of Eve,” which narrates the anxiety a lesbian woman feels in deciding whether to share her queer desires with some family members. The artist tenderly holds Hansberry’s words, and the author’s own internal grappling with her queerness, charcoal enveloping the piece and leaving only a glimpse of what is written. In her layering of videos with photographs printed on vinyl, dumas-o’neal contemplates waterscapes that lead beyond where the eye can see.



zakkiyyah najeebah dumas-o’neal, *to feel it from every direction, for every departure*, 2022-2023

Ogbara's vessels are formed through curving mounds; smooth surfaces complement areas of texture, like crystallized liquid dripped over the sculpture. Her works are hollow, the inside serving as a metaphorical holding space for Black femme interiority and attending to the "necessary fragility" Ogbara names as too often extricated from discussions of Black womxn's lives. *A Bellow of My Laughter Pt.1* is painted in a reflective, metallic blue-back color, glints of light concealing the minute details of the surface. Emerging from the vessel is a heavy laugh that verges on crying, the distinction of pain and pleasure blurred.



Installation Image: (Center) Lola Ayisha Ogbara, *A Bellow of My Laughter, Pt.1*, 2021, (Back left) Lola Ayisha Ogbara, *Untitled, Forget Me Knot* series, 2023 and (Back Right) Sasha-Kay Nicole, *Belly Pickney and Herself*, 2022.

With their heads covered in plastic bags, a distance is created between the viewer and the figures in Nicole's images. The impulse to forge connections through the face is interrupted. In the anonymity afforded to the subjects, there also emanates the potential for these figures to be many. In *A Cultural Subject*, there is no body, but a haunting presence remains. Nicole's work interrogates the harm projected onto Black womxn with subtlety, for violence does not constitute the entirety of their lives.



Sasha-Kay Nicole, *My Screams Haunt Me*, 2022

“To be a mystery” does not idealize an embodied mystique, for it is a complicated position that comes with its own difficulties. It is a reminder that one can lean into obscurity, disclosing only what you choose, while nourishing the self. It is a deep regard for the contours of the interior.

Curator: Gervais Marsh, PhD

[i] Quashie, Kevin. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. Rutgers University Press, 2012.

[ii] Alexander, Elizabeth. *The Black Interior*. Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2004.