

BERMUDA NATIONAL GALLERY



JOSCELYN GARDNER
Staging Mary Prince: in her own words

June 16 - November 26, 2016

Barbadian / Canadian artist Joscelyn Gardner's work probes British-Caribbean colonial archives from a postcolonial feminist perspective in order to subvert 18th and 19th century portraiture and documented histories. Working with multimedia installation, she often uses interventionist strategies to fill the archival void. In the two-channel video installation titled ***Black Mary; or Molly, 'Princess of Wales'*** (2016), Gardner explores the life of Mary Prince, a Bermuda-born "West Indian" slave whose c.1831 narrative, written down from "her own words", was instrumental in furthering Britain's abolitionist movement. This print-based work draws upon early 19th century toy theatricals and their associated printed ephemera, as a site for addressing the "performance" of Creole¹ identity in the circum-Atlantic context through conflation with historical portrait traditions.



Joscelyn Gardner

Mary's story is performed on a replica toy theatre stage using live footage and digital simulation within a 3D computer generated environment to animate the printed / paper components. Intaglio / digital prints and cut paper backdrops, wings, costumes and props, mimic those of early toy theatre productions (private domestic entertainment), while playing on the slippage between history painting, portraiture, and theatrical painting of stage characters, and their derivative souvenir prints, that "fixed" identities in dramatic frozen poses. Enacted as an experimental opera, the work interrogates patriarchy / colonialism by rupturing the staged narrative with off-stage interjections.

Created for the Bermuda National Gallery, project research took place in Bermuda, and at the V & A's print and theatre collections in London, England, in 2013/14 under a Canada Council for the Arts Visual Art Project Grant. As part of a larger project exploring resistance to slavery by enslaved women, this work aims to give agency to Mary Prince, named a Bermuda national hero in 2012, while allowing previously silenced British / Creole voices (from the 19th century through to contemporary times) to respond to her allegations.

The ***Black Mary*** video installation is presented as a double portrait. In the first portrait, the arrangement of figures within a toy theatre stage setting has been compositionally appropriated from a 1760 'conversation piece' painting. Characteristic of these group portraits, which amounted to theatrical displays of power for the British upper class subjects who commissioned them, the

finely dressed white Creole Master and his family are depicted seated on a seashore with a 'prospect' across the water to the topographically detailed outlying Bermuda islands beyond (a nod to the sea-faring source of the wealth of the family). The Mistress, her young daughter, and their dog, sit at the base of a mature Bermuda cedar tree, a familiar compositional device. The sitters appear to be leisurely enjoying the outdoor setting, typical of the genre. The Master and his son are perched in a boat; the father seated and the son standing in a mock-heroic pose. The only subtle hints of the narrative's violence are found in the whips held by Master and Mistress, the boy's bayonet, and the tools of torture amongst the vegetation.

While the white family members remain as lifeless card cut-outs, frozen in place and silenced, the black slave girl, Mary, comes alive to theatrically recite her story through song in five Acts. Appearing as a young girl "still innocent of her 'condition' as a slave", she recounts her painful narrative of abuse at the hands of her owners, and of her struggle to escape slavery, while role-playing with a surrogate doll (evidenced by checkered scarification on the doll's back, a pattern echoed by the Harlequin costume of the dog that is similarly owned by the white family and acts as Mary's foil). Repeatedly dressed and undressed by Mary, this wooden peg doll has movable legs and arms and sexualized breasts (based on African fertility dolls). Small moments of childish exuberance in Mary's performance punctuate long and harrowing accounts of ill treatment and vicious punishment meted out to herself and her fellow slaves that she sorrowfully enacts on her doll.

A large-scale video projection positioned directly across the room includes a collection of 'portrait heads' - witnesses from various time periods who emerge from the darkness to remark on the staged performance. Their comments either confirm or challenge the 'received' history of Prince's slave narrative and the surrounding fall-out from its publication in Britain in 1831, and again, when it was re-published in 1987 and 1997. Several people including her publisher, Thomas Pringle, her biographer, Susanna Strickland, her owners, the Woods, as well as more contemporary Bermudian voices, either attest to or directly contest her story. As the narrative reaches its climax, and Mary's defiance grows with impending freedom in sight, the audience members' declarations intensify. The conflicting viewpoints serve to problematize the legacy of slavery in Bermuda (and the wider region) and point to the construction of both (white and black) Creole identity as Other.

1) The term Creole was coined in the 18th century to mark the cultural difference of whites born in the West Indies from those of European birth. It was later used to describe both white and black bodies in the Caribbean.



Black Mary; or Molly, 'Princess of Wales' (2016), two-channel video installation, 33:41 min., variable size.

Black Mary has been produced between Canada and Barbados, with a team of over forty people. Barbadian musician, Stefan Walcott, PhD, was commissioned to compose and direct what he describes as “an avant-garde Afro-Caribbean opera grounded in chromaticism and Afro-Diasporic minimalism.” He explains, “I centered the piece around the perfect 5th and the tri-tone intervals. The 5th suggests openness while the tri-tone is the most important interval of the Blues. I was therefore sonically representing the hope of Mary as well as the constant sadness and strength of the blues. The opening motif returns several times to ground the narrative. The instrumentation (harpichord and cello) was proposed by the project director to suggest the period of the late 18th century. I also added drums to underpin the piece and reference the West African aesthetic. The 5th movement has a quicker pace and generally lighter tone to frame the new space of London and the change in Mary’s context.” Walcott is founder and artistic director of the Caribbean’s only big band and steel pan group, the 1688 Orchestra. This group functions under his social business, Hats Music, which aims to return live music to Barbados. He teaches at the University of the West Indies and the Barbados Community College.

Gardner now lives in Canada where she is Professor of Art at Fanshawe College. She has held solo exhibitions in the USA, Canada, Spain, and throughout the Caribbean and has participated in numerous international biennials, exhibiting both prints and multimedia installations. Her work has also appeared in curated group exhibitions at museums in the USA, France, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands, India, China, Puerto Rico, Martinique, Barbados, and Trinidad, and is in public collections in the USA, Europe, and the Caribbean. In 2011 she received the Grand Prize at the 7th International Contemporary Printmaking Biennial in Trois Rivières, Quebec, and she is currently a nominee for the Queen Sonja Print Award 2016 (international printmaking award). She holds an MFA from Western University, and a BFA (in printmaking) and a BA (in film) from Queen’s University.

Research for this project was supported by Canada Council for the Arts



The exhibition was co-sponsored by Bermuda’s Ministry of Education and Ministry of Community, Culture & Sports

BERMUDA NATIONAL GALLERY
 City Hall & Arts Centre, Hamilton, Bermuda
 www.bng.bm • (441) 295-9428 • director@bng.bm

PRINTED BY BERMUDA PRESS DIGITAL