

**OTHER**

**CALGARY**

**STEVEN COTTINGHAM  
JOSCELYN GARDNER AT ALBERTA PRINTMAKERS**

**Joscelyn Gardner's *Creole Portraits III: bringing down the flowers...*** is an intimidating exhibition. Earlier, I was having a conversation with a

friend at another gallery. She asked what I thought about the paintings and I said – as obtusely as I could – that in a society ruled by racist patriachs, I have no patience for art that concerns itself with trending aesthetics. This behaviour, I explained, only reinforced the superficial prejudices that have made this world the shit-hole it is today. She gave me a look and we talked for a while longer: me, backpedaling, and her, describing aesthetics as a vessel that redelivers the morals we so often take for granted.



Joscelyn Gardner

Gardner's exhibition at the **Alberta Printmakers' Artist Proof Gallery** is the perfect counterpoint to my initial polemics. The accompanying

essay by Jenn Law elaborates on the colonial prerogatives that were so present throughout the early development of print history, acknowledging specifically how Gardner's prints examine "the representation of the black female subject as an object of scientific and anthropological analysis, as well as a politicized site of both subjugation and resistance."

The show, then, is a thirteen-part riff on a single formula: each hand-painted lithograph comprises an elaborately plaited hairstyle, an



unthinkably cruel 19th Century iron slave collar, and an abortifacient flower specimen. Gardner uses the aesthetic vernacular of scientific illustrations – proliferated to all corners of the European Empire through the burgeoning print medium – and a technique of plaintive collage to recreate monstrously faceted narratives of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Undoing the objectifying intents of the original documentors, the

artist ventures into a world untouched by any noble-minded scientist. The hairstyles, portraits of the back of various women's heads, display numerous complexly braided attempts to assert individuality from within the most dehumanizing of circumstances. The slave collars are just as varied and individual. One, a thorn-like assemblage of barbs and bells, is especially disturbing.

Plantation owners were keen on the growth of their labour forces and, accordingly, abortions and unfulfilled pregnancies were considered heinous crimes. Female slaves subverted the will of their oppressors by ingesting a variety of flowers that induced menstruation and prohibited pregnancy. Thus the eponymous euphemism of the show: "bringing down the flowers..."

The hair, removed from the head; the collar, removed from the neck; and the flower, removed from the context of rape and capitalist oppression, result in abstract assemblages. They are beautifully rendered with a neutral-ish scientific precision that leaves them initially unclear in their purpose. They look like alien growths and, after reading the essay and speaking with the gallerist, I wish they did belong to an alien species that had no hand in shaping the world that exists today. Sadly, this is not the case.

**Alberta Printmakers' Artist Proof Gallery:** <http://albertaprintmakers.ca/>

Joscelyn Gardner: Creole Portraits III: bringing down the flowers... continues until November 29.

**Steven Cottingham** is another artist. Based in Calgary, he studied in New York and has recently exhibited in Havana, Glasgow, Fredericton, and Vancouver. Currently he is writing, as so many have done before, a book about love and art. He can be followed on Twitter [@artcriticism](https://twitter.com/artcriticism).