

# NIGHT GALLERY

2276 E. 16th Street, Los Angeles, California 90021

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Tiana Reid, "What You Have, When You Have It," Flash Art, Issue 323, December 2018 – January 2019.

## FLASH ART

50–57

*What You Have, When You Have It*

Tiana Reid on Landscape and the Figural in the Sculptures  
of Tau Lewis



*the cause and cure is you*, 2017. Plaster, cloth and secret objects. 18 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 60 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 24 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. Installation view at Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queens University, Kingston, Ontario, 2018. Photography by Tim Forbes. Collection of Murray Quinn.

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If you search Google Images for the term "figural," you'll see thousands of images of Disney key-ring dolls, mostly made of foam. Since abandoning my own childhood dolls, which I remember styling or mutilating, depending on my mood, I find dolls grotesque and almost unethical: so unreal they are almost real. It's like browsing fake Louis Vuitton bags on Canal Street: you know it's a fake, but you want it anyway. In fact, you need it, like little kids dragging their plastic pets across the floor, knowing there are stories inanimate objects tell that animate subjects would rather ignore. In visual theories, the figure is often a mere synonym for the human form. But the adjective "figural" is a little looser, and thus more precise, denoting a kind of commitment to the figure. Think of those dolls on Google Images or the spiritual *figuras* in medieval imagery.

By mining the line between a human figure and its other, artist Tau Lewis's doll-like figures make the known feel strange, and the strange feel known. At Frieze New York this year, Toronto's Cooper Cole gallery, which won the 2018 Frame Prize for its presentation, exhibited a posse of Lewis's creatures. *Earnest Lewis King* (2017) poses on the floor like an obstinate supermodel with a tail, knowing the scene is watching. Another figure wears a bucket hat and sits in a rocking chair, seemingly mid-swing, and holds a doll of her own. Yet another — a 2018 piece called *Unity (Negros Historical Information Systems in Every Dark Corner)* that sits floppily on a wooden chair — is a flexible paranormal being protruding with eight bulges made of hand-sewn fabric, fur, and leather, coming together in what seems to be six arms and hands and two legs. Is a body in bad form still a body? Its gaze, if you can call it that, is vacant, framed by two humanlike ears and two bearlike ears. Whatever these things are — human, animal, magic, or art — they are tired of being asked, "What are you?"

Lewis was born on October 31, 1993 (she calls herself a "Halloween baby"), making the creep factor to her art feel almost inborn. But her practice is more than trickery: everyday objects hold histories of violence as well as many other forms of social and material relations. If black

people, under the terror of transatlantic slavery, were considered commodities, what else haunts the history of the human?

The liberal notion of the universal human still indexes a specific kind of empowered and self-assured individual that, at least in Lewis's world, does not exist. In every interview, Lewis, a Jamaican-Canadian self-taught sculptor and journalism-school dropout, makes the thematic of her work perspicuous: black identity.

Today, hyphenated nationalities, such as Jamaican-Canadian, are said, in print and behind the podium, to be tolerated, and yet, even within this suffocating national rhetoric, acceptance is still bound by the vicious rigamarole of citizenship. If you're not from Canada, you have probably even more inherited myths about the country, a site of fantasy, and they're so boring I deign to repeat them here: polite, liberal, diverse. If you're from the Great White North, and if you're black, however, you live as Lewis does: by telling your own stories with what you have, when you have it. Lewis is based in Toronto, a city often blindly touted as one of the most multicultural in the world, despite the persistence of racist inequalities. The landscape of the city is not only a theme in Lewis's work but a material requirement. Her sculptures gather tokens from the city: chains, paint cans, pipes, toys, hair, stones, copper, fabric, wires, acrylic paint, plaster, old clothes. Also, stuff not easily associated with the city but found there nonetheless, like seashells, stones, and bark. And also: some secrets. (She hides objects inside of some of her works.)

The last person someone interested in art should talk to is an art teacher, but school is a good litmus test of canon formation, that is to say, how a society deems to represent itself. And a teacher of Canadian art will, without fail, mention the Group of Seven — either with regret or enthusiasm — and suggest that Canadian art is not known for representing figures but for representing lands. Remembered as an originator of Canadian landscape art, the Group of Seven (a group of, you guessed it, seven artists), working in the early twentieth century, painted the sublime by way of clouds, lakes, snow falling, and pine trees. A key figure of the Group of Seven, Lawren Stewart Harris,

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*three angels waiting*, 2018. Concrete, rebar, concrete mesh, hand sewn furs, leathers and fabrics, cotton batting, stones, pipes, driftwood, dried flowers, hardware. 76×38×24 in. Courtesy of the artist.



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*Unity (Negros Historical Information Systems in Every Dark Corner)*, 2018. Detail. (Negros) Spirit Conservation Vessel. Hand sewn fabrics, furs and leathers, hand carved plaster, wire, seashells, stones, cotton batting, polyester batting, human hair, acrylic paint, chalk pastel and wooden chair. 38×30×23in. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.



*Precious things (everything)*, 2017. Detail. Hand carved plaster, stone, brick, reef stone, seashells, sea glass, milk thistle seeds, wire, acrylic paint, driftwood, rebar, concrete. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.

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is quoted as having said, "We in Canada are on the fringe of the great North and its living whiteness, its loneliness and replenishment, its resignations and release, its call and answer, its cleansing rhythms."<sup>1</sup> Harris was comparing the art of the United States to that of Canada, where there might emerge "an art more spacious, of a great living quiet, perhaps of a certain conviction of eternal values." The serenity of such spacious wilderness, however, comes from a history of white settlement. And yet the "whiteness" Harris mentions is often suggested to refer to snow only.

Lewis belongs to a group of black Canadian artists who aren't really talking about whiteness at all, but about themselves. The question is how to work with entrenched Canadian narratives to ultimately work against them by putting forth a counternarrative. In her 1992 collection *Frontiers: Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture*, poet and writer M. NourbeSe Philip, who was born in Tobago and lives in Toronto, outlines the problem:

I carry a Canadian passport: I, therefore, am Canadian. How am I Canadian, though, above and beyond the narrow legalistic definition of being the bearer of a Canadian passport; and does the racism of Canadian society present an absolute barrier to those of us who are differently colored ever belonging? Because that is, in fact, what we are speaking about — how to belong — not only in the legal and civic sense of carrying a Canadian passport, but also in another sense of feeling at "home" and at ease. It is only in belonging that we will eventually become Canadian. [...]

How do we lose the sense of being "othered," and how does Canada begin its m/othering of us who now live here, were born here, have given birth here — all under a darker sun! Being born elsewhere, having been fashioned in a different culture, some of us may always feel "othered," but then there are those — our children, nephews, nieces, grandchildren — born here, who are as Canadian as snow and ice, and yet, merely because of their darker skins, are made to feel "othered."<sup>2</sup>

This past summer at Mercer Union, a nonprofit art space in Toronto, a collective of queer Caribbean artists, RAGGA NYC,

put on a group show in which Lewis participated. Many of the presenting artists, including Canadians Oreka James, Aaron Jones, Michele Pearson Clarke, Camille Turner, and Syrus Marcus Ware, are that next generation that Philip speaks of: the children and grandchildren of black immigrants who yearned for a sense of belonging. It is as though today, for Lewis and her cohort, belonging to some greater Canada, however seductive, remains a concern of the past. With her family of sculptures, the figural is where representation breaks down.

This does not mean that Lewis disavows Canada — far from it. Rather, it means that being part of the national body politic is not a politics. It is as clear as ever that the Canadian multiculturalist future, enacted by the liberal policies of the 1970s and 1980s, never arrived. In the 2006 book *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Katherine McKittrick lists a number of supposed surprises that plague the whiteness of the Canadian imagination, including "black women in Canada," "black resistances," "slavery in Canada," and "Canada as a site of permanent black residency."<sup>3</sup> These things, she writes, "are not 'Canada,' are not supposed to be Canada, and contradict Canada; they are surprises, unexpected and concealed."<sup>4</sup> Responding to the erasure of what McKittrick, Lewis, and others refer to as "black Canada" within the history of Canadian art, Lewis uses the materials of the Canadian landscape, of which an urban space like Toronto is a part, to construct her figures by repurposing waste.

With this wayward approach to figuration (one that does not dichotomize between human and landscape), Lewis's sculpture practice orbits rather than settles on portraiture. A 2016 work, *Everything Scatter (Army Arrangement)* — a title that cites Fela Kuti — consists of a bust mounted on a cinderblock, made with a plaster casting of a friend's face, wire, soil, a paint can, a Christmas cactus, and other materials. The face, perched on the paint can, feels more like a mask than a face. There are parts that seem familiar to a human figure — the plant leaves as hair, the paint can as the neck, or the chain as the skull — and that's



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what makes it strange: the familiar presents itself as unfamiliar. A similar practice of defamiliarization exists the other way, too, showing how nonhuman objects contain vitality and life. For example, she told *Canadian Art* magazine in 2016 that "the cacti probably has the most symbolism in my work. I frequently use cacti to talk about diaspora and black identity. They're tropical plants that come from really hot climates and they've been super domesticated and can survive like anywhere in the world. They also grow, like, really prickly spines that sort of act as preservation tactics." For Lewis, cactuses, in becoming intimate with concrete, chain, and carved plaster portraits, showcase the precariousness of the space between organic and inorganic, use and abuse, subject and subjection. While her work has been called surrealist due to her commitment to found objects and assemblage, her use of salvaged materials as an interpretive medium reminds me not of a subversion for subversion's sake but of those who used and abused Dadaism and Surrealism, like writers Aimé Césaire and Amiri Baraka, and especially the late black American artist Noah Purifoy, who is best known for his work that reclaimed debris from the aftermath of the Watts Riots in 1965. Since a 2016 show, "foraged ain't free," which focused on busts, Lewis's work has increasingly featured full-body plaster figures. On Lewis's Instagram, you can find them posing with her friends — on little chairs, cozied up for bed, half-painted in her studio, cradled by Lewis herself, and getting

serenaded by Toronto-based singer Charmie and her acoustic guitar. Unlike paintings, or other artwork stuck to the walls, sculptures provoke an immediate kind of intimacy. With three dimensions, they live among us, in the middle of a room, a gallery. You can walk around a sculpture and breath it in. Still, the most intimate relationship to the work might be the artist's own. "I secretly hate it when my work sells," she told *Canadian magazine Flare* in 2017. "They may be inanimate, but they're very real to me. I have a really hard time letting them go."

At the same time that she might inadvertently wish against her own financial success, she seems to be working very hard. Her first solo museum exhibition, "when last you found me here," is currently on view at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario. Here, her figures shed some of the cheeky tone of earlier work. *Boom bang (shiny girl)* (2018) and *you lose shreds of your truth every time I remember you* (2017) are mixed-media sculptures that both employ chains, making them less doll and more flesh. As for the title, "when last you found me here," Lewis suggests that found objects are also a prophetic announcement of the break between being lost and being found.

TAU LEWIS's exhibition *when last you found me here* is on view at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario, until December 2, 2018.

TIANA REID is a writer, editor at *The New Inquiry*, and PhD candidate at Columbia University. Her work has appeared in *ARC Magazine*, *American Quarterly*, *Bitch*, *Canadian Art*, *Garage*, *Real Life*, and *VICE*, among others.

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- 1 Lawren Stewart Harris, "Revelation of Art in Canada," *Canadian Theosophist* 7 (July 1926), pp. 85–88.
- 2 M. NourbeSe Philip, *Frontiers: Selected Essays and Writings on Racism and Culture, 1984–1992* (Stratford, Ontario: Mercury Press, 1992), pp. 16–17.
- 3 Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 92.
- 4 Ibid.

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*Something joyful*, 2017. Detail. Plaster, wire, fur, leather, fabric, pillow stuffing, stones, human hair, acrylic paint, shopping basket, jute. 67×20×32 in. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole, Toronto.