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SANDRA BREWSTER is a Canadian visual artist based in Toronto. Her work has been exhibited nationally and abroad. A recipient of the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts Artist Prize (2018) and the Gattuso Prize for Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival (2017), Brewster has been recognized for her community-based practice that centers a Black presence located in Canada. The daughter of Guyanese-born parents, she is especially attuned to the experiences of people of Caribbean heritage and their ongoing relationships with back home. She received a Master of Visual Studies degree from the University of Toronto. Brewster is represented by Georgia Scherman Projects.

A SENSE OF PLACE: SAN-
DRA BREWSTER AT YYZ

BY CANISIA LUBRIN

Town Girls Beneath is a re-iteration of Sandra Brewster's *A Trace | Evidence of Time Past*, her master's thesis show composed of a jar of Black Cake mix sitting on a plinth near the entrance of the exhibition hall, images on the walls of Brewster's aunts travelling long ago through a remote location in Guyana, and large hanging prints of Guyana's Essequibo River—both, gel transfers. And if you are among those who can count this exhibition as a re-encounter with this material, I cannot claim your lens. My introduction to it, then, is a recording of its removal from its first exhibition space, which now comprises the sole object in *Town Girls Beneath*. It features the layering of white paint over images of Brewster's aunts in the concreted ecosystem of a vertical wall. For me, this opens up a moment of analytic fabulation, where I wonder: *but, here, does life intervene with more life?*

The auto-visual intervention of this work remarks through metaphor, symbolism and the language of re-memory. It is as though we get a view into the much broader through autobiographical meta-material, without privileging the self-portrait or the artist as a starting point. Here, Brewster's photo-based gel transfers offer an iteration of older women in her family when they were young as both subject and vehicle for a powerful metaphor about movement along a storied continuum: place time and the concept of home. In Brewster's hands, this calls up the very real practices of refusing anti-Black ideas in the spaces of reality that comprise Black life in diaspora. The context here is specific—a historical and contemporary shoring of peoples between the Caribbean and Canada. This allows associations between background and foreground to appear first as trace and, then, through identifiable forces that counteract the effects of time passing. We begin to grasp how time is evidenced in place through connotations in culture, tradition, prejudice and other forms of facing history through practice and protocol.

Such an intervention includes the technician tasked with the removal of those images and those of us who come bearing witness now.

Sandra Brewster makes clear in *Town Girls Beneath* that we are all bound up in the atmospheric and spatial implications of its composition because the multi-dimensional ecosystem of this work encourages thinking that is associative rather than contrasted or related to opposites. In this way Black-Caribbeanness in the geospace of Canada colours the interplay between presence and absence, permanence and impermanence, shadow and light, time and place, home and elsewhere. This makes urgent the request to consider what is made when narratives of Black being as disposable are troubled—or refused—particularly when erased or otherwise made invisible by institutional processes, such as the one evidenced here.

The pictorial conditions of repetition inherent in photography are challenged in this specific gel-overlay interaction that has happened in the “past” contained in the video. The existing interiorities between shadow and light, the main vernacular of the imagistic mode, speak beyond their presence and their pretence of frozen time. Brewster makes us think of our own sense of place within the sites, functions and upheavals of diaspora vis-a-vis the promise of permanence which the photograph makes possible. It is this site of memory, and in Brewster's employ, the method of memorialization, which disrupts the obvious or expected strategy of using photographs of her family members to address wider abstractions of community and the nature of family. One of the images not included in this video installation is a photo of members of the Senior Guyanese Friendship Association hunched over the exhibition catalogue. This becomes a way to think of how new communities form beyond institutional recognition.

In signalling to the turbulent geo-histories of Black peoples in Canada, a more acutely equatorial connection is made of the movements of Black people activated by the metaphor and category/world of the Black Atlantic. The brown colour of some of the images mirror the colour of the Essequibo river. This invites considerations of the “matter” and materiality of Black being. In Brewster's words the water is “stained by silt, leaves and sediment below the water

surface.” This suggests forces of affect coming from both within and without. Where the “I” that separates the title and subtitle in the original exhibit symbolizes a slash as a barrier, the word “beneath” in *Town Girl Beneath* annotates the discontinuous convergences between people and their geographic location, especially one that would subsume them.

Between disjunctures of sound in the liminal spaces of video documentation and the archiving of an absented presence, how does presence accumulate over time? How do stories, narratives and vernaculars for living present in tangible and intangible ways? Another potent absence in *Town Girls Beneath* is the jar of Caribbean Black Cake mix (ingredients) elevated on a plinth. This extends the symbolism and metaphorical power of the dessert's mongrelized history (british pudding + Caribbean spiced cake) through parallels of Brewster's family moving from Guyana to Canada, where the cake's particular diasporic constitution, its confounding sense and taste and how it comports tradition continue in undeniable specificity within Black Caribbean community but in a new Canadian context. Therefore, the jar's absented juxtaposition with the images of Brewster's aunts travelling through a remote location of Guyana in the picture *Town Girls Atop A Hill*—which is being sanded down and painted over—operates on the level of bewilderment and estrangement. Brewster styles this sanding down as imbrication, as having her family members “forever embedded in the architecture of the institution.”

Where this exhibition concerns the afterimages or the ghosted presence of these images once removed from the exhibition space, the zones of our interactions multiply to include imagined lives. From this process of sanding and painting-over, comes another interchange between stillness and movement. The stillness is an excess of a certain density of life in the photographic image that endures as a faded presence, as a porous apparition through the sanding process. And the movement is illusioned as the painter moves his brush vertically and systematically and the images begin to disappear into fragments until

unseen. This then invites a new participation in Brewster's angular shaping of her master's thesis, given the added dimension of a video installation. We are witnessing the removal of an art installation within the context of an exhibition. This act of witness refuses apolitical interactions with such a work. The question of complicity is opened up in the act of witnessing this whitening of a Black presence whose erasure happens only on the surface.

Brewster's composition in this way contextualizes her own methodology and adapts her current preoccupation with the process of the gel transfer through the double-visual technology of film-to-gel-based photography and to digital film. Yet, Brewster's return to this material doesn't merely excavate and reuse. In this re-configuration of a past, the space of its composition takes the form of a rescue, a recycling and reintroduction of these images into the videographic medium, recorded in the act of their removal.

Brewster calls for a particular and deliberate engagement with the past-tense time, which is not, in monolithic terms, unalterable. In a striking directness, the process of removal is offered as sonic and literal. The scratching sounds of the sanding process travel through space as a kind of abstraction for a precarious embedding. Perhaps unintended, the sound can be interpreted as both soothing and chilling. It is a decomposition of the method of gel overlay while giving aural testimony to an actual site of Brewster's own sense of identity (first-generation Guyanese-Canadian). Further underscored by the cost and potential of institutionalization, here is one revelation of the regularly invisibilized presence and creativities of Canada's Black peoples.

These interplays make clear that an often obscured history can re-enter the present calling for new ways to hold and address what it makes urgent. Brewster trains her incisive eye on the rapturous work of an understated accentuation of the past as not-yet-gone but for the fact of its echoes in the continuation of the Black Atlantic project.