Photograph of a box of plant material gathered by the Tropical Agriculture Garden in Paris for use in French public schools, as part of the educational arm of the colonial system, highlighting the riches of the French empire. Credit: CIRAD Historical library.

Cacao pod.


A draft co-written by James Baldwin and Bobby Seale in 1975 proposing the publication of a dialogue on topics including Eldridge Cleaver's new found Christianity, Angela Davis and black masculinity reactions to her, connections between black liberation, women's liberation, sexuality, Marxism, and Pan-Africanism, as well as speculations on gender. James Baldwin Papers, SC MG 536, Box 58, Folder S, Schomburg Center.


Images of anatomical models of human flesh.

Hortense Spillers's classic essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An Essay on the Invention of Whiteness" comes visible in glimpses, and a diasporic longing and dispersed fragments, precarious lives be-tenuous – now gathered together in pieces that do not comprise the whole. But in the scattered and dispersed fragments, precarious lives be-come visible in glimpses, and a diasporic longing for a portable home creates new genealogies by affinity. Lin weaves together the stories of James Baldwin (1924–1987), Black American novelist and essay-ist, Jeanne Baret (1740–1807), French botanist and first woman to have sailed around the globe, and Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), artist and naturalist born in Frankfurt. Going beyond their highly divergent social situations and historical contexts, Lin highlights how the three characters engaged complex negotiations of intersectional power relations throughout their lives. Strongly engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, James Baldwin was nevertheless dismissed by some of the Black Panther Party leaders for his homosexuality, which they disparaged by aligning it with femininity and whiteness. In his novel Giovanni's Room (1956), Baldwin describes a makeshift home, a space that is both oppressive and hope-ful, impoverished yet constantly being renovat-ed. This description of Giovanni's room was the inspiration for Lin's preceding iteration of the room rendered in wet porcelain; it is the site that makes possible a desire, rich, but still evocative of internalized self-loathing. Here, in preserved fragments, it represents the way stories are recomposed in incomplete and new arrange-ments.

Jeanne Baret left her peasant life by means of a borrowed identity: She cross-dressed as a man to be able to embark aboard the French ship L'Étoile for the famous voyage navigated by Louis-Antoine de Bougainville in 1766. Visible only through scarce archival traces and minor reports written by distant commentators, Baret's out-standing trajectory is overshadowed by the legacy of the royal botanist Philibert Commer-son, her lover and employer. In his journals, his debt to Baret's knowledge is apparent in refer-ences to plants he learned from her alongside racialized and classed descriptions of her masculini-ty.

Unlike Baret, Maria Sibylla Merian grew up in an environment of renowned engravers and print-makers (including her step-grandfather Theo-dore de Bry, who made some of the first publicly disseminated images of the New World shown in Europe). Merian had an exceptional life as a woman and a scientist of her time. She left her native Frankfort to spend most of her life in the Netherlands, living for some time under the protection of the Labadist religious community, divorced and in custody of her two daughters. In her fifties, she traveled for two years to Surina-me, pursuing her research on metamorphosis. Though ostensibly complicit with colonialism and slavery in the Dutch colony, she was one of the few to credit African and Indigenous slaves and workers, on whose labor she relied. In the speculative narrative of Candice Lin's exhibition A Hard White Body, a Soft White Worm at Portikus, the three human characters encounter non-human agents. The sculptures are made of porcelain, a material that has been
described in a racially anxious language as the exquisite white body, a Chinese secret of Western Orientalist desire, inimitable until the mid-eighteenth century. While porcelain is known for its pure whiteness and resistance to cracking or staining, here its damaged aspect reveals its fragility and porosity. In the nine-teenth century the French scientists Louis Pasteur and Charles Chamberland used it as a filter for the study of bacteria. In doing so, they discovered the existence of viruses as well as the local cause of the 1865 silkworm disease, which caused large economic losses in the French countryside and was spoken of as a foreign contamination. A century and a half earlier, Maria Sybilla Merian had extensively searched for a profitable New World equivalent to the silkworm.

Alongside the installation, a detox herbal tea is being served, welcoming the visitors for a hot drink. The plants in the brew are the components of Swiss Tea, marketed by Commerson from the plants he learned about from Baret. The tea evokes an idea of a healthy, natural body that is cleansed from damaging environmental and social influences, such as endocrine disruptors or toxic working conditions. The privilege of purity in toxic times. The tea is prepared in the exhibition and visitors can serve themselves; an invitation to toxicity. The hot tea is prepared in the exhibition coproduction with Bétonsalon - Center for Art and Development CIRAD, Paris.

A [Hard White Body, a Soft White Worm](#) is a coproduction with Bétasonsion - Center for Art and Research, Paris and the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, The University of Chicago, with contribution from Temporary Gallery, Cologne.

The exhibition at Portikus was made possible with the financial support of the Hessische Kulturstiftung.

Co-curated by Lotte Arndt, Lucas Morin and Philippe Pirotte.

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**Video credits:**

*The Beloved, Video, 12’* © Candice Lin 2017

*Voiceover:*

*Viole Aronshan*

*Sound editing:*

*Daniel Oldham*

*Photography scene and CG animation of objects described in Giovanni’s Room rendered by:*

*Daniel Oldham*

*Text written by Candice Lin with quotes and anecdotes from:*


**Research Images:**

-Photogrammetry scans and CGI animation of objects described in Giovanni’s Room rendered by: Daniel Oldham

-A reproduction of a watercolor drawing depicting Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, the first French circumnavigation of the Atlantic World, Huntingdon Library, Rare Book Collection.

-“Aotourou joined the expedition on board La Belle” by Jean-Baptiste Bouffartigue. From a series of drawings on the voyage, 1764-

-“Crossing of the Line” (see caption 41).

-Photographed and translated by Hélène Maes. Natural History - Paris, Department of Collections, Central Library, Ms 884.


-“A Hard White Body, 2017/18, distillation system, bricks, urine, plants, porcelain, wood, cardboard, books, photographs, paper, used clothing, dried plants, glass jars, hot plate, kettle, pitcher, silk worms, heating wire.”

-B The Beloved, 2017, video, 12’ loop.

-C Under the Shadow of the Peacock Flower, 2018, Ceiling painting, plastic sheeting, paint.


-3 Early draft of a biographical sketch written by James Baldwin, wherein he discusses the significance of his use of the metaphor of the sea and what it means to undergo a ‘sea change,” as he writes in Giovanni’s Room. James Baldwin Papers, SC MG 936, Box 1, Folder 4, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Harlem, New York.

-4 An excerpt from a letter written by Sol Stein to James Baldwin. James Baldwin Papers, SC MG 936, Box 3b, Folder 50, Schomburg Center.


-8 In her book In the Wake Christina Sharpe describes the concept of “residence time”: the time that organic matter takes to disappear from the environment, in relation to memory and history. Christina Sharpe, In the Wake: On Blackness and Being, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, 34-35.

-9 A postcard from Alik Hakey to James Baldwin (and his sister). James Baldwin Papers, SC MG 936, Box 3a, Folder 18, Schomburg Center.

-10 Maria Sybilla Merian: Over de Voortrekkers en Wonderwerktuigen Veroverende Der Surinaamse Insecten (Metamorphosis of the Insects of Surinam, Amsterdam, Jean Frederic Bernard, 1675, 268). James Baldwin Papers, SC MG 936, Box 1, Folder 4, Schomburg Center.


-12 A reproduction of a watercolor drawing depicting Louis-Antoine de Bougainville’s expedition, the first French circumnavigation of the globe, arriving on Tahiti in 1768. Bougainville claimed Tahiti for the French and named it. 2. tourou joined the expedition on board La Boudeuse (C), becoming the first Tahitian to visit Europe. Jeanne Baret and Philibert Commerson traveled in the other ship, L’Etoile (D). Credit: Bibliothèque nationale de France (Paris).

-13 Samples of plants for educational purposes, distributed by the environmental library of the Research Center for Agronomical Research and Development CIRAD, Paris.

-14 Candice Lin, 2017. Graphite on paper. Sketch for the watercolor “Crossing of the Line” (see caption 41).

-15 A list of plants possibly written by Jeanne Baret, found in the archives of Philibert Commerson. Jeanne Baret suffered chronic skin rash due to binding her breasts and may have used these plants for their emollient properties. Table des plantes médicamenteuses, 18th century, manuscript. National Museum of Natural History, Central Library, Ms 884. Credit: MNHN (Paris).