

Bold Tendencies 2022 Q&A with Rhea Dillon

To start, could you give us a bit of background on yourself, such as where you studied, where you're currently based and some of your key interests as an artist?

I'm Rhea Dillon; I'm an artist and writer. I studied at Central Saint Martins but not on an art degree. That being said, I'd always been aligned with art from a young age. I'm currently based in London despite travelling a lot for practice and research. My practice entails looking into what has formed the ontologies of Blackness and how to approach or usurp those properties with the ontic of my being.

Your practice traverses nearly all mediums, from sculpture, painting and video to poetry and performance. What is often the driving force behind your selection of materials and is there a conceptual common ground between them?

The initial idea, and/or the research that it trajects, evokes the material the piece desires as a vessel. In that sense it could be described as spiritual, but for me it feels innate or didactic. There have been instances though, which I really strive for, where the original material I worked through an idea with didn't hold up as a piece so I looked to another material. This is important because it means I'm still questioning throughout the making, and editing.

Your recent residency at V.O. Curations in London finished with your first solo show, *Nonbody Nonthing No Thing*. It was a powerful and minimalistic show that explored a "poethic exploration of Blackness." Can you describe a bit more about this term, "poethic", and its relationship to this exhibition and your work more generally?

"Poethic" is a term that was introduced to me in conversation with Simone White from her friend Joan Retallack's book, *The Poethical Wager*. It is defined as "a poetics thickened by an h" which I extend as language thickened. Poethics, when coming into the physical artworks I make, meets a non-figurative and therefore conceptualism. However, it is important to note that I start from an extension of language and an ontology of Blackness from language.

Your new commission for Bold Tendencies 2022 is called *9/3 or I know how to fall (3) and I was born to nights (9)*. Can you briefly describe the physical piece?

Nine over three is a series of 9 triboid plinths (triangular faced cuboids) stacked on top of one another, turning to reach heaven. This stacking forms a minimalist obelisk made out of Sapele mahogany.

Immediately, the work strikes me as taking the scale of a public monument or classical statue. Did you intend to draw this connection, and if so, how do you think the work might engage with the question of who and what we choose to memorialise in society?

With 2020's Black Lives Matter uprising following the murder of George Floyd, a number of statues of colonisers were and continue to be torn down globally. I wanted to think about removal. Removal connects to the removal of African people from the continent for the Slave Trade. Removal, in this instance, is removing the figurative reminder of this global pillaging that colonists did in the making of the Capitalocene... and so we are left with the plinth. I wanted to give space for the removal of spirit in that this is now an empty holder for a non-body. The plinths are triboids as that connects them numerically to the triangular slave trade route map. Then this ascension to heaven results in a birds eye view of a 9 pointed star. 9 plinths and 9 points both reference the Nine Nights tradition in Jamaican culture, where on the ninth night after a person's death families have a large celebration to finally see off the spirit, to see off the duppy.

Over the past few years you have been working a lot with African hardwood, seen in your new commission but also in your recent solo exhibition with *Soft Opening, Janus*. What do you find so evocative about this type of wood?

Mahogany has history in being indigenous to West Africa and thus being used to build the slave ships that would have transported my ancestors to the Caribbean and the New World.

Much of your work, and I think this is typified in your new commission, suggests a confluence between lyrical expressions of home and identity, alongside those of abstraction, dynamism and estrangement. Do you think

these terms can ever exist alone — or are they necessarily part of the same equation?

This is a great question. As a diaspora child the answer is no they can no longer ever exist alone. The expression of home and identity includes estrangement for black people in the West.

How do you think about your commission in relation to the programme theme of Love?

I think only love can be present when faced with death. Mourning is the wound carved by the deepest love. And when I think about the love I want to breed and see, I always follow bell hooks' definition: "Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect and trust." I know I always seek my practice to be any one, if not all of those words, especially when thinking about identity and ancestral ties.

What have you got planned for the rest of the year — are there any special projects in the pipeline?

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