

TATE ETC.

Summer 2023
Issue 58





Rhea Dillon talks to fellow artist Anthea Hamilton about the resonances and meanings of materials, colonial histories, and her desire to be at play with an audience

An Alterable Terrain

RHEA DILLON IN CONVERSATION
WITH ANTHEA HAMILTON

ANTHEA HAMILTON *In short, what would you like to do with this exhibition?*

RHEA DILLON The exhibition is my most direct engagement with black women's geographies and my viewpoint within the Black British diaspora. There is this play within the title, *An Alterable Terrain*, where I am trying to give location's reins to a black woman, from her body, and with her own hold on her visibility/invisibility.

AH *We're in your studio, on the 18th of April, surrounded by some of the works that will be included in the show. How will these constituent elements come together?*

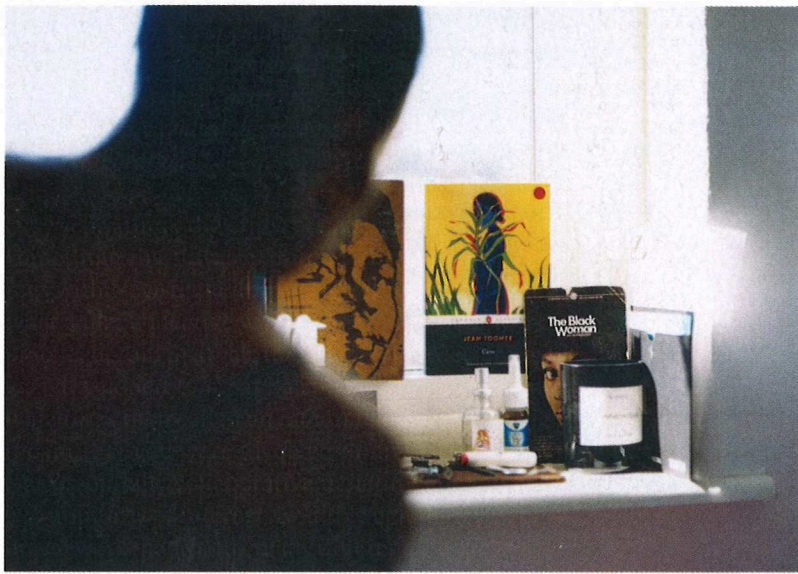
RD I wanted to think about the framework of the/a black woman's body. I asked a friend, a lover, my mother and a 'brother' two questions: 'What would you say the key parts of a black woman's body are?' and, secondly, 'What would you say the key parts of a woman's body are?' These questions had to be asked in that order. Confronting the subconscious is an important part of my research.

So I'm thinking about perception, and how curation could be described as 'architecture meets artworks'. These plates, for example, will be suspended from the wall, allowing light to shine through them, to convey the textural quality of the works. They almost look bodily in a way. They're made from molasses mixed with resin, in differing quantities. The second part of this work is a series of cut-crystal plates made from soap, which is scented from an ongoing sweat project I'm working on. These are positioned in four stacks on a low plinth. Four, because each of the soap stacks represents a number from the year of Jamaica's independence: 1, 9, 6, 2.

The plates on the wall will be in conversation with the plate stacks below them. I see the neat meeting of the low plinth that the plates will sit on with the wall as a representation of Deleuze's fold theory. During the act of folding, Deleuze articulated that the marginalised individual has the ability to encounter an alternate self that is 'different ... from the identity imposed by external, marginalising forces'. The fold could be like looking into a black hole. What is the future and what could it look like? Could the fold be a perceptive analysis of the question: when is a point of folding – or even leaning – able to be self-governed by the black woman?

AH *There's an exhausted lean, there's a posturing lean... What type of leaning are you thinking about?*

RD I feel that in all acts of leaning there are points of rest, and that's my main desire. There is a lean that is also a rest with non-desirous consequences; like the biblical leaning on the cross, or a leaning on stocks as public punishment. The stocks and cross both make a



Rhea Dillon in her studio in London, photographed by Sirui Ma, April 2023

point of contact with their 'support' where the subject is leaning off it under duress.

AH *I like the idea of the point of contact. I'm interested in how your work physically touches the institution – this idea of Tate being 'concrete' or 'solid' and the works being edited, even translucent in some cases. There's this kind of contrast between the total object and the partial.*

RD Absolutely. I like to think of it as a process of affecting, and imbuing. My artworks are sometimes described as found-object sculpture, but they're sourced objects; there's a didactic means as to why I've chosen a thing. With the calabashes, I sourced them through another artist friend whilst I was in Jamaica conducting research. They came from her family's land.

AH *For me, as well as the source of the objects, it seems to be about their presentation, and an aesthetic lineage – why your grandmother would have this particular curtain, for example. It's quite specific, right?*

RD Obviously, with the net curtain in *Flagging Visions of Periphery* and the cut-crystal plates in the cabinet in *A Caribbean Ossuary* (which joined Tate's collection last year), there's a deep desire carried forwards from my grandma and other relatives to give a presentation. Perhaps I would be doing a disservice to the reality of having lived with my grandma multiple times throughout my life – seeing her care for the presentation and beauty of objects – if I was to just collect or 're-frame' them.

AH *I think that's why I'm stuck on certain objects. Because they're familiar to me, in quite a particular way, and I feel close to them. I understand the struggles of how they came to be and I identify with them, which is quite a strange sensation, because they have both a warmth and a coldness.*

RD What you're saying is exactly the experience that I share, that we all share. That's why with *A Caribbean Ossuary*, there are broken pieces of cut-crystal glass: it's about receiving the object and then repositioning it from your perspective.

AH *There's a potency in these objects. What roles do geography, theory and mythology play in the exhibition?*

RD I always think about a birthing. How one rebirths. How we give birth. The support in the labour, the labour in the support. I think about what the academic Katherine McKittrick expressed through M. NourbeSe Philip's poetry of how a geographic story could be produced 'from the last place they thought of, from the "place in between" the legs: the seemingly silenced and expendable black feminine body/parts and selves'.

bell hooks talks about how important black women were to the slave trade because they were the ones who could keep making the slaves. The production line. It gets stated that the black man had the world on his back, but Atlas would actually be a black woman in that respect. Holding this world, both in the sense of how the Capitalocene started through that birthing and through the slave trade, but also how the cleaning of society is leant on the backs of black and brown women today.

AH *How are you hoping your show will be received by visitors to Tate Britain?*

RD Good art for me is art that belongs in the conversation. So, art that produces questions; whether that's questions to your kin, or to yourself. It's like these molasses plates here: a strictly 'good' one for me is just one that can hold itself – structurally, but also one that meets the desire for questioning. Which one looks the most interesting? What is that? And why is that? I think those are the most fundamental questions that anyone can ask. I have no desire to educate an audience, but I have a desire to be at play with them, and to extend my shared questions with them. That is always what I feel most excited by.

AH *That's why I'm excited about your body of work being in that building. There's a stillness to it, but I see it talking: not only to bodies, but also to the stone of the building, or to the light in the room. There's a monumentality to it even within its physical lightness. There's a great gravity to what you're doing; I always feel like I'm sinking into something when I see your work.*

Art Now: Rhea Dillon: An Alterable Terrain, Tate Britain, until 1 January 2024. Curated by Daniella Rose King, Adjunct Curator, Caribbean Diasporic Art, Hyundai Tate Research Centre: Transnational. Art Now is supported by the Art Now Supporters Circle and Tate Americas Foundation.

Rhea Dillon and Anthea Hamilton are artists who both live in London.

