

ART

Monthly

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Conversation Pieces

Eric Baudelaire interviewed by Colin Perry

The Look of War

Julian Stallabrass

Why Duchamp

Mark Prince

Bertille Bak

Profile by Tom Denman

Jesse Darling

Profile by Adam Heardman



Ingrid Pollard: Carbon Slowly Turning

MK Gallery, Milton Keynes, 12 March to 29 May

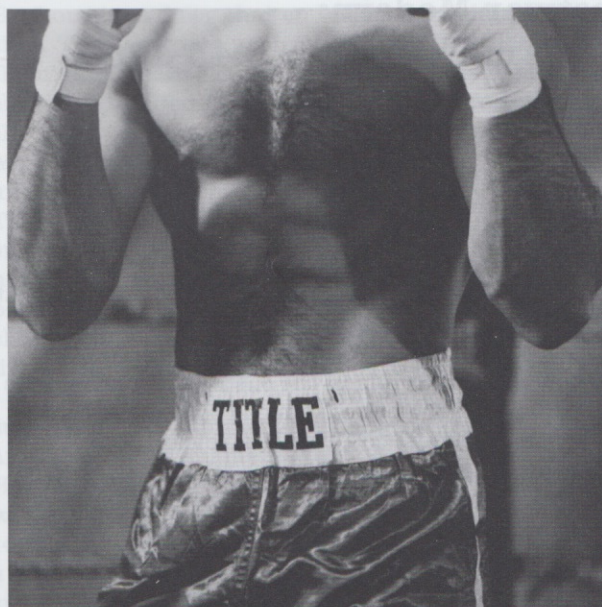
One of the key uses of carbon is determining the age of organic matter by using radio-carbon dating. During a given lifespan, all growing material - mineral, plant or animal - absorbs carbon, whereupon the accumulated carbon starts decaying at a measurable rate. Typically, carbon dating is used to determine the age of archaeological or paleontological specimens, providing previously unknowable truths about our world and moving our comprehension of deep time forward.

Carbon and its relationship to geological properties is used to frame Ingrid Pollard's exhibition at MK Gallery. Unfurling across six loosely themed rooms, the exhibition presents a generous overview of Pollard's practice and her fervent investigations into power, time, control and memory. Her work also leads us to understand how historical representations of land over millennia have remained or decayed.

Pollard's best-known series, *Pastoral Interlude*, 1987, comprises hand-tinted photographs of herself and friends in bucolic settings, and has been lauded for the way it challenges the stereotype of black people being primarily associated with urban environments. In a recent interview, Pollard also expressed her desire for viewers to consider the way in which agricultural landscape is managed, controlled and fabricated for industrial use. To perhaps encourage this reading, the series is installed opposite *Landscape Trauma*, 2001, a group of large-format prints on linen detailing rock-forms found in Northumberland: all swirling painterly forms and hypnotic colours which, on first glance, could be the cosmos, internal cells within the structure of a body or the glistening temporal shapes of a sandy shoreline. Pollard compresses associations between the ephemerality of life and the deep geographical patterns of rock formations shaped over aeons. The absence of any human form in the images enables us to reflect on our physical impermanence.

That's not to say that Pollard is not engaged with human bodies and identity. In the mixed-media installation *Contenders*, 1995, she directly comments on the physicality of the male body. The work illustrates two boxers in fighting stances, their honed bodies ruptured over numerous square frames. Between and beside the images are bricolages of boxing paraphernalia and collages from magazines which instruct the reader on how to punch and about how their body should look. Toying with ideas of boxing as a demonstration of ultimate strength and idealised physical form, the installation gestures to theories of power and control in photography, Pollard's primary medium.

Throughout history, whomever is wielding the camera has controlled the narrative. Photography is often held as truth, and yet it usually tells an incomplete story. This is evident in *The Valentine Days*, 2017, a series of enlarged and hand-tinted 19th-century postcards of post-emancipation Jamaica featuring scenes of individuals and communities working. Originally produced by the Scottish-born Valentine Brothers to entice people to settle and spend money in Jamaica, the images promoted the country as a destination for redevelopment. Pollard uses an archaic hand-tinting method to draw attention to the black men, women and children who were peripheral to the original purpose of the postcards. Here she foregrounds



Ingrid Pollard, *Contenders*, 1995, detail

the ordinary, subtle modes of oppression of black lives after emancipation - what Sadiya Hartman would call the 'afterlife of slavery'. They are an uneasy reminder that Jamaica is still part of the Commonwealth with Queen Elizabeth II as head of state, despite its desire to become independent (as the monarchs-in-waiting were reminded by Jamaica's prime minister Andrew Holness during their recent beleaguered Caribbean tour).

Archival re-engagements with history are echoed throughout the exhibition. In *The Boy Who Watches Ships Go By*, 2002, Pollard speculates about the story of Sambo, whose unconsecrated grave she came across near the ports at Sunderland Point. Over ten hand-tinted emulsion prints stretched on canvas, Pollard ruminates: was he a runaway, an enslaved cabin boy or part of a ship's crew? Her crumbling, imperfect images suggest a fallibility of memory - stories tossed about in the ocean. *Belonging in Britain*, 2010, is a video work of animated photographs and letters sent from London and the Caribbean in the 1950s, while *Bow Down and Very Low - 123*, 2021, presented the story of a young black girl who has been voted as the 'May Queen'. Taken from a propaganda film made by the Colonial Film Unit in 1944, the girl's curtsying image is rendered on a lenticular print and produces a ghostly spectre of her action, repeating again and again. Is she accepting of her newfound regal position, or is she in deference to the white people who bestowed it upon her, and that continue to look at her?

In 'Carbon Slowing Turning', Pollard extracts and presents latent histories in both found and staged photographs which, despite the fixedness of the photographic image, become imbued with life. She interrogates the images, often revealing their colonial undertones and social constructs. The exhibition presents these stories and gives us the opportunity to learn from them - it is vital that we do.

Rosa Tyhurst is assistant curator at Spike Island.