

ANIMISM is the worldview that
non-human entities (animals,
plants and inanimate objects
or phenomena) possess a
spiritual essence.

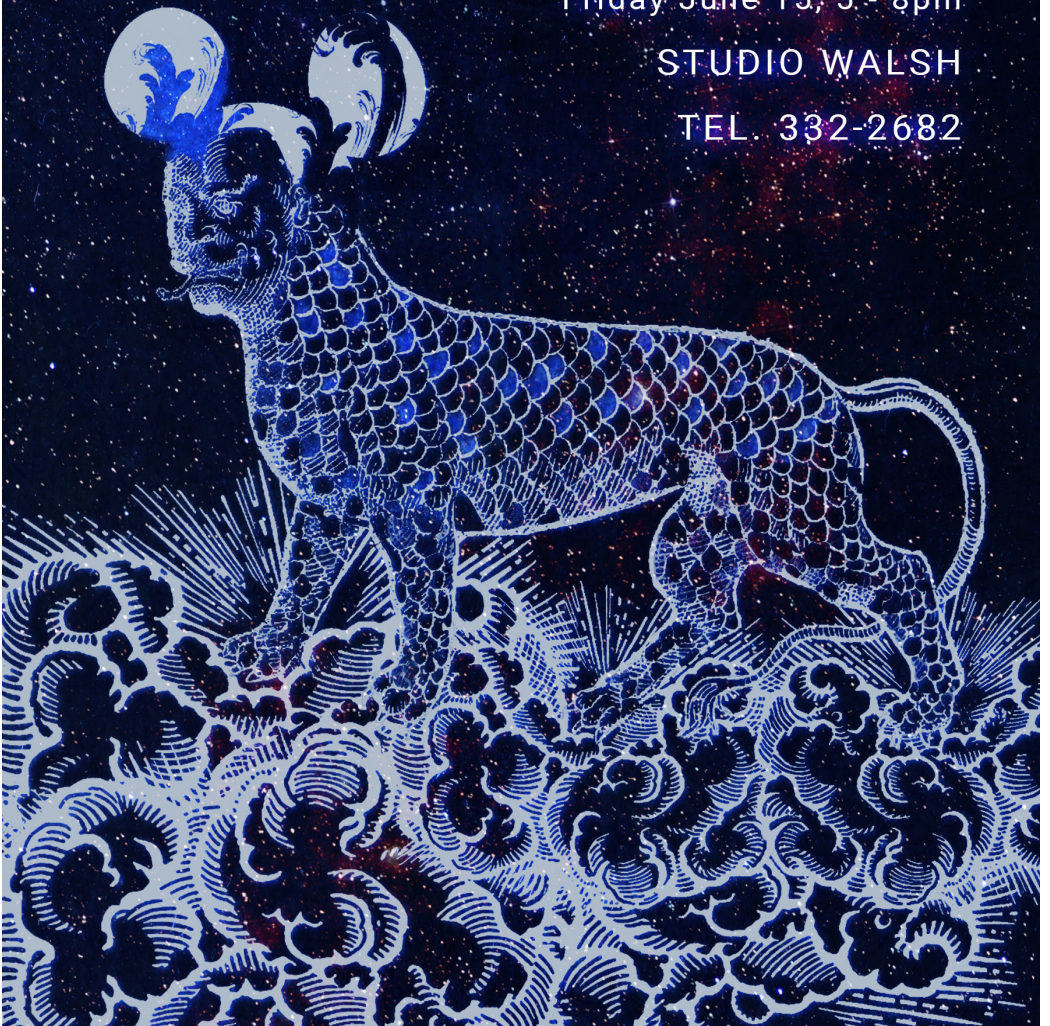
ANIMISM AND THE COLONIAL IMAGINATION

FROM SENEGAL TO ST CROIX

Friday June 15, 5 - 8pm

STUDIO WALSH

TEL. 332-2682



“‘The purpose of art,’ James Baldwin wrote, ‘is to lay bare the questions hidden by the answers.’ He might have been channeling Dostoyevsky’s statement that ‘we have all the answers. It is the questions we do not know.’”

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen*

A contemporary art show in the U.S. Virgin Islands about something called the colonial imagination arrives towing a rattling string of questions. Not least of all where we imagine colonialism to be in relation to ourselves. Where is it, where are we, in this moment that is forever aftermath, in this stubbornly non-self-governing territory? What do our positions within these frayed and unfurling histories of power and violence mean? If the contemporary art world sometimes adopts an urbane, impartial attitude that upholds the value of ambiguity, then we must be ready for protestations that colonialism in the U.S. Virgin Islands is not ambiguous, that it leads us down the path of mystification, alienation and displacement at best.

‘Animism and the Colonial Imagination: From Senegal to St. Croix’ is an exhibition of work by 14 artists that opened at Studio Walsh on St. Croix on June 15, 2018, nine months after two record-breaking Atlantic hurricanes lashed the U.S. Virgin Islands in its so-called ‘centennial year’ (100 years since the transfer from Denmark to the U.S.).



Lauren Baccus



Niarus Walker

The show was organized by artist collaborators Janet Cook-Rutnik, William Stelzer and Edgar Endress, and sponsored in part by a grant from the Virgin Islands Council on the Arts. It would not be the first show of contemporary artists, in the Virgin Islands or elsewhere, for which I think it best to leave the title and the more tangled aspects of its thematic underpinnings be. The show was conceived at heart as a needed opportunity for the display of works, old and new, in a storm-traumatized and often arts-underserved colony of the United States. So, the work deserves our attention.

‘Mixed Breed, Female’ by Lauren Baccus appears as a pair of women’s shoes made from leather, cotton, velvet and plastic, but as with so many cultural objects whose neutrality we take for granted, Baccus’s piece is encoded with meanings historically-inherited. The piece’s hoof-shaped heels gesture not only to local myth (the cow or goat-foot woman) but to the dehumanization of colonial projects and economies, a gesture frequently repeated in the exhibition. Language play is also important to Baccus’ piece. The artist is clear-eyed about the word ‘breed’ in the V.I. vernacular; its use, as both noun and verb, inherited from a world of plantation slavery.

Other artists in the exhibition, likewise, gaze back at the plantation, a conspicuous target, and mine it for insights on the present. The knotted materiality and imposing size of Niarus Walker’s monumental half-bull, half-man sculpture ‘Good Breeding Stock,’ (note the word again) made from power lines brought down by 2017’s storms, are the most



Janet Cook-Rutnik

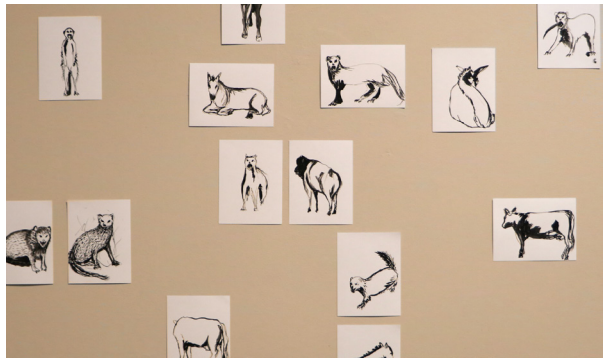


Sara Lee Hayes

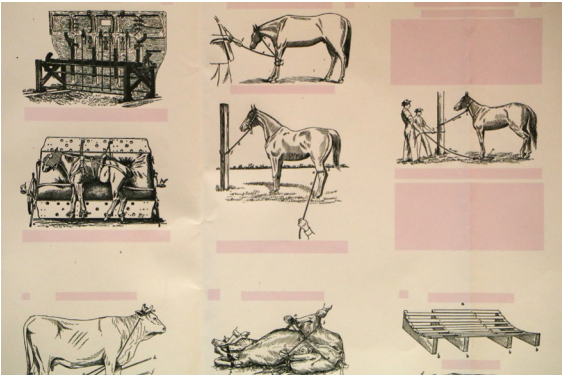
immediately striking thing about it. But Walker is likewise interested in the warped narratives about humanity that chattel slavery and colonialism spin out as self-justification, chief among them the categorizations and classifications of race. In Baccus' and Walker's works, representations of the feminine and masculine, the quotidian and the magical, originate from within a shared critical discourse despite their vast difference in scale, in the intensity of their gestures.

Works displayed by Janet Cook-Rutnik and Sara Lee Hayes are more interested in the artifacts and architectural remains of the plantation, cane bills and sugar mills specifically, and the contemporary narratives that surround them.

Cook-Rutnik's 'Cane Bills' consists of a series of three image transfers on the titular agricultural tools. The transfers are of an 18th-century painting by Agostini Brunias, an exoticized vision of an apparently untroubled, prosperous Creole society in Dominica. The cane bills as canvas return the erased labor, the sharpness and edges, to the picture. Meanwhile Hayes' ceramic sculpture "One Legacy is Another One's Inheritance" started, according to the artist's statement, with an awareness that sugar mills too easily become just another symbol of the tropics for touristic consumption. To counterbalance this, Hayes went in a decidedly unpastoral direction with one of her ceramic mills, filling it with severed heads and painting on it the flags of the islands' primary colonizers, Denmark and the United States. Historical awareness ends up here as a body count.



La Vaughn Belle



Edgar Endress

Several pieces in the exhibition pose questions about the production of knowledge. La Vaughn Belle's series of 22 V.I. animal sketches titled 'the Most Wretched Objects of the Brute Creation' reads like the scattered pages of an exploded travelogue or notebook of 'discovery.' But here we do not see the conquistador's uncertainly drawn animals, symbols of the one divine reality, but instead something more accommodating to multiplicity and a kind of freedom. The 'local' V.I. animals, all of them imported by the island's colonizers to

serve a function, refuse to submit to a universalizing or reductive eye. The mongoose bristle with prickly resistance; the cattle turn their backs to the representor, inscrutable and opaque; the donkeys, beasts of burden at rest, meet the gaze with an idle indifference.

Edgar Endress's digital print 'Dominion' is an exercise in decontextualization. The images used in the piece are ones that recall the encyclopedia or almanac, and likewise deal with animals and control. With large areas of text redacted, the viewer is forced to confront the images alone as startling depictions of violence and implements of torture. One imagines the missing text as being exceedingly rational, methodical,



Sigi Torinus



Christina Frederick Gasperi

here; others such as roulette, bid, and backstroke are freer of context. The accumulated marks of burned writing are layered and cacophonous, hard to decipher. The bare wood on the other hand makes no invitation to be deciphered. On its own, the question is not what does it mean, but can it mean? Is there a sovereignty beneath the things inscribed, branded on us by our experiences, by language?

Paintings in the exhibition by Luca Gasperi and Christina Gasperi have primarily ecological concerns, perhaps owing to the fact that the two artists are also farmers. Christina Gasperi's untitled mixed media piece from a series titled 'Wayfinding' depicts a stack of animal skulls, but the palette is contradictorily cheery and inviting. The skulls become a monument, more sharply rendered than the blotches of color that make up the landscape, to the consequences of our extractive activities. Similarly, the distant smokestacks of Luca Gasperi's watercolor 'Our Nature' signal the ongoing despoliation of St. Croix's industrial South Shore, but the presence of a young child in the foreground also makes the argument for an Edenic innocence attached to the body in its 'native' environment. The attitude of both paintings appears to me to be reflective, the rumination of artists who also work the Earth, saying: 'Beware the creaking bridge between encounter and conquest.'



Luca Gasperi

The work of two photographers is included in the exhibition. David Berg, whose ethereal visions of St. Croix are often influenced by magical realism, seeks to find in the strongest of his three black and white photos the inner life of the Senepol, a breed of beef cattle 'developed' on, and suited to, St. Croix. (For those wondering, the Senepol, said to have a genetic connection to West Africa, are the reason for the 'Senegal' in the exhibition's title, and explain the preponderance of cattle-themed works.) Berg's extreme close-up of two seemingly inquisitive Senepol does have something soulful about it; the animals' wide eyes and the character in the wrinkled folds of their peaked heads invite the viewer to contemplate them as individual beings rather than a 'utilitarian type,' which Berg states is his intent.



David Berg

The photos displayed by John Jaffers were made during the shooting of a documentary titled 'Bred for Slaughter' which explores the history and recent rise in international popularity of the Senepol. Unsurprisingly given the process, and similar to the work of Berg, Jaffer's images have a sweeping, cinematic quality.

instructional, prompting the question of what horrors under our noses language allows us to coolly accept.

Sigi Torinus' 'Backstroke' is an experiment in pyrography (writing by burning) that also treats language in a philosophical way. Torinus' piece consists of two small square boards; one is branded and inscribed with words, the other blank. Some of the words that have been left like scars in the wood – such as estate, empire and 'American paradise' – are clear enough in their meaning

The photos displayed by John Jaffers were made during the shooting of a documentary

One image in particular, 'Generations,' has a windswept poignancy. In it Jaffers captures from above a team of working horses running through a cattle pasture that their ancestors also worked, creating a more romantic image of the creolization of the animal kingdom that the exhibition keeps returning to, sometimes bitterly, sometimes pridefully.



John Jaffurs

Large paintings by Kharis Kennedy and Gerville Larsen, and a driftwood sculpture made on-site by William Stelzer reach directly for mythology and spirituality. Kennedy's "Goat Foot Woman" incorporates local legend into a figurative work that, with its shadowy scowl, broad-shouldered costume, clenched-fist stance and exposed genitalia, presents in a way that makes confrontation, self-assertion and sexuality difficult to separate.



Kharis Kennedy

The title of the piece, 'Struggling to Stand while Head Reaches for the Sky' speaks not only to the form the sculpture took organically but to resilience after manmade and natural disaster.

If today our cultural production in the U.S. Virgin Islands is steeped in, fueled by, resistant to, and in collaboration with 'the colonial imagination' perhaps that tells us nothing but that we are fish in

Larsen's abstract and semi-mystical mixed media 'Caliginous Aura' meanwhile is a hazy encounter, enigmatic and inexplicable, but not without a similar boldness to its vertical dimension, the contrast of its earthy browns and liquid blues, its points and frayed edges.

Stelzer's rickety but dignified cow sculpture, transported in pieces from St. John to St. Croix, is literally an evocation of spirit, the spirit of cattle that were once grazed across St. John. In the 20th century the conversion of much of St. John to a U.S. National Park, and the accompanying shift from a subsistence farming-based economy to a tourism-based one – issues not separate from a contemporary sort of coloniality – meant the end of widespread grazing and cultivation. In the aftermath of the devastation of Hurricanes Irma and Maria, the artist used debris to reanimate a totem of the island's past.



Gerville Larsen

water. Here, as in other dependent territories, the decolonial position can prove especially elusive. There are questions we do not know, here in these islands that grow busily and wildly over other islands; here where our fears are so often linked to what Derek Walcott, writing in 'Midsummer,' saw in the quality of this soil, the way its fealty changes under our feet.

David Knight Jr.



William Stelzer

Lauren Baccus

www.machetewomanlb.com
 lrbaccus@gmail.com
Mixed Breed, Female
 Leather, cotton, velvet & plastic
 12 x 12"
 2016

LaVaughn Belle

www.lavaughnbelle.com
 belle809@hotmail.com
The Most Wretched Objects of the Brute Creation
 Installation of Ink Paintings on Paper
 20 @ 6" x 8"
 2018

David Berg

www.blackwoodimaging.com
 www.davidberg.art
 blackwoodimaging@gmail.com
Side Eye
 Photography
 11 x 18"
 2018

Janet Cook-Rutnik

www.janetcookrutnik.com
 www.cookrutnikART.vi
 cookrutnik@gmail.com
Three Cane Bills
 Installation
 3 @ 19 x 4"
 2017

Edgar Endress

www.eendress.com
 eendress@gmail.com
Dominion
 Digital Print
 53 x 60"
 2018

Christina Frederick Gasperi

gasperifineart.com artfarmllc.com
 islandorganics@gmail.com
Untitled
 Mixed Media
 9 x 12"
 2007

Luca Gasperi

gasperifineart.com artfarmllc.com
 islandorganics@gmail.com
Our Nature
 Watercolor on paper
 18 x 24"
 2006

Sara Lee Hayes

slpottery@hotmail.com
 340-514-7508
One Legacy is Another One's Inheritance
 Clay, glaze
 10'x10"x12"
 2017

John Jaffurs

johnjaffurs@gmail.com
 (646) 954.8200
Generations
 Photography
 9 x 11"
 2018

Kharis Kennedy

www.khariskennedy.com
 khariskennedy@gmail.com
Touch Has A Memory : Goat Foot Woman
 Oil and glue on panel
 80 x 36 inches
 2018

Gerville Larsen

www.tallerlarjas.com
 info@tallerlarjas.com
Caliginous Aura
 Watercolor - mixed media
 22 x 90"
 2001

William Stelzer

www.wtstelzer.com
 wtstelzer@att.net
Struggling to Stand while Head Reaches for the Sky
 Driftwood and zipties
 60 x 30 x 40"
 2018

Sigi Torinus

www.sigitorinus.com
 sigitorinus@gmail.com
Backstroke
 Pyrography on wood
 14 x 7"
 2018

Niarus Walker

Niarusart.com (under construction)
 niarus.art@gmail.com
Good Breeding Stock
 Coax cable wire
 8' x 12' x 5'
 2018

Catalog Photography/Design:

William Stelzer

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