


Fragments of a Shared Colonial History

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La Vaughn Belle is another artist whose work provides valuable insight into the colonial past of the Virgin Islands, particularly in relation to Denmark and the United States. Belle works in a variety of disciplines including painting, installation, photography, video, and public interventions. Throughout her practice, Belle finds inspiration in architecture, history, and archeology to effectively challenge colonial hierarchies and narratives, while also exposing systemic structures of invisibility. Firmly positioned at the forefront of decolonial art practice, Belle sums up some of the factors that inform her work:

I see my art practice as an investigative tool, as a way to engage in dialogue, a platform for thinking and a means to develop knowledge. My work has evolved from figurative and symbolic explorations in painting to a variety of modes that include drawing, painting, video, performance, installation and public intervention projects. Therefore, the emphasis of my work does not lie in the medium, but in creating a space to explore social contexts and collective narratives. History, film, soap operas, fairy tales and mythology all inform my work in that they are narrative modes that I use as well as sites of investigation. I look for the narratives inscribed in various objects and places and find ways to add to them and at times subvert them. Because I live in the Virgin Islands, a place that has changed colonial hands seven times, the longest being Denmark, and the last being the United States, I am particularly interested in the colonial and neo-colonial narrative and how it shapes identity, memory and reality.³⁹

Belle melds fragments of history, archaeological remnants, and references to architecture (particularly colonial architecture with its inherent power

structures) into a richly interconnected visual language. In 2014, she began the ongoing body of work *Chaney (We Live in the Fragments)*. This series of paintings connects Denmark and the Virgin Islands visually, formally, and historically. These beautifully executed paintings, which echo the blue and white patterns of traditional Danish porcelain, feature specific references to the flora, fauna, and wildlife of the Virgin Islands. As Belle explains, *Chaney*, understood as a hybrid term for China and money, references the fragments of colonial plates that are still found throughout the Virgin Islands—in the gutters, on the beach, and, especially after a hard rain, as the shards are pushed up from the soil, in gardens and back yards.

Taking these fragments as a point of departure, La Vaughn Belle paints a picture of the Virgin Islands that stands as a powerful antidote to colonial erasure and whitewashing. Her paintings speak out effectively against colonial stereotypes and power structures, while also exposing the uncomfortable details of colonial past. As objects with a very specific history, these small archaeological treasures signify a double fracture. They are physical traces of the plates, teacups, and dishes that were originally produced by colonizers and transported to the colonies to consume colonial goods. As physical fragments of colonial wealth, they are an everyday visual reminder of the fractures caused by colonialism. If these bits and pieces from the past tell only part of the narrative, Belle paints a more complete picture of the past in her decolonial narrative.

La Vaughn Belle's first visit to the Royal Copenhagen flagship store and museum is powerfully conveyed in Helle Stenum's 2017 documentary film *We Carry it Within Us: Fragments of a Shared Colonial Past*. Belle's encounter with Danish porcelain, already familiar to her from St. Croix, is conveyed in a very personal account of the historical ties between Denmark and the Virgin Islands, coupled with thoughtful reflections on the continued denial of Denmark's (and Norway's) colonial history. While it might seem like poetic justice that Belle was given the opportunity to produce the *Chaney* plate series for Royal Copenhagen, the fact is that when she approached them to do a centennial plate in 2017 using her *Chaney* designs, they turned her down because they no longer made commemorative plates. It was only later, when they invited her to design the Harald Award, that she negotiated being able to produce a limited edition of the *Chaney* plates. Belle was the first Black artist they have ever worked with and also the only



La Vaughn Belle
*Chaney (We Live in the
 Fragments)*, 2015
 Oil on wood
 152.4 × 121.9 cm
 Photo: William Stelzer



La Vaughn Belle
*Chaney (We Live in the
 Fragments)*, 2018
 Oil on wood
 152.4 x 121.9 cm
 Photo: William Stelzer

artist from the Virgin Islands. Both the paintings and the plates are “a reminder of both the colonial past and the fragments present in Caribbean societies. These shards tell the visual stories of power and projection and how cultures reimagine themselves in this vast transatlantic narrative.”⁴⁰

Belle confronts the remnants of colonial history through works that question the implications of various objects in relation to colonialism. She makes it clear that colonial history is not something that we can dismiss as part of the past because the consequences of colonialism are ever present, as we witness today with systemic racism and social injustice. As a visual storyteller who consistently exposes the link between past and present, Belle emphasizes the importance of considering who tells the narrative and who has the power to be saying what is a part of whose history. It’s no secret that Denmark and Norway are wealthy countries, but the fact that much of that wealth was a direct result of Danish-Norwegian colonization and colonial trade still hasn’t been adequately acknowledged. In fact, it continues to be consciously erased.

On the Service to the Kingdom (2017) addresses this kind of historical erasure and is a critical response to the fractured colonial histories that continue to be told from the colonizer’s perspective. The work was inspired by the dessert plates commissioned by King Frederik the 6th to represent the breadth and wealth of the Kingdom of Denmark.⁴¹ As Belle explains, there is only one plate, #75, of the eighty-one plates that depicts the former Danish West Indies, from which much of Denmark’s wealth was gained. As a dessert service, the series clearly references the sugar industry, which was a vital part of the plantation economy and colonial trade. However, the image depicted on plate #75 is fictitious, it simply is a copy of a copy. The artists commissioned in 1834 to do the series had never even visited the former Danish West Indies. Instead, the artists created a composite of other paintings while adding stereotypical Caribbean signifiers such as coconut trees, a sugar mill, and an aloe plant. As such, the work explores the ideas of colonial image-making and consumption, and the resulting processes of fragmentation of identity.⁴²

Beyond the sheer visual appeal of Belle’s work, the numerous historical and sociopolitical references position her firmly at the forefront of decolonial aesthetics. She examines Denmark’s colonial history not from the detached



perspective of an archival researcher but with the immediacy of an archaeologist with traces of dirt on her hands. She fills in the gaping holes in Danish colonial narratives with works that reconstruct the fragments of colonial history (both physical fragments and the fragments of cultural consciousness) into a coherent, meaningful whole. Her works map out the immediate connection between history and contemporaneity. Adding to the clear historical references throughout her work, the concept of fragmentation is a vital part of her decolonial artistic strategy. Whether she weaves the implications of a found fragment of colonial history into a painted narrative or confronts the fragmentation of Caribbean identity typical of colonial image-making in a new and improved version of King Frederik's dessert service, she approaches fragmentation as one would a fracture or a

La Vaughn Belle
On the Service to the Kingdom, 2017
Painting/Installation
Acrylic on paper plates
Photo: La Vaughn Belle



La Vaughn Belle
Collectible, 2008
Detail
Colored pencil on paper
Photo: La Vaughn Belle

wound. In the case of the dessert service, where Caribbean identity is reduced to one single plate, she takes the image from that one plate and divides it between all the plates, thereby claiming full ownership of the narrative. Similar to Belle's earlier work *Collectible* (2008), the work is comprised of everyday paper plates—the quintessential disposable object—which gives immediate associations to the fact that over the course of its tumultuous history, the Virgin Islands have been repeatedly passed along between colonizing nations.