

# **The Alchemy of Creative Resistance**

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La Vaughn Belle



The alchemy of creative resistance, the practice of unbecoming a colonial subject begins where it began- in the elements, in the basic structures of a thing. It's speculative, a little fantastical and protoscientific. It requires intuition, inquiry and a daring imagination- nothing less for transmutation to occur. From the beginning the European plantocracy transformed the physical environment and the landscapes of the islands they claimed. Aside from running most of the original inhabitants in the Caribbean sea isles, they burned and slashed their virgin forests to build the structures needed to extract their mono crops. They also burned and slashed people too, setting into motion another series of psychic and physical transformations. The increasingly necessary racialized structures were embedded into the colonial project with simultaneous processes that rendered some parts visible and others invisible. The *counter*, the *de*, the *un* to this is also necessary.

I live on an island that was originally called Ay-Ay by its first inhabitants but was renamed Santa Cruz by Christopher Columbus and renamed by the French Saint Croix. We, however, pronounce it like the English who along with six other nations claimed us too at one point or the other and sometimes at the same time. The French were the first to build lasting structures and when the Danes purchased the island they overlaid Christiansted on the French town, Le Bassin, and made it the capital of the eventually named Danish West Indies. They later created other towns also to be named after Danish royalty, Frederiksted and Charlotte Amalie, the latter being the last capital and located on St. Thomas.

I work in Christiansted, a town in the form of a gridded structure with many public buildings on its waterfront integral to the colonial project: a fort equipped with cannons and dungeons, a scale house, a customs house and a chapel (of course). With many of these buildings now being federalized into the United States National Parks repertoire, there are some elements that are now gone, like the slave auction block, or remain out of public view, like the whipping post. Aseptifying unpleasant history goes that way, some items bleached will remain visible, some removed yet remembered and others effaced and forgotten.

When we look at the Danish building codes of 1747 we see traces of how race became atomized and infused into everything. The forbidding of thatched roofs and wattle and daub structures often used at the time in West Africa is not just about the fear of fire and a request for less susceptible materials. The attempt to corral the free Black population into a specific area of the town named (later to be known as Free Gut) had no non-racialized cover. It too was about social control. Many of the wooden cottages that the formerly unfree built still stand today. However, since so many are abandoned and derelict they are susceptible to fire again, although for other reasons, as their transient occupants are mostly addicted to illicit drugs. My studio was one of them. It too had been abandoned and burned and then degraded to another deeper form of

Figure 1. Opposite Page: Cuts and Burns (ledgers series 002), 2017 Photo Credit I Do Art Agency  
Figure 2. Detail of Cuts and Burns (ledgers series 002), 2017 Photo Credit I Do Art Agency

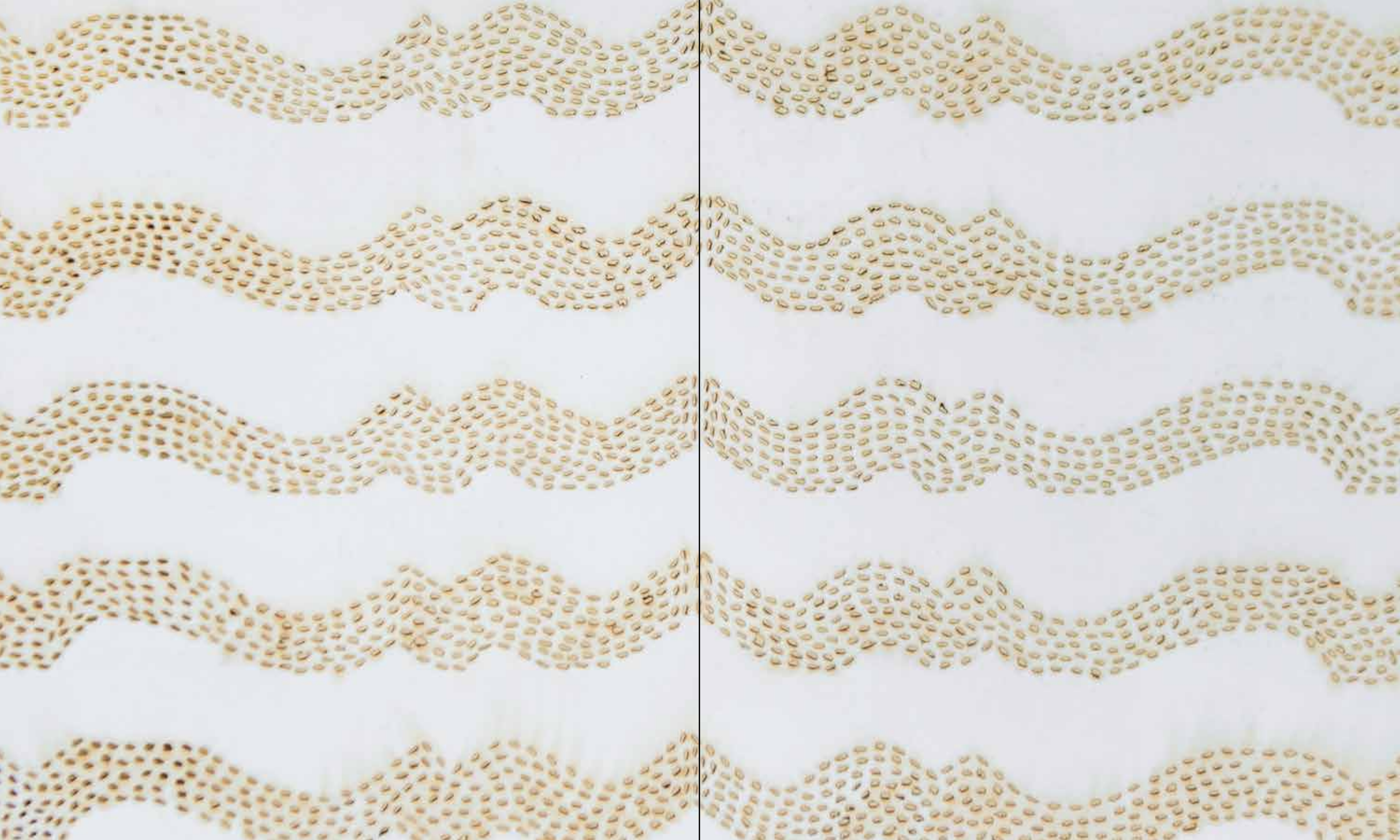




Figure 3. The House That Freedom Built, 2011-present (taken in 2011) , Photo Credit Bernard Castillo

abandonment, the kind that slips into invisibility, like people. Located in the extended Free Gut on the western end of East street, purchasing it transformed my practice (and my life). The renovation process, the developed intimate knowledge of the materials, the subsequent research into the history of the former owners and interviews with neighbors and former residents led me on a path that was speculative, a little fantastical and protoscientific. I wanted to know what did these spaces mean to people whose freedom was tenuous? How does someone who was born free, then cargoed along the Atlantic, worked from dayspring to eventide in abiding labor yet bolstered enough to elude the death covenant of the cane field manage to obtain a little one room house where manumission means if you are a man you must hunt runaway slaves, if you are a woman you cannot wear lace or chintz, if you are either you must be in the house by 10pm, you must not gather in public, you must carry your free papers at all times, you cannot marry whites (although if you are a woman you can be a man's "housekeeper"), you cannot hold a tavern license nor one for trade and you certainly better not be harboring any runaway slaves, although you can own slaves and some most certainly did.



Figure 4. The House That Freedom Built, 2011-present, (taken in 2016), Photo Credit Tamia Williams

Figure 5. The House That Freedom Built, 2011-present, courtesy of the artist

Figure 6. The House That Freedom Built, 2011-present, courtesy of the artist

This long process of wonderings and inquiry led to the work . This installation of small wooden houses made entirely of fretwork designs with no frame, nails or glue was designed to be fragile, mortised with removable metal pins and buttressed by its own weight. The piece draws from my studio and the houses in Free Gut of a similar shape and from the fretwork patterns more common in the town of Frederiksted. Located on the other side of the island on the western coast Frederiksted was built later than Christiansted, with wider streets, a small harbor and its own fort with cannons and dungeons, and the ever necessary customs house. However, what makes Frederiksted look different is the abundance of the Victorian-style fretwork, the wooden ornamental designs added to buildings during the reconstruction after the largest labor revolt in Danish colonial history occurred there in 1878. Also known as the Fireburn, the revolt began on the day that the annual contracts would be effectuated. On that day workers who hadn't seen much improvement in their living and working conditions since slavery, and some could effectively argue that it was worse, decidedly burned down most of the town and neighboring plantations.

Despite the death and destruction, or perhaps also because of it, wages did go up, conditions did improve and the revolt set into motion the beginning of labor unions on St. Croix.

I was intrigued with how this history of resistance was inscribed in the buildings, in the reconstruction and the proliferation of the fretwork patterns. I was also intrigued by the transmutation evidenced in the two most common tools used in rebellion- blade and fire- cuts and burns- and how they have morphed from colonial implements to workers tools to rebel weapon. I wanted to develop a visual vocabulary that could transcribe these processes of not only the resistance, but also speak to liminal, temporal, negotiated and imagined freedoms. The resulting series has taken its own various forms; from large panels and scrolls, to smaller emblem-like works and hanging pieces.

One of the first times I showed the series I was approached by someone who placed their hand on my shoulder and with great concern asked if I was ok. Before she told me about how the piece inspired a deliverance of tears I knew what she was asking. Maybe it was in the timber of her voice, maybe it was because she touched me, but suddenly I realized the work carried other connotations of psychic trauma and psychological pain. For the record I was fine (more or less), but I was translating aspects of the colonial process that I had not originally intended to. The practice of the *counter* the *de* and the *un*, the process of self-regard, often leads you to unexpected hypotheses and conclusions.

I did not know when I bought that building looking for a cheap studio space that it was a part of Free Gut. I was oblivious that it's first owners were born along the West African coast and survived the unimaginable. I was just as unexpecting that while sitting on the steps of my studio taking a lingering break that I would have a eureka moment while looking at a coral stone and wonder why it was there and why there were straight edges. I learned it was possible to remember something you never knew, a sudden spark of memory that leads you to ask a historian if it's true that the enslaved cut these stones out of the ocean and that these are the foundations of almost all the colonial era structures that we don't see, that we don't see the stones, nor them, nor remember their labor, we only see the Danish yellow bricks that were brought as ballast in ships and were put on top and so we call them Danish buildings, and Danish architecture and we forget who built them and the labor it took from them until...until it's in ruins, a few tumbled coral stones in front of you that one day may affix your gaze.

My attempt to record that has taken various forms. The first one being which was conceived as a response to an invitation to create a memorial around the Centennial anniversary of the transfer of the Virgin Islands from Denmark to the United States. I wanted to create a structure, a plinth, that highlighted the invisibilized labor and the foundations of colonial societies, but also signal similar foundations in an art historical context. As the piece is quite a heavy and difficult piece to move, is another variation, another attempt to record the unremembered. While searching for a paper that wouldn't rupture in the transfer process, I found a website dedicated to the hobbyists of grave rubbings. Using those specific materials seemed appropriate in a symbolic



Figure 7. Opposite page: Coral stones found outside artist studio, courtesy of the artist Trading Post, 2015 Photo Credit Tamia Williams

Figure 8 and 9. Following spread: Walling Rubbings in process, 2017, courtesy of the artist Archival Dialectics, 2018, courtesy of the artist



Those seastones are collected from the reefs that surround nearly the entire island; this makes things much easier for those plantations located near a beach...The reefs that grow out of the sea produce never-ending, limitless quantities of limestone. Just as fast as it is removed, it grows back again. And it is quite convenient to gather because the reef extends above the surface of the sea, with the result that the slaves can stand on it with the water not rising above their feet, except at high tide when it reaches to their thighs and often to their midsections. For that reason, one waits for the low tide and calm weather to undertake this work. The sea is then calm. On such a day, more coral stones can be cut and gathered than on two other days. When the weather is good, one need not worry that one's slaves will get drowned or hurt. The slaves are not unaccustomed to standing naked the whole day long in the sea gathering stones, although when it is windy, it becomes very cold.

-Reimert Haagensen, "Description of the Island of St. Croix in America in the West Indies" published in 1758

way as they are used in recording tombstones, the markers of the dead. I too am marking the markers of the dead: their lives, their work and their crepuscular freedoms. This mark-making and make-marking is the *counter*, the *de* and the *un* to one of the great tragedies of coloniality- the eclipse of futurity. Hence to imagine a future one must reconstitute the elements of the inextricable . To construct our own manumissions we must alchemize the fragments of these and in doing so find our way through all that it portends.