Visualizing Vocabularies of the Counter Archive:
A Conversation with La Vaughn Belle
By Michael K. Wilson
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Michael: I am interested in the notion of counter narrative and counter archiving within your artistic practice. Much of your work interrogates the relationship between object and subject, and within much of these works, you include material objects such as pottery, patterns and stones to uncover various stories and subjectivities. How would you define your artistic practice, and can you speak more to this interplay between object and subject as a means to reinterpret various narratives and subjectivities within Caribbean history and storytelling?

La Vaughn: My artistic practice is first defined by a belief in art as a means to develop knowledge, a platform for thinking and a space to create dialogue. That being said, my work is also greatly defined by my positionality as an artist from the Caribbean and more specifically an artist living and working in the US Virgin Islands, a place that has changed colonial hands seven times, the longest being Denmark and the last being the United States. The Caribbean as a place has always been defined by this tension between object and subject struggling to redefine oneself against the European imaginary of "possession-ship". As a part of this struggle we seek to belong to ourselves and project our own imaginary onto ourselves. My work tries to do this by looking first at the materiality of the colonial project- the buildings, the furniture, the pottery, the documents, the photographs, the paintings, etc.-and to reinterpret them based on my subjectivity. In that way my work usually involves a lot of research and various forms of narrative. This research will also dictate the form of the work, whether it be a sculpture, a painting, a plate or a photograph.

Michael: What do you mean by "redefining oneself against the European imaginary of 'possession-ship'"?

La Vaughn: Well, we have always been looked at by Europe and to a large extent North America from a boldly proprietary nature. They often see the Caribbean as an imagined space in which one could exact their will. We are often viewed from a position of being a possession. This literally happened in the Virgin Islands where we were sold to the the United States in 1916 and then transferred in 1917. This was done without the

consultation of the people living in the former Danish West Indies although Danish citizens got a chance to vote on what to do with us. They were citizens, we were possessions. We actually had no citizenship after the sale for 10 years. This has greatly impacted us both literally and symbolically, both historically and in present day.

Michael: It is very interesting you bring up Transfer Day when mentioning the Caribbean as this imagined space between Denmark and the United States. I had the opportunity to visit St. Croix during the Transfer Day Centennial and attend several of the commemorative events. I noticed large numbers of Americans and Danes traversing the island and, in a way, the environment was very festive and celebratory. In the midst of the parades and fireworks, I asked myself who is actually doing the celebrating, and what in fact are we actually celebrating? I say *who* because I noticed there were not many Crucians lining the streets in attendance for the parade on Transfer day. Conversely, a group of protesters from the Virgin Island Youth Advocacy Coalition were following the parade wearing shirts and carrying signs that said “the centennial celebration is a violation of my right to self-determination”. It forced to me think of how US Virgin Islanders felt about not only the Centennial, but their positionality as a whole in this complicated space.

La Vaughn: The Centennial year, but especially the time close to Transfer Day, March 31, 2017, felt like living in the “twilight zone”. There was a Danish warship that came, there were galas, parades and protests. Along with thousands of Danish tourists the Danish prime minister was there. A branch of the Danish Moravian church issued an apology and then the Governor of the VI questioned why they apologized saying they did not participate in slavery-which was not true. The Secretary of the Department of Interior, (the area of the US Government that is responsible for us) was there and unlike every other speaker who commented on the inequalities that Virgin islanders still face in respect to the US, he made no comment of the most glaring one which is that we fight and die in American wars and cannot vote for the person who sends us there-the President of the US. There were just so many conflicts and it was manifested greatly during the Centennial. What there wasn’t enough of was critical discourse in an organized way. This is of course a result of our coloniality and that we lack the institutions and structures to adequately respond to something as significant as the Centennial. Many people felt that we could celebrate the strength of the Virgin Islands people and their ability to survive these difficult circumstances, however reconciling that with what was essentially a commemoration of being passed from one colonial power to another proved very challenging. In some ways artists were the best positioned I think to deal with these multiple layers and conflicts.

Michael: In terms of dealing with these conflicts within critical discourse, there were several artistic responses to the Centennial. The Bajo el Sol Gallery in St. John developed a group exhibition titled “100 Years of…: A Centennial Transfer Reflection Exhibition”. Another group exhibition, curated by Monica Marin, was held at the Caribbean Museum Center for the Arts in St. Croix titled “Invisible Heritage: Transfer 2017”. A third, titled “The Centennial: My Take/My View” was exhibited at the Fort Frederik Museum in St. Croix. These exhibitions comprised of artists throughout the USVI and the Caribbean. You actually participated in all three of these exhibitions.

La Vaughn: Yes I did. And the versions of them that went to Cuba and to Denmark. Casa de las Americas in La Habana held a symposium about the 3 Centennial commemorations going on in the Caribbean this year: 100th of PR American citizenship, 100th Transfer of the VI from Denmark to the US, and 100 years since the massacre that occurred on the border between Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Priscilla Hintz Rivera and David Knight Jr., a curatorial duo, based in St. John brought that project to Cuba. Then Monica Marin brought a version of the Invisible Heritage exhibit to Denmark. Both of those projects I must add were done on shoestring budgets through great sacrifice and effort on the part of those involved, a very stark contrast to the well-funded exhibitions produced in Denmark.

Michael: Can you talk about your participation in these exhibitions and what it means for Caribbean artists to use their voices and practices to respond to these various conflicts both in and beyond Caribbean spaces?

La Vaughn: I think that the exhibition provided opportunities for responses in creating one's own imaginary. They also provide a form of counter archive as we were talking about earlier. They are spaces to have alternative accounts, images and problematics, a place to question gazes and shift them, turn them around or ignore them entirely. However mostly I think that we are pushing back against the narratives imposed upon us.

Michael: In relation to your notion of the counter-archive, one of the works you included in both “100 Years of…” and “Invisible Heritage” was your *Cuts and Burns* series. I think these works also reflect what you stated earlier surrounding subjective reinterpretations and “materiality of the colonial project”. Can you explain the intent and process behind this particular body of work?

La Vaughn: Yes, it's a series I developed in 2016 and have shown it in various manifestations. It started from my interest in the historic architecture, especially in the

town of Frederiksted in St. Croix. This town was burnt down in 1878 in a labor revolt known as the “Fireburn”. It was a protest to the conditions that had not changed enough since slavery was abolished 30 years earlier. The response was to burn everything down and it was led mostly by women. However what I found interesting was that when the town was rebuilt, it was done during what was called the Victorian period, where this very ornate gingerbread fretwork and design patterns were popular. So the town had this history inscribed in the architecture. As an artist I wanted to see if I could use this resistance strategy of taking colonial tools and transforming them. When we think about the colonial project cutting and burning was essential. When Europeans arrived and wanted to dominate these lands and transform them into plantations they burnt and cut down all the original forests. Interesting enough though these were the same tools that Africans used to liberate themselves. They took the same machete, a working tool, and used it as a weapon and they used fire as a weapon as well. The Haitian Revolution was fought this way too. As an artist I wanted to try to create a visual vocabulary around that. That’s how this series was born. I used the patterns from the buildings and adapted a wood burning tool to do the cutting and burning into paper. But something else happened in this project that was unexpected. It goes back to my original statement about art being a platform for learning, a cognitive tool. After I showed the piece people came up to me and asked me if I was in pain. It then occurred to me that the piece also tapped into this psychological component. This idea that when people experience pain they also inflict cuts and burns on themselves. There was this other layer in that the work captured the resistance, but also the pain. It’s a very violent piece, very insidious even though it's quite fragile and elegant. I have done variations of the work: long installations that resemble a railing, a large curtain, small emblems and ledgers in the form of scrolls. There is a lot there to explore.

Michael: When I look at some of these works, I notice you use the negative space similar to an etching to create the image. It is the negative space that creates the visual vocabulary and I find that symbolic to making various invisibilized historical narratives visible. There is something to be said about how narratives are sometimes to be read within the negative spaces and your process brings that to life in a very literal way.

La Vaughn: Yes, that’s an interesting reading of that work.

Michael: I would like to talk more about the references of violence within your work as it particularly relates to the European gaze and interpretations of the Caribbean. One of the works you included in the “The Centennial: My Take/My View” exhibition was a series titled *Storm (and other violent interruptions in the pintoresco)*. They consist of charcoal studies of palm trees bending in the fray of a violent storm. When you first told

me about these works you said ‘these trees in turmoil represent what it feels like to live in the Caribbean- simple, beautiful and violent all at the same time.’ Palm trees are typically exoticized and read as objects of tranquility, but you chose to depict them within turmoil.

La Vaughn: That work started as a challenge to myself to work with an image of the Caribbean that was saturated in stereotypes, like the palm lined tranquil landscape, and try to interrupt it. The definition of a storm is literally an disturbance or an interruption in the landscape and atmosphere. But I also wanted to capture this spirit of resistance that is persistent and essential to the Caribbean social life as well.

Michael: So you’re not simply depicting a storm, you’re attempting to disrupt/ interrupt a certain framing of the Caribbean pintoresco. Or perhaps the European pintoresco.

La Vaughn: Yes I would say there in an effort to interrupt a colonial gaze. These images, although they may have originated from this position of an exterior colonial gaze, we have adopted them ourselves for various purposes, one of the main ones being for the tourism industry. We have participated in selling a particular image that is an extension of the aforementioned colonial one.

Michael: Your mention of material and tourism culture in relation to the European/colonial gaze provides a perfect context to talk more about your more recent work in Denmark. You’ve been working with chaney for some time now, and one of your current projects works with the Royal Copenhagen and their commemorative porcelain plates. What is chaney and in what ways have you been working with this in your artistic practice?

La Vaughn: Chaney is a colloquialism in the Virgin islands, a hybrid word that combines “china” and “money” and it is used to describe the fragments of colonial pottery that are often found in the ground. Children used to round them to look like coins and used them as play money. So they are a type of currency and currency is a type of platform. I began to see these shards as way to begin to talk about a fragmented identity, fragments of the African, European and indigenous identities that make up who we are. I had an experience the first time I went to Denmark that very much informed this work. I was walking along the pedestrian streets and wandered into a store. On the third floor there was a museum that had floor to ceiling plates that went back chronologically. At that moment I realized that the chaney, the fragments of pottery that are popular to collect in the VI were part of this larger narrative. In some ways I wanted to recreate that experience of being surrounded by these blue and white patterns. I

started with a painting series of large paintings that looked at the patterns and tried to put them together and meld them. It was a very interesting process in that I learned that there are some patterns, or narratives, that we like to repeat and others, maybe they are too difficult to deal with, we ignore. There were parts of the patterns that I didn't know where they led to, how many petals were on the other side of the flower for example. In those instances I just had to imagine it, create something new, bridge it with the pattern of another piece. It very much spoke to formation of Caribbean identity and how it's created.

The store that I had wandered into in 2008 was the Royal Copenhagen, a brand of fine porcelain products. I had the opportunity of doing two projects with them this year: one is a commission to create the Årets Harald, a prize of given to an esteemed professor at the University of Copenhagen and the other is a series of plates. I created a series of 12 plates based on the chaney designs. I just finished them so I am still processing the experience. But in some ways there is an echo of the disruption idea. The Royal Copenhagen produces some of the most expensive pottery in the world, with a 270 year production and craft history. Their patterns are legendary and very much a part of the Danish ethos. There is a particular way you paint them, those trained spend years learning. It was interesting taking the colonial patterns from patterns that were not just Danish, but English, Dutch and German and interrupting that history in a way, adding my subjectivity, my hand.

Michael: Though walking through the Royal Copenhagen was your first time seeing a plate in its entirety, would you say the collaging of these patterns within your chaney paintings are actually more complete representations of the complexities of Caribbean identity as opposed to the full plates you came across in Denmark? Especially because several of their plates do attempt to depict the former Danish West Indies.

La Vaughn: Yes. It's the reality of the Caribbean. We speak European languages but have changed them significantly enough that one would argue that they have become a language of our own. It's this process that I am replicating here in the paintings.

Michael: In addition to transforming the language to include your subjectivities, you also reimagine the medium for some of the works. You stated these are some of the most expensive pottery in the world, however for the piece titled *On the Service to a Kingdom* exhibited at GL Holtegaard, you specifically used paper plates to recreate one particular Royal Copenhagen commemorative plate.

La Vaughn: Yes, however there is a precursor to that piece, which was a series I did in 2008 called *Collectible*. They were inspired by an experience I had when I wandered into the Royal Copenhagen and saw there were plates going back over a century. I figured there must have been some made that had imagery dealing with the Virgin Islands. I was correct. At that time I researched and found about nine. Drawing and reproducing them on paper was about signaling the utilitarian nature of the colonial project and how we were dispensed of not just physically through the sale, but the memory and history as well. It's also of course about subjectivity, my hand in the work. However the piece at the GL Holtegaard work was an expansion of this work in that instead of reproducing a 1:1 plate I reproduced the plate over 45 plates. This piece is from a series of plates that was commissioned by the King of Denmark in 1834-35 to display his Kingdom. There were 81 in total but only one that depicted the Virgin Islands, an image of St. Thomas harbor. However when I first began painting it and researching the other plates in the series I noticed that there was something off about image. I asked Klaus Dahl who had written a book about the plates if the artists had ever gone to the colonies in the Caribbean because the colors looked so similar to all the other plates depicting the Danish landscapes. He said there was no evidence that they had visited the colonies from their journals and that most likely they had made a copy of a copy and composited previous paintings. So basically it was a fiction and the the Caribbean signifiers of the palms trees, the sugar mill and the aloe plant were added. I actually found the lithograph of a copy of a painting that proved this theory.

Michael: In one aspect, similar to your use of chaney, I find using 45 plates to depict one image speaks to the fragmentation of Caribbean identities and histories. However, in another, what I find interesting about the use of paper plates is that the medium becomes an engagement with disruption and disposal. It is a disruption to the elegance and extravagance that tends to be played out both within colonial narratives and the material objects that reflect them. This elegance can come in the form of luxurious porcelain plates, however the extravagance can come in the exaggeration of Virgin Island visual representation. For example, the Royal Copenhagen commemorative plates are more fantastical and exoticized recreations of the Virgin Islands created by people who never visited the island, as opposed to actual representations. So what you have is a deconstruction of that exotification process by recreating the recreation on a surface that, within itself, is completely stripped of luxury and opulence. It's almost like the presumed absurdity of seeing a Royal Copenhagen plate made of paper equates the absurdities within colonial history that tend to control, recreate and dispose of real life histories and lived experiences. And as a result of placing these fictitious narratives on paper plates, you are attempting to dispose of these absurd narratives.

La Vaughn: *Y*es I agree. I often characterize myself as a disruptor of the colonial narrative, interrupting expected or traditional narratives that existed, creating insertions. However, it wasn't until I was commissioned to do a piece at the Royal Copenhagen that I understood that I was a disrupter with my physical body as well. This is after all a very white space, filled with white porcelain celebrating a narrative of white European opulence. However, since I was using "chaney" whose patterns are not only from the Royal Copenhagen or even Denmark, but English, Dutch and German, there was also an interruption in that pristine narrative and years of tradition. I also of course was not going to learn in a few weeks how to paint like the painters working there who have been there for 10 plus years and learn how to paint with an expert balance of machine-like precision but still being able to show that it is handmade. So my way of reinterpreting these patterns and again asserting my subjectivity was also a form disruption.

Michael: Once again, you highlight the relationships between object, narrative, subjectivity and agency. Additionally, there is certain type of agency created when analyzing the relationship between these disposable plates in preservation within a museum's collection. There is a symbolic transfer of power that can be interpreted when an institution purchases this particular body of work, because they then are responsible for the long term preservation of these disposable plates that highlight the attempted disposal of real life histories and lived experience. Through the delicate care of the plates, the subjective narratives they reclaim become signifiers for preservation.

La Vaughn: Yes, I think those things are very essential and interconnected in my work.

Michael: I'd like to talk about another artistic strategy prevalent in your work; your use of Juxtaposition. This is particularly seen in your *Photomontage Series*, which was displayed at the *Blind Spots* exhibition in the Danish Royal Library. Within this series you position personal family photos next to various colonial photographs within the Danish archive. Can you talk more about this strategy?

La Vaughn: I think this in some ways is another way of interrupting the colonial narrative by expanding them through juxtaposition. They present a form of counter archive that questions the positionality of the colonial images. In the *Photomontage Series*, for example, I position an image of a woman seated in a chair holding a baby next to a photograph of my mother standing holding my brother. In the Danish National archives this image is described as "woman in upper class". The classing of this woman is interesting as the image reveals her status through her dress, her hairstyle, the furniture she sits on and the house she is sitting in front of. Much of these same

signifiers are evidenced in the image with my own mother and we begin to see a trajectory of how Caribbean women are located and locate themselves. My mother sits in front of a concrete two-story house on a hill which means it has a view of some kind. All signifiers of class. Furthermore she wears a store bought outfit, a polyester pantsuit and her hair is straightened. It's a really interesting conversation on gender and class but placed in conversation with a historical one.

Michael: How does juxtaposing these signifiers and bodies reflect back to the idea of a counter archive?

La Vaughn: I think it's about creating an alternative site/sight of memory as well as contesting the narrative presented.It is both a space and a viewpoint that provides a counter to the colonial one. At times it runs parallel, other times it's divergent.

Michael: When I think about creating alternative site/sights of memory juxtaposed to acts of disruption, your 2011 video *Somebody's Been Sitting in My Chair, Somebody's Been Sleeping in My Bed* comes directly to mind. In this video, you reenact the fairy tale of Goldilocks by walking through the Great House of the Whim Plantation Museum in Frederiksted, St. Croix. Similar to your experience in the Royal Copenhagen, your body becomes the disrupter of space and spatial narratives. However, as opposed to being positioned in Denmark, these narratives are directly constructed and positioned within St. Croix, which may bring up additional complexities when examining the colonial gaze in relation to time, space and place.

La Vaughn: Yes, the Whim Plantation Museum is a very polemical space. It is located on a former sugar plantation and includes a Great House that has been restored, a sugar mill partially restored and other machines and items related to the industry around the grounds. The housing of the enslaved is no longer belonging to the same property but is adjacent and not restored but in ruin which is often the case. Today it functions as a type of museum that while trying to tell the story of what happened there the edifice is really a symbol of colonial wealth and power. The furniture inside and all the trappings, plates, silverware are roped off to prevent theft and damage so there is a double forbiddenness both to the history and also to the physical space. So by me reclaiming the space and the history in this way through a reenactment of the Goldilocks story which is about being somewhere that is not yours and in which you are trespassing, my work was about questioning and interrupting this idea. You wonder while watching the video about what it means for my particular body to wander through this space and it creates an alternative memory to the previous one of servitude and subjugation but of

exploration and self-actualization. It was definitely about reimagining oneself, the history and the space.

Michael: In what ways can this be reclaiming and self-actualizing? How is this reimagining different than you using your body to merely pretend or mimic the colonial bodies once present in that space?

La Vaughn: Typically this space is forbidden in the sense that people are not allowed to physically engage with the materiality of the space. You can't touch the objects, you can't sit on the furniture, you can't lay down in the bed. Being given permission to do that was a way to develop a certain experiential knowledge around being a colonized body and also to contest it. Remember that a woman in an African descended body like mine historically was only allowed to move in that space as a servant, not freely examining the objects and making claim to them. There was a duality to the experience as I was aware of this history and very aware of the present and how my actions were intervening with both.

Michael: So, in a way similar to the use of paper plates to replicate colonial Danish porcelain, would you say that the act of physical touch is a means of demystifying the forbiddenness and exclusivity these material objects represent?

La Vaughn: There is a physicality involved, but it's not so much about physical touch. It's more about the direct engagement with the materiality of the objects and the narratives they represent. The interactions, in one way, serves as a disruption to what these objects symbolize and represent- both in historical memory and in the present day nostalgia.

Michael: Spaces, like the Whim Plantation, are defined by the tension their historical exclusivity represents. Thus, your notion of disruption highlights another function of the counter archive: a demystification of the object and all the epistemologies and nostalgic trappings that come with the coloniality stored within them. It is a revisitation of space and the narratives that reside within and around certain spaces. Part of this process I see as archeological in the way you exhume stories forgotten and unseen. However, it is also constructive through rearranging or reordering problematic narratives that are currently presented for visual consumption. These reimagined arrangements provides a certain vocabulary to speak to the things that coloniality can't may not allow these objects to say. They piece together narratives and historical gaps. And through challenging what is accepted as knowledge, as narrative, as fact and as reality, your work not just reimagines the archive, but recreates it.

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