

Sharon Norwood's Drawing Room

Norwood's mixed media collages such as, *Gordon*, *Whipped Peter* and *Tolerably Good Looking*, engage the tradition of domestic genre paintings and prints that illustrate the cult of domesticity so pervasive in Victorian Britain and America. In this collage series the artist enhances the surfaces of 19th century prints of fashionably dressed women surrounded by their children from the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection with layers of cut-outs, mirrors and organic line drawings. The cut-outs were informed by the pattern of the keloidal scars on the back of the runaway enslaved man known as Gordon. In 1863, during the American Civil War, photographs of Gordon's "scouraged back" resulting from the whippings he received in slavery were published in *Harper's Weekly* and galvanised the abolitionist movement. Norwood's manipulation of the surface of the images highlights the ways in which romantic projections of domesticity and models of femininity and beauty were supported by and enacted through Black bodies, sometimes violently. The mirror element in the works challenges the gap between past and present and implicates the viewer in the construction of beauty, gender and race.

In the wall installation, *Precious Things*, Norwood uses hair for the first time as material. In the artwork two cast statuettes of African American boys are connected by a silver chain necklace. Her own hair is encased in a resin ring on a gold necklace that hangs from the arm of one of the figures. Attached to the wall, below the figures, is a one hundred US dollar bill. The artist found the moulds of the figures in Savanna, Georgia which she imagines was part of a local industry of black crafts people who sold their decorative objects to a largely African American community. The installation provides recognition of the history of Black artisans in the United States while connecting her own experience as an artist and maker of objects to that history. By including her own hair, Norwood reflects on her own creative work as part of an economy of labor, recognising her own agency and visibility in relation to Black artisans who came before.

The central work, *Adornment*, is a maximalist table installation. Layers of manipulated fabric decorated with a variety of trimmings provide the base for the still-life of an assortment of items including found objects, Norwood's abstract, sculptural curlicues and teacups decorated with decals of her line drawings. The installation takes as its subject the domestic sphere as a site of leisure and grandeur wherein class, gender, and racial identities are created and positioned. As the cultivation of cane and production of sugar by enslaved Africans in the diaspora forever transformed the taste and economy of Britain, the symbol of the teacup in the installation links the intimate setting of the home to empire.

Included in the installation are porcelain bricks. Throughout the South enslaved children, men and women were tasked with creating bricks for buildings and forts. After the Civil War thousands of the newly freed African Americans were ushered into the prison system which provided free labor to private industry, including brickyards, through the convict leasing system. Douglas A. Blackmon in his book, *Slavery by Another Name*, explains that in Georgia, where the artist now lives, prisoners were forced into brutal working conditions for the Chattahoochee Brick Company. Through this state-sanctioned practice African Americans helped to rebuild Atlanta during Reconstruction, without compensation and recognition. Bricks have appeared in Norwood's sculptural works since 2020; like other motifs in her oeuvre such as teacups and saucers, they act as indices of Black labor and presence in spaces and histories that we take for granted--whether in the intimate setting of the home or in the history of architecture and the decorative arts.

Norwood's line drawings appear repeatedly throughout her work. In her monotone prints and series of ceramic plates, interwoven black curly lines set against a white background create dynamic forms. They appear as braided hair in some of her work while in others as abstract markings. On her custom wallpaper, *Untangled Roots*, repeated lines and shapes form a graphic pattern. In *Black* and *The Three Graces*, her drawings are laser printed on black painted panels that are also incised. These black paintings place her work in conversation with modernist artists such as Yves Klein and Frank Stella, who experimented with monochromatic paintings. Norwood's formal investigations of surface, perception and mark-making however, is conjoined with her political interest in recognising the presence and labor of Black bodies in the arts and in our everyday environments. According to Norwood, "My work often deals with issues of identity where I use hair as a medium to explore complex relationships and systems of power. The work aims to create a dialogue that speaks in nuanced ways to issues of race, gender and class. The curly line at times becomes a metaphor for the Black body, other times it is the kinky hair. I enjoy the shift between hair and line, how at one moment the work is read as hair while at other times it is simply a decorative mark.