

*For Pop Pop,
Millard Claude Mitchell*

*with warmest thanks to
my cohort at The Rhode Island School of Design*

fungible commodities

Abstract

This is an unbound portfolio printed using polymer plates on the vandercook press, in Providence, Rhode Island. The portfolio was created as a supplement for *fungible commodities*, a series of three multimedia installations.

Themes

Excavation / Veiling / Oral History / Authorship / Place Making / Home /
Constructing Identity

Contents

Tar / Rope / Earth / Crisco / Beeswax / Logs of The Great Dismal Swamp / Rushes of
The Great Dismal Swamp / Cotton / Abaca / Milkweed / Water of The Great Dismal
Swamp / Pots / Pans / Collected Vessels / Oral History / North Carolina Peanuts /
MCM Family Archive

Introduction

Fungibility is defined as something that can be exchanged for something else of the same kind.

The following poetry, short stories, and oral histories are reflections, interpretations and inspirations for a body of work which acts a labyrinth for mapping my journey of racially constructed landscapes throughout time. In this body of work, I exhibit tactile materials (rope / earth / water) and emotive sensorial qualities (tar / swamp / pans / slides) as a trigger for historical, self, and collective reflection in the context of African American histories—whether they be told, untold, experienced, erased, lost or buried.

This body of work centers, what are often, internalized contradictions. These contradictions manifest conceptually as:

home vs. trap, beauty vs. grotesque, trauma vs. joy, and generosity vs. withholding.

Emotive sensorial qualities

Tar / Swamp / Pans / Slides

Tar

An old factory on a Sunday /
recognition of labor

Their kitchen after smoking
meats / sustaining family

Property usurped /

Our landscape being
burned away

Their body tarred and tortured
/ hate crime

Pans

Kicking the tin can /
past time

/ nourishment prioritized
Kitchen hustle

“supper time”
/ Conjuring congeniality

A sentimental

collision

Swamp

nature’s pheromones,

sodden milkweed

Their gaseous emissions

rotten eggs /A
sulfuric haze

Our fertile damp Earth
/ arable land

Slides

Recalling moments
/ collective memory

The workings of machinery
/ breathing machinery
/

choices
click,
click,
click

material histories /

Nan's card table

A sampling of oral histories and anecdotes unknown

Peanuts

Every summer he would travel to his favorite place, Garysburg, Northampton County, North Carolina.

A small town with dirt roads and familiar faces. It was home to his family farm, Mitchell Place. He had twelve brothers and sisters, the women slept in the house, while the men slept in the barn adjacent the livestock.

They farmed peanuts. Among other things.

He was born in May, 1928. He became a learned man in a one room schoolhouse. He left Garysburg. He went to college. He met his wife. He went to Korea. He became a Father. He became a Civil Rights activist. He became an aerospace engineer.

He went back every summer to his favorite place, Mitchell Place. He would return from his journey three shades darker and incandescently happy, burlap bag in-hand full of Northampton County peanuts.

He would boast of his bounty. A man averse to the domestic, he would turn the peanuts into peanut butter and the peanut butter into cookies. He proclaimed culinary mastery. He insisted you enjoy the fruits of his labor.

I hated peanut butter cookies, but disliked disappointment more, I imbibed.

He died. I reflected with his wife on our favorite memories. I spoke of the peanuts. She spoke of the fallacy. She revealed the rouse, she was the arbiter of the peanut butter and the adjudicator of the cookies.

He was a propagator of self-fulfilling falsities that sated a sweet tooth, in the hopes of making his favorite place, our favorite place, Mitchell Place.

Earthen Floors

The planter and his family would live in the big house, the site's nucleus.

Behind the big house was a work yard consisting of various outbuildings, with earthen floors, much like the living quarters of the enslaved.

Plantation architecture acted as a scaffolding for racially motivated hierarchies to urgently permeate the layout, function, floor plan, and landscaping of the plantation as 'home'.

When the big house did not encompass the kitchen, it was found amongst the outbuildings in the yard. Here the enslaved cook must sustain the life of the "master" through their forced and exploited labor and, on occasion, be made unwillingly implicit in the institution by sustaining the lives of other enslaved people by way of the products of their enslavement.

The kitchen, various outbuildings, and living quarters of the enslaved provided less surveilled spaces to promote place making and attempts at agency. Enslaved individuals would often dig holes in the earthen floors that grounded these domestic, labor-intensive, and violent spaces.

The act of excavating the earth to hide valuables can be interpreted as a reclamation and redefinition of 'home' and 'history', a display of desire for control, and a searching for self-definition.

Swamp

John W. Mitchell was born in 1848, just 15 years before President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

John W. had a brother named Bill and oral accounts tell us that as slaves, they escaped and swam across the Roanoke River near Jackson, North Carolina, around the area called "The Occoneechee Neck."

During their escape, Bill was shot in the stomach and almost died.

The quick-thinking John W. rescued his brother and went into hiding until he could nurse his brother back to health. Coming up with a sure way to elude captivity, John W. took Bill to the Northampton County section of The Great Dismal Swamp where they traveled deeper into the swamp and where many other escaped slaves lived.

The swamp provided a safe haven for many runaways who hired themselves out as log cutters and shingle makers to free blacks in the surrounding area. John W. just may have lived and worked along with and among a group of swamp dwellers called marooners who survived in one of nature's most unpleasant environments.

While nursing Bill's wound, or sometime later, John W. met and married a beautiful widow, half indigenous and half white and whose name is lost to us. This "Lassiter" woman was from Bertie or Hertford County, North Carolina. What we do know is that she had a very young daughter named Louisa and who became John W.'s new step-daughter.

There John nursed Bill back to health. William "Bill" Mitchell, later married Delia whose surname is lost to us. The family pronounces Delia's name as "Dealy." Bill and Delia had seven children: Mattie, Charlie Robert, Georgia (Mitchell) Grant, Nora, Alice (Mitchell) Kee, Evie and William (Bill) Mitchell, Jr." After Bill recovered, they all traveled back to Northampton County where oral accounts tell us that John W. lived on the plantation belonging to General Matt Ransom, a confederate soldier who lived in Jackson, NC. While still a young man, John W.'s wife died and he was left with the child, Louisa.

Oral accounts proclaim her to be an only child.

In order to keep her from being abused by the master or sold to another plantation, John W. took the child and "went to live in the woods" until she was old enough to be presented as his second wife. It is said that they may have returned to the Dismal Swamp (probably until the end of slavery when they were free to live a sparse existence).

Source: mitchellplace.org

Preface

Trying to imbibe in
histories unknown,
untold, usurped.

Depictions of tragedy require recognition of transcendence.

Let's not conflate reconstructed remembrance
with a negation of joy, of tenderness, of pride, of

reclamation. Me? My family? My we?

More than
underserved.

More than spoken
for.

More than used, abused, dehumanized, economized and commodified.

A bedrock.

A cornerstone.

A foundation for
futures.

A beacon.

A new imaginary.

A sweat through struggle that is sweeter than every rose-

colored anything. No skin served me better.

No hand held me
tighter.

No song lifted me
higher.

No voice gifted me such
wisdom. No touch gave
me more life.

Than my me, my family, my we.

Hole in My Pocket

I have this hole,

Dug in my pocket.

My
Great
Great
Great
Great
Grandmother put
it there.

If she *really* dug it...

But why do we care so much about
ownership,
Don't we want to be free?

Can something be both empty and full?

Can't anything mean Love.

Of value and without explanation

I don't know what dwells here--but it is a home

Of John: A Story in 13 Pockets

1. The dismantling of slavery will not equal emancipation.
2. John and his brother swim across the Roanoke River around The Occoneechee Neck and find healing for all manner of wounds in The Great Dismal Swamp 15 years before 'emancipation'.
3. When even what you find empowering is already fractured.
4. They travel where no white man will enter. Amongst kinfolk they fortify futures.
5. Colonial inclinations return them to General Ransom's plantation in Jackson, North Carolina.
6. You cannot make a home in the master's house.
7. Inherited imaginations permeate personhood and thwart autonomy. Tragedy ensues, they return to the Swamp.
8. Slavery defines the space of the free. January 1863 John is allotted forty acres and a mule; no one asks him to define reparations.
9. On the day of his death his wife Louisa is kicked off of their property.
10. Blackness and femaleness is everything but a claim.
11. They have fourteen children: John Drew, Charlie Robert, Henderson, William 'Willie', Edward, Ellen, Rebecca, Martha John, Missouri, Roxanna, Willie Mae, Cora, Louisa Lucille 'Cindy'.
12. Charlie Robert marries Amie Wych they live and farm in Garysburg, North Carolina, sixty-four miles from The Great Dismal Swamp. They have twelve children: Bertha, Ellis, Leroy, Robert Willis, Mary Ellen, Walter Lewis, Louise,

Raymond, Millard Claude, Joseph Wilson, James Elign and John Arthur.

13. *An identity bequeathed.*

Second Sight

You are no longer whole...
Do you wonder what they're searching for?
There is a nuclear fission
And then what?
When they look to you.

Will they keep watching?
Will they intervene?
Will someone shout?

Enough!

There is a nuclear fission
You are no longer whole...
Do you wonder what they're searching for?
When they look to you.

Will they keep watching?
Will they intervene?
Will someone shout?

Enough!

And then what?

You are no longer whole...
There is a nuclear fission
Do you wonder what they're searching for?

Will they keep watching?
Will they intervene?
Will someone shout?

Enough!

And then what?

When they look to you.

For Those Who Hear It Too
As Performed by Those

Imagined in Collective Refrain

Dreaming someone else's subconscious

Remembering
The other Song

A sentimental trespassing.

Who Taught me
Every word ?
Every interlude ?
Every key change that moves song through melody and memory ?

Can Something
S - I - N - G - U - L - A - R
Be truly shared?

Please,

Demarcate the Boundaries
Of
The
Universal.

Remembering
The
Other
Song?

The one
I know so well
And

Not at all

Remembering
The
Other
Song ?

The one

With
Faceless Singers
Clearly defined

Remembering

The
Other
Song ?

The one That
Catalyzes
Cadence
And
Guides gait

Remembering
The
Other
Song

And

Kin Who Hear It Too

16-Gallon Wash Tub

My head still

Echoes with

The reverberation of aluminum from the 16-gallon wash tub.

That fell

From the sky of the same silver color

On to my head

And through

My eyes,

And nose,

And mouth,

And throat,

Coming to rest in the pit of my sore shallow stomach.

The echo vibrates

And pulses like waves.

Waves that come and go like the tide,

But ebb with no moon

And flow with no current.

Unbothered by the laws of nature or man.

An unpredictable parasite has laid temporary claim

To this vessel.

I am dizzied and shaken.

How did I never look up,

At that silver sky

And spare myself

The cacophony.

Note to Self

To me, you are Love —
Pure delight--
A golden hour sunshine all-day-long

That sets pink
And makes even its wake irresistible.

Warm, like summer stones.
Sweet, like powdered pastry.
Astute, porous pine.

To me, you are Love.

Repeat.