

NICOLA
VASSELL

**ALBERTA
WHITTLE
RESPECTABILITY
WON'T SAVE YOU:
A CARIBBEAN
HAUNTING**

**MAY 18 —
JUN. 25**



Opening **MAY. 18**
5-8pm



**CURATED BY
ARIANNA
NOURSE**

Film still from Alberta Whittle, *RESET*, 2020.

Co-commissioned & co-produced by Frieze and Forma. © and Courtesy the artist, 2020.

Gallery Hours

Tuesday - Saturday, 10 am - 6 pm 138 10th Ave. New York, NY 10011

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How To Avoid Becoming A Snake © 2022

by Arianna Nourse

As a child, I was given beautifully illustrated books with photographs and drawings of the flora and fauna that inhabited different topographies. But whenever I saw a snake, I would get so scared that I absolutely could not or would not touch its image. I would hold the page by its edge or use a pencil or some other implement to turn it, so I would not have to engage with its physicality, which did not seem to be fully trapped by the paper. It seemed as if those images of snakes could not be contained, that they would find some way through the confines of their own physicality to pass through and bite me.

— Alberta Whittle, *How To Avoid Becoming A Callus*, 2020

"The calls are coming from the house!"

— Sergeant Nash, *Black Christmas Alberta Whittle*, 1974

There are Bajan people in these works and they are from town. Their own ancestors had left rural chattel houses, with siblings and parents, purpose and pride, and emigrated West, by horse, to urban Bridgetown.

Alberta Whittle's ancestors arrived from rural Barbados in the 1920s, and earlier; but by the 1960s, they'd truly arrived. Bridgetown was culture, Bridgetown was class. Bridgetown was respectable— and respectability? Respectability was safety.

For the artist's grandfather, Gladstone Fitzroy Barker, there would be no combing of hair outside; no shiny clothes on his family before 6 pm; and certainly no island mysticism. In silken armour - the cousins hoped - no officer would frisk you. Follow the codes - the aunties whispered - and nobody gets hurt.

Years later, and a land apart, Gladstone's granddaughter questions the price extracted by her forebear's call to "self-contain". For her solo debut in New York, Alberta Whittle summons a journey of assimilation, resistance and healing for herself, her family; indeed, for any of us prodded to "cover up" to get-by.

Using her grandfather's family snapshots as a port of departure, Whittle sweeps her sitters from fashionable Bridgetown, intimately painting them into the unfettered landscapes her ancestors derided as "too country".

Whittle leaves her family in their fine frocks; but in a gentle side-stepping of the photographer's middle class wishes, the artist swaddles both her ancestors and their land up tightly, in shawls of hoodies, of lace and of cowrie shells. This land is the site where England refined both sugar and chattel slavery, exporting the sweet and the atrocious throughout the world. Reaching through time and reconfigured space, Whittle ensconces her people and her home in alternative talismans for protection.

Four sparingly rendered, blue and gold paintings on view shift our family protagonists forward. While the artist deeply feared snakes as a little girl, her guardian proxy seizes the one depicted confidently, or even mockingly. This family figure, unclothed save for a Giotto-esque Afro, battles snake and self to shed scales of conformity. Contained in oceanic portals between worlds lived and imagined, the stakes could not be higher.

Two large tuftings give us a glimpse into the other side. The rituals and codes of adornment have slid from the Cosmopolitan to Masquerade eo ipso. The Shaggy Bear, one of four key Bajan characters associated with the hybrid Tuk bands, suggests a celebratory, triumphant ascension over norms, rules and regulations.

It is 2022, and Whittle offers her ancestors a space to shake demons within and without. We offer hope they will succeed.

May 18 — June 25 2022

Alberta Whittle

Alberta Whittle (b. 1980) is representing Scotland at the 59th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia. She was born in Bridgetown, Barbados and currently lives and works in Glasgow. Her creative practice is motivated by the desire to manifest self-compassion and collective care as key methods in battling anti-Blackness. She choreographs interactive installations, using film, sculpture, and performance as site-specific artworks in public and private spaces.

Alberta has exhibited and performed in extensive solo and group shows, including *Revisiting the work of Black Artists in Scotland*, GoMA, Glasgow (2022); *Sex Ecologies*, Kunsthall Trondheim (2021); *We Are History*, Somerset House (2021); *Life Between Islands*, Tate Britain (2021); *Here Be Dragons, a Reprise*, Copperfield, London (2021); *Congregation (creativng dangerously remix)*, Grand Union (2020); *In the Castle of My Skin*, Eastside Projects (2020); *How flexible can we make the mouth*, DCA (2019); *Stalking the Image: Margaret Tait and Her Legacy*, GoMA, Glasgow (2019); *Useless*, Pig Rock Bothy at the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh (2019); 13th Havana biennale, cuba (2019); *Business as Usual*, Tyburn Gallery — Now Tyburn Foundation, London (2019); *Another Country*, The City Arts Centre, Edinburgh (2019); *There's something in the conversation that's more interesting than the finality or (a title)*, The Showroom, London (2018); *Transforming Spaces*, National Art Gallery of the Bahamas (2018); *Corpus Callosum*, RAW Material, Dakar (2018); *Curatorial Cure: Humanising Practice*, FADA Gallery, Johannesburg (2018); *Right of Admission*, the Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg (2017); *Embodied Spaces*, FRAMER FRAMED, Amsterdam (2015); *The Cradle*, Goethe On Main, Johannesburg (2015); the Johannesburg Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, Venice (2015), and *Where We're At! Other Voices on Gender*, BOZAR, Brussels (2014), amongst others.

Whittle was awarded a Turner Bursary, the Frieze Artist Award, and a Henry Moore Foundation Artist Award in 2020. Alberta is a PhD candidate at Edinburgh College of Art and is a Research Associate at The University of Johannesburg. She was a RAW Academie Fellow at RAW Material in Dakar in 2018 and is the Margaret Tait Award winner for 2018/9. Her work has been acquired for the UK National Collections, The Scottish National Gallery Collections, Glasgow Museums Collections and The Contemporary Art Research Collection at Edinburgh College of Art amongst other private collections.