

HOW
FLEXIBLE
CAN WE
MAKE
THE
MOUTH

ALBERTA WHITTLE

Exhibition Notes | Sat 14 September — Sun 24 November 2019

DCA²⁰
Dundee Contemporary Arts

152 Nethergate
Dundee, DD1 4DY
01382 432444
Scottish Charity No. SC026631

Open daily 10:00-18:00
Open late Thu 20:00
Admission free
www.dca.org.uk

INTRODUCTION

How Flexible Can We Make the Mouth draws together new and recent works by Barbadian-Scottish artist Alberta Whittle to reflect on memory, trauma, and tensions between the land and sea. This is the first major project to draw together all the different facets of the artist's practice: from printmaking, assemblage, poetry and photography, to performance, film, installation and sculpture.

Whittle's interdisciplinary way of working develops a visual, oral and textual language that questions accepted Western constructs of history and society. The work is undertaken with an acute understanding of how formal historical records produced by privileged white males have sought to replace more ancient and informal ways of comprehending the past. Her wider research questions the authority of postcolonial power, its implications and its legacy.

Whittle's work often considers conditions in the afterlife of slavery where the racialised black body can become suspended in a state of stress that directly impacts upon physical, mental and emotional health. Within her work, the artist connects these ideas of black oppression with meditations on survival; championing the idea of healing as self-liberation.

The exhibition begins in **Gallery 1** with **a suite of new prints developed at DCA** over the past six months. At the heart of this body of work is an interrogation of the publication *1492: What Is It Like to Be Discovered?* This compilation of poems, unattributed texts and artworks includes adaptations of a series of 16th century engravings by Theodore de Bry, whose work illustrates the arrival of Columbus in the Americas, and European colonists' brutal and unjust claiming of a so-called 'New World.' The central imagery in the prints, drawn from the de Bry engravings, has been created with laser-engraved woodblocks, inverted and transposed, creating deliberately hard to read areas in depictions of Columbus's first arrival and subsequent violent suppression of indigenous peoples. These not only recall the 16th century prints but, through the process of cutting into and gradual removal of the wood, also evoke Whittle's memories of the material impermanence of living in Barbados, where wooden furniture, housing, even books, may gradually erode due to invasive woodworm or corrosive salt air.

Finally, the prints have been embossed with a shimmering gold snail trail – a hard, fleshy form, impressed upon the bodies of the invaders within the scene. Alluding to the invasive, giant African snails in her home town, Whittle chose to incorporate saline traces left by these animals. Superimposed on this narrative these trails recall the concepts of 'slippage' and transience in the artist's other works in the exhibition, alongside the more literal wetness and saltiness of the sea.

The second half of Gallery 1 centres around the film installation ***my grandfather, her father*** where the voice of the artist's grandmother acts as a bridge between the lives of the living and the spirits of the dead, speculating on Scottish heritage within Whittle's family tree. The sound and texture of the voice is a key element of this piece, as is the projection of blank/black space upon the teal panel affixed to the blue wall. The work refuses to offer us visual imagery to accompany this narration; instead we are asked to think more on these oral accounts of history and ancestry that are so often lost or disregarded over time.

Elsewhere in this space are **assemblage and sculptural works** which speak to the idea of repair work, which is incredibly important to Whittle's approach to artmaking, allowing her to physically stitch and hold together many bodies and overlapping cultural histories together. This work rebuilds, reconnects, and cares for ideas and identities lost through trauma, whether that trauma has been enacted through human violence or natural disasters, or sometimes both. **Textile costume work, items of clothing, and masks** evoke absent bodies within these pieces, bringing forth Caribbean spirits and deities that were largely erased by Christian colonial enterprises, and further highlighting alternative ways of remembering our past that resist white European imperialist ideologies.

These ideas are further carried into **Gallery 2** in the form of **two new sculptures**, one comprising a suspended bell held in place by braids and afro picks. Whittle conceived of this work as a call to attention, an alarm, weaving many voices together in solidarity and community to rise up against oppressive forces. The other depicts a Caribbean Limbo scene. The word 'Limbo' potentially derives from 'limber', and this dance demands that bodies bend and stretch to perform feats of physical endurance. Although now widely known through popular culture, Limbo can be connected to histories of slavery – original iterations of these performances were enacted in 19th century Trinidad to symbolise slaves entering the cramped galleys of a ship, or spirits crossing over into the afterlife.

Beyond these works, the main focus in Gallery 2 is a major installation of works centred around Whittle's 2019 film ***between a whisper and a cry***. This work links together sonic cosmologies within Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite's research and Professor Christina Sharpe's work on 'the weather' from her seminal book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Sharpe and Whittle both use the concept of 'the weather' as a lens through which to consider the afterlife of slavery across the Atlantic Ocean, with Whittle framing her film around an old mariner's rhyme that gives an overview of a hurricane season, starting with 'June, too soon' and closing with 'October, all over'.

New sculptural objects, photographs, methods of display and furniture have been developed for this expanded conception of the work at DCA, including **a to-scale Chattel House** which seems to be sinking into the floor of the gallery. A Chattel House is a small, mobile wooden dwelling typically found throughout working

class communities in Barbados. The term harks back to plantation days when people would have had to build houses designed to move from one property to another, depending on where they were working. The bright colours of this work are based on Alberta's memories of properties like this from her childhood. The stark state of collapse of the structure evokes both the historical and present movement of black bodies and communities across the Caribbean through no will of their own.

The overall title of the project, *How Flexible Can We Make the Mouth*, refers to Whittle's preoccupation with healing, writing, breath and orality. Writing has always been an integral part of her practice; the texts and language within her work are almost always heard as well as seen. She also works rhythmically in relation to writing and reading, particularly looking at punctuation marks as visual signifiers of shifts in breath and breathing. You will find artworks addressing these concerns in the small rooms at either end of Gallery 2, with **cushions and quilts to rest on** (some marked with thermochromic ink that subtly reacts to body heat), and Whittle's own **poetic texts printed onto the gallery windows**. These and other texts will be further developed within the project as part of a **collaborative performance** with the artist and writer Ama Josephine Budge on Thu 31 October.

Finally, in an intimate space at the back of Gallery 2 you will find an entirely new video work, ***from the forest to the concrete (to the forest)***, urgently made for this exhibition and completed on 9 September. This reflects further on the weather as well as societal structural inequalities destroying parts of the Caribbean at present. It is made in solidarity with countless communities displaced in that region in recent months; it mourns those lost through the continued inaction of world superpowers, and asks us to ensure that we always look beyond our own state of relative comfort here in Scotland, to parts of the world desperately in need of support. Evoking black feminist writers such as Octavia Butler, it calls for a better future beyond capitalism, beyond patriarchy and beyond empire.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Alberta Whittle (b.1980, Bridgetown, Barbados) lives and works in Glasgow. Whittle received her MFA from Glasgow School of Art in 2011 and is a PhD candidate at Edinburgh College of Art. Whittle was also the 2018 recipient of The Margaret Tait Award. Whittle's work has been exhibited in solo and group shows within institutions including the 13th Havana Biennial, Cuba (2019), GoMA, Glasgow (2019), The City Arts Centre, Edinburgh (2019), The Showroom, London (2018), National Art Gallery of the Bahamas (2018), RAW Material, Dakar (2018), FADA Gallery, Johannesburg (2018), the Apartheid Museum, Johannesburg (2017), FRAMER FRAMED, Amsterdam (2015), Goethe On Main, Johannesburg (2015), and at the Johannesburg Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015).

NEW PUBLICATION & EDITION

A new book has been published to accompany the exhibition, featuring newly commissioned texts by writer and scholar Christina Sharpe and researcher, artist, curator, writer and activist Ama Josephine Budge, alongside an introduction by DCA Head of Exhibitions, Eoin Dara, and an excerpt of a poem by Barbadian poet and academic Kamau Brathwaite. Copies are available to read in the galleries and the Information Space. In addition, Whittle has been working with DCA's Print Studio team to develop a suite of new limited edition prints which can be viewed in Gallery 1 and in our Editions Space. All these items are available to buy online and in DCA Shop.

INFORMATION SPACE

Visit the Information Space next to the galleries to learn more about the exhibition. Here you will find a video interview with the artist, alongside a selection of books (listed below) chosen by Whittle that have been influential to her practice.

READING LIST

bell hooks, *all about love: new visions*, 2000

Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 1988

Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, 2017

Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 2016

Deborah Small with Maggie Jaffe, *1492: What Is It Like to Be Discovered?*, 1991

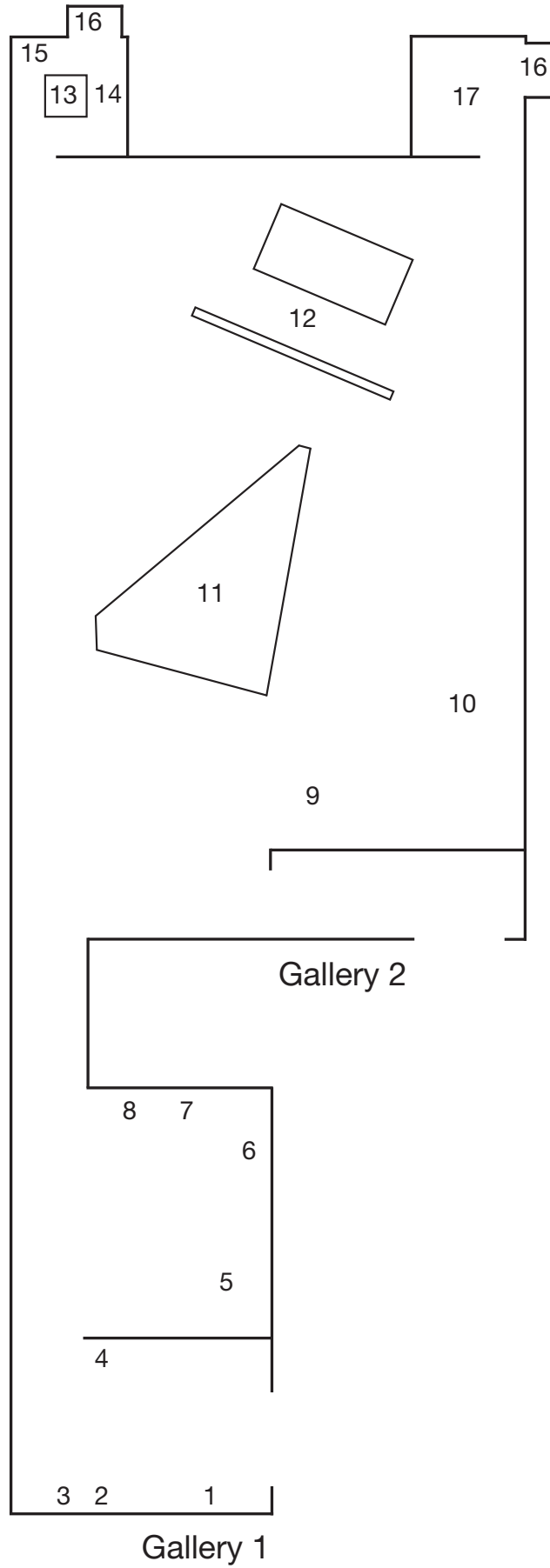
Maud Sulter, *Passion*, 2015

Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, 2006

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, 2018

Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, 2015

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION



GALLERY 1

1. *secreting myths (golden yellow)*
Woodblock print, 2019

2. *secreting myths (jade)*
Woodblock print, 2019

3. *secreting myths (magenta)*
Woodblock print, 2019

4. *secreting myths (golden yellow)*
Woodblock, 2019

5. *Road Openers (For E)*
Mixed media, 2019

6. *my grandfather, her father*
Video, 9 minutes, 2019

7. *Palavar*
Mixed media, 2017

8. *Road Openers (For E)*
Mixed media, 2019

GALLERY 2

9. *Road Openers (For E)*
Mixed media, 2019

10. *matrix moves*
Mixed media, 2019

11. *Memorial for "The Great Carew"*
aka Neville Denis Blackman
Sunken Chattel House, 2019

12. *between a whisper and a cry*
Plastic stacking chairs, chains,
galvanised roofing, film projection
(41 minutes), 2019

13. *visualising breath*
Quilt and cushions, 2019

14. *between a whisper and a cry*
process documentation (Lewis)
Photograph, 2018
Photography by Matthew A Williams

15. *from the forest to the concrete (to
the forest)*
Video, 10 minutes, 2019

16. *blue + blue*
Vinyl lettering on glass, 2019

17. *between a whisper and a cry*
process documentation (Lewis)
Series of four photographs, 2018
Photography by Matthew A Williams

TALKS AND EVENTS

For more information visit
www.dca.org.uk

Meet the Artist

Fri 13 September, 18:30 – 19:00

Galleries

Free, but ticketed. Please book in advance

Join us to hear DCA Head of Exhibitions, Eoin Dara, in conversation with Alberta Whittle. They will be discussing the development of different works within *How Flexible Can We Make the Mouth*, and how this major exhibition draws together many strands of Whittle's diverse research.

Exhibition Tours

Daily at 11:00 and 15:00

Free, drop-in

Meet at the gallery entrance

Interested in knowing more about the works on show? Then join our friendly Visitor Assistants for a guided tour of the exhibition.

In the Evening There is Feeling: Reading Christina Sharpe

Mon 14 October, 18:00 – 19:30

Create Space

Free, but ticketed. Please book in advance

In the Evening There is Feeling is DCA's Exhibitions reading group. It takes its name from Gertrude Stein's 1914 book *Tender Buttons* and focuses, in an informal and welcoming way, on feminist and queer texts from the worlds of art and literature.

This session will introduce and discuss some of the ideas contained within Sharpe's newly commissioned text responding to Whittle's work, as well as reading and thinking through a short text from her seminal book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. This excerpt focuses on the idea of 'the weather' as a means to work and think through how the afterlives of slavery still affect us now.

Sharpe is a scholar of Black literatures (in English) and Black Studies. Her academic research focuses on Black visual studies, Black queer studies, and mid 19th century to contemporary African-American Literature and Culture.

Digital copies of the texts will be available and emailed to participants upon booking a place. If you do not receive these please email exhibitions@dca.org.uk

Senior Citizen Kane Gallery Tour and Workshop

Tue 15 October and Tue 5 November
10:30 – 12:30

Galleries and Create Space

Free, no need to book, just meet us at DCA Reception to start.

Aged 60+? Join Senior Citizen Kane Gallery Tour and Workshop. We will explore the exhibition with one of our friendly Visitor Assistants, then there's the chance to take part in a creative workshop making work inspired by the exhibition. Tea, coffee and biscuits will be on hand to fuel your creativity and chat.

**Ama Josephine Budge
& Alberta Whittle:
A Harem of Haunting Delicacies**

Thu 31 October, 18:00 – 19:00

Gallery 2

Free, but ticketed. Please book in advance

Join Ama Josephine Budge and Alberta Whittle for a performative reading and collaborative conversation centred around Budge's new text *Fragments of Exercises For Learning How To Remember / To Member The Harems that Haunt Delicately*. This new work has been written in response to Whittle's work and is published as part of our accompanying publication which is available to view in the galleries, and purchase online and in DCA shop.

Budge is a researcher, artist, curator, speculative writer and pleasure activist whose work navigates intimate explorations of race, art, ecology and feminism.

**In the Evening There is Feeling:
Reading Ama Josephine Budge**

Mon 11 November, 18:00 – 19:30

Create Space

Free, but ticketed. Please book in advance

This session will introduce and discuss some of the ideas contained within Budge's newly commissioned text responding to Whittle's work, as well as reading and thinking through some poems by Kamau Brathwaite that connect to both Budge's and Whittle's practice.

Digital copies of the texts will be available and emailed to participants upon booking a place. If you do not

receive these please email
exhibitions@dca.org.uk

Echo + Saoirse Anis

Thu 21 November, 18:00 – 20:00

Galleries

Free, but ticketed. Please book in advance

Echo is an evening of multidisciplinary presentations set within Whittle's exhibition, designed to throw new light on the works in our galleries by inviting other artistic voices into the building to respond to each show.

As part of this instalment, we have invited Dundee-based artist Saoirse Anis to respond to Whittle's work. Anis' creative process is a celebration of the holistic and constantly changing nature of existence, and she takes delight in being able to explore fascinating and beautiful relationships between materials and memories. Recently, she has become increasingly interested in her personal ancestry, investigating the ways in which she is responsible for the continuation of her own cultural heritage.

In advance of this response, there will be opportunities for other voices to present ideas. In past events, participants have presented a wide variety of new and existing works that they have made in response to our exhibitions. If you would like to share your creative response to the work on show, please submit a short proposal (up to 300 words) to exhibitions@dca.org.uk by **Mon 11 November 2019**.

ARTIST'S CHOICE SCREENINGS

“*Carmen Jones*, *Poetic Justice* and *Young Soul Rebels* are films which have intrigued me since childhood and continue to affect the language(s) I weave through my own practice. Each of these films defies cinematic expectations of race, gender and sexuality, deftly layering entanglements of love, desire, grief, trauma and recovery amidst political strife as worthy and multiple.”

Alberta Whittle

Carmen Jones

Sun 15 September, 15:30
Cinema

Directed by Otto Preminger, this lively adaptation of the Carmen story transplants the action to World War II-era America and, in basing itself on the 1943 Broadway musical of the same name, boasts an entirely black cast. While the musical was a principal influence, this is a film that is very aware of its sources; with music from the Bizet opera (probably the most famous version of the Carmen narrative) Preminger also worked closely from the original 1846 novella, giving the film a multi-textual approach in telling a well-worn story through a black perspective.

Dir: Otto Preminger / USA / 1954 /
1h 45m / U

Poetic Justice

Sun 29 September, 20:30
Cinema

Poetic Justice is the follow-up to John Singleton's seminal breakthrough *Boyz n the Hood*, and stars Janet Jackson as Justice, a beautician and poet in mourning after a personal tragedy, while Tupac Shakur plays Lucky, a musician who ends up on a road trip with Jackson's no-nonsense heroine. The poetry (written for the film by celebrated poet Maya Angelou, who also cameos) is recited in voice-over, and the film plays with the contrasts between the language of Justice's poetry and the language of her everyday life.

Dir: John Singleton / USA / 1993 /
1h 49m / 15

Young Soul Rebels

Tue 8 October, 18:00
Cinema

Set in 1977 London over the weekend of the Queen's Silver Jubilee, artist Isaac Julien's 1991 feature debut *Young Soul Rebels* is an energetic and vibrant work which still feels radical today. The film's approach to race, sexuality and class presents ideas which are only now (or still have yet to be) embraced by mainstream cinema and we are thrilled to be presenting this extraordinary film in 35mm.

Best friends Caz (Mo Sesay) and Chris (Valentine Nonyela) run a pirate radio station, enthusiastically spreading soul music throughout London at a truly divided time; Union Jacks are hung from multi-storey flats, swastikas are daubed on walls, while punks rail against the monarchy and gay men

meet after dark in a local park. The murder of a close friend gives the film a loose thriller narrative, but Julien uses this as a springboard to delve deep into ideas of British national identity and, like all good period pieces, this film is as much about contemporary society as it is its 1977 setting.

While the film is steeped in a very tangible sense of danger, *Young Soul Rebels* presents to us a world where fashion, music, drugs and youth culture intersect thrillingly, and, in giving us characters that are an absolute joy to spend time in the company of, ultimately looks to the future as much as it looks at the past.

Dir: Isaac Julien / UK 1991 / 1h 45m / 18

FOR YOUNGER VISITORS AND FAMILIES

Family Art Lab

Sat 5 October, Sat 26 October and Sat 9 November

13:00 – 15:00, Create Space

Suitable for ages 5+, all children must be accompanied by an adult. Free, no need to book but please arrive for the start time.

Join our artists to explore the exhibition, Alberta Whittle's ideas and to create your own art together. We'll be exploring weather phenomena, family trees, generational songs and rhymes passed down from grandparents. Each session lasts two hours but you don't have to stay the whole time.

MAKING WORKSHOPS

Making and Doing with Alberta Whittle

Sun 3 November, 13:00 – 17:30

Create Space

Suitable for ages 16+

£25

This special one-off workshop is led by exhibiting artist, Alberta Whittle. Throughout the afternoon we will explore her ideas and her making practice with the aim of inspiring you to create your own work or develop ideas in response. There will be a wide range of materials and kit to hand plus refreshments to fuel the conversations and creation.

Sewing Teeth and the Tongue: Optimistic Conversations whilst Making

Sun 10 November, 13.00 – 15.30

Create Space

Suitable for ages 16+

£10

Join us for a group stitch, make and chat workshop inspired by Whittle's work; her use of Kente cloth Adrinka symbols from West Africa, her focus on 'networks of care', rebuilding and repairing our humanity. We will have templates, fabric, thread and guides to help you to create a cushion cover or small hanging, revitalise recycled material or embellish a tote bag. We will also have refreshments to fuel your making. No experience required.

Create Space

Open daily unless being used for a workshop – **do phone ahead to check if you are making a special trip.** Free, drop-in. An adult must accompany children at all times.

DCA Create Space is a comfortable and imaginative space right next to the gallery designed for younger visitors and family groups to pop in and enjoy on a visit. New activities this season will be about weather, our family ancestry, songs and rhymes passed down from generation to generation and how we try to map these things. Most importantly it's about you and your imagination.

JUST ASK

Our friendly Visitor Assistants are always happy to help with your questions.

KEEP IN TOUCH

Keep up to date with the very latest from DCA by visiting www.dca.org.uk or by following us on Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Tweet us your thoughts on the exhibition using **#helloDCA**.

Interested to know what's coming up in DCA Galleries? Pick up one of our Exhibitions brochures to find out what's happening in our future programme.

UPCOMING EXHIBITION

Seized By The Left Hand

Sat 14 December 2019 - Sun 22 March 2020

This international group exhibition, co-curated with Kim McAleese, takes as its starting point some of the ideas contained within American writer Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness*.

Using the book as a lodestar of sorts, and invoking Le Guin's generous spirit in thinking through the possibility of an exhibition inspired by her writing, we are drawing together a community of different artistic voices from all over the world to fill our galleries across the winter in Dundee. Presenting work by Sophia Al-Maria, Andrew Black, CAConrad, Harry Josephine Giles, Emma Wolf-Haugh, Isaac Julien, Huw Lemmey, Flora Moscovici, Quinie, Abel Rodríguez, Tuesday Smillie, Manuel Solano, Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa and Ming Wong, the exhibition aims to explore some of the questions and ideas thrown up by Le Guin half a century ago that are still urgently being debated in contemporary society.

Seized by the Left Hand seeks to champion artists, performers and writers who, much like Le Guin was, are engaged in the vital act of radical imagining: crafting alternative spaces and worlds that hint at ways in which we all might better live, love and care for one another.