

Care and complexity; feminist considerations in the work of Tai Shani and Zadie Xa

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Abstract

In this paper I seek to explore the connections between feminist critiques and conceptions of complexity and care predominantly expressed by Lola Olufemi, Joan Tronto and Donna Haraway, through the contemporary art practice of Tai Shani and Zadie Xa.

Critiquing two exhibitions - *Semiramis: Dark Continent* by Tai Shani at Tramway, Glasgow 2018 and Turner Contemporary, Margate 2019 and *Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation* by Zadie Xa at De La Warr, East Sussex, 2020 - I will consider the implications of the complexity of feminist conceptions of experience pointed to through these works and the material interpretations that highlight those concepts through installation and performance.

Exhibition Account

Tai Shani – ‘Dark Continent: SEMIRAMIS’

Tramway, Glasgow,

28 April 2018

I walk into Semiramis: Dark Continent at Tramway, I'm handed a pair of headphones and check the channel is working properly. A mesmeric, semi-erotic litany takes off in my ears, while I carefully make my way into the darkened space, the occasional word registering in my consciousness as the majority of my senses try to rationalise the tableaux before me. Gently playing in the background is an ethereal mix of Electronic Dance Music which I discover is by Let's Eat Grandma and I focus on that as I take a seat at the back of the space, ensconced in semi-darkness, while I regard the room.

As my eyes adjust I begin to get into the rhythm of The Vampyre's recitation, experiencing shock or amusement as phrases sink in: "The parthenogenic sea anemone...had become fused against the lips of her cunt where it made its home...I had no image of myself, only touch...I was linked by points of pleasure and points of pain, a double-sided surface demanding to be felt and also to feel."(Shani, 2019) Interjections from the "Psychic Anemone" register periodically and serve to reinvest me in the oration as I get up from my seat to explore the scene before me.

The experience of entering into this work is mesmerising, gentle, an invitation. It balances neatly on the edge of sensory provocation without fully overwhelming your sense of self. I find the presence of the disembodied narrator and her/their discomfiting account of pleasure and pain prevents a divestment from self-awareness that the lulling, rhythmic and dimly lit space encourage. Teetering in this aroused bodily state, you can choose to walk directly into the set,

be brightly lit and become an actor for those hidden in the semi-darkness to watch, or, you can remain at the edges, observing.

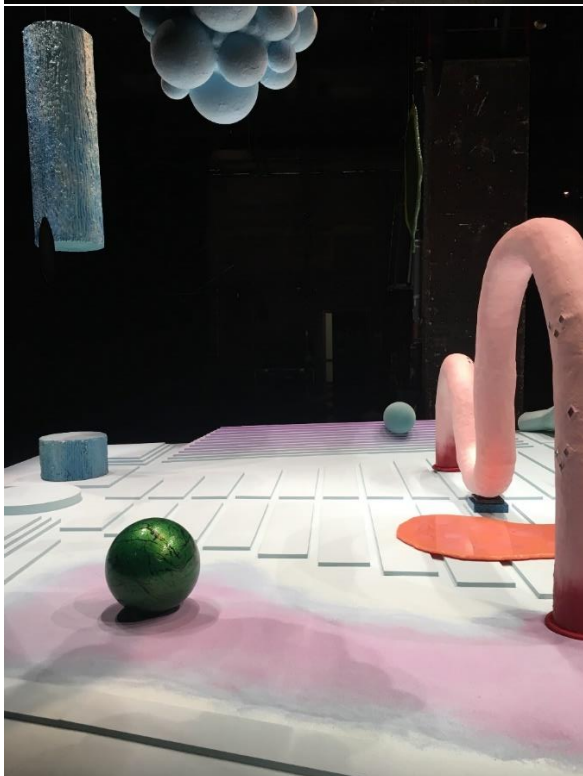


Figure 1 & 2. *Dark Continent: SEMIRAMIS* by Tai Shani. Tramway, Glasgow. Images: Ruth Jones.

Shani piques a complex experience that at once grounds and dispossesses you of bodily sensation, intrigues your curiosity both materially and intellectually, gently dragging you between states that eventually return you to a heightened occupation of your body and mind.

Introduction

“Art that grapples with and documents survival, as well as contributing to movements that seek to make the world more just, can propose revolutionary ideas. When women and non-binary people make art with the intention of raising consciousness, they are not only contributing to the feminist fight, *they are demonstrating that feeling is a way of knowing* and a powerful starting point for building a political framework. *Affect, the ability to be moved, should never be underestimated.* It is what brings us to feminist politics and what sustains us.” [Emphasis my own] (Olufemi, 2020, p86).

Contemporary feminist artists Tai Shani and Zadie Xa build expansive worlds in their installations. These worlds represent the overlapping and diverse experiences with which many women are familiar: gendered violence and oppression, but also, importantly, community, hope and solidarity.

These installations model the complexities of women’s (and other marginalised genders) lived experiences, situating them outside of conventional contexts, offering their audiences a considered environment in which to experience, feel and contemplate their reactions to those experiences. As a methodology, this is an act of care, intentional or not. Imbuing artworks, installations and performances (situated within the exhibition boundaries) with the weight of the complex reality of gendered and intersectional forms of oppression, provides a critical distance for the audience, inviting safe contemplation without trauma, disengagement or didacticism.

This removal from the real – enacted through myth, science fiction and other means in the installation space – ironically creates the distance necessary to engage with the emotive experience of reality, re-investing us in the real after the event has concluded.

In the course of this paper, I hope to draw the connections between feminist philosophers, sociologists and art theorists to critically examine how these practices, present within the works of Shani and Xa, count as methods of care and effectively represent the complexity of experience that is constituted in our gendered identities.

Feminist subjects and Intersectionality

“‘Woman’ is a strategic coalition, an umbrella term under which we gather in order to make political demands. It might be mobilised in service of those who, given another option, would identify themselves in other ways. In a liberated future, it might not exist at all. It has no divine meaning absent of its function as a strategy; that does not mean we cannot feel, reckon with and grapple with our own private experiences of womanhood.” (Olufemi, 2020, p. 65).

The complexity of experience for women, as founded in numerous contradictory elements of our identities and the projections and expectations of society, are mirrored in the complexity inherent in defining and constituting us as subjects.

The constitution of feminist subjects, predominantly women, is contentious. Which is why discussions surrounding feminism invariably need prefacing with historic positionality. In this instance the term intersectionality gets straight to the crux of these contentions.

Whilst she was not the first to talk about these issues, the term ‘Intersectionality’ was coined by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1991) to point to the specific intersection of racial and gendered oppression that black women faced, where neither the feminist nor the civil rights movement could fully articulate nor address those oppressions satisfactorily. Feminism’s inability to account for the multiple factors that can affect women whose identities sit at various intersections of oppression (race/class/age/disability/sexuality to name but a few) exemplifies the difficulties of the multiple ways in which feminist subjects can be constituted.

The refusal of second-wave, white, middle-class feminists to recognise the differences between women, in favour of finding a universalising essence, something that all women relate to, has been the greatest stumbling block in divesting women from feminism. “Woman has never been a coherent group, it has always been a shifting category; ‘woman’ is frequently coded as cis, white and heterosexual. But it belongs to no one...”(Olufemi, 2020, p. 65). By ignoring the differences between our experiences as women, we have failed to account for the myriad issues that women face. The privileging of one narrative of feminism over another has caused damage to a movement intended to improve the lives of women.

The Texas abortion ban is a recent example of these lines of difference. The predominant narrative surrounding the Texas abortion ban is that of women’s *abortion rights*, a predominantly white centric notion. Black and indigenous women of colour, on the other hand, have long advocated for *reproductive justice* – an issue that centres the right to choose to have or not have children. The ruling on abortion in Texas, whilst rightly condemned as inhumane, does little to redress the wrongs of experimentation and forced sterilisation that black and indigenous women have historically faced, and serves to platform the voices of white feminists as more important.

“...Melissa Upreti, the chair of the UN’s working group on discrimination against women and girls, criticized the new Texas law, SB 8, as “structural sex and gender-based discrimination at its worst”.”(Pilkington, 2021). However, there has not been the same level of outcry over the forced sterilisations on Native American women that took place as a form of genocide:

“Over the six-year period that had followed the passage of the Family Planning Services and Population Research Act of 1970, physicians sterilized perhaps 25% of Native American women of childbearing age, and there is evidence suggesting that the numbers were actually even higher. Some of these procedures were performed under pressure or duress, or without the women’s knowledge or understanding. The law subsidized sterilizations for patients who received their health care through the Indian Health Service and for Medicaid patients, and black and Latina women were also targets of coercive sterilization in these years.”(Theobald, 2019).

What this serves to highlight is that white women's refusal to "...recognise difference makes it impossible to see the different problems and pitfalls facing us as women" (Lorde, 2017, p. 99). There is a real divide in the experiences of women and "...[p]ainful fragmentation among feminists (not to mention women) along every possible fault line has made the concept of *woman* elusive, an excuse for the matrix of women's dominations of each other" (Haraway, 1998, p. 155).

This brief contextual example of the intersection of race and gender within reproductive justice demonstrates the complexity of the issues that feminism struggles to address purely across the lines of race and gender. With the introduction of further intersections, such as disability, sexuality and class, it becomes apparent that, as Haraway states:

"[t]here is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women... There is not even such a state as 'being' female, itself a highly complex category constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other social practices. Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism." (Haraway, 1998, p. 155).

These considerations of intersectionality clearly inform the practice of both Xa and Shani as will be detailed later in this paper.

Exhibition Account

Zadie Xa – 'Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation'

De La Warr Pavillion, Sussex

1 November 2020

Xa's work is dense; rich; and I find myself moving from space to space like a diver submerging deeper and deeper, discovering shimmering artefacts of an unfamiliar culture until, eventually, I arrive in front of 'Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation'.

I'm met by a warmly lit and softly carpeted space, the intricately contrasting and somehow complementary sound and visual rhythm's in 'Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation' are projected across the width of the room, intimate yet theatrical with its conch shell lights and friendly, giant stuffed orca.

The narrative is lulling and thick with repetitions, both visually and aurally; footage shifts between polished performances of a deity on a beach to enlarged phone captures of orcas and oceanscapes, to slick animations.

This story has the feel of an unearthed retro-future, a cultural mythology that centres matriarchies and spaces of safety. It offers a grounding from which to stand, an anchoring in a turbulence of shifting identities that sit both within and outside of the predominant capitalist narrative of what and how it should be to be a woman. At once an affirmation and a dissolution

of the difficulty of holding those conflicting states of identity in suspension – the work seems to offer us the space to consider how we could reconfigure ourselves to become what we need.

Like the alien sea creatures and mythological beings of Xa’s film, a deep connection is made to the earth and our place within it, despite dominant narratives that seek to dislocate us from histories and heritages.

The objects in the installation took on a quasi-spiritual quality from the mythology of the film. They felt powerful and they held within them the echoes of the matriarchs you envisioned wearing them, sewn together from apparently incompatible and jarring fabrics, patterns and colours which became in their own right objects of influence and creation. The lushness of colour and surface and the lighting did everything to enhance those qualities of the fabrics, clothing and masks.

The weight of importance of Xa’s work is held lightly alongside the comical, friendly Orca as a symbol of the matriarch of the ocean and unknown. This motif is woven into costume, painting frame, film and object throughout the exhibition. Offered up as furniture upon which to watch the film, as sculpture submerged into the floor surface, its face used as a mask, embellished with long, brightly coloured hair, and as guardian for Xa in the self-portrait profile that juts at right-angles from the wall, the orca is a playful counterpoint to the seriousness of the eradication of matriarchal creation myths.

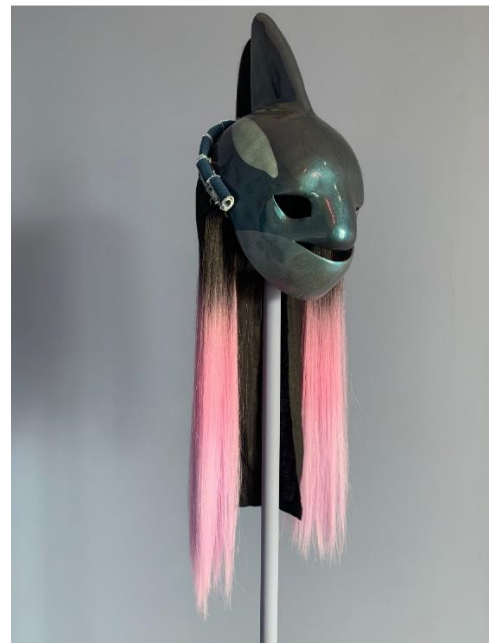


Figure 3 & 4. Installation view of *Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation* by Zadie Xa at De La Warr Pavillion, 2020. Photo by Ruth Jones.

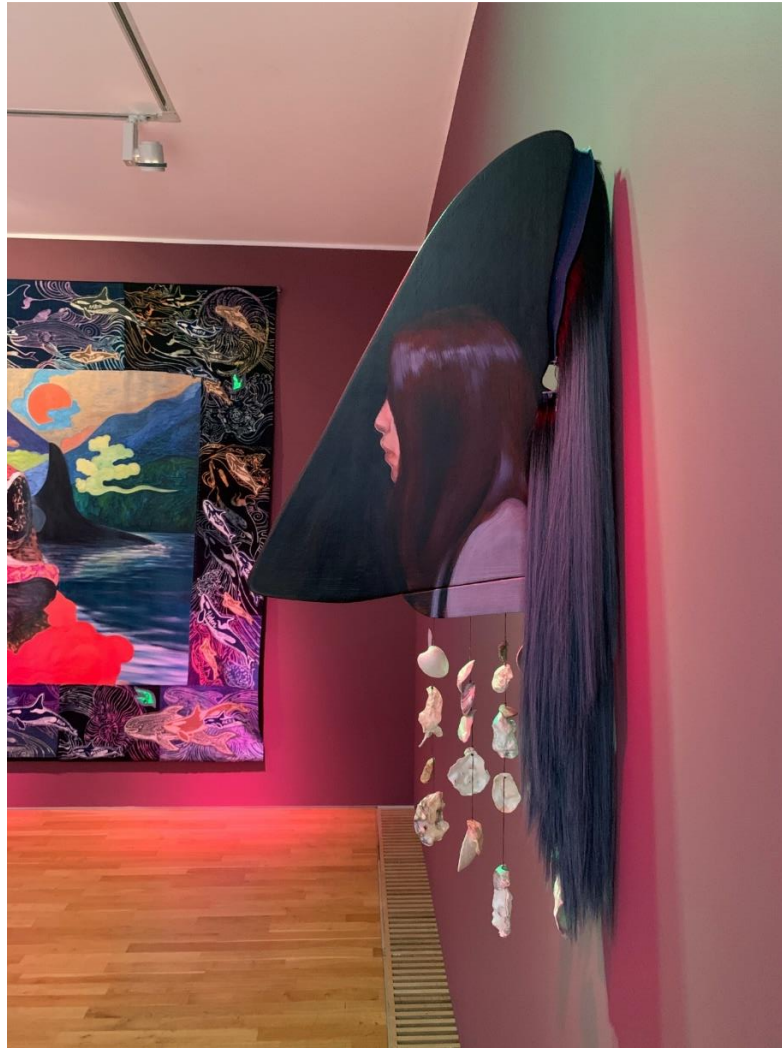


Figure 5. Installation view of *Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation* by Zadie Xa at De La Warr Pavillion, 2020. Photo by Ruth Jones

Constituting care

As demonstrated by section 1.1, gender is complicated at best and indivisibly linked to numerous intersections of oppression. Unfortunately, care is not any better in its constitution; how it is valued and enacted is inseparably connected to patriarchy, capitalism and colonialism.

Care is perhaps easier to define than it is to trace the manifold ways it can and cannot be enacted, and how inextricable it is from gender and class. Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher devised a catchall definition for care, which, under closer examination, is broad enough to encapsulate almost any positive action:

“On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.” [Emphasis is the authors] (Tronto, 1993, p. 103).

This necessary and apparently universal activity appears benign on the surface, however, who receives it and who gives it becomes a politically and socially problematic practice entrenched in paid and unpaid labour, classed, racial and gendered divisions.

The Overseas Development Institute Report from 2014 accounts “...that ‘...on average across 66 countries, representing two thirds of the world’s population, women spent 3.3 times as much time as men on unpaid care.’” (Dowling, 2021, p. 24). The global experience of caring, offloaded onto women, is a form of labour. Under capitalism, and in fact to allow capitalism to function at all, women’s unpaid labour maintains the family. In *The origin of The Family*, 1884, Engels briefly alludes to the significance of women’s unpaid labour in terms of social reproduction:

“...On the one side, the production of the means of existence, articles of food and clothing...; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation under which we live is determined by both kinds of production; by the stage of development of labour on the one hand and the family on the other.” (Engels as quoted in Rowbotham, 2015, p. 47).

The ‘family’, the production of (and caring and raising of) human beings has historically been left to women and is not paid: “In a capitalist economy, the reproduction of labour power is a cost to capital that must be offloaded (or externalised) in order to maintain profitability.” (Dowling, 2021, p. 36). This close entanglement of capital, profit and the ability to offset the cost of care clearly demonstrates that the cost is shouldered by women. However, the distribution of that cost for women becomes, again, more complex. Not caring is a luxury afforded to those with money and power (Graeber, 2014). Class becomes an overwhelming factor within care. (Graeber quoted within Dowling, 2021, p. 27).

When the burden of care is removed, we can consider why certain achievements are possible: “Against the idea of the autonomous individual whose concerns revolve around himself and is always hailed as the epitome of social progress and individual freedom, we can ask what this celebration of individual autonomy obfuscates: who does the work to allow for that individual to emerge and thrive?” (Dowling, 2021, p. 30).

Tronto and Fisher’s broad description doesn’t entirely account for the nuances within the social and political aspects of care, which is why I prefer Dowling’s (2021) definition:

“Care is a social relation that manifests itself in thoughts, words, gestures, as well as priorities and commitments. Therefore, care is best understood as a particular configuration of social relationships that are politically and economically...conditioned, with all of the gendered, racialised and classed implications of power relations, as well as considerations of vulnerability, need, ability and disability.” (Dowling, 2021, p. 38).

Care is not an act that is simple to define. Its constitution is as murky and difficult to pin down as the constitution of women as subjects, being reliant on so many additional conditions to be satisfactorily described or determined. The political, social and economic factors at play within acts of care call into account who is performing them, why and how, and what cost the act of caring exacts.

However, the necessity of care, its purpose and the benefits it provides come close to some of the most important actions we can receive. Provision of care affords "...the possibility of leading a meaningful life beyond being merely instruments of labour" (Dowling, 2021, p. 45).

This articulation of the benefits of care: the opportunity of leading a meaningful life outside of the constraints of labour and work, is a view that has also been postulated about the impact that art can have on those who have the chance to engage with it, as will be discussed in the following section.

Installation Art

It is my argument that installation art is a particularly effective medium for feminist artists to point to the complexity of the experiences of women (and marginalised genders), and through which to articulate and enact forms of care for its audience. As sections 1.1. and 1.2 have indicated, anything which considers the term *woman* and the act of *care*, will, by necessity, require more than a simple or linear description. Installation art, a medium which the audience enters into and determines their own path through, lends itself to laying out a web of ideas that leave the audience free to make connections across and between in a way that makes sense to them.

Particular qualities of installation art contribute to considering it as a feminist medium. Inherent within it is the possibility for multiple viewpoints (Bishop, 2012) and non-hierarchical elements that privilege more than one sense, in the same way that feminist identities are intersectional, with no "...basis for belief in 'essential' unity." (Haraway, 1998, p. 155). It holds the possibility for contradiction in the same way that feminist identities have to hold that possibility, as "...contradictory, partial and strategic..." (Haraway, 1998, p. 155).

Some of the dominant thinking around installation art is discussed in political terms due to the belief that the manner of perceiving it is an emancipatory experience (Bishop, 2012). Jacques Rancière's (2009) discussions of aesthetics and politics offer several readings of the emancipatory potential of art, however, his understanding of art as a container for contradiction, alongside the constitution of common spaces has informed my thinking about installation art as a particularly successful material practice for feminist work.

Emancipation and care within art

In his conception of aesthetics, Rancière points to the politics of constituting public or common spaces; who is permitted to occupy them and how they are permitted to imagine them. He uses a Platonian example which refuses to acknowledge workers as political beings, stating that they have time for nothing but their work and so never attend the people's assembly (Rancière, 2009).

Rancière discusses this as a kind of classed exclusion from political representation or rights: "Their [workers] 'absence of time' is actually a naturalised prohibition written into the very forms of sensory experience" (Rancière, 2009, p. 24). Rancière borrows heavily from Schiller in his determination of why access to free time, and by extension art, is necessary for

emancipation, and, as demonstrated below, it is effectively identical to Dowling's articulation of the stakes of care.

For Rancière art is important *not* as an object in itself but as a focal point for "free play". Free play allows the spectator to play with ideas as the free appearance on which those ideas can be projected. Schiller uses the Juno Ludovici as that focal point, as an artwork that encapsulates his understanding of beauty. For Schiller beauty is the consummation of our humanity, as it represents both matter and spirit. Beauty straddles both knowledge *and* experience (Schiller and Snell, 2004). Beauty is an idea which changes, and is an idea that is "played" with. (Schiller and Snell, 2004).

His choice of the Juno Ludovici is determined because he reasons that "We shall never be wrong in seeking a man's ideal of beauty along the selfsame path in which he satisfies his play impulse" (Schiller and Snell, 2004, p. 79). For Schiller, that is most apparent in the Classical Greek desire to imbue the inhabitants of Olympus with the qualities that should have been realised on earth: truth and toil, futile pleasure, "...they released these perpetually happy beings from the fetter of every aim, every duty, every care, and made idleness and indifference the enviable portion of divinity; merely a more human name for the freest and sublimest state of being...It is neither charm, nor is it dignity that speaks to us from the superb countenance of a Juno Ludovici; it is neither of them, because it is both at once" (Schiller and Snell, 2004, p. 81).

Schiller's (2004) understanding of what is at stake within play and art: "Man plays only when he is in the full sense of the word a man, and he is only wholly man when he is playing." (Schiller and Snell, 2004, p. 80). This suggests that our humanity is contingent upon our access to play. Play is a gratuitous activity that intends no serious outcome; ideas are free to be contemplated without thought of gain, reward or responsibility – factors which usually dictate our existence. Play is freedom from our assigned roles...; "Play's freedom is contrasted to the servitude of work" (Rancière, 2004, p. 31). In comparison with Dowling (2021): care affords "...the possibility of leading a meaningful life beyond being merely instruments of labour" (p. 45).

Olufemi (2020) adds to the complex nature of the alleged emancipatory capabilities of art: "It is only as effective as we allow it to be. We give art its agency and healing ability: we enable it to speak to the painful, shameful and most delicate aspects of our lives." (p. 85). And, who gets to experience art is not an equal opportunity: "Although the experience of witnessing art may feel context-less and universal, the idea that it can cross difference and get to the root of what it means to be human fails to recognise that in the world we live in; there are whole swathes of the population who have been excluded from the scope of full humanity" (p. 85)

To be cared for and have the time to play freely with the aesthetic qualities of art become the conditions by which we can define our lives meaningfully, with the scope of full humanity, separate from any of the responsibilities of labour. This alignment of the act of care and experiencing art, and its possibilities for audiences provides a cornerstone of my argument for why art, and in particular feminist art, is capable of offering *care* to its audiences. Precisely because of the artists' understanding as feminist subjects, the work they produce articulates the conditions women experience in such a way that lays them bare to be examined, mourned, celebrated and understood in an environment that does not demand its audience to consider

themselves as purely “instruments of labour.” The complex intersections that women bestride and that the artists express allow room for more than just “women” to be cared for by the work.

Art and complexity

The potential of art for Rancière is its capacity to contain contradictions that provoke specific contemplations for its viewers. Art can contain multiple meanings for those viewing it, but as a passive object, it cannot contain those meanings in and of itself. That art is capable of maintaining these contradictions as a passive container activated only by its viewers, is important. In this sense, art acts as a catalyst, without itself representing specific politics, this capability is termed ‘metapolitics’ by Rancière (2009).

However, an understanding and experience of the aesthetic is not interchangeable with an understanding of political conditions that lead to emancipation. The aesthetic then, is a tool for holding these hugely complex relationships and ideas in suspension for an audience to “play” with.

Feminism is a political standpoint, and to view art created by feminists as lacking any positionality in political ends would be foolish; however, feminist art does not fall into the trap that Rancière indicates exists in thinking of art as inherently emancipatory. As Lola Olufemi suggests, “[v]isual art, painting, sculpture, photography and literature provide a space for us to test our limits. They are mediums for meditation and reflection. Art moves us because it provokes feelings and calls for a response. Whether that response is repulsion, fear, joy, appreciation, or boredom – art calls for a witness...” (Olufemi, 2020, p. 83)

For Olufemi, art holds comparisons to the political, but she too is cognisant of its limitations:

“Perhaps it is this same desire to witness that is the driving force behind the work of feminist activists. As feminists, we are moved by injustice in the world, we work because what is happening around us demands a response. Our responses are varied and aren’t limited to the sphere of ‘the political.’ We do a disservice to the power of art and artistic creation when we assume that it is less important than political intervention, likewise we do ourselves a disservice when we assume that art alone can liberate us” (Olufemi, 2020, p. 83).

The importance of art is its capacity to allow us to test our limits and reflect, to witness the conditions we are experiencing, but also to imagine them differently. But art is not presumed to be the means to emancipate us, rather it offers us a space and an opportunity to play with the complex ideas that help us to live meaningful lives.

The depth at which we can determine how we experience a meaningful life, again, determined by ourselves (rather than *only* through the labour we can leverage in a capitalist system to secure our access to basic needs) is described through the embodied sensation that Audre Lorde terms the erotic. Lorde cites the erotic as “...a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognising its power, in honour and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves” (Lorde, 2017, p.23). Our depth of feeling, our embodied and emotive experiences

offer us ways to recognise meaningful pursuits within our lives; there is not a privilege of intellect over emotion or vice versa.

As an artform, a free-appearance that can be played with, installation art does not privilege the senses over reason. Rather than representing qualities of light and space within a frame to a viewer to be thought about and considered, installation places the audience within the work (Bishop, 2012); the opportunity to think and consider is supported by the sensory experience of being within the work. This embodied or *erotic* experience is one which can offer audiences ways to identify what is meaningful for them within the work.

In her account of the history of Installation art, Claire Bishop (2012) suggests that the installation "...introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy..." (p. 11). She supports the sensory with Kabakov's notion of the 'total installation' which not only physically immerses the viewer, but, crucially, psychologically absorbs them too. (Bishop, 2012, p. 16). She contrasts this to the previous tradition within the arts that placed sight as the primary sense and means of interacting with a work. This shift from a detached intellectual method of interacting with an art work to one which does not privilege the primary sense of sight over any of the other senses, and which places an emphasis on the emotive, psychological and immersive experience is important for me. It connects a form of art that seeks to create an absorbing experience with a method of knowing that relies on a depth of feeling (Lorde's 'erotic').

Both Shani and Xa use intense light, sound, colour, texture and narrative in their installations to create absorbing worlds that encourage emotive responses and leave little space for the audience to analyse any one element of the work at a time.

Exhibition Account

Tai Shani – 'DC: SEMIRAMIS'

Turner Contemporary, Margate,

17 November 2019

At the start of the performance we are ushered into the space in a hushed fashion. The performers are present and still in the installation, causing curiosity and a hushed atmosphere as I assimilate the visual plateau. Slowly, realisation dawns on me that all performers are women/non-binary. And many are semi-naked. It sets a tense scene, not the least because I, as an audience member, could reach out and touch the performers should I be bold enough. There is no hierarchy of stage, wings or flies. We are part of this performance, bearing witness to it.

As the performance starts, the large, flat screen TV tightly frames the narrator for this performance. She speaks in hypnotic prose, shifting between possible violences endured by women-cum-cyborgs. Weaving futures and presents, histories and fictions together in a mesmeric fashion, we watch in fascination as the performers slowly turn to confront us.



As a woman, this confrontation doesn't feel threatening. I've shared collective trauma and the violence discussed is no less unsettling than the realities and masculine fantasies of horror films. The semi-nakedness almost feels like a defiance, the male gaze is denied here, these women are standing with a multiplicity of women, where every apparent effort has been made on Shani's part to cast diversely. Despite this possible unity of "female" or "woman" I sharply feel Haraway's influence "...which identities are available to ground such a potent political myth called "us", and what could possibly motivate investment in this collectivity?" (Haraway, 1998, p. 155). The complexities of identity politics silently interrogate us as we voyeuristically view these "women", consuming their appearances and visible identities.

Shani's mesmeric world making employs numerous strategies. The layered and sometimes contradictory elements in Shani's performance and installations evoke again: "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary." (Haraway, 1998, p. 149).



Tai Shani – ‘Dark Continent: Semiramis’

Dark Continent: Semiramis, now shortened to *DC: Semiramis*, is collection of “...’tableaux vivants’ that often function as sites for performance, or otherwise serve as visual portals into fantastic and gothic narrative worlds” (Turner Contemporary Arts organization: Margate, 2019, p. 72).

Having seen the exhibition at Tramway in Glasgow in 2018 without witnessing the performance, and then seeing the performance at Turner Contemporary in Margate in 2019 for the Turner Prize, the “tableaux vivants” function remarkably well for performance, but also as independent installation worlds to be experienced.

The appeal with Shani’s work is the generous quality of *sharing space*. Her works offer the audience the opportunity to co-produce the space and meaning, even with the mesmerising meta-narrative that ties the series together. Shani employs ambiguous objects, lush textures and evocative lighting to envelop you in an unfamiliar world that references early 1980’s computer animation and technological devices.

The space and its objects permit the audience to play with ideas, populate it with fantastic characters, all while projecting an otherworldly, subtly sinister atmosphere. Shani layers an impossibly dense experience of sound, narrative, light and texture with rich literary, fictional

references to Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405) a proto-speculative fiction.



In the face of graphic violence, trauma and desire that heavily informs the narration, it is perhaps contradictory to consider Shani's work as capable of "care" (Turner Contemporary Arts organization : Margate, 2019). The introduction of violence as a theme relevant to feminist concerns evokes Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* and the achievements forced upon women to accept patriarchal, capitalist colonial determinations of gender, race and class. (Haraway, 1998). Violence and trauma are an unfortunate reality of women's experiences and to leave them unacknowledged would suggest a lack of care. The narrator's stream of consciousness, their recital of violence, divorced from reality; the tableaux of semi-naked women; the carefully considered installation; all leaves space for care:

"There is a sense that this violence against women's bodies attests to both personal and collective psychic trauma, to cruel acts perpetrated by individuals within systems of patriarchy. Yet there is something of an emancipatory gesture in the portrayal of violence removed from oppression; removed from the gendered power dynamics we

are used to consuming them, often casually, within” (Turner Contemporary Arts Organization : Margate, 2019, p. 78).

The violence that women face is not a surprise to us. Shani frankly addresses violent acts of sexual assault, bodily harm and the social structures of patriarchy that maintain and reproduce an environment that proliferates a hatred of women. But her frankness is not one note, trauma is not the only experience of women and she paints a full picture of sexual desire, joy, boredom, fear and the difficulty of holding these contradictory elements together in suspension by her protagonists. These complex characters and scenarios feel possible or real. Lola Olufemi speaks of the creative power necessary to confront these violences: “The project of building a new world and combating the harm produced in this one is rarely viewed as creative. Political endeavours are separated from the mysterious nature of ‘creativity’ ... [the] space that art opens up reminds us that despite the violence we are subjected to, there are still parts of our minds that cannot be controlled.” (Olufemi, 2020, p 86).

Indeed what Shani is offering us is a chance to imagine beyond the limits of patriarchal oppression and a “...’feminine’ subjectivity and experience” as decoupled from gender.”(Turner Contemporary Arts Organization : Margate, 2019, p.72). In other words, to maintain what has been typically viewed as feminine: “...privileg[ing] sensation, irrationality and interior subjectivity...” (Turner Contemporary Arts Organization : Margate, 2019, p. 72) but not limiting those traits to a specific gender.

The material sumptuousness of Shani’s installation worlds, light absorbing velvets paired with highly reflective sculptural surfaces, carefully considered lighting, but ultimately the intense and rhythmic vocalisations in the narrative performance excite sensory responses from the audience. The performers activate this space with minimal movement, a sinister stillness and confrontation of violence as yet unacted. The mesmeric quality of the installation that Shani creates recalls something of a disembodied “stage presence”. Jane Goodall (2008) describes mesmerism as “...the compelling power...[that can] erase everyday thoughts and...transport [the audience] to another plane of feeling...create a sense of expanded destiny and heightened meaning...to all who wish to embrace it.” (p. 87). There is a sense of apprehension in being transported without agency or awareness, itself an act that holds the possibility for violence.

This affecting quality of the work, does much to “...abstract us from the demands placed on our bodies at any given time.” (Olufemi, 2020, p. 84). The intensity of affect in Shani’s work is the result of her “..desire to move people deeply, to the point at which a sense of overstimulation becomes inevitable and is likely intended. When entering a world that privileges sensation, it is required that we feel intensely, too.”(Turner Contemporary Arts Organization : Margate, 2019, p. 78).

Zadie Xa – ‘Child of Magohalmi and the Echoes of Creation’

“*Child of Magohalmi*... is a mesmeric, narratively disjointed and at times slow-moving film, best absorbed in intermittent doses. Combining choreographed scenes and animation, its imagery ranges from a masked figure on a beach (Mago) as she creates the world from sand, water and her own bodily excretions, to pastel-hued kelp overlaid on waves.” (Lafarge, 2020)



Xa's work is expansive and incredibly rich, creating numerous points of curiosity for her audience; it is quieter than Shani's work, less insistent on affecting visitors, but no less engaging. Curated as a series of rooms that shift in colour and lighting, each space feels like a surface breached, emphasised by the crashing waves outside of De La Warr Pavilion in East Sussex.

The collection of objects in each room are given greater meaning when we see Xa wearing them, dressed as a deity in a mask in the film we encounter in the third room. Until that point, they strike a peculiar balance, referencing museum artefacts, but futuristic in their materials and colour. Incongruous materials are juxtaposed in the clothing, heavyweight fabrics hanging from delicate ones; overlaid with multiple embroidered lines in gold, silver and synthetic iridescent threads, these lines resolve into patterns of shimmering light on the surface of water before the light shifts and they become orcas submerged in the cloth; some have raw edges and hanging threads, but all are opulent and speak of the import of the wearer.

Engaged in this way, the audience become anthropologists of a sort, piecing together a civilisation they have no experience of, applying their own cultural significances onto these possible relics, a not unsurprisingly colonial predisposition, given the museological allusions the curation references.



Questions raised by these pieces are not answered by the film, at least not in full. But the sense of status exuded by the extravagant costumes and masks is rewarded as, gradually, the rhythm of the film divulges partial hints to matriarchal lineages embedded in its creation myth. Squatting in the sand, paying no mind to the garb she wears, Xa digs. Recoloured in lavender, images of Orca pods swimming across the ocean repeat. Gradually the connection between Magohalmi (Grandmother Mago) and Jaetu (the matriarch of the orca pod) become more apparent. The Orca as a symbol of the grandmother, the creator of the world and representative of matrilineal knowledge passed down orally from generation to generation.

The presentation of the installation speaks to a lost history, a forgotten mythology, the water a representation of the unknown and the anxieties that presents. There is a sense of mourning, for a devastation of the natural world of this imagined civilisation. This allegorical collapse of a civilisation is one into which we are easily transported, particularly during our current climate crisis and the loss of diverse habitats and species. The effect of loss and mourning for our environment is a powerful re-investment for the audience in our current ecological crises.

If we return to Tronto and Fisher's definition of care, their expansive explanation suggests that "...caring be viewed as a *species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world'...* all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web" [Emphasis is the authors] (Tronto, 1993, p. 103).

The complexity present within care, and the conditions articulated by feminists so that the capacity of care, its acts and its political impact can be expansive, has naturally grown to incorporate an understanding of care beyond a *purely human* narrative. As Puig de la Bellacasa states: "...in times binding techno- sciences with naturecultures, the livelihoods and fates of so

many kinds and entities on this planet are unavoidably entangled...” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 1)

Xa’s installation work is emblematic of a practice that encompasses a broader intersectional approach to the complexities inherent within our identities as women and as carers. With the conflation of matriarchies with endangered mammals, myth with reality and mournful loss of an ecosystem with our climate reality, Xa highlights the interconnections between patriarchal, capitalist and colonial oppressions and their impact on us and the environment.

The complicated connections and resonances that Xa creates would struggle in a medium outside of installation. Indeed, Xa herself has foregone her original medium. In an interview with Ellie Wiseman for *Ocula Magazine* she states: “The ideas that I had always wanted to explore and express in my work were never done successfully with painting...I felt really weighed down by what the possibilities of paint could do for me, and I felt like it always needed to be referential to art history because painting was taught to me through the conventions of the European institution” (Wiseman, 2020). The Eurocentric history of painting is one which centres the viewer, and Xa’s work specifically holds space for alternate viewpoints.

Xa’s expansive statement repeats throughout *Child of Mahohalmi*, “all creation legends are true,” generously holding space for an audience not presumed to be monotheistic, but also not prioritising this legend over any other. In her book on installation art, Bishop (2012) draws a line between the advent of the decentred viewer, feminism and postcolonial theory. Stating that centring has been considered by critics as a fantasy “...perpetuated by [the] dominant ideology [as] masculinist, racist and conservative; this is because there is no right way of looking at the world, nor any privileged place from which judgements can be made (p. 13). Xa’s work does not presume a privileged position for its audience, instead in her single statement regarding creation legends, she meets each person exactly where they are, enfolding them into her world.

In a counter to the dominant and western view of Asian cultures, Xa’s work makes use of motifs and symbolism as entry points for her audience. The orca, water, the yin yang symbol and the shaman, a figure situated in an in-between state, between the spiritual and the real, life and death. The shaman’s capacity to inhabit these liminal spaces allows Xa to situate the shaman as representative of the diasporic position (Wiseman, 2020). Existing in these in-between states for Xa, spanning different cultures, different ideas of existing as a woman, is also represented by the shaman. This grounding of the slippery nature of identity through symbolism is developed further through matrilineal histories. Xa reanimates them “...to combat and engage with Eurocentric perceptions of Asian identity. In doing so she aspires to create a new and alternative Asian identity through the fantastical and supernatural, attempting to realign history through feminine descent” (Stewart, 2020).

Installation as a break from the hierarchical and centred viewer is a specific challenge to the traditional European values for art (Bishop, 2012). The conditions that Bishop discusses for installation art to rebut the hierarchical relationship to the object, a bourgeoisie and masculine possessive tendency (Bishop, 2012). Xa’s refusal of the Eurocentric ideals of painting whilst entering into relationship with her diasporic identity, are far better situated in the expanded installation, which leaves room for interpretation and space for others to explore their cultural relationships and identities alongside the work.

My argument that feminist artists’ understanding of the complex conditions of our lives as women (and marginalised genders) is the reason that their installation works are capable of offering their audiences care takes on greater depth in Xa’s work. Leaving space for exploration of identity, colonialism, eurocentrism, patriarchal eradication of matrilineal power, climate disaster and the intense mourning many of us experience in holding these elements together,

she nonetheless designs an environment that allows us multiple ways to connect with these elements. Gradually submerging us in the weight of the complexity - but permitting us the opportunity to determine the depth to which we will feel - she offers us the chance to detach from our everyday concerns and the calls on our time to instead attend to the business of considering the relics of a mythological civilisation.

Conclusion

It is the inclusion of the emotive, the mesmeric, the apparently irrational, that makes the work of Xa and Shani so potent. This refusal to cut off an emotive experience of art is a refusal to excise alternative means of knowing. And it is Installation arts capacity to hold space for multiple viewpoints, decentering the traditional Renaissance understanding of the viewer as the master of the image he surveys or indeed has commissioned, that is particularly effective in presenting its audience with the opportunity to engage all their senses in experiencing the work, making the effect of the works all the more moving. Particularly when removed from gendered understanding of the Renaissance Masters and privileged viewpoints.

Both Shani and Xa build worlds in their works. The care expressed through speaking women's stories re-invests us in our own potential to imagine our lives as whole and complex, rather than purely as labourers in a capitalist system.

With the mythological and fictional devices used in both works, it may be suggested that these fictions remove us from our engagement with the immediate, political struggles with which feminist movements grapple.

Accusations such as this have been levelled at Shani's work by Andrew Hunt in his Artforum review: "As much as this speculative genre has potential to create a new discourse around gender politics, as well as relevance to current discussions on contemporary feminism, any form of futurism can also be seen as a fantastic distraction from reality. The civil rights and women's movements of the past century represent some of the major political advances of that era, and their struggles were of the here and now." (Hunt, 2018)

However, these concerns do not pick up on the complexity of lived experience, nor do they echo Olufemi's claim that the possibility for creativity is not eradicated by violence. Indeed, as the curator Rowan Geddis states in the Turner Prize 19. Publication: "...[F]ar from an escapist gesture, the potential of this practice of speculative world-making provides the necessary framework for critical distance. It generates a capacity to express social and political truths, to be a factory for the production of wholly new values and models of society" (Turner Contemporary Arts Organization: Margate, 2019, p. 79).

The speculative worlds these feminist artists create operate on a number of levels and in different ways. They acknowledge the concerns about progress in women's rights and social justice, but they do not sacrifice the possibility for creativity through that acknowledgement, instead using the violent injustices as means to spur their creativity or to create *in spite of* those violences, as Olufemi believes.

The lines that I have drawn between the complexity of experience that women face in being constituted as subjects and the complex and unequal constitution of care acts have demonstrated that both terms require more than singular explanations or descriptions. Presenting evidence that I feel suggests that art offers its audience a form of care that permits them to exist outside of their societal roles and responsibilities and to imagine new worlds. And installation art in particular is a suitable medium for feminist artists to lay out the complexities present within their work, one which allows for multiple viewpoints and entry points. In combination, I believe that my argument that installation art is an effective medium in holding the complexity of experience and the opportunity for care in the work of feminist artists Tai Shani and Zadie Xa is strengthened by the inclusion of feminist theories and concepts of care.

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