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CONCEPTUALISM THROUGH MOTION AND SPACE: ERIKA DEFREITAS IN CONVERSATION WITH KENESHA JULIUS

Moko is pleased to present a series of conversations with visual artists in the Guyanese diaspora inspired by “[Un | Fixed Homeland](#)”, a recent exhibition of thirteen Guyanese artists at Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art in Newark, NJ. *Moko* would like to thank Celeste Hamilton Dennis from *OF NOTE Magazine* for facilitating these interviews. This month, *Moko* contributor Kenesha Julius speaks with Erika DeFreitas.



Erika DeFreitas, *A Visual Vocabulary for Hands in Mourning* (detail), 2013. Inkjet digital print. Image courtesy of the artist.

Photo credit: Daniel Ehrenworth.

Erika DeFreitas is a conceptual artist who shows no boundaries in her creative prowess. With a focus on process and documentation, DeFreitas uses photography to record her performative actions, which illustrate themes of identity, culture and loss.

Praised for her talent, the Toronto based artist has been exhibited in multiple locations like the Houston Museum of African American Culture. She is also the recipient of several awards; the most recent being the 2016 Finalist Artist Prize from the Toronto Friends of Visual Arts and the 2016 John Hartman Award.

In this brief interview, DeFreitas expresses her artistic visions, the influences and the process that go into her artwork.

What differentiates you from other conceptual artists?

In my opinion, conceptual art is such a vast genre that I think it would be hard to differentiate myself from other artists, especially since the themes and ideas I'm working with are not unique to my practice. At times I feel like some of the works I create are homages to other artists as a way of acknowledging their influence.

Which artists have inspired your way of thinking?

For a very long time I have been inspired by the writing by the late French philosopher Jacques Derrida, specifically his writings on the complexities of mourning. In the past year, I was introduced to the work of late American writer and art patron, Gertrude Stein. Her writing has had a significant impact on how I engage in the act of writing, but also in how I think about time-sense and aesthetics. There are writers like bell hooks and Franz Fanon, whose influences have been with me for years and have become a part of how I navigate the world.

Artists who inspire my way of thinking are as follows:

Hanne Darboven	The grid and sequences
Charles Gaines	The sublime
Felix Gonzalez-Torres	The social and political, private and public
Francisco Goya	The Disasters of War series
David Hammons	The body (as material and subject matter)
Eva Hesse	The use of materials and ephemerality
On Kawara	The diary and mortality
Deirdre Logue	The self, anxiety, and the use of video
Agnes Martin	Subtlety



Erika DeFreitas, *The Impossible Speech Act*, 2007. Inkjet digital print. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Daniel Ehrenworth.

During the conception phase, what is your thought process like?

I spend a lot of my time observing and thinking about things. It can often look like I'm spending my time in unproductive ways because I'm not sketching in a book or physically testing out ideas. Once a thought has lived with me, it sometimes translates into an imagined visual that tends to resonate a bit and then I take action by doing research by looking, reading, and listening with more intention. When I'm curious enough about something, I have a small community of creative beings that I can tap on the shoulder and say, "hey, what do you think of this?" This process of sharing is invaluable and I would say it's the most important part of my conception phase. The discussions that we have aren't restricted to any one part of the conception/creation phase and I see these discussions and relationships as a crucial part of my artistic practice.

Often times I get frustrated with myself when I can't quite seem to get 'here' and 'there' and that is a place where I personally need to be to feel like I can move forward with a work. Sometimes I think I'm 'there' and I start collecting materials and then something shifts for me and I change my mind, heading down a tangential path. It's all challenging and exciting because the whole time this is happening I'm learning and I'm getting to see an idea through.



Erika DeFreitas, *A Teleplasmic Study with Doilies (Angle No.2)*, 2010- 2011. Inkjet digital print. Image courtesy of the artist.

Has your style changed over the years– if so, in what ways?

For a while, the work I made was performance-based and took the form of interventions in public spaces, and at times, made for unsuspecting audiences. While I was working on my Master's degree at the University of Toronto, I started to explore performance art made for the camera; moving from the public realm to the private. I also started to see the performative nature of object making. My practice became increasingly multidisciplinary and during this period of my life, my ideas were translated into the media I felt most appropriate, whether it be large-scale photography, video, textile-based work, artist books, etc.



Erika DeFreitas, Sometimes the Metonymic Object is an Absence, 2014–2017. Inkjet digital print. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Toni Hafkenscheid.



Erika DeFreitas, At the Very Point Where Words Fail Us; (the old word foi, 'faith') Images No.1 and No.2, 2016. Inkjet digital print. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Daniel Ehrenworth.

You and your mother are recurring subjects in your artwork. Why is this so?

Some of the major themes in my practice are mourning and loss, matrilineal narratives, post memory, and cultural identity. I approach these themes by looking at relationships to others, to locations, to objects and to images. A long lingering fear of mine has been losing my mother, so a large body of my work is about my relationship with her. She first became a subject in my work in 2007 for the photographic series *Right there, between here and over there* (2007). For this work I wrote an invitation to my mother asking her to create something of comfort for me and I would then become something of comfort for her. In turn, she crocheted this large cozy that I was sewn into and we were photographed occupying space together. I then started to think that a solution to this fear of loss was to attempt to make the impermanent permanent. My research involved the various ways people mourn, grieve, commemorate, and so forth. An example of how we approached this is in the two-channel video, *The Truth of Lineage* (2007). We are seen crying, catching each other's tears in glass vials and then drinking the tears. In later works we are focusing on loss, but also exploring ideas of migration, the concept of 'home' and belonging, as seen in the work *Sometimes the metonymic object is an absence* (2014). Our latest photographic work together, *at the very point where words fail us; (the old word foi, "faith" (2016)*, is about my perceived difference in the relationships we have to Catholicism, while exploring the iconology of the Virgin Mary and the history of hysteria. A challenge and goal is to embrace making work that may stem from a personal narrative, but execute it in a way that can resonate with a broader audience.



Erika DeFreitas, Right There, Between Here and Over There, 2007. Inkjet digital print. Image courtesy of the artist.



Erika DeFreitas, Her Body is Full of Light (often, very often and in floods), 2016. Video Still, Image courtesy of the artist.

In the 2016 exhibition “Un/Fixed Homeland” where artists explore the Guyanese experience of migration, what was the concept behind your work, ‘The Impossible Speech Act’?

The Impossible Speech Act (2007) was created during the time I started to think about mourning rites and rituals. In my research I came across the history of death masks, which are masks made from casts that are taken of someone’s face shortly after they have died. Using icing sugar, my mother and I created flowers and leaves and constructed masks for each other. The action of placing each flower and leaf on each other’s face was documented with photography. I was interested in using icing sugar for a few reasons. The masks and the documentation were ways of conceptually ‘preserving’ an impression, an action, and a skill. In Guyana, my grandmother held classes in her home where she taught women from her community how to bake and decorate cakes. My mother learned these skills from my grandmother and has attempted to share these skills with me. Additionally, I loved that sugar has been used as an ingredient in food preservation. In the end, the icing sugar melted because of our body heat.



Erika DeFreitas, *She Said Anything Once It Is Made Has Its Own Existence* (detail), 2016. Inkjet digital print. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo credit: Daniel Ehrenworth.

Where would you like to head to next? What would you like to explore creatively in the future?

A dream of mine is to do residencies all over the world; learn a new skill in each location, meet new people, share ideas and create. I’m looking forward to participating in a residency this summer at Alice Yard in Trinidad. I would love for my next residency to be in Paris so that I can explore the catacombs, cathedrals and research the history of the late French poet Charles Baudelaire’s séances. I am still very much interested in the themes that I’ve been working with as there is a lifetime of ground to cover, but I want to play around more with object making, and I would love to learn the art of weaving and traditional ways of making wall paper and re-contextualizing these ‘crafts’ or ‘decorative arts’.

<http://mokomagazine.org/wordpress/2017/05/07/conceptualism-through-motion-and-space-erika-defreitas-in-conversation-with-kenesha-julius/>