

TIWANI CONTEMPORARY

The Seed Keepers

CHARMAINE WATKISS

16 November - 5 December 2021

The drawings of the plants that feature in Charmaine Watkiss's first solo show, *The Seed Keepers*, at Tiwani Contemporary call to mind the botanical studies of 18th and 19th century naturalists – the many individuals whose contributions to the sciences became inseparable from the larger projects of imperialist expansionism. In Watkiss's universe, however, a different mode of being is in view. Through her character portraits, plant and black life are presented to the viewer hand in hand, unflinching at the reality that both have known the whims of capitalist extraction, justified by cruel habits of categorisation, exploitation, and abuse.

Watkiss's eyeline stretches wider than this. Far from being concerned solely with the harms that have been inflicted upon colonised body and land, she gives more generous attention to the stories of survival that are rooted both in black Caribbean womanhood, traditional African cosmologies, and modes of kinship with the natural world, and their transportation across the Atlantic. It is often stated that indigenous cultures across the world do not acknowledge a clear separation between humans and the natural environment. Watkiss offers us a similar proposition. It is in exactly this way that the plants she features: cerasee, sage, ginger amongst others – appear as accompanying characters, or kindred spirits.

In *The Matriarch I*, three women are featured in varying positions that suggest to the viewer a range of relational possibilities. They are posed as though for a photograph, yet two of the women peer elsewhere beyond the boundary of the paper: one stands with her back to us, and the other is seated – evocative of being the oldest of the three. The third woman, in the most intriguing position, kneels at the feet of the other two. Her head rests in the seated woman's lap; her thick braids lie stretched across and over the woman's hands. Unlike the other two, she has her eyes closed. In keeping with the rest of Watkiss's drawings, each of the women carry a similar face, as though related, their clothing and hair differs.

And yet, still to be mentioned is the flower that features in this portrait, which stands for more than a purely aesthetic instance of filigree or embellishment. It is precisely through the language of plants that the subterranean wisdom of Watkiss's portraiture becomes more apparent. Blooming from the dress of the standing woman is a peacock flower, also known as a Pride of Barbados, or *Caesalpinia pulcherrima* – native to the Caribbean and Tropical America. The same woman also holds a wooden doll in her right hand. Finally, at the foot of the image lie what appear to be a gathering of small fruits.

All of this is significant. The doll is a fertility symbol, common across various West African cultures. The peacock flower and various parts of the manchineel tree (*hippomane mancinella*) as whole were used by the enslaved across the Caribbean as tools of agency and resistance. The seeds of the peacock flower could be used as an abortifacient to do away with unwanted pregnancies, whilst extracts of manchineel, toxic from root to sap to fruit, played a central role in poisonings of masters by the enslaved, famously in the case of Sally Basset, a mixed-race Bermudan woman executed in 1730 for this reason. Knowing the histories that surround the plants and the doll – two sides of the same coin of life and death – makes another image legible.

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The secrets held within the images are hidden in plain sight with reason. In the Seed Keepers cosmology of relation, wherein symbology and fugitivity play no small part, everything is not for the taking. This is very much the point: what one knows is often dependent upon whatever one has needed to know in order to survive. Perhaps what one reads in an image is just as equally true.

Who are the women in these drawings, we ask, and how are they familiar with one another? Are they even individual women at all, or different iterations of the same woman – different visions of one person meeting herself for the first time? What is it that she knows – that they know – about the plants with which they appear? 'I would like the viewer to ask these questions themselves,' says Watkiss. 'I would like the viewer to be drawn into their narratives, and to see what narratives they come away with.'

During each of my visits to her Thameside studio, Watkiss spoke at length about the role that plants played in her upbringing. She mentioned the influence of her mother, who treated Watkiss and her brother with herbs, or sent them out on errands with a list of items to purchase:

'My mother came from Jamaica from St. Thomas, in the Blue Mountains. She was one of nine and they tilled the land, knowing about plants and about herbal medicine. My grandmother was someone who was a specialist with plants. If someone was sick, she would just go walking in the fields – if anyone followed her, they would have to be quiet. I think this was her way of centering herself.'

Here we encounter a connection to plant life that is not based on an academic or institutional training in herbalism but instead a gathering of knowledge that is communal and familial. It is rooted in kinship, shared experience and to a large extent, an overwhelmingly women-led tradition of care and keeping loved ones well in difficult circumstances – whether in the plantation-era Caribbean or more recently in an immigrant-hostile post-war Britain. Unavoidably, too, the presence of plants in Watkiss's work speaks in no small way to our present age of rapid environmental decline. The question of survival persists, in this way, at the planetary level, looming heavily over all Earth-based lifeforms, and demanding other paths forward.

All of this is richly alive in Watkiss's portraits, even if discreetly so. Her light touch, her leaning towards less as opposed to more, is deliberate. Concerning her insistence upon pencil work, the delicateness of her compositions and her preference for watercolour, Watkiss sees herself as 'committed to the drawing aspect'. Although each of the figures depicted are undeniably black women, none of their skins are given colour by the artist, remaining shaded in grey. She avoids the painting of faces simply because she does not wish for the images to be perceived as paintings, noting how often she has known artists to be 'amazing at drawings' only to then 'paint over them, obliterating any kind of subtlety'.

Like the women of her portraits, Watkiss has lived many lives too. Her practice is informed by work in digital design, advertising, shoemaking, sewing and animation, and so although the final images are two-dimensional, her approach is not. She uses pattern-cutting skills to design her figures, frequently testing out templates of their outfits and pinning them in place, before taking a photograph to see if they satisfy her from a distance.

The drawnness of the work is most central for Watkiss; the intimacy it offers viewers, to look for longer and more carefully. The universe of seeing and sensing from which Watkiss has crafted The Seed Keepers is one in which stillness – the very quality of quiet that her grandmother called for whilst herb-seeking – is still vital for survival. Even as the world we inhabit today demands less of this attuned sensitivity, in her latest body of work Charmaine Watkiss asks us to consider it necessary, if only momentarily.

Victoria Adukwei Bulley

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About The Artist

Charmaine Watkiss lives and works in London. She holds a MA in Drawing, from UAL Wimbledon College of Art (2018).

Recent exhibitions include Summer Exhibition 2021, Royal Academy, London (2021); Breakfast Under The Tree, Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate (2021); Drawing Room Biennial (2021), Drawing Room, London; The Abstract Truth of Things, Tiwani Contemporary, London (2020); Me, Myself and I, Collyer Bristow Gallery (2020); Trinity Buoy Wharf Drawing Prize (2019), Wimbledon College of Art MA Degree Show (2018); Against Static (Curated by Tania Kovats), Wimbledon Space (2018).

She is on the selection panel for the Derwent Art Prize 2022.