



Deborah Jack

20 Years

Pen + Brush

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i never met my fathers mother
she died before i was born

now i wonder if knowing her
would have helped me
know him

Figure 1
little girl lost, 2002
Archival c-print on baryta fine art paper
7 x 4.5 inches

Deborah Jack: Beginnings

GRACE ANEIZA ALI

This little girl was at the beginning of this work, and she occupies its center.

—Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake*

It is of note that in the over thirty works presented in Pen and Brush’s retrospective, *Deborah Jack: 20 Years*, taking us through a sweeping journey of her oeuvre, we are given one photograph that returns us to the artist’s origins and beginnings. In the humble black and white portrait of the artist as a child, *little girl lost* (2002) (Figure 1), an eight-year-old Black Caribbean girl stands barefoot on a sandy shore in her homeland of Sint Maarten. Behind her is a wall of vibrant foliage, emblematic of the kinds of almost otherworldly Caribbean landscapes Jack often immerses us in, such as *Intertidal Imaginaries: The Resistant Geographies of the Shore(coast) in the Aftermath of Saltwater(storm surges)* (2021) (see Figure 12 and pages 114-119) or *evidence* (2009) (Figure 14). In works like these, where contested and abstracted landscapes are

at the center, we usually find Jack deliberately absenting the body. In contrast, *little girl lost*, with its subject staring directly back at the viewer, is a marked departure. This “little girl from Cole Bay,” as Jack refers to her, is both a cultural subject as well as an autobiographical identifier. She is at once vulnerable and steely in her gaze. From this posture, her head slightly lowered but her eyes raised, one can imagine what kind of person in the world she will be: one who both searches and questions as equally as she will be fierce and full of defiance. To echo Christina Sharpe’s words from *In the Wake*, quoted above in this essay’s opening epigraph, “She occupies its center.” It is this singular work that for me serves as the retrospective’s punctum. Elusive and understated as it might be in its small stature (merely 7 by 4.5 inches), *little girl lost* is

a most important work for the poignant glimpse it provides us into the worlds Deborah Jack both invents and unravels throughout her practice.

This delicate photograph, its four corners framed and buttressed by strips of white, is laid on top of a sheet of lined white paper that reminds me of the pages from the blue composition books I, too, spent writing in throughout my childhood school days growing up in Guyana. Like me, and like Jack, these are the notebook pages where so many of us Caribbean girls from small places penned our hopes and dreams on. It is where we imagined worlds beyond the ones we were born into, where we conjured up trajectories and blueprints for our lives in spite of the absence of anyone around us living such a life. “She knew her dreams were beyond the horizon,” writes Jack, “but she also knew that to see the horizon, she had to be standing in a place safe enough to dream.”² The artist’s choice to pair the image with the notebook page evokes the question: how many girls must tuck their dreams in notebooks, memorialize them, guard them, because no one asks about their dreams? With these questions I am reminded of the words of another Caribbean girl from a small place, the Antiguan-born writer Jamaica Kincaid who wrote of her own struggles for self-invention, “I understood that I was inventing myself, and that I was doing this more in the way of a painter than in the way of a scientist. I could not count on precision or calculation; I could only count on intuition.”³ For Jack to speak of dreams is to usher in the fantastical interior world of Caribbean girlhood. It is a refusal to allow them to be unseen or mis/seen. As Régine Michelle

Jean-Charles poignantly notes in her essay, *Occupying the Center: Haitian Girlhood and Wake Work*, “To truly occupy the center means not only to be seen but to see. It means being fully present, embodied, able to speak for oneself, and *allowed to dream*.”⁴

Urging us to see Caribbean girls across time, Jack returns to our protagonist in other works on view in *Deborah Jack: 20 Years*, though not as the “little girl from Cole Bay,” but as a slightly older girl from the artist’s community. Those works include *standing* (2013) (Figure 2), *the embrace of trees* (2013) (Figure 3), *yearning...waiting for an edge to take shape...* (2013) (Figure 4), and *hillside haunt* (2013) (Figure 5), all part of Jack’s larger photographic series, *what is the value of water if it doesn’t quench our thirst...* (2013) and the adjoining film *The Water Between Us Remembers* (2015). Of this protagonist, Jack also offers us an origin story:

A young girl who is both ancestor and descendant. Her journey begins inland, and she makes her way to the shore only to return to the center. Her impulse is to perform this ritual as a form of (re)remembering what was lost/taken/forgotten. Traveling across (in)visible boundaries toward the shore.⁵

Carrying a bouquet of red royal poincianas—Sint Maarten’s National Tree, the girl quietly journeys barefoot from the island’s lush interior landscapes, through its rocky hills, and finally to its coastline where she releases the flowers into the sea. Her seemingly simple and organic



steps read instead as a choreographed dance meant to gently guide and move us through a terrain at once full of beauty and precariousness. In expanding on what needs to be “(re)membered,” Jack links the ancestral traumas of slavery with the modern-day violence of displacement. We are reminded of the sobering reality that citizens of Sint Maarten continue to be mired in extreme climate crises, including constant threats of deadly hurricanes, vulnerable shorelines, rising sea levels, and dangerous hot temperatures. Jack cautions:

Here is this energy, this memory, whatever this trauma is; it exists and needs to be recognized and healed. It is going around looking for an outlet. When you think of the trauma of the Black Atlantic—of slavery—of this sort of rupture and displacement, it’s a primal scream.⁶

Figure 2

standing, from the *what is the value of water if it doesn't quench our thirst* series, 2013
 archival c-print on baryta fine art paper
 20 x 30 inches (50.8 x 76.2 cm)

Whether Jack steps her protagonist in the important work of dreaming or in (re)membering, she demonstrates what it looks like to center



Caribbean girls—to place them squarely at the nexus of their own narratives.

What we are shown via these Caribbean girls across time in *little girl lost* as well as *what is the value of water if it doesn't quench our thirst. . .* (figures 3 - 5) is an artist who takes great care and responsibility in her construction and framing of self and subjectivity. Additionally, this kind of care also functions as a gesture of resistance against the widely disseminated picturing paradise iconography and tropical fantasy tropes associated with the Caribbean. Jack's artmaking has long been included in this ongoing resistance taken up by many artists from the Caribbean. It brings to mind the haunting question/call to action posed by fellow Trinidadian artist Christopher Cozier that those of us from the region must grapple with in our life and work: "How do we define living in a site that was designed for others to play in?"⁷ Further, the artists who take up this charge must always be vigilant of a precarious tension between how the gendered Caribbean subject has been historically rendered invisible versus the ways in which they have become hypervisible in our contemporary moment. Nevertheless, Jack is attentive to another kind of representation in her work that goes beyond visibility (both hypervisibility and invisibility) to one that points us to the vast inner terrain of Caribbean girls. Such attention is demonstrated in the handwritten text inscribed in blue ink at the bottom of *little girl lost*. Here, Jack points us to the subject's consciousness, delving deeper into her interior world with the question: "I wonder if knowing her would have helped me know him." This mode of questioning, marked with such complexity—in subject matter and emotional intelligence—stands in stark contrast to the portrait of Caribbean girlhood innocence in the image above it. It's a kind of pondering that is pregnant with grief, longing, mourning, and the possibility of more loss.

Jack is a poet, sharply attentive to language's ploys and its discontents. Her penchant for chiseling away at words has long garnered my admiration. For example, I often turn to these

Opposite page:

From the series *what is the value of water if it does not quench your thirst...*

Figure 3

the embrace of trees..., 2013
Archival c-print on baryta fine art paper
20 x 30 inches (50.8 x 76.2 cm)

Figure 4

yearning...waiting for an edge to take shape..., 2013
Archival c-print on baryta fine art paper
20 x 30 inches (50.8 x 76.2 cm)

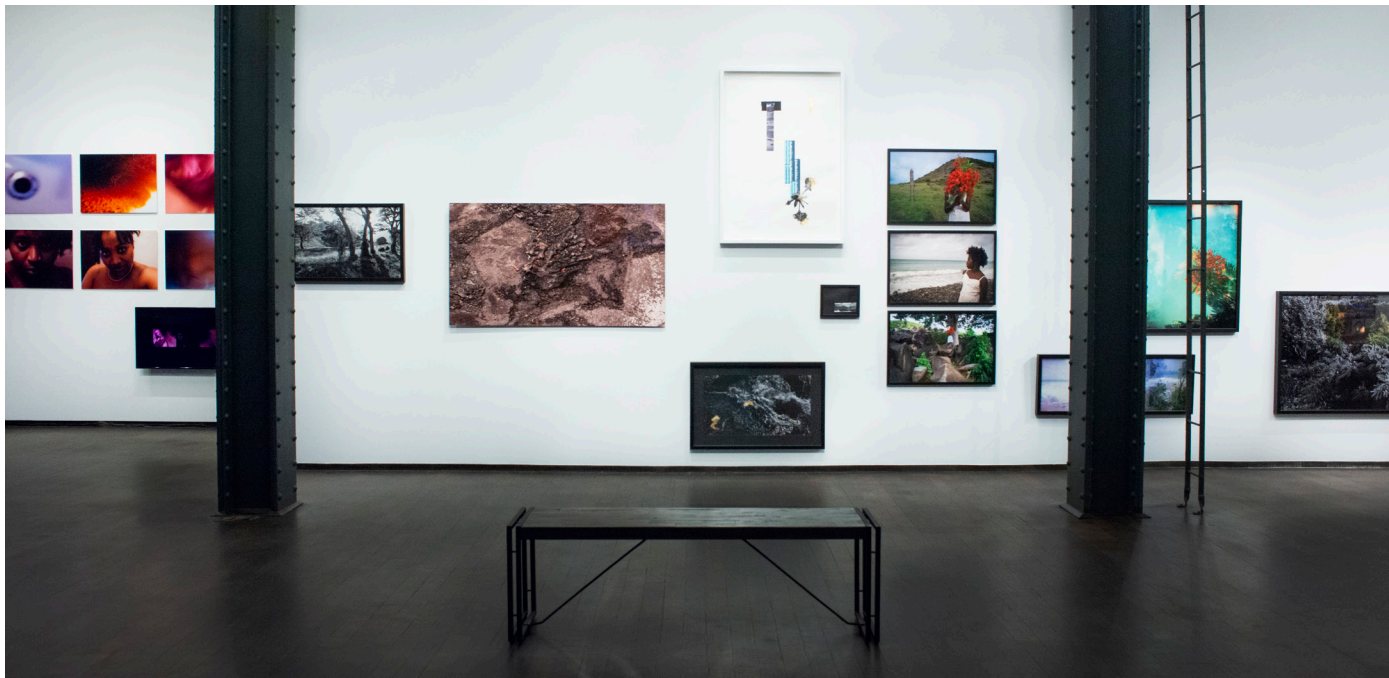
Figure 5

hillside haunt, 2013
Archival c-print on baryta fine art paper
20 x 30 inches (50.8 x 76.2 cm)

opening lines from her poem, *cultivating the archipelago*, for the ways in which it speaks to the rupture of migration—a rupture that I continue to grapple with in my own life and work on exploring migration’s liminal spaces.

how to grow in this (a)salted (is)lands
to be planted in unknown land
unfamiliar soil
by hostile hands⁸

I’ve learned to appreciate the artistry in her infusion of language into the work itself—for example, the handwritten text here in *little girl lost* or the poems etched onto the glass casings that make up *foremothers* (2002) (figure 6). Similarly, I’ve grown to pay close attention to her artistry in naming, which is often brilliantly coded texts, functioning as extensions of the work’s narratives. I imagine that an exercise to gather her work’s lyrical titles could produce its own poetic collage of sorts. In tandem, in *little girl lost*, Jack’s poetic sensibilities are not only at play in the handwritten text. They are also illustrated in her choice to name the work “little girl lost”, not little lost girl. The difference—to (again) center “girl” in the title—is subtle yet striking. While the latter is burdened with dispossession, the former allows for infinite possibilities to continue her story—she can be a *little girl lost* to land, to sea, to body, to self.



Installation view of *Deborah Jack: 20 Years* at Pen + Brush, 2021

Endnotes

- 1 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 117.
- 2 Deborah Jack, Instagram Post: September 23, 2001, Available online at https://www.instagram.com/p/CUJouc_rSH1/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link (accessed January 10, 2022).
- 3 Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy: A Novel* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 134.
- 4 Régine Michelle Jean-Charles, "Occupying the Center: Haitian Girlhood and Wake Work," *Small Axe*, November 1, 2018; 22 (3 (57)): 140–150.
- 5 Deborah Jack, "what is the value of water if it doesn't quench our thirst for . . .", *Small Axe*, March 1, 2021; 25 (1 (64)): 155–166.
- 6 Jessica Lanay, "Mare Incognitum/Unknown Sea: Deborah Jack Interviewed by Jessica Lanay," *BOMB Magazine*, February 24, 2021, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/mare-incognitum-unknown-sea-deborah-jack-interviewed/>.
- 7 Nicholas Laughlin, "Working Notes: On Christopher Cozier's Tropical Night Drawings." *Choosing My Confessions*, 2007, www.nicholaslaughlin.net/tropical-night-working-notes.html.
- 8 Deborah Jack, "cultivating the archipelago," *ASAP Journal*, August 2, 2021, <https://asapjournal.com/caribbean-gardener-cultivating-the-archipelago-deborah-jack/>.