

## Jade Montserrat

STUART HALL LIBRARY, INIVA

A gallery today is mostly imagined as a three-dimensional *space*; instead, the artist, activist, and writer Jade Montserrat frequently activates her exhibition sites primarily as a valuable collection of *walls*, which she loads with messages and reflections about black British bodies—their overlooked history and experiences—alongside an urgent call for a renewed society built on affection, care, and ethics. Her performance/installation *No Need for Clothing*, 2017, featured the artist naked and hard at work, drawing with charcoal directly on the wall to compose an all-over spread of brief enigmatic texts (written in a giant, vibrant, serifed font) derived from various sources: literature, overheard conversations, her own writings. The artist sometimes invites visiting participants to edit or highlight her work—these collaborators come away as covered in sooty charcoal as the artist's body was—and the result is an artistic-literary practice that foregrounds direct artist-viewer connections beyond just looking.

In comparison with those large-scale installations, the twenty small, colorful works on paper here (some previously exhibited at London's Alison Jacques Gallery in 2017, felt subdued—suitably hushed for a library. (The Stuart Hall Library occupies the heart of the recently relocated Institute of International Visual Arts, or Iniva.) One encountered Montserrat's drawings—mostly in mixed media with an emphasis on watercolor, and hung at eye level alongside open-shelf stacks or above a study desk—at close range. There were basically four drawing types. Some were text only, as in *Her inscription read brown sugar*, 2017, its title handwritten against a mottled-brown background suggestive of dark freckled skin or crumbling demerara sugar. In others, snippets of text accompany fragmented faces—recalling pulp-fiction novel covers—including a 2015 work with a lusciously red-lipsticked smiling mouth bearing the words BORN TO SUFFER THE WEIGHT OF MEN. Also, delicately painted works reminiscent of African wax textiles were loosely inscribed over a woman's torso. Finally, six magnificently detailed drawings featured a female silhouette, the black outline of her body punctuated by short texts and brightly dotted patterns—like a cross between an illuminated manuscript and a constellation map, with stars sprinkled across the soft forms of a standing or squatting female.

These latter works' palette and composition vaguely recalled the works of Chris Ofili; one of the many books that Montserrat provided at the library's entrance to accompany her show was Coco Fusco's reader *The Bodies That Were Not Ours: And Other Writings* (2001), which includes the 1999 text "Captain Shit and Other Allegories of Black Starcom: The Work of Chris Ofili," about white expectations around Ofili and black art, potentially offering a critical context for Montserrat's works, too. This exhibition-with-syllabus trope has often been adopted before; here, however, sited in this quiet library, with the listed volumes readily available and empty seats all round, the books seemed especially integral and inviting.

Reading from them, I noticed that many texts also referred to walls: from bell hooks's 1994 *Sisters of the Yarn: Black Women and Self-Recovery* ("Since we know in our hearts that racism and sexism hurt . . . many of us are walking around surrounded by a wall") to Sara Ahmed's 2012 *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (which describes symbolic walls of "institutional inertia" that diversity workers bang their heads against). A watercolor dated 2016 depicted a brick wall in close-up, bearing the word PULSE written in chalk: Perhaps this references the imperative of just staying alive, or the name of the Orlando, Florida, nightclub where forty-nine people were murdered by a gun-wielding homophobic the year this work was made. Walls can protect and disseminate educative messages as well as isolate and entrap.

Here and there, a glowing watercolor hung above a small cubicle desk. As a devoted library user, I saw these personal study spaces—generously equipped with a good desk light and an exquisite Montserrat drawing—as tiny, welcoming, intensely private heterotopias: minuscule "white cubes," not so much for exhibiting as for something more akin to one-to-one sharing.

—Cilda Williams

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