

Artists Charles Campbell and Camille Turner evoke souls lost to slave trade

Campbell's *How many colours has the sea* is a room-sized installation at the Power Plant Gallery at Harbourfront, while Turner's show *Otherworld* is at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto

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INCLUDES CORRECTION

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Camille Turner's *Portals*, a new work commissioned by the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.

TONI HAFKENSCHIED/ART MUSEUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Both Charles Campbell and Camille Turner have been thinking about their ancestors. Jamaican-born visual artists working in Canada – he's in Victoria; she is a Torontonion now living in L.A. – they are descendants of enslaved Africans. Coincidentally, they are both showing work in Toronto that evokes ancestors and contemporary Black experience.

Campbell's *How many colours has the sea* is a room-sized installation at the Power Plant Gallery at Harbourfront. It mourns the many people lost during the middle

passage of the transatlantic slave trade. One sculptural component places the viewer underneath the sea floor; another features large abstract coloured photographic panels, each one based on a tiny sample of an individual's breathing.

Turner's show *Otherworld* at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto features a body of work that began when she was commissioned by the Bonavista Biennale in 2019 to investigate Newfoundland's role building slave ships. In videos and photographs, Turner introduces powerful Black characters into seashore scenes, offering a counterweight to the lost stories of the enslaved. Her work also evokes Afrofuturism, that branch of sci-fi that can imagine a different future.

The *Globe and Mail* asked both artists to discuss their art.

Kate Taylor: Charles, where did this work come from?

Charles Campbell: I was doing a lot of work around my ancestors and thinking about the broken connection between myself and the African continent.

One of the things that came up for me was the people who didn't make it over, the thought of tormented souls that needed some kind of respite. Estimates are around 20 per cent, so the order of two million people. And that's lost in the journey. There were even more lost in the transport across the African continent to the slave ports.

We don't spend that much time thinking about it. The horror of the trade is noted and that people died, but we don't focus on those that have passed.

We need to more fully grieve what transpired there and those would-be ancestors who didn't make it.

KT: Camille, you've chosen to focus on one particular aspect – the slave ships that were built in Newfoundland. Where did that idea start?



Camille Turner's 2023 *Sticks and Bones* installation features materials gathered from the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. In the background, the artist appears as a character in a video of the same title.

DOMINIC CHAN/ART MUSEUM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Camille Turner: Growing up in Canada, we don't learn about these things. We learn that the only connection of Canada to the transatlantic trade of Africans is the underground railroad, right?

I've spent the last decade on learning what had actually happened.

In 2004, I visited Senegal and saw the Door of No Return, which is one of the many fortresses that were built by European traders along the coast of West Africa. I remember feeling this kind of rage, but also this confusion. Ten years later, I went back with a grant from the Ontario Arts Council to look at the future. I'm always drawing from Afrofuturism. How are Africans thinking about the future? The only thing is, everywhere I went, I just kept getting called back to the past.

A year later, it was artist Bushra Junaid, who's a Newfoundlander of Jamaican and Nigerian descent, who shared her research that made me aware that there were slave ships that were built in Newfoundland. Then I was invited by the Bonavista Biennale and that's when I started focusing on these slave ships.

KT: Building the ships means you're complicit, obviously, but it's on a different scale than enslaving people or running an economy based on slavery. How do you feel about that hierarchy of immorality?

CT: I'm not there. The work that I do is not to point fingers and to talk about who's complicit. My goal is to commemorate the people who were taken. There was 5,798 people that were carried in these Newfoundland ships from West Africa to the Caribbean, many to Jamaica. That's where I'm from. It's about remembering these people, acknowledging what they went through. There's no way for me to know who my ancestors were. There are no names in the slave voyages database. There's so much that was lost. So, for me, it's a way of reclaiming.

KT: Charles, you've recorded the audible breath of living people and made coloured visualizations from a split second of a breath. What do those representations achieve?

CC: I've done about 80 of those recordings for members of the Black community across Canada.

It is there to focus on our life breath rather than these states of trauma, the violence and oppression which is sometimes used to almost validate our existence. It's like because we suffered, we're owed a debt, so we have a right to be here. Each of us, in our humanity, has an inherent right to be here.

Every moment of our breath is precious and beautiful; we don't need to validate our existence.

The space is dealing with grieving and with death. These grieving processes are also about reclaiming our humanity. We're actually diminishing ourselves in the present because we're not giving our due to our losses.

KT: Camille says in one of her videos that it's the responsibility of the living to honour the dead. Why?

CT: I feel this kind of haunting of ancestors who were waiting for me to tell their stories. And it's a story in which I'm implicated. It's a story in which I come into being. I didn't choose it, it chose me. It's just being open and being a vessel for what needs to be done.

KT: How do you make a link with Afrofuturism? Some of the characters in your work come to us from the future.

CT: From the age of awakening into our age, which is the age of silence.

I think about the liberated future as an anchor for myself because it is a painful process going into the archive. It's a place where my ancestors are seen as commodities, disposable. In order to go into that place, I think about non-linear time. I share with those from the past, but it's also shared with those from the future.

CC: I wonder if I could jump with a couple of things. In the retelling of the slave trade, it's often these moments of extreme violence that are pointed to. But when you read accounts of slavery, the thing that always hits me is the language of commodification, which enabled this whole system.

The language somehow infiltrates your brain. You start to think: "Oh yeah, of course, the slave ship acted in that way because they had to keep their costs down." For me that is the most violent thing because it gets inside.

Camille's work makes much more direct references to those archives and that language. My instinct is actually to pull away because it feels like the pull of death. I don't need to understand me as a commodity; I need to reclaim my humanity. I find that stuff extremely hard to read. I force myself through it sometimes, but it is a violence to myself.

CT: Absolutely. Do you know NourbeSe Philips's *Zong!*? She talks about this story that has to be told but can't be told.

KT: Charles, your work with *breath* seems to be a counterpoint or retort.

CC: Exactly. The work came out of slogans like “I can’t breathe” but I have to reclaim something here. I can’t just say “I can’t breathe” because it just places me in a more abject space.

KT: This is highly emotional material. Camille’s video *Sarah* – named for a Newfoundland slave ship – has a trigger warning because of the scenes of police violence it includes.

CT: I didn’t intentionally make that video. I would wake up with story boards in my head. It’s as if it was being whispered to me what I needed to do. The film made itself.

KT: How do you respond to viewers who are uncomfortable with that, who might say, slavery is not my history?

CT: We all sit within this history. It has shaped us all. It has shaped the modern world. There is no place you can look that is devoid of this history. I mean, Newfoundland! It’s connected differently to all of us, but it’s connected to all of us. This is all our histories.

Editor’s note: (Oct. 21, 2024): An earlier version of this story referred incorrectly to singer Bessie Jones. This version has been corrected with a reference to the NourbeSe Philips poem *Zong!*



Charles Campbell's *how many colours has the sea* is on view at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, as part of the Toronto Biennial of Art. It was co-commissioned by the Toronto Biennial of Art and the National Gallery of Canada.

TONI HAFKENSCHIED/POWER PLANT CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY

This interview has been edited and condensed.

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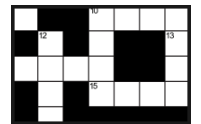
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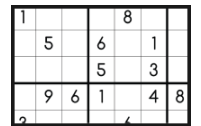
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