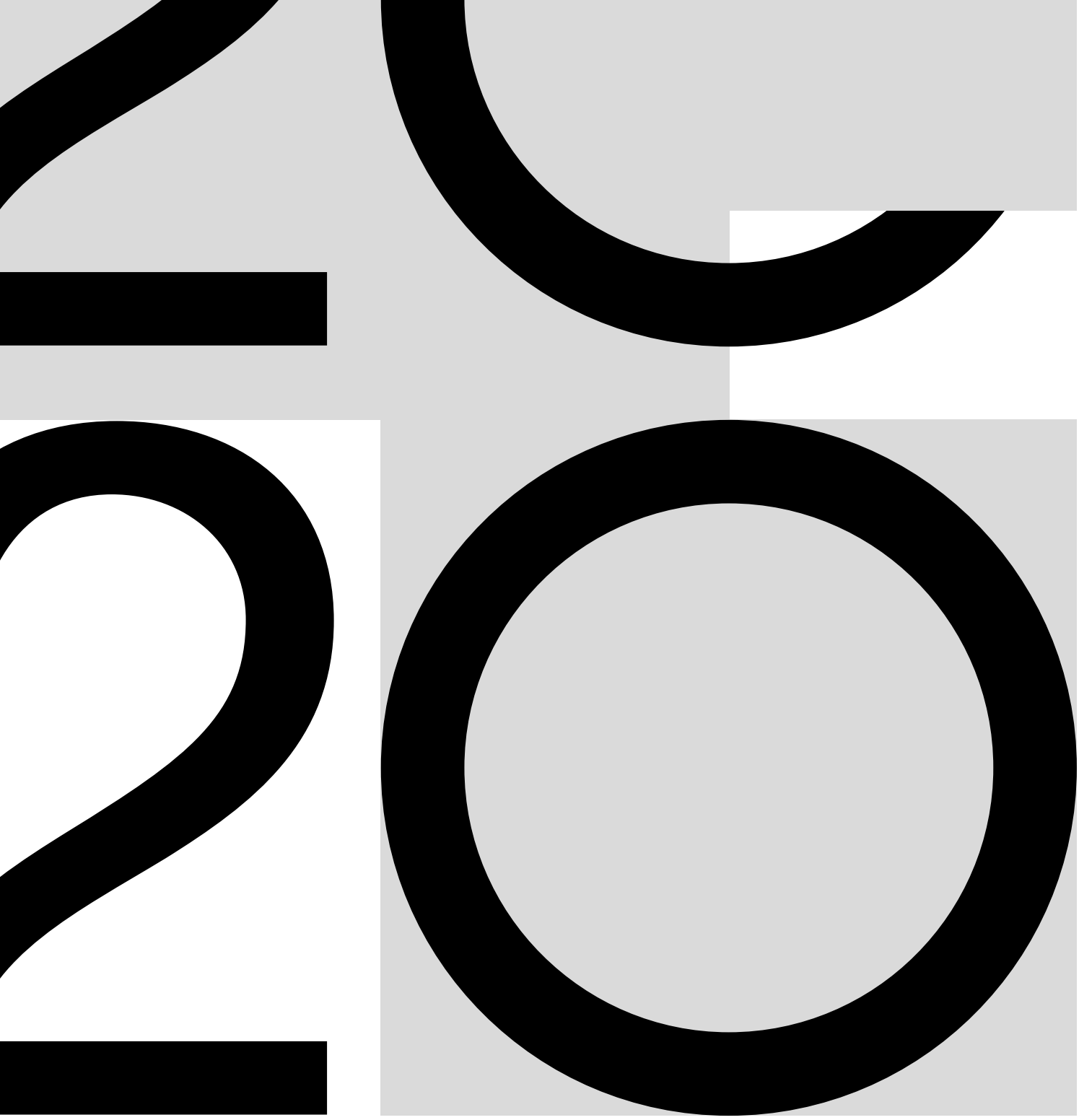

Disentangling the Archive: The Zong Massacre and Liverpool

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

Karen McLean's 'Stitching Souls: Threads of Silence' (2024) is the culmination of years of research, both in theory and praxis. In 2022, McLean was awarded a Developing Your Creative Practice grant by Arts Council England, which enabled her to travel to France to learn to weave and to Boykin, a former cotton plantation in Alabama, where she learnt from the renowned Gee's Bend Quilters Collective. Observing those around her hand quilting, she learnt to rock the needle from Mary Anne Pettway.

While in Alabama, McLean visited significant memorial sites including the Legacy Museum, which is built on the site of a former cotton warehouse where enslaved Black people were forced to labour. It houses 400 years of American history from slavery, the era of segregation in the Jim Crow era and the ongoing legacies. Upon her return to the UK, the connection between the Deep South, cotton and Liverpool felt palpable to her.

By 1750, Liverpool overtook London and Bristol in the trading of enslaved people from Africa. Forty years later, the city controlled 80% of the British slave trade and over 40% of the European slave trade.[1] Within this trade, cotton was a crucial commodity. In 1785, it was feared that if 'slaves ever should be emancipated, cotton cloth prices might double or triple with devastating consequences for Britain'.[2] It is within this climate of profit and violence that the Zong massacre took place.

The fate of the British slave ship Zong was due to a number of factors. Firstly, when it left Cape Coast Castle, now Accra, it was already over capacity. Secondly, it was led by an inexperienced captain, who was a surgeon by trade, and a contentious crew. After leaving St Kitts, it was discovered that some of the water barrels were leaking. Thirdly, as they neared their destination, someone mistook the western end of Jamaica for Cape Tiburon in eastern Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) which led to a costly detour. As the crew feared water shortages and the threat of slave insurrection, it was decided that they would throw enslaved Africans overboard. Two groups were thrown overboard before it rained and water was replenished. Despite this, a further group was thrown overboard, with the final ten throwing themselves rather than being murdered.[3] It is believed that of the 133 that were thrown overboard, one survived. When the syndicate that owned the Zong tried to claim compensation on the premise that the captain was preserving the lives of the crew, the insurers refused and this led to a court case. Although the insurers initially lost, an appeal overturned the verdict in favour the insurers, who did not need to pay the owners of the ship.

The case brought widespread attention to the slave trade, propelled by the work of the abolitionist Olaudah Equiano (also known as Gustavus Vassa), who was formerly enslaved, and anti-slavery campaigner Granville Sharp, who attempted to have the ship's crew prosecuted for murder. The Zong was owned by the William Gregson slave-trading syndicate, based in Liverpool. Among the owners were John Bridge Aspinall and George Case whose portraits are part of the Walker Art Gallery 'Legacies of Slavery' collection. At the time the portraits were produced, they signified class and status, and were seen as tools of power and a mode of self-representation.

McLean has incorporated replicas of the portraits of George Case and John Gladstone (one of the largest slave owners in the British West Indies) into her work, alongside blank frames that stand in for portraits that cannot be moved from Liverpool's Town Hall. The inaccessibility of these portraits became a driver for McLean, who considered their immobility a nod towards the

> broader difficulty in acknowledging and addressing historical injustices [...] it highlights the systemic barriers that exist when confronting these uncomfortable truths about the past. It speaks to the extent (consciously or unconsciously) that institutions and the key stakeholders in our culture go to ensure the permanence of their historical narrative.[4]

It is late spring when I visit Karen McLean in her home studio in Birmingham. She stands at the door, welcoming me in. The sound of Buju Banton echoes through the hall and I'm led to the dining room which she is using as an extension of her studio. It seems apt that the heads she is stitching are gathered at the dining table where we share some of her homemade banana bread. I wonder what stories they would have been speaking had they not been thrown overboard. I wonder what final words were uttered, screamed and swallowed up in the water that carried their bodies away from the hold of the Zong.

The figures that McLean presents, with the support of the many hands that contributed to their making, offer more than portraiture can. 'Stitching Souls: Threads of Silence' is an intricately woven rebuttal of the inaccessibility of portraiture in this context, offering viewers the tangible presence of those that were murdered so that their owners could claim £30 per person as compensation for lost property.[5] McLean bought and gathered cotton from different countries in Africa, calling on old and new friends who generously sent off-cuts from treasured clothing, swatches from vintage fabrics and rediscovered samples. Within the transnational, multicoloured patterns, red stands out. Red ribbons were used by enslavers to

attract individuals towards the slaving ships to entrap them.[6] Cowrie shells and embellishments are added to emphasise human features. Beneath the tapestry of the skin, cotton wadding is carefully sculpted and wrapped around each head in a process akin to mummification, indicating their age and gender as they stand at different heights.

The 132 figures represented, each one stitched together in an act of remembrance and reverence, is being recalled. Recalled in their individuality and as part of a collective to return in the cyclical trajectory that the Yoruba people of Benin and Nigeria believe that life takes place; aye (through the tangible world) and orun (the journey to the spirit world) and their rebirth.

I hope they are listening.

Endnotes

[1] 'Liverpool and the transatlantic slave trade – Information sheet 3', National Museums Liverpool, 2024, https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/archivesheet3.

[2] Sven Beckert,' Empire of Cotton: A Global History', Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2014, p.110.

[3] Trevor Burnard, 'A New Look at the Zong Case of 1783', 'XVII–XVIII: Revue de la Société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles', vol.76, 'Crime and Criminals', 2019, https://doi.org/10.4000/1718.1808.

[4] Karen McLean, email correspondence with the author, 8 May 2024.

[5] Burnard 2019.

[6] Lisa Gail Collins, 'Stitching Love and Loss: A Gee's Bend Quilt', University of Washington Press, Washington, DC, 2023, p.29.

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