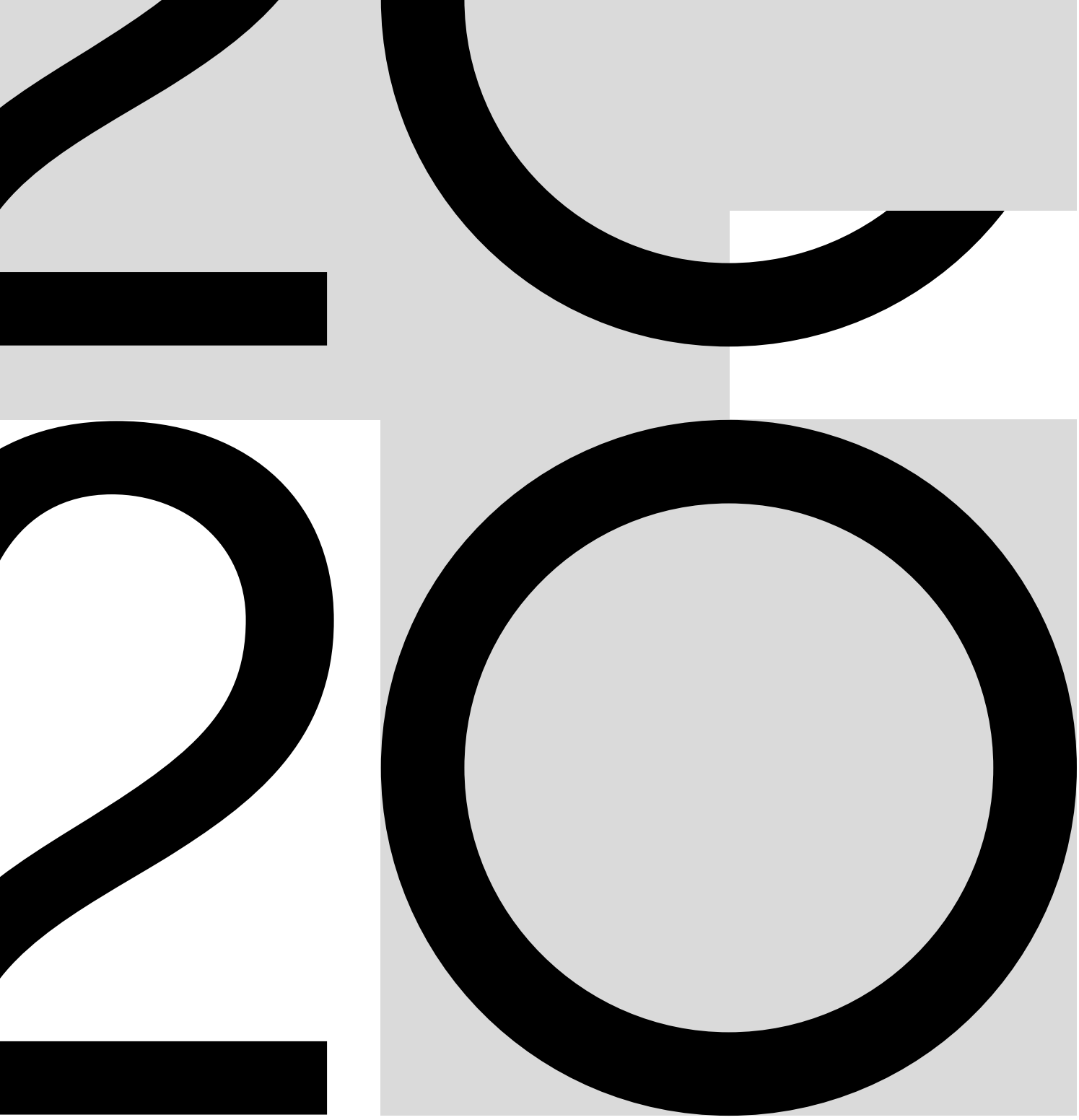

Looking for Paradise

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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.

> ‘I am trying to implant those elements of utopia, you know? I’m trying to extract this element of: yes, there’s a resistance, a rebellion here; there is an act which is thinking about a positive future. It’s about survival. Is there a paradise in that survival?’[1]

In preparing for her new commission for Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, Jessica Ashman is both extracting and implanting knowledge – moving things around to foreground stories which have been submerged and create a hopeful reimagining of the past. Her research began in the museum’s archives, looking through the natural history collection with help from curator Rhian Rowson, and the British Empire and Commonwealth Collection with the assistance of archivists Frances Davies and Jayne Pucknell. A key manuscript in Ashman’s research is ‘Elegancies’ (1758–71), a collection of watercolours and descriptions of plants grown in Jamaica made by John Lindsay, the so-called ‘pro-slavery priest’.[2] Lindsay arrived in Jamaica from Scotland in 1758, where he took charge of his own parish and married into a slave-owning family. His watercolours depict the flora and fauna of the island, often employing a slightly unusual focus with half-completed backgrounds and playing cards to demonstrate scale. Ashman also explored Arthur Broughton’s dried and pressed plant collection, which was formed in Jamaica in the 1780s and 1790s.

John Small, a Scottish pharmacist and coconut plantation owner, also documented the different plants growing in Jamaica. Alongside a list of fruits and vegetables, he notes: abundant in all parts’.[3] While, for Small and other colonisers at the time, Jamaica might have appeared to be a luscious paradise with abundant resources, it was also a place of incredible violence, driven by enslaved people’s forced labour. According to Rhian Rowson, the knowledge contained in documents such as those found in the archive was often gleaned from enslaved Africans who were not credited for their input, and these studies were normally carried out with the aim of increasing food production to fuel the British Empire’s economy.[4] Enslaved people appear as background figures in Lindsay’s work, used to illustrate agricultural processes or give visual context for the plants depicted. We see them collecting fruit from a tree or operating a cotton mill. Ashman is drawn to these figures in her pursuit of a different kind of paradise, one that departs significantly from the Jamaica that is imagined as a landscape of abundance ready for exploitation.

‘I’m trying to attach a story to John Lindsay’s “background” characters,’ she says. ‘I’m seeing an image from Lindsay and thinking, right, I’m going to have to project a narrative onto this person deemed unworthy of proper documentation. What were their dreams? What were their hopes? The utopian elements will come with these stories of hope. It could be within what the characters are doing in these vistas, these vignettes.’

It is difficult to hold the concept of paradise in relation to this period of Jamaica’s history. To me, paradise sounds like a vast landscape, utopia references a perfect society; they are expressions of an extreme state of bliss. But in Ashman’s work, paradise can be realised in small places, everyday things and seemingly insignificant actions. A moment of paradise can be contained within the joy and magic of growing plants, for example. ‘I get so excited about growing,’ Ashman says, talking enthusiastically about an aubergine she’s just grown in her allotment. Thinking about the stories she is foregrounding in her work, she elaborates: ‘planting that joy and autonomy of growing into an enslaved person, it’s like a hint to freedom’.

Enslaved people in Jamaica were sometimes able to buy their freedom, raising funds by selling surplus fruits and vegetables they had grown. This was especially the case for women, who used Sunday markets as ‘a forum for them to meet, plan and exchange precious information’.[5] Plants were used for medicine and healthcare, with wild cassava, for example, being used to induce abortions.[6] Making a garden was also one of the first tasks for a newly formed maroon group, who would grow plants such as cassava, yams and sweet potatoes, bananas and plantains, rice and corn.[7]

Plants could also become a means of active resistance, with people using their knowledge of the toxic properties of plants to poison their oppressors. Ashman pointed to a botanical record from Lindsay’s manuscript, which discusses caccoon, a plant used as an antidote to poison: ‘Formerly, the Antidote Quality was in such esteem & vogue, that I am told most people used to keep it in their Pockets, from a dread of Accidents either from the unknown Qualities in the Fruits of the Island, or from a suspition of any Designs from their Slaves.’[8] According to Ashman, ‘it was used to help induce vomiting – a powerful antidote against poison. Oppressors would keep it on their person at all times because there was this constant threat. And, also,

Jamaica had the most rebellions in all the Caribbean. I just love that fact! Ready to pop at any time. I could just do a whole project on the antidote caccoon.'

At the time of writing this text, Ashman's commission for Bristol Museum and Art Gallery is still being developed. She plans to create an ambitious installation with several animations projected onto a variety of sculptural forms. The centrepiece will take the form of an animation projected onto layers of translucent painted fabric. The layering reflects the layering in Lindsay's paintings, which Ashman describes as 'surreal', where everything is happening at once like in an eighteenth-century history painting: lots of small actions unfolding across a landscape to make up a wider story. However, Lindsay's layering is based on only one type of observation and the privileging of a single sense and point of view. He had no scientific background, and historian B.W. Higman notes that 'Lindsay was comfortable not measuring or weighing objects while at the same time declaring the superiority of his observations. He also had no time for experiment but depended chiefly on the evidence of his eyes, his visual inspection of surfaces – sometimes apprehended merely in his mind's eye.'[9]

Ashman's installation, meanwhile, will go beyond the visual, incorporating music and performance. The performances will reference traditions of carnival performance as a 'historic act of rebellion in itself', taking inspiration from carnivals across the Caribbean and the UK, from Trinidad & Tobago to St Paul's in Bristol. She explains: 'The costumes for the performance will be inspired by the history of mas bands who mocked their oppressors with both their costumes and performances, but in a botanical context. I want these costumes to reflect the natural flower and fauna of Jamaica, perhaps even explicitly referencing plants which were used as a form of rebellion.'[10]

The layering in Ashman's work allows her to build in the complexity that depictions like Lindsay's brush aside. Discussing Jamaican maroons, Ashman says 'basically they're freedom fighters; this is the kind of legacy they have. Nanny of the Maroons is on the $500 bill; she's a known hero and there's all this folklore around her. But obviously, that history is so complex, so nuanced. Some of the survival tactics of the maroons included being in cahoots with the oppressor, killing enslaved people, only having certain subsets of people within their new communities they made... I don't want to tell a lie.'

And so, this is not one story and it cannot be constrained to one surface. In Ashman's installation, the layered narrative will break away into smaller pools, or portals, which will be scattered across the floor. The materials used in her commission will both reveal and obscure: portals formed of one-way mirrored glass will distort the projections while translucent layers of painted material also avoid any obvious reading.

Ashman complicates the perspectives found in the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery archives by speaking 'to some of these utopias or paradises in a way which is hinting to a possible future'. Through her work, we see that, beyond landscapes and people, paradise can also exist in intangible form: the power and possibility of being able to look back and imagine, to implant and extract, to rearrange and to hope.

Endnotes

[1] Unless stated otherwise, all quotations are Jessica Ashman in conversation with the author, 19 July 2024.

[2] B.W. Higman, 'Pro Slavery Priest: The Atlantic World of John Lindsay 1729–1788', University of the West Indies Press, Mona, Jamaica, 2011.

[3] Letter from John Small, c.1853.

[4] Rhian Rowson, conversation with Jessica Ashman, 24 November 2023.

[5] Stella Dadzie, A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery and Resistance, Verso, London, 2020, p.21.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Richard Price, 'Introduction: Maroons and Their Communities', in 'Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas', Anchor Books, New York, 1973, p.10.

[8] John Lindsay, 'Elegancies of Jamaica' manuscript, part of 'Elegancies' (1758–71), p.195.

[9] Higman 2011, p.156.

[10] Jessica Ashman, correspondence with the author, 30 July 2024.

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