



CRITICAL
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Burnt Sugar

Curatorial essay by francesca ekwuyasi

My interest in sugar as a symbol for the interconnected relations of migration, the transatlantic slave trade, Blackness, and food has taken many forms and been influenced by many thinkers, artists, and experiences over the course of developing this project. Sometime around 2016–17, while scrolling through Instagram, I saw a post by Shantrelle Patrice Lewis, an African-American American curator, scholar, critic and filmmaker, in which she shared that she was fasting from sugar. She referenced the book that inspired this choice (which I fail to remember now), but I mention it because it sparked a curiosity in me—I was fascinated by how the history of something so seemingly ubiquitous could inform such a choice. While her reasoning for abstaining from sugar was about her physical health, her post was the first time I felt moved to learn more about this sweet substance, its sources, and the history of its production. Despite having recently completed a master's degree in International Development, it had never occurred to me to engage more deeply with the history of sugar production (and other commodity goods) and its interconnected stories of enslavement, labour, migration, and power—in that the initial large-scale production of sugar was made possible due to forced labour and exploitation of enslaved people on stolen land. I picked up a copy of *Sugar: A Bittersweet History* by Elizabeth Abbott from the library and was dazed by the inextricable connections between sugar production and the transatlantic slave trade. The sugar industry has a dark and bloody history rife with exploitation, and I learned throughout my continued reading and research that many artists and writers have explored it through various mediums.

One artist whose work on sugar informed my conceptualization of this project is María Magdalena Campos-Pons. In her mixed-media installation *Sugar/Bittersweet* (2010), consisting of twenty-five antique spears mounted on rounds of sugar installed on small stools, “she contends with the sordid history of the Cuban sugar mill industry and her relationship to it in a childhood spent living in a former sugar mill plantation.”¹ Similarly, the internationally renowned contemporary artist Kara Walker, in *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014), occupied New York’s abandoned Domino Sugar refinery, where the already sugar-thickened walls surrounded a 35 x 75-foot sphinx sculpture with the head of

a “mammy” made from thirty-five tons of sugar and sugar paste. Sculptures of small boys surrounded the sphinx, carrying baskets of bananas and sugar, their faces dusted in white powdered sugar and bodies dripping with molasses. The work’s extended title described Walker’s intention: “an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.”² These artists set a precedent for engaging with these issues in a materially-forward way, and their works on sugar greatly influenced my research for *Burnt Sugar* by illustrating the various entry points to creatively engaging with the history of sugar, Blackness, enslavement and labour exploitation. There are myriad stories and connections to be made on these themes, so my curatorial approach is to find and weave them together.

My initial approach to exploring these themes was as an artist. I wanted to tell this story of sugar, its history and contemporary implications, in short experimental video form with interpretive dance and movement, archival footage, text, and translation. I sketched out and storyboarded the project and even reached out to potential collaborators, but then in 2018, I saw Bushra Junaid’s *Sweet Childhood* (2017), a stereoview made with an archival photograph of three small Black children eating sugarcane among the stalks and foliage of a cane field, with archival text—period ads for sugar and molasses—printed on backlit fabric panel. Exhibited at the Royal Ontario Museum in *Here We Are Here: Black Canadian Contemporary Art* (co-curated by Julie Crooks, Dominique Fontaine, and Silvia Forni), Junaid’s stunning work was in compelling conversation with the other pieces in the show, and showed me the storytelling that work by various artists could accomplish—different from one piece of art or even a dynamic body of work from a single artist. The experience informs my approach to curating *Burnt Sugar*, which is primarily rooted in storytelling and to which collaboration is critical.

The overarching concept of *Burnt Sugar* is an exploration of the interconnectedness of sugar and other commodity goods and the transatlantic slave trade, labour exploitation, migration, Blackness, and food. The artists—Adama Delphine Fawundu, Shaya Ishaq, Bushra Junaid, Kosisochukwu Nnebe, and Oluseye—have longstanding practices that engage with themes of movement, migration, identity, Blackness, and the diaspora, and their works in *Burnt Sugar* weave together to tell the story of sugar from the perspectives of contemporary Black artists.

I invited **Bushra Junaid** to create new work for this exhibition, interpreting the exhibition theme by using neon lettering to produce a work entitled *It is all up to you!* The work quotes from a 1950s-era booklet called “Advice for West Indian Women Recruited to Work in Canada as Household Helps.” The West Indian Domestic Scheme (1955-1967) brought some 3,000 women (including the artist’s mother) to serve Canadian families as a path to citizenship. Junaid’s layered work comments on industrial production, extraction,

export/trade, care, domesticity, expectations, and what was lost and gained along the way as women came to work in Canadian households. Her interpretation of the theme focuses not on the materiality of sugar, but on imitating the look of sugar with neon to explore labour, migration, and domestic work. Junaid's project, to my mind, draws attention to a continuation/consequence of enslavement and forced migration, wherein Black West Indians, presumably descendants of enslaved folks, are compelled through circumstance and the need for fruitful employment to migrate.

Oluseye focuses on the materiality of sugar in an adaptation of his 2022 installation *Hot Commodity* (originally presented at the Albright-Knox Museum) featuring antique vending machines filled with cotton, soil, afro picks, watermelon candy, brown sugar, durags, a black phallus, rum, black-eyed peas, indigo, synthetic hair, cassettes, detergent, basketball figurines, cowries, Air Force 1 sneakers, and bamboo earrings. For *Burnt Sugar*, Oluseye's installation titled *Sugar, Skin, and Everything Between* (2024) centres on the various shades of sugar in a reflection of the many shades of Blackness.

Both **Shaya Ishaq** and **Kosichukwu Nnebe** have chosen to show photo series with indigo and cassava, respectively, as focal points in exploring the exhibition's themes. In *Daboya Blues* (2018), Ishaq captures the indigo dyeing process; and in *An Inheritance* (2022), Nnebe documents herself processing cassava to extract its poison. As Nnebe describes, the steps in the process of producing cassava poison "are reimagined as a recipe passed down from generation to generation... to assert one's subjectivity in the face of an (un)livability that persists in the wake of transatlantic slavery. Turning to forgotten histories of resistance and refusal, the work acts as a meditation on Black rage, not as something to be choked down and repressed, but as a generative and liberatory form of affect."³ Using similar strategies, both Ishaq and Nnebe's works are a meditation on materials (indigo and cassava) to illustrate the complex histories and interconnectedness of a people and their practices, even within the crosshairs of enslavement and exploitation.

And, through self-portraiture and mixed media, **Adama Delphine Fawundu's** work activates Critical Distance's Billboard on Shaw. *Sea Whispers for Mami Wata at the Shore of Guanahani* (2020/2024) references the meaning beyond the "mythology" of Mami Wata. To Fawundu, the sea represents the foundation of life on the planet. It's an extremely powerful source of life and sustenance. Fawundu does not centre this work on the trauma of the middle passage, but on the energy of the sea as an original source, in order to recognize our collective power beyond colonial structures and to imagine futures beyond colonial boundaries. Mami Wata embodies both beauty and danger, and her association with the ocean can thus be seen as a way of reclaiming the narrative surrounding the sea, transforming it from a site of historical violence into one of power, spirituality, and cultural continuity. And in the gallery space, Fawundu's mixed media work, *And it Don't Stop...and the story continues in Toronto* (2021–2024), consisting of photo lumens, cyanotypes, block prints, laser prints, raffia, hair, film, and digital negatives continues a photography-based conversation with Ishaq and Nnebe's work, while also inviting more texture to the space.

Together, these works form a narrative web that confronts both the historical exploitation surrounding these materials and the ways in which contemporary Black artists use them to address identity, migration, and liberation. The show offers an exploration of how historical trauma is embedded in material culture, while also pointing toward new ways of imagining futures beyond colonial legacies.

With a combination of installation, photography, and a reference area, *Burnt Sugar* opens at Critical Distance with a walkabout with the artists as they converse about their showcased works and the stories they tell. This gesture of being in conversation with each other further insists upon the critical role of collaborative storytelling, particularly when engaging with themes as massive as the ones in this exhibition. As visitors leave *Burnt Sugar*, my hope is for them to reflect on the profound and enduring connections between history, labour, migration, and power, particularly as seen through the lens of sugar production. The exhibition uses sugar as a case study to highlight how greatly intertwined global histories are with the exploitation of people and resources alongside histories of resistance in creative and subversive ways. I hope the audience comes away with a deeper curiosity to better understand how commodities like sugar have shaped economies, cultures, and even identities across centuries. I want them to keep thinking about the cost of this interconnectedness—how historical systems of enslavement and colonialism are not isolated events, but part of a continuing legacy that influences modern global power dynamics.

Notes

¹ Dell M. Hamilton, “Sugar/Bittersweet,” The Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art, accessed September 11, 2024, <https://coopergallery.fas.harvard.edu/galleries/mar%C3%ADa-magdalena-campos-pons-sugar-bittersweet>.

² Doreen St. Félix, “Kara Walker’s Next Act,” *Vulture*, April 16, 2017, <https://www.vulture.com/2017/04/kara-walker-after-a-subtlety.html>.

³ “Kosichukwu Nnebe: An Inheritance,” *Coloured Conversations*, accessed August 2024, <https://www.colouredconversations.com/an-inheritance>.

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About the Curator

francesca ekwuyasi is a learner, artist, and storyteller born in Lagos, Nigeria. She was awarded the Writers Trust Dayne Ogilvie Prize for LGBTQ2S+ Emerging Writers in 2022 for her debut novel *Butter Honey Pig Bread*. Her novel was also shortlisted for a Lambda Literary Award, the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, and the Amazon Canada First Novel Award, and longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, and the DUBLIN Literary Award. francesca co-wrote *Curious Sounds: A Dialogue in Three Movements* (2023), a non-fiction multimedia art book with Roger Mooking. francesca has participated in residencies at the Khyber Centre for the Arts, ARTEXTE, the Banff Centre for the Arts, and Centre for Arts Tapes. She has been a writer in residence at Queens University and the University of Winnipeg. francesca's art, short films, and writing have been shown and screened at Hermes Gallery, Nocturne Halifax, Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Black Film Fest, DRIFF, and elsewhere.

About Critical Distance

Critical Distance Centre for Curators is a not-for-profit gallery, publisher, and professional network devoted to the support and advancement of curatorial practice and inquiry in Toronto and beyond. With a focus on critically-engaged, collaborative, and cross-disciplinary practices, underrepresented perspectives and experimental approaches, and wider public outreach and education on curating and exhibition-making, Critical Distance is an open platform for curatorial research, experimentation, and production, and a forum for ideas on curating as a way to foster meaningful connections between people across cultures, disciplines, geographies, and generations.

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