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Curating the Caribbean: unsettling the boundaries of art and artefact

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we consider the material and visual implications of coloniality – the darker side of modernity, and structure of management that underpins and supports modernity's rhetoric of promises – within the circum-Caribbean through a reflection on curating the exhibition *Decolonising Refinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié*. By juxtaposing the recent work of Haitian-born American painter and sculptor Edouard Duval-Carrié (1954b) and a selection of historical artefacts from the Southeastern US we bring to light the recursive patterns of colonialism and exploitation in which the Gulf region has been culturally, economically, and politically entangled. Our collaborative exhibition deconstructs the notion of refinement both in the aesthetic sense and also as processes by which a resource becomes a product. For Duval-Carrié, the Caribbean is not merely a case study for these broader global dynamics, but rather the crucible from which the modern, industrial age emerges. We thus approach this exhibition as an experiment in decolonising the museum – itself a tool of coloniality – by creating dynamic visual and material relationships in the gallery that deny the viewer the convenient binaries of past/present, art/artefact, and US/Caribbean, and thus forge new possibilities for a kind of decolonial museality that reflects upon its own medial limitations.

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Prologue

We write this essay from a moment of collective suspension. A global pandemic and state-sponsored violence from the US southern border to the heart of the country's cities have laid bare systemic xenophobia and inequities, revealing the stark racial divisions and tensions that reside at the core of the nation's formation and its current imaginary. Protests and uprisings throughout the nation, and across the world, simultaneously swell, attesting to the urgent need to reveal and unravel the historical processes of racial oppression, violence, and trauma that sustains current institutions and civic bodies. A revolutionary time is at hand, in which the inertia and quietude of isolation and quarantine collides with unified cries for civic reform and a reimagining of economic and social relationships. Though we cannot quite envisage the future, we make space to interrogate the past, to unveil its concealed, darkened corners, and to better understand how and why oppressive state-sponsored fictions have persisted such that they are now, and have always been, entangled with present realities. Given the pronounced contestations of past, present, and future in our current moment, how can artistic institutions, scholars, and curators harness the visual environment as an instrument of confrontation and negotiation? What role might the arts play as agents of change?

It is with an eye towards this interrogation, unmooring, and collapsing of past and present, fiction and reality, that artists, curators, and scholars have begun to plumb the depths and potentialities of a decolonial approach to cultural heritage. The decolonial has been invoked across a diverse range of curatorial pursuits, each seeking to deconstruct narratives and epistemologies that have and continue to re-inscribe and enforce colonial systems of power. In this way to decolonise is a practice as much as it is a methodology because it seeks to alter the very nature of the power structures upon which it focuses. In light of the current intellectual thrust to decolonise, we offer here a reflection on the decolonial as praxis, as action, in dialogue with, and as a disruption of, curatorial and research-based artistic collaborations. If decolonial curation sets out to delink from colonised modes of knowledge production and its attendant venues (i.e. universities, archives, museums, the art market); then, how can we reconcile with and ultimately resist the instruments of the field while engaging a curatorial practice that centres decoloniality? And how might we reposition collaboration within the curatorial process to make space for the subjectivities and disobediences that decoloniality necessitates? We offer one possible response to these questions by way of a discussion of *Decolonizing Refinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié* (Museum of Fine Arts, Florida State University, 16 February–1 April, 2018), a monographic exhibition curated by the authors, and in direct collaboration and concert with the artist and myriad historical collections. As an exhibition engaged in research-based artistic and curatorial praxis and the reframing of Black history and heritage in North Florida, *Decolonizing Refinement* suggests a decolonial framework that centres and critiques the veiled logics of sensorial coloniality (i.e. exclusionary and elite class formations of taste and refinement), which have historically perpetuated and upheld modernity through an aesthetics of taste. By visually and conceptually dissolving temporalities, this exhibition newly activates and expands the decolonial project set forth by twentieth-century Latin American and Caribbean intellectuals into the US Southeast, breaking down the fictions of national boundaries by repositioning the interstices of colonial expansion through the notion of refinement and its ties to the colonial matrix of power (Quijano 2000).

Decolonial theory, as developed in the work of Mignolo (2000), Mignolo and Walsh (2018), Quijano and Ennis (2000), Escobar (1995), Dussel (1995), and others (Maldonado-Torres 2016; Moraña, Dussel, and Jáuregui 2008) represents a reframing of modernity, not as an ontological moment of history, but as a fictitious narrative of salvation, civilisation, and progress that hides the logic of coloniality which undergirds it (practices of subjugation, control, extraction, labour exploitation, racism, slavery, and dehumanisation). Modernity and coloniality are conceived as complementary sides of the same coin emergent from a locus of thought and experience tethered to the European expansion, invasion, and colonisation of many parts of the world, which arguably emerged in its most pronounced form in 1492 with the confluence of the Spanish Reconquista's reinstatement of Christianity and Christopher Columbus' mistaken encounter with the Caribbean. Since that time, colonial societies and their national descendants have upheld patterns of modernity/coloniality that are deeply rooted in Western thinking, sensing, and being as constitutive of capitalism or economic coloniality. This fiction of modernity that constitutes Western (Occidental) ideology has been advanced by literature, science, historical writing, collecting, exhibitions, visual arts, and performative practices that have contributed to the production of Western knowledge, subjectivity, and ontology over the course of the last 500 years. As a region entangled with colonial plantocracies and the violence of enslavement, the Caribbean stands as a bastion of resistance to a past laden with injustices that continue to circumscribe the daily lives of individuals and communities today. Decoloniality attempts to de-link from these Western imaginaries, knowledge, and practices through a variety of strategies including the effort to recover subaltern voices, narratives, and methodologies, not only to expose epistemic, sensorial, and ontological domination but also to build new frameworks crafted from indigenous and diasporic epistemologies (see Césaire [1955] 2000; Wynter 2003; Fanon [1952] 2008; Smith 2012; McKittrick 2015) that Western systems continuously attempt to suppress. Curating the Caribbean, therefore, necessitates active dialoguing between past and present as well as visible and invisible.

Decolonial strategies

The exhibition *Decolonizing Refinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié* arose from years of collaboration among Florida State University art history faculty and students with the Haitian-American artist/curator Edouard Duval-Carrié (born Port-au-Prince, Haiti, 1954). This exhibition juxtaposed Duval-Carrié's recent body of work with a selection of historical artefacts from the Southeastern United States, which together situates the US Gulf Coast in a broader circum-Caribbean nexus, both as it existed historically and at present. Through this object-based disruption of normative US historical narratives, we performed an epistemological reordering of the Caribbean and US visual and material heritage, bringing to light the recursive patterns of colonialism and exploitation in which the Gulf region has been culturally, economically, and politically entangled. Duval-Carrié's work catalysed this dialogue through the material and conceptual layering that comprise his compositions, in which historical imagery and material artefacts are embedded to unsettling socio-political ends.

Our exhibition is informed by and contributes to decoloniality by first, disavowing normative museum practice as an authorised and compulsory frame of reference for the presentation of cultural material. This exhibition thus continues in the tradition of previous exhibitions such as Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (Maryland Historical Society, 1992–1993); *Our America: The Latino Presence in American Art* (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2013–2014); and *Visual Voyages: Images of Latin American Nature from Columbus to Darwin* (The Huntington, 2017–2018), among others, each of which deployed object-based inquiry as a vehicle to reconsider the geopolitical frameworks of refinement through which differences have been articulated as values in the Americas for centuries. In this approach, academic hierarchies of fine art versus historical artefacts are disregarded through an artistic and exhibitionary employment of eclectic strategies to bring history into the present and thereby acknowledge that historical narratives are emplaced in the present to serve specific agendas. Secondly, the exhibition and artist disrupt normative historical constructions by deploying images and objects in contexts distinct from their original intent. Thus, in Duval-Carrié's hands, recontextualised colonial paintings of a bucolic Caribbean become a means to deconstruct the fictions they represent. We, therefore, resituate the value of the historical images and objects that populate this exhibition as belonging to an evolving global Caribbean present while questioning the site-specific loci of enunciation from which they emanate.

The deployment of these curatorial strategies has proliferated in recent years across museums and galleries in the Western Hemisphere, as an archival turn in the arts has yielded a generation of artists, like Kara Walker and Glenn Ligon, striving to articulate their revisionist positionalities through startling visual and material critiques of historical conventions.¹ The arts of the African Diaspora have emerged as a pointed and prevalent facet of this archival turn, responding to the idiosyncrasies of the art market and, more importantly, to the astounding gaps that remain under-explored in the history of the Black Atlantic, including its pivotal role in the shaping of modernity even, and especially, as it has been subalternized by and through mercantilist and capitalist Occidental exploits. Like his contemporaries, Duval-Carrié's work sharply and rigorously leans into the archives of the African Diaspora – most notably exemplified by the artist's residency at Brown University's John Carter Brown Library in 2014, where he plumbed the depths of the special collection's visual history and heritage of the Haitian Revolution.

In concert with these artistic and cultural shifts, museum exhibitions in recent years have demonstrated a particularly acute investment in the African Diaspora and its relationship to historical violence, erasures, and inequities in the West, including the opening in 2016 of the celebrated National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC. In May 2015, as Edouard Duval-Carrié began embarking on new works that would ultimately find their home in *Decolonizing Refinement*, French President Francois Hollande arrived in Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe, to inaugurate the opening of Mémorial ACTe, a cultural centre, museum, and memorial – the largest in the world – dedicated to slavery. Sited on the Banc des Couillons, which opens directly into the

Caribbean Sea, Mémorial ACTe can be seen from multiple vantage points around the island, a monumental call to memory (*Mémorial*) and action (*ACTe*) for liberation and equality, a message that poignantly emanates from the shores of a Caribbean colony that today remains under French governance.

Mémorial ACTe quite literally seeks to decolonise refinement by mapping the cultural memory of enslavement directly onto the historical site of the Darboussier sugar refinery, once the largest on the island and the heart of 19th and 20th-century Guadeloupean economic activity. It is a vast, multivalent complex – a memorial museum – whose spaces serve a variety of didactic, collective, and meditative functions. The site’s historical commerce has been supplanted with strikingly contemporary architecture whose quartz bands entangled over a dark, reflective façade call to mind both the rhizomatic mangroves reflected in the bay and a surface or skin, disrupted by scars (Figure 1). The interior of the complex, however, never fully excavates coloniality in the present, since the site’s centrepiece, the permanent exhibition, “History of Slavery from Ancient Times to Modern Day,” emplaces slavery into a linear historical narrative comprised of a visual timeline of enslavement and colonisation on the epistemological terms of the coloniser, rather than the colonised. The exhibition’s design – a series of individual ‘islands’ grouped into six distinct ‘archipelagos’ – innovates through a spatial refraction of the region; the complexity of the ‘repeating island,’; however, is persistently mitigated by the site’s predetermined chronological sequence. Each archipelago engages conceptual themes through an array of media, including films, historical objects, reproductions, immersive installations, and contemporary works by artists such as Kara Walker, Pascale Marthine Tayou and Thierry Alet, each of which resides in proximity to, and conversation with, the historical material on display. Affecting as these curated galleries may be as sites of remembrance, rhizomatic connections never quite materialise, thus rendering the dialogues



Figure 1. Exterior view of Mémorial ACTe, Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe. Photo by Lesley A. Wolff.

promised by the building's impressive design as more artifice than praxis. The museum's wide Afro-diasporic lens, constrained by the parameters of temporal and spatial linearity ultimately positions the visitor as a witness to past events (*Mémorial*) rather than active decolonizer (*ACTe*).

In the spring of 2018, as *Decolonizing Refinement* was unveiled to the public, the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), a non-profit organisation founded by attorney Bryan Stevenson in Montgomery, Alabama, inaugurated a museum and memorial in the city that address the history of slavery and racism in the United States. The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, situated in Montgomery's warehouse district in which enslaved people of African descent were held captive during the nineteenth-century intercontinental slave trade, presents compelling exhibits that take viewers from slavery to Civil Rights struggles. The exhibition is particularly noted for its display of soil collected from lynching sites in the US, housed within jars and labelled with the victim's name, if known, which forms part of an ongoing project to track lynchings across the country in the post-Civil War era. En masse, the utilitarian jars lend the exhibit the nostalgia of a by-gone era. Yet nostalgia abruptly gives way to the quantitative weight of what Hannah Arendt called 'the banality of evil', conjuring the sensory potential of the soil that bore witness to these horrors.

A little under a mile away from the museum stands the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, designed in collaboration with MASS Design Group of Boston, where the EJI has endeavoured to create 'a sober, meaningful site where people can gather and reflect upon America's history of racial inequality' with an emphasis on racial terrorism.² Upon arrival within the monumental enclosure, the visitor beholds a riveting sculpture, produced by the artist Kwame Akoto-Bamfo, of enslaved people struggling against the shackles that bind them. The spatial progression, centred on 'memorial square', includes pathways of textual didactics and inscriptions from the writings of Toni Morrison and Elizabeth Alexander. The visitor enters a covered space with a sequence of six-foot 800 corten steel monoliths that bear the names, and when names are unknown, absences, of lynching victims along with the states and counties in which the heinous acts were perpetrated (Figure 2). One journey through long expanses of gradually inclining space where the embodied experience of the visitor is activated through the human-scale monoliths that gradually rise high above the viewer's head as the floor descends. One ultimately arrives at the centre of the memorial square to be surrounded on all four sides by hundreds of ghost-like monoliths that stand in for the souls of the lynched bearing witness to the visitor's own presence in a public space. This memorial square evokes public squares used in urban lynchings across the US in which victims were dehumanised, tortured, and killed before throngs of cheering white audiences. While the Legacy Museum presents innovative exhibitions and didactics that tell the unsettling story of the continuities of white domination from slavery to Civil Rights in the US, it is perhaps the National Memorial for Peace and Justice that writes most decisively in disobedience to the normative history of its genre. What US audiences have been historically programmed to expect of memorials by Occidentalism – socialisation in the progressive, inclusive, and 'enlightened' narrative of Western civilisation – is radically inverted in a space in which the visitor encounters an absence of self, of personhood systematically denied, managed, subalternized, violently tormented, and killed through systemic racism and terrorism in order to create the brighter side of modernity, that inclusive civic space of democracy and freedom that whites in the US have come to accept as their right for generations.

Decolonizing Refinement stands as another if smaller, intervention into the decolonial exhibitionary landscape by dialoguing with similar conceptual and historical vectors as the aforementioned institutions but as articulated from the so-called Forgotten Coast of North Florida. The exhibition and its accompanying catalogue (Niell, Carrasco, and Wolff 2018) are informed by a decolonial approach not only in the analysis of Duval-Carrié's artwork but through a curatorial and collaborative practice in which objects that are often relegated to collection vaults become activated through a public encounter via visual and material narratives, turns, and dynamic entanglements of contemporary art with historical artefacts. Alongside Duval-Carrié's *Memory Window* series (discussed below), for instance, we installed three iron grave markers from the slave burial site of Oakland Plantation, Louisiana (Figure 3). These visually arresting objects, heavy, dark, and historically poignant showed



Figure 2. Equal Justice Initiative and MASS Design Group, 'memorial square,' The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, 2010–2018, Montgomery, Alabama. Photo by Paul Niell.



Figure 3. Tombstone, strap form cross, iron, 18.84 × 32.4 inches, originally from Oakland Plantation Cemetery. Image courtesy of the Southeast Archaeological Centre, US National Park Service.

their age. Each grave marker bore the name of the deceased, restoring personhood to these enslaved individuals who were denied legal entitlements in life, but whose grave markers nonetheless proclaim their social selfhood. Each marker is unique in its form; one marker in particular echoes the foliation of the *fleur-de-lis* at the end of its arms, seemingly embracing the incised name 'JOSEPH' across its centre. We affixed these heritage objects to a wall stencilled with a stylised interpretation of the cotton motif originally frescoed onto the salon ceilings of Tallahassee's Goodwood Plantation (constructed circa 1830) during the antebellum period. The motif, modified by Duval-Carrié, was then repeatedly painted across the wall to mimic refined wallpaper. The foliation of the *fleur-de-lis* grave marker thus echoed the foliated forms of the plantation fresco, cultivating a visual dialogue between historically visible and invisible negotiations of agency and refinement.

These displays activate the gallery on radical terms, amplifying, rather than smoothing over, the interstices among past and present, self and other, visible and invisible, raw and refined. In this way, the exhibition strove to enact Anzaldúa's (1999) and Mignolo's (2000) call for 'border thinking', a decolonial strategy in which fissures of the modern world system make themselves known along the cultural interstices. We built connections among contemporary work, the objects and images upon which Duval-Carrié's art is often based, and the residue of the historical circumstances that he presents. Importantly, we utilised the taste-making site of the museum – a construct tethered to coloniality – as an opportunity to amplify the problematic and Occidental notion of refinement. By re-articulating visibility and materiality from a place of radical juxtapositions, both within Duval-Carrié's work and through the exhibition as an ontological site, we sought to disrupt conventional meanings of refinement and thus open up the concept to scrutiny, inclusivity, and plurality. The siting of this exhibition at a university museum proved critical to the transformation from border thinking to border doing/praxis through refinement. By working with a museum whose mission articulates a 'meaningful' commitment to intellectual and community life, we ensured that subversive critiques of Western institutions, such as museums and universities would not be censored and that inclusivity and criticality would be privileged. The museum, which is accredited with the AAM (American Alliance of Museums), maintains its duty to 'diverse audiences' through educational outreach and free admission. The museum's mission thus cultivated an atmosphere best suited for our curatorial agenda. Indeed, despite this exhibition's institutional critique and deconstruction of popular nostalgic narratives typical of the US Southeast, this exhibition yielded some of the highest attendance numbers in MoFA's recent history, attracting over one thousand visitors to the opening and another five thousand people over its five-weeks run. This success would seem to indicate the general public's (and academia's) hunger for this kind of decolonial praxis.

Layers of meaning in Duval-Carrié's work

Duval-Carrié's work has often focussed on his native Haiti and the diasporic communities of the Caribbean. His paintings and sculptures move from representations of major political figures and events from Haiti's history, to Vodou deities, to the transatlantic slave trade, among other themes (Sullivan 2007). Mixed-media works, such as those included in this exhibition, play a dominant role in his repertoire. His practice involves activating spaces both through the intricacies of his own creations as well as through broader spatial dynamics among works. One of the benchmark installations of the exhibition comprised a new series of engravings on Plexiglas by Duval-Carrié each of which illustrates scenes from Carpentier's (1904–1980) marvellous realist novel *The Kingdom of This World* ([1949] 2017). The book narrates a surreal account of events surrounding the Haitian Revolution and by Duval-Carrié's own account has been a formative entry point for the artist into Haitian history. The book's protagonists, Macandal and Ti Noël, both formerly enslaved labourers on St. Domingue, appear throughout Duval-Carrié's print series at various moments in their spiritual, political, and physical transformations. Interspersed among these scenes, the artist illustrates moments of violence that foreshadow the Haitian Revolution to come and Haiti's subsequent transformation into an independent nation.

The novel opens in the late eighteenth century on the sugar plantation of Monsieur Lenormand de Mézy, where Macandal and Ti Noël are enslaved labourer toiling away in the sugarcane mill on the grounds. In a pivotal episode in the novel's early chapters, Macandal's left arm becomes caught in the mill and must be amputated, which sets the events of the Haitian Revolution into motion. Duval-Carrié depicts this gruesome event in the etching *L'Accident à la Guildive* (2017; [Figure 4](#)), a seductive, gestural vignette enveloped by floral ornamentation. Duval-Carrié frames the composition in a large artist's frame, painted in royal blue and embellished with silver floral stencils. The frame both references the floral ornamentation of the composition within and also situates the individual work as one of a larger series of 15 identically framed etchings, which together create the illusion of fine eighteenth-century tile work or wallpaper. Only upon closer examination does a more sinister tone emerge. The Plexiglas floats in the frame inches away from the wall, producing an abyss of blue-black darkness, a sea whose depths are uncertain and reminiscent of the Middle Passage. This darkness becomes increasingly prevalent when focusing on the surface of the image, where a grisly scene unfolds. In the foreground, Macandal emerges from the right side (left in the print) and extends his injured arm across the picture, his dangling, nearly detached hand almost touching the flower of the frame. On the same plane, bundles of cane lay before him. At centre, the mill looms over the scene with the pool into which the cane juice pours echoing the blood streaming down Macandal's arm below. In the distant background, we glimpse the landscape into which Macandal will eventually escape and where he will gain the knowledge necessary to mobilise a revolt.

This episode brings to the fore many pressing issues in Duval-Carrié's work as well as those issues raised through our curatorial collaboration with him. *L'Accident à la Guildive* makes brutally clear, as does much of Duval-Carrié's *oeuvre*, the dual meaning of the word 'refinement' as both aesthetic and social sensibilities. This term may work in an aesthetic sense as found, for example, in baroque



Figure 4. Edouard Duval-Carrié, *L'Accident à la Guildive*, 2017, etching on Plexiglas, 20 × 14 inches, © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

ornamentation, bucolic colonial images of the Caribbean, systems of etiquette and taste, or, in this case, the finery of the double floral frame. In a second sense, refinement denotes processes by which a resource becomes a product – cane to sugar, pine resin to turpentine, or cotton to textiles. In *L'Accident à la Guildive*, for instance, the viewer moves from the seductively baroque ornamentation of the frames to the horrifying scene from Carpentier's novel, in which a man loses a limb, and eventually his life, in the service of rendering sugar for European wealth, not a penny of which he will ever receive (see Mintz 1985; Kriz 2008). Both crushed between the rollers, Macandal's black body and the sugarcane alike share the identity of capitalist commodity, bound to a system of material extraction and refinement.

These complementary meanings help locate the demand, manufacture, and consumption of commodities within the theatre of the colonial world. These colonial structures, foundational to modern capitalism, are generative and reflective of a new kind of ecology, in which all things, including people, could be commodified, and their value configured by an abstract world market. This theatre of globalised production and consumption, commodities, and the insatiable Western drive for 'refinement', both social and material, has become the world stage upon which modernity/coloniality promotes and propels itself. However, for us and Duval-Carrié, the Caribbean, and the Americas more broadly, are not merely case studies of these global dynamics, but rather are the very crucibles from which the modern, industrial age emerges.

Art museum as decolonial laboratory

Perhaps no site stands as more of a crucible of coloniality than the art museum, an institution historically devised to cultivate value, taste, and refinement and which now artists like Duval-Carrié seek to engage, if only in the service of its destabilisation and dislocation.³ Refinement also highlights the role that the arts – visual and literary – and museums play in the engendering of a decolonial public discourse through making present a countervisuality, which may bring into its orbit historical material that otherwise might lack contextual moorings or be solely interpreted within a framework of a fictitious Southern Plantation nostalgia. *L'Accident à la Guildive*, as but one example, conveys artistic refinement for contemporary viewers; the composition appeals to the eye with carefully rendered linework and decorous floral motifs. Nonetheless, in order to truly engage this beauty, one must also confront the unbearable costs of slavery conveyed by Macandal's severed hand and the implication of the vast quantities of blood spilled in the sugar mill. Duval-Carrié's frame and the image within layer these ideas one atop the other. We drew upon the layering inherent to Duval-Carrié's work as a productive decolonial framework for the exhibition as a whole, following his lead of engaging historical material that resonated with contemporary issues of coloniality and local-global heritage. When seen jointly, the complementarity of these layers of history and refinement deconstructs a system of production entangled with taste that has valorised and continues to naturalise Eurocentric epistemologies.

In the exhibition, we placed Duval-Carrié's work and the issues that it raises into visual and material conversation with the US Southeast. An avid reader of history, Duval-Carrié has long studied what he calls the 'Global Caribbean', emphasising the ties between the history of imperial exploitation, the Haitian Revolution, and contemporary Haiti's transatlantic consciousness (see Ferrer 2014; Scott 2018). By engaging these aspects of his work, we hoped to bring Florida into a broader Caribbean dialogue in order to unsettle not only national borders but also the traditional narratives about and depictions of the Gulf region. We thus approached this exhibition as an experiment in decolonising the museum – itself a tool of coloniality – by creating dynamic visual and material relationships in the gallery that deny the viewer the convenient binaries of past/present, art/artefact, and US/Caribbean, and thus forge new possibilities for a kind of decolonial curation that reflects upon its own medial limitations. In this way, we devised object-based curatorial practices to revivify historical materials which in many cases never see public exhibition because of their quotidian nature. We recontextualized them within Duval-Carrié's decolonial narrative, one which stands apart from the normative

antebellum heritage of the US Southeast that often dominates house and plantation museums. In so doing, we position Florida and much of the Southeastern US as a region historically unified by the social terrors and material heritage of plantation culture; through this exhibition, we sought to establish new ways publically activating the human costs of refinement, while simultaneously advancing a critically engaged analysis of a major contemporary artist.

That is to say while building on the recurrent themes in Duval-Carrié's work, our collaboration newly positioned Florida and the Gulf region as socially, visually, and materially tethered to the Caribbean world at a moment when issues of race, nationality, and authoritative historical narratives – 'heritage discourses' (Smith 2006) – in the United States have become particularly contested and stand at the forefront of national debates. Instead of erecting a wall between the US and the Caribbean, we situated the Gulf of Mexico as a fluid conduit between these regions, acknowledging that indeed Florida and much of the Gulf Coast US have historically been, and today remains, part of a greater Caribbean cultural sphere. This process and the physical layering of objects and images in Duval-Carrié's work prompted us to extend these layers into the space of the gallery by incorporating historical objects that speak to the complex history of North Florida, refinement, and the region's contiguity with the Caribbean world.

Destabilising artifice

Developing these physical and conceptual layers necessitated continued collaboration and conversation with Duval-Carrié. The artist often works through collaborative means, particularly as a curator, such as with previous exhibitions *Visionary Aponte: Art & Black Freedom*, *Pótoprens: The Urban Artists of Port-au-Prince*, and *From Within and Without: Haitian Photography*, all of which he co-curated. These collaborative interdisciplinary exhibitions facilitated by Duval-Carrié set the stage for our project, which emerged from research-based artistic practice, rooted in the engagement of beauty and artifice as well as the horrors of capitalism rarely acknowledged in the rarefied space of the museum gallery. When dealt with individually, each component only serves to reify neoliberal narratives of capitalist accumulation and linear trajectories of progress, but when entangled amongst each other, these various facets of historical and contemporary art and heritage activate the gallery in new, decolonial modes that help to destabilise and dislocate power from any singular narrative, thus rendering the space more inclusive and more representative of voices, experiences, and visions that are often precluded from exhibitionary practice.

Sugar stands as one particularly resonant theme whose historical complexities arose time and again throughout the exhibition, most notably in Duval-Carrié's impressive work *Sugar Conventions* (2013; Figure 5). This mixed-media piece comprises nine gridded tiles, each of which contains an image that alludes to Caribbean society, real and imagined, historical and contemporary. None of the nine central images embedded in each of the tiles is unique to the work. Rather, Duval-Carrié has extracted images from archival paintings and photographs and placed them into his art, layering them between pieces of Plexiglas like specimens augmented under the microscope. In this piece and elsewhere, Duval-Carrié invokes the eighteenth-century Italian painter Agostino Brunias (1730–1796) whose images Duval-Carrié literally incorporates into this assemblage. During the eighteenth century, Brunias's idyllic scenes of the British West Indies became the means through which much of Enlightenment-era Europe encountered the Caribbean. Duval-Carrié uses Brunias's renderings of a beautiful young flower-seller and a group of free women of colour (Figure 6) to punctuate that which is *not* portrayed, namely the brutality of enslaved labour essential to plantation culture and economy.

The ways in which Brunias veiled the horrors of enslavement did not make the realities any less gruesome for those kept under the institution's heavy hand. Sugar plantations dominated Haiti and thus gained enormous wealth for the French Crown. As seen in *L'Accident à la Guildive*, this wealth came at a massive human cost. Enslaved labourers frequently lost life and limb in the service of sugar cultivation and refinement. Sugarcane is a demanding crop and sugar refinement labour



Figure 5. Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Sugar Conventions*, 2013, mixed media on backlit Plexiglas, 72 × 72 inches, © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

intensive and dangerous. The seasonal variability of the cane coupled with high commercial demand required around-the-clock labour to harvest the matured crop. Enslaved plantation workers had to rapidly force cane through a mill of wooden rollers to extract the juice. Even a small misstep could entangle one in the rollers and lead to a loss of fingers and hands, and at times death.

Duval-Carrié does not mask the harsh realities of plantation slavery from the viewer but rather explores how the ‘politeness’ of artifice not only veils but also engenders and enables the horrific production and consumption of refinement. In *Sugar Conventions*, he thus glazes Brunias’s ‘saccharine’ images with a coating of refined sugar crystals. Layered one over another, sugar becomes historicised and aestheticised. Moreover, through the inclusion of actual sugar this mixed-media composition becomes a reliquary to the commodities produced through enslaved labour, if reliquaries of a contentious legacy of colonial refinement. In *Sugar Conventions*, the product, sugar, in representation becomes indexical to the labour of its creation. The realities of sugar’s commodification



Figure 6. Agostino Brunias, *A West Indian Flower Girl and Two other Free Women of Color*, 1769c, oil on canvas. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection. Public Domain.

confronts the viewer in an immediate way and stands in contradistinction to the romantic images of the West Indies composed by Brunias. This focus on labour and refinement in both senses also speaks to Duval-Carrié's labour as an artist and curator who works with the effluvia of history as a kind of raw material which he transforms into a product for the contemporary art market. In this instance he employs sweetness to subversive ends, drawing in and then enchanting the viewer, only to reveal upon closer examination how the object of desire, be it art or sugar, actually serves as a kind of violence. The artist situates the subject as the key to unlock the disparity between artifice and existence. The physical layers of Duval-Carrié's work thus function as a conceptual framework for the fraught dynamics among visual representation, material production, and social reality.

Against this backdrop, we developed curatorial strategies to continue and amplify this oscillation between representation and presence in the gallery. In the case of *The Kingdom of This World* series of etchings, and in dialogue with *Sugar Conventions*, we placed two historical sugar mills in a central position with the intent of providing not only physical evidence to the narrative developed by the artist's illustration of the novel but also as a way of embedding these historical objects in a plausible narrative that had the potential to make the viewing audience see them outside their utilitarian function as mills (Figures 7 and 8). By posing them within the gallery space and in dialogue with contemporary art, they became enmeshed in a larger system of artistic refinement, while maintaining a literal connection to the violence of enslaved labour to which Duval-Carrié's work speaks.



Figure 7. Wooden roller 'trapiche' from sugar mill, 29 × 13 ½ inches. Courtesy of the Florida Division of Historical Resources.

Engaging locality

In addition, as a dutiful and diligent artist and curator, Duval-Carrié sought to engage this project by not only providing topical works that suited our exhibition proposal but also by studying the landscape and heritage of the US Gulf Coast. He thus created new works that directly responded to the visual culture of imperialism and enslavement that we, as art historians, uncovered from the region and shared with the artist. In the year prior to the exhibition, Duval-Carrié travelled to North Florida in order to visit heritage sites such as former plantations and archaeological collections. These local experiences became direct references layered in his work and echoed in our exhibition design. Duval-Carrié's recent *Memory Window* series marks a particularly robust body of work that engages the local-global complexities of coloniality through a complex iconographic and media entanglement of objects, images, and mixed media.

His *Memory Window* series makes use of resin, glitter, and found and mould-made objects. Resin has allowed Duval-Carrié to create pieces with transparent depth – resembling water – into which other objects are encased or submerged. In the *Memory Window* series, reproductions of historical photographs and images are encased in resin. The resin echoes the ocean grave of the many Africans who died during the transatlantic voyage, a theme also found developed in earlier paintings and his sculptural series of so-called sugar boats. In these works resin is both a metaphor for the watery tomb of victims of the slave trade as well as a medium by which fragments of history can be embedded and juxtaposed to engender new narratives. Similar to the use of Plexiglas in *Sugar Conventions*, resin combined with backlighting transform these works into reliquaries of the commodities produced through enslaved labour and the visibility of particular moments or individuals.



Figure 8. Installation view of Edouard Duval-Carrié's engravings related to *The Kingdom of This World* in the exhibition *DecolonizingRefinement: Contemporary Pursuits in the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Florida State University, Spring 2018.

In *Memory Window #4* (Figure 9), myriad images of enslaved and formerly enslaved labourers populate the viscous panels of resin, revealing a nearly cinematic montage of black bodies unfolding across the backdrop of Southern plantations that once propped up the economy of the US Gulf Coast. At the centre, a photograph of a young woman sits wedged between an image of a former Florida plantation's main house and the photograph of an elderly black woman seated on a chair. The photograph of the young woman (Figure 10), perhaps named 'Sarah', came from the Thomas County Historical Society, in southern Georgia, a town where she likely lived as a woman enslaved by the Jones family in the 1850s. We incorporated the original, framed tintype of 'Sarah's' image in the exhibition alongside dozens of reproductions of photographs from the region's plantation past, their visages and ties to their material lives rhizomatically repeating and reappearing. A persistent dynamic, therefore, between historical realities and contemporary interpretations kept visitors visually immersed in local histories, with the past constantly mapping itself onto the present both through Duval-Carrié's archival works as well as the material urgency of the artefacts themselves.

Conclusion

These are but a few examples of the complex relationships between Duval-Carrié's images, historical objects, and documentary evidence that we placed in subversive dialogues throughout the gallery. While we did not conduct a systematic survey of museum visitors, comments on social media and conversations with visitors evidence reactions ranging from excitement to revulsion, in the latter case often with reference to photographs of lynchings incorporated in Duval-Carrié's



Figure 9. Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Memory Window #4*, 2017, mixed media embedded in resin in artist's frame, backlit, 58 × 58 inches, © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

work. It seems that the dialogue developed between the contemporary artwork and the historical artefact amplified each – brought each other into a different kind of contemporaneous existence, revealing their multivalencies and reflexive socially constructed meanings of categories of value and time. While this collaboration was a unique opportunity to work with an artist immersed in a research-intensive practice, the model that we developed of setting contemporary art in conversation with artefacts – a twist on mining the museum – presents a potential way of curating objects that might not otherwise be exhibited or that are the material residue of complex, and often times challenging, historical moments. In this way, we hope that through our curatorial practice we, too, are involved in a labour of decolonial refinement that reveals historical processes and activates the space of the museum as a location for dialogue both among a diverse set of objects and images and the range of stakeholders that comprise any community.

In this article, we have reflected on the conceptual process of curating this exhibition, which since this initial exhibition has been shown in various permutations at two other venues (Florida Atlantic University, Fondation Clement Martinique) and we are hopeful that it will continue to run



Figure 10. Portrait of a woman named ‘Sarah,’ enslaved or formerly enslaved by the Jones family of Greenwood Plantation, Thomas County, Georgia, 1858c, framed tintype, 3 ¼ × 3 ¼ inches. Courtesy of the Thomas County Historical Society.

at other institutions in the coming years as the arts increasingly turn to the decolonial. In this exhibition, we juxtaposed Duval-Carrié’s works with a selection of historical artefacts from the Southeastern US to bring into stark relief the material culture of refinement as it simultaneously dialogues with the work of Duval-Carrié and with the objects and spaces associated with the Black Atlantic. Through this juxtaposition of his work and the material residue of labour and of exploited communities, the exhibition presents the recursive patterns of colonialism in which the Gulf region has been culturally, economically, and politically entangled. Duval-Carrié’s work emphasises the ties among coloniality, the Haitian Revolution – the only successful slave revolt in the early modern Atlantic world, which transformed France’s most lucrative plantation colony into a sovereign nation – and contemporary Haiti’s transatlantic consciousness. By engaging these aspects of his work in the exhibition we bring Florida into a broader the Caribbean and Black Atlantic dialogue to unsettle not only national borders but also the historical narratives and depictions that have long defined the Gulf region.

Notes

1. This turn was initially articulated as ‘The Archival Impulse’ in an essay by Hal Foster of the same name in 2004. See Foster (2004).
2. Quotation taken from the EJI webpage: URL: <https://museumandmemorial.eji.org/memorial>.
3. In this moment of global pandemic and antiracist platforms, artistic and art historical challenges to the art museum have grown exponentially. The ‘Death to Museums Unconference’ (August 1–2, 2020) is but one example that attests to the active efforts to reimagine and destabilise arts institutions through virtual means in the service of restructuring the taste-making of the art museum in terms of equity and justice.

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