Museum of Contemporary Art
Cleveland

Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom

January 31–May 17, 2020

Lewis Gallery & Interior Stair
Historically Indigenous and Black artists have been visionaries in our struggles and movements. They have also affirmed our presence—created temporary spaces of joy and freedom, and enabled me to go on. In the academy I think about things, and lecture about things, but in performance I can set up space together with an audience to share something different. I really liked creating these islands of freedom, little glimpses of freedom where we stand together and we get to feel, just for a second maybe, what freedom might be like, and to get that feeling into our bones. These spaces open up different possibilities. These spaces are not just spaces of refusal, they are also generative. They are also spaces of joy and possibility.

—Leanne Betasamosake Simpson
**Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom**

The group exhibition *Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom* honors the discussion that Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg artist and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Canadian poet and scholar Dionne Brand forged in their 2018 article of the same title. While reflecting on colonialism, anti-Blackness, Indigenous and Black liberation struggles, they emphasize the importance of ephemeral expressions and the arts in the creation of freedom. Simpson notes, “for Indigenous Peoples, colonialism is a system, a process, an ongoing act that is very much alive ... It controls all aspects of Indigenous life.”

*Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom* continues the article’s vision by presenting work by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson with Cara Mumford and Amanda Strong, Vaimoana Niuei-Tolou and Kyle Goen, John Edmonds, and Tricia Hersey. Together, the artists reimagine signs and the relations of power, stress the importance of soulful communal regeneration, and reveal paths for building decolonized futures. In addition, *Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom* engages moCa’s winter seasonal question “How do we mark our communities?” by questioning the very question itself.
Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom centers on the often overlooked dynamic between Indigenous and Black artists—two groups who regularly fight the continuance of colonialism and the ideology of White supremacy—while also recognizing their differing experiences. By examining the role of power dynamics in resistance, Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom considers how the term 'we' suggests, implies, assumes, creates, or argues for relationship.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's stop-motion animation Bidaaban (The Dawn Comes) (2019)—a collaboration with Michif filmmaker Amanda Strong—highlights how the term 'we' is not always inclusive. The video's main character, non-binary Bidaaban, sets out on a mission aided by shapeshifter Sabe to reclaim the ancient Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg practice of harvesting maple sap, a tradition based on bonds of mutuality between people, animals, lands—and spiritual realms. Unlike the ancestors who came before them, they encounter hostility from settlers—non-Indigenous people living on appropriated lands, which forces them to work at night in secret. Through the youth's act of rebellion, Bidaaban heralds the resurgence of Indigenous life and presents a decolonialized alternate world that ultimately dethrones the current colonialisit social and political systems. Indigenous people's connections to their lands and customs are restored.

John Edmonds’s work deconstructs visual practices as he creates intimate, yet expansive, freedom-centered moments of Black life, breaking centuries of racial, class, and gender exploitation. In his large-scale photograph Untitled (Du-Rag 6) (2017), Edmonds challenges us to question our assumptions about the subject depicted. Through refusing us access to the sitter's face, he encourages us to reexamine the tendency to stereotype and exclude, especially in regard to race and gender. Printed on silk and pinned directly to the wall, Untitled (Du-Rag 6) is a sensitive portrait of an individual, a meditation on visibility and invisibility in today's surveillance culture, and a demand to look closely, understanding the impact of our own viewing.

Mark

Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom explores marking as a form of relation between things only perceptible through context and communion. More than the simple residue of ink on paper, cracks in clay, or metal signs along roads; marking is about impression, shift, change, sensation, sovereignty, recognition, refusal, articulation, gathering, silencing, and erasure. It is a form of experiencing the world. It is with this expanded understanding that we can see the persistence of Indigenous and Black life and love against ongoing violence as a resolute form of marking. As an exhibition, Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom echoes the traces of these experiences, both by creating its own temporal mark on moCa, but also through the imaginations of those who encounter it.

IMAGES (clockwise)
In her video *Leaks* (2013) created with filmmaker Cara Mumford, Simpson recounts her child’s jarring first experience of racism, her own feelings of inadequacy at being unable to prevent the occurrence, and the healing power of performance. *Leaks* speaks back to the colonizer’s threat by juxtaposing one of Simpson’s song poems with vibrant forest colors, signaling that communing with the land and ancestral histories revives Indigenous people. While colonialist violence continues to mar Indigenous life through the ongoing dispossession of lands, denial of tradition, and the murders and disappearances of women, Indigenous people resist by honoring their existence and bonds with elders, nature, and spirituality.

“We stand in support of the return of their lands. This is where we must begin. Decolonize this place.” These three last lines of *Red Carpet* (2016), a 30-foot painted floorcloth, issue a strong call for action. Artists Vaimoana Niumeitolu and Kyle Goen, both members of the activist organizations Decolonial Cultural Front and Decolonize This Place (DTP), have installed iterations of their bold red and white floorcloth both inside and outside. The work creates a pathway to disrupt the status quo of North American settler colonialism when exhibited on the steps of the Smithsonian Arts and Industries Building in Washington D.C., at the NY Stands with Standing Rock protest at Washington Square Park, at DTP’s “Nine Weeks of Art and Action” interventions in the halls of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and other sites.

The painted text on *Red Carpet* references the Lenni Lenape people of the present-day New York area where the artists reside, and all Indigenous people. Now installed on the floor of moCa, it connects to the past and present Indigenous communities of this area including but not limited to, the Erie and member of the Haudenosaunee Confederation. When walked on, the carpet heightens our awareness of self in space and place. In turn, the impressions left from our foot traffic underscore the floorcloth’s message that we are all on Indigenous lands. United with *Red Carpet*’s previous activations, here at *Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom* is where we must begin.

**Our Communities**

*Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom* acknowledges that the term ‘community’ is loaded with meaning and purpose. Many people employ the word to disguise unequal, oppressive relations, and when people who have access to power use the term to suggest that their conditions are synonymous to those with less social, economic, or political means, a gross imbalance occurs. Similar to how some use the term ‘we’ to imply a relationship that actually may be nonexistent or abusive, the use of the term ‘community’ can be deceptive and dangerous. It can become a means for erasing people’s experiences and obscuring inequities.

Literary giant James Baldwin found the term ‘community’ meaningless except when used by groups most harmed by oppression, groups who know they “can sustain and re-create each other” in spite of how institutions of the state disregard them.” Baldwin’s understanding is akin to how Simpson’s work stresses the importance of deep relationships, mutual interdependence, and reciprocity in Michi Saagil Nishnaabeg society.

Performance artist Tricia Hersey’s work issues a profound message: “Rest is Reparations.” Her collective...
Performance artist Tricia Hersey's work issues a profound message: “Rest is Reparations.” Her collective care-based practice includes her project The Nap Ministry, @TheNapMinistry, where she broadcasts her rest wisdom to more than 74,000 Instagram followers. Hersey, who also goes by the moniker “The Nap Bishop,” has created a site-responsive installation as part of Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom. Titled A Portal for Rest (2020), Hersey evokes memories of enslaved African ancestors who were forced to toil their lives away in cotton fields. Her installation features cotton hanging from the ceiling, beds appointed in soothing fabrics, and the posted statement, “Rest is a quiet resistance that can save us.” Hersey’s A Portal for Rest positions relaxation as a human right. Similarly to how Simpson’s Bilidaaban depicts a world where Indigenous ways have toppled settler colonialism, Hersey’s installation inverts capitalism and the ideology of White supremacy. In A Portal for Rest, the communal refusal of burnout culture and racism is the path to deconstructing colonialism. It is the road to liberation.

Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom embraces modes of resistance and community aligned with Simpson’s concept of generative refusal. The act of disengagement from, or nonparticipation in, colonialist and racist systems allows Indigenous and Black life to thrive. In each of the works presented, the artists have found ways to subvert the violence of existing structures, creating their own “islands of freedom.” These spaces of possibility and healing are where we rekindle our connection to one another and to the world. It is within them that we find co-resisters and build our community.

As the curator of Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom, I have adopted Simpson’s attention to the methods and conditions for achieving freedom, reflecting on not just the artistic practices included, but also the means I use as a Black woman who advocates for equity, in concert with the work of various colleagues who collaborated on this project. Accordingly, I see the production of this exhibition as a practice toward making ethically responsive museum experiences.

Through this exhibition I aspire to bring more voices to Simpson’s and Brand’s conversation, to care for those within my sphere who are most harmed by oppressive social and political forces, and to contribute to the overall project of unsettling—the collective work of decolonization, which fosters new worlds grounded in respectful relationship.

La Tanya S. Autry,
Gund Curatorial Fellow, moCa Cleveland

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4. James Baldwin (1924–1987) was a celebrated American novelist, essayist, and playwright who deeply examined the role of race.
Artist biographies

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson is a renowned Michi Saagilg Nishnaabeg scholar, writer, and artist living and working in Mississauga Nishnaabeg territory (southern Ontario, Canada). She received her PhD from the University of Manitoba and currently teaches at the Dechinta Centre for Research & Learning in Denendeh, Canada. Simpson’s recent publications include: As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance, The Accident of Being Lost: Songs and Stories (both 2017); Islands of Decolonial Love (2013), and Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back (2011).


Tricia Hersey (b. 1974, Chicago, IL) lives and works in Atlanta, GA. She earned her BS in public health from Eastern Illinois University, Charleston, IL and a MDiv from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Atlanta, GA. Recent exhibitions include: Flux Projects, Atlanta, Atlanta Contemporary, and The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Chicago (all 2019). She has taught and led workshops at Chicago Public Schools, Columbia College, Chicago, Free Street Theater, Chicago, Google, and the United States Peace Corps.

Vaimoana Niuleitolu (b. 1978, Nuku’alofa, Tonga, raised in Hawai‘i and Utah) lives and works in New York, NY. She earned her undergraduate degree in painting and performance from New York University, received the Ellen Battell Stoeckel Fellowship in painting & drawing from Yale University, and attended Columbia University’s graduate program in acting. A member of Decolonial Cultural Front and Decolonize This Place, Niuleitolu is also a founding member of AKA Exit and Mahina Movement, an all-women music and poetry trio. Niuleitolu has written, performed in, and directed numerous theatrical productions at venues including Lincoln Center and Harvard University. She has created 24 community murals across the world, in Australia, Kenya, Jordan, New Zealand, Palestine, South Africa, and the United States. She continues to work with youth communities in New York.

Kyle Goen (b. 1967, Bakersfield, CA) lives and works in Maplewood, NJ. He is a multidisciplinary artist and founding member of AKA Exit, an art collective that combines research, aesthetics, and action in its practice. Goen is a core member of Direct Action Front for Palestine, Decolonial Cultural Front, and MTL+, the collective facilitating Decolonize This Place, an action-oriented movement and decolonial formation that blurs the lines between art and activism around five strands of struggle: Indigenous Struggle, Black Liberation, Free Palestine, Global Wage Worker, and De-Gentrification. He is also an active member of Global Ultra Luxury Faction (G.U.L.F.).
Naps help you wake up.

The Nap Ministry
@thenapministry
Exhibition checklist

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Amanda Strong
*Biidaaban (The Dawn Comes)* 2019
Video
Color, sound, 19:14 min
Courtesy the artists

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Cara Mumford
*Leaks* 2013
Video
Color, sound, 2:42 min
Courtesy the artists

John Edmonds
*Untitled (Du-Rag 6)* 2017
Pigment print on silk
50 x 40 in (127 x 101.60 cm)
Ed. 1/3
Courtesy the artist and Company Gallery, New York

Tricia Hersey
*A Portal for Rest* 2020
Multi-media installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

Tricia Hersey
*Deprogramming* 2020
Phototex installation
Dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist

Vaimoana Niumeitolu and Kyle Goen
*Red Carpet* 2016
Acrylic on cloth
371 x 60 in (942.34 x 152.4 cm)
Courtesy the artists

In keeping with the ideas embedded in *Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom*, these gallery notes are printed on non-archival paper, and will not last forever. To extend *Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom*’s energy beyond the exhibition, we encourage you to research the artists and sources spotlighted. The work of decolonizing Indigenous lands and eradicating antiBlackness involves more than acquiring knowledge, we must take action to create more islands of freedom.
* How are our various institutions—schools, museums, healthcare, and local/federal government—complacent or complicit in upholding colonialism and antiBlackness?

How can we challenge these actions?

Further readings


For Early Learners


The group exhibition *Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom* is organized by Gund Curatorial Fellow La Tanya S. Autry and presented in the Toby Devan Lewis Gallery and moCa’s Interior Stair from January 31–May 17, 2020. The exhibition is the prologue of a longer conversation at moCa that explores how artists create liberatory futures. The next chapter *Imagine Otherwise* will unfold February 19–June 27, 2021.

Generous support for *Temporary Spaces of Joy and Freedom* provided by the Anselm Talalay Photography Endowment Fund.

All current moCa Cleveland exhibitions are funded by Leadership Circle gifts from anonymous donors, Yuval Brisker, Joanne Cohen & Morris Wheeler, Margaret Cohen & Kevin Rahilly, Becky Dunn, Harriet Goldberg, Agnes Gund, Richard & Michelle Jeschelnig, Kohl Family, Jan Lewis, Toby Devan Lewis, Roy Minoff, and Kelly & Scott Mueller.

moCa Cleveland is provided institutional support in part by the residents of Cuyahoga County through a public grant from Cuyahoga Arts & Culture, the George Gund Foundation, an anonymous donor, Dealer Tire, the Kelvin and Eleanor Smith Foundation, the Ohio Arts Council, and the continuing support of the museum’s Board of Directors, patrons, and members.