

Although I only titled my latest body of work 'Invasive Species' in 2019, reflecting on my practice now, I realise that I have been working within this ecological reconstruction of the world around me for much longer. It began about a decade ago, with the creation of sculptural pieces reminiscent of living plants/creatures, created from repurposed material and domestic objects which I would install/implant into unlikely surroundings to see if or how they might 'take root'. I noticed that, despite using inviting colours and aesthetics intended to entice the viewer, the work would take on a mysterious or sinister quality when wrapping, reaching and entangling itself into spaces. There is a conflicted sense of wanting to inspect the "organisms" further, but hesitance to get too close, in case they were to worm their way around and consume the viewer – posing the question of whether it is an invasive species, or a lifeform trying to assert its presence in the midst of hostile conditions.

I was reminded of Jamaican poet Olive Senior's piece *Plants*, which likens the spreading of foliage and vegetation to the act of colonialism; not merely taking root, but taking over or taking advantage of the habitat and inhabitants it encounters:

...Yet from the way they breed (excuse me!)  
and twine, from their exhibitionist  
and rather prolific nature, we must infer  
a sinister not to say imperialistic

grand design...

.....

They'll outlast us, they were always there  
one step ahead of us: plants gone to seed,  
generating the original profligate,  
extravagant, reckless, improvident, weed.<sup>1</sup> (*Plants*. 5-9; 33-36)

In the article *Feral Ecologies: Performing Life on the Colonial Periphery*, Nigel Clark notes that colonisation was "...as much a biological process as it was an economic, cultural or political one. Amidst all the forms of disorder and 'deterritorialization' accompanying colonization, biological forces stand out as the most irruptive and unpredictable – and the least amenable to recontainment."<sup>2</sup> So much of the Caribbean, from its people to the very earth, sea and sand on which we live, has been forged through the trauma of colonialism. It is ingrained and in many ways inescapable for us; not just in the shadows of history, but in neocolonial mentalities and persisting, problematic notions of the contemporary Caribbean as well. "In the Western imagination, 'island' and 'islandness' have metaphorical nuances that are highly contingent upon

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<sup>1</sup> Senior, Olive. "Plants." *Gardening in the tropics*. Toronto: Insomniac Press. 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, Nigel. "Feral Ecologies: Performing Life on the Colonial Periphery." *The Sociological Review* 51, No. 2, (October 2003): 163–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00457.x>.

the repercussions of European colonialism and continental migration towards island spaces.”<sup>3</sup> (Deloughrey, 2004). This contentious relationship is one that has been approached metaphorically and literally by creatives in the Caribbean across many genres, because it is one which must be challenged, as we affirm our identities and value outside of stereotypes or oppressive, euro-centric standards.

With these poetics and ideologies in mind, ‘Invasive Species’ began to coalesce into its own micro-ecology and sets of sub-species, referencing flora, fauna and anatomical/biological imagery and processes in form and materials, questioning and extending the fantasy of escaping from the perspective of someone entrenched in this region; not only from one’s outer environment, but from one’s very own body. I experimented with different materials – organic and manmade – including plastic tampon applicators, both as visually appealing items at first glance that reveal their purpose on closer inspection, and as something which very intimately crosses a boundary of man-made items intersecting a natural process – not unlike the invasiveness of the paradise narrative.

Shells also became central to the environment. My attraction to the scallop shells initially stemmed from tropical iconography and symbolism. The beaded shells were representative of life cycles in this series, subverting expectations of what is natural as the decorated shells become animated only when covered in synthetic material, and in a somewhat ironic depiction of how decay works in this fictional environment, becoming still and lifeless after reverting to their natural states. I have come to realise that my intuitive use of these objects sits within a larger history of shells being seen as part of a transition between life and death:

Ashley Dumas, an archaeologist with the University of West Alabama, believes the reason so many cultures use shells in burial rituals is that shells are liminal. “They come from the seashore, which is neither fully land nor fully sea,” she says. “That ties in with a lot of cultures’ thoughts about what death is”—a state where you’re neither fully gone, nor fully of this world. Just as a shell persists after the creature it housed decomposes, so too might a person’s soul or spirit live on, an eternal thing more beautiful than the body it left behind.”<sup>4</sup>

*Enmeshment* is based on a psychological concept which describes relationships where boundaries have eroded, leading to toxic emotional co-dependency or an “unhealthy symbiosis.” This immersive piece uses a combination of organic/inorganic elements to create an alternate lens for viewing a tropical landscape, subverting the stereotypical, flat image of ‘paradise’ often portrayed of the Caribbean.

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<sup>3</sup> Deloughrey, Elizabeth. “ISLAND ECOLOGIES AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURES.” *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*, Vol. 95, No. 3, (2004): 298–310. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9663.2004.00309.x>.

<sup>4</sup> Langlois, Krista. “The Symbolic Seashell.” *Hakai Magazine*, October 22, 2019. <https://hakaimagazine.com/features/the-symbolic-seashell/>

The synchronised movements of the embellished shells are mesmerizing yet unsettling when coupled with the echoes of distorted environmental sounds, and the lattice that entraps them as they contract and vanish. This interplay of enchantment and tension is familiar in the Caribbean, alluding to the region's reliance on our landscape to entice a touristic gaze, but feeling the cost and constriction when it comes to agency, autonomy and identity. *Enmeshment* internalizes this complex reality, and both utilises & scrutinises the concept of escapism, playing with external and internal fantasies that are projected onto the social and physical environment. In a sense, as written in *Feral Political Ecologies?: The Biopolitics, Temporalities and Spatialities of Rewilding* the piece attempts to reframe "...the focus of conservation on the enchanting possibilities of multispecies kinship and the difficulties of co-existing, learning and exploring less ordered more-than-human worlds. It emphasises both the need for respect and admission, and a more compassionate understanding of the complex histories, trajectories, vulnerabilities and threats of co-existence."<sup>5</sup>

*Plexus* continues to explore environments and relationships shaped by an "exotifying" gaze. The series attempts to internalize or reconcile existing in "paradise", when we are bound by the lived realities of that space. The limitations we have all experienced over the course of 2020 and 2021 so far have added another layer to what it means to be confined by shorelines and external expectations, as well as the very narrow scope of our homes, minds and physical beings.

*Plexus* arose from my exacerbated experience of restriction. It draws on biological plexuses as hidden, intricately branching internal networks of vessels or nerves that connect to keep a body operative and aligned. In some meditative or religious practices, the solar plexus chakra is also the focal point of the body which is responsible for confidence, self-esteem and being in control of your life and free will. All of these concepts have been thrown into more disarray than usual; Barbados and the world have been confronted with circumstances which have exerted strain on mental and physical health in ways that we could not run from or ignore, inciting feelings of powerlessness.

The shells contract, stagnate and fade while haunting, distorted sounds recorded from my limited surroundings grow louder and more invasive. A web grows in their place, something which keeps me alive, yet remaining trapped by circumstance, and marked by objects that allude to biological cycles and the monthly passage of time. This plexus holds a necessary duality: a system representing a functional body, but one prone to being ruled by frayed nerves, as the constriction and anxiety around the state of affairs remained.

This ongoing series has manifested in the merging of ideas, forms and media, expanding from sculpture to video and sound art, and entering physical and virtual spaces. This world I am building is in some ways an antithesis to Olive Senior's comparison of uncontrollable nature with colonisation; I hope that this feral ecology continues to grow consciously from my observations,

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<sup>5</sup> Clancy, Clara, George Holmes, Kieran O'Mahony, Kim J Warde and Sophie Wynne-Jones. "Feral Political Ecologies?: The Biopolitics, Temporalities and Spatialities of Rewilding." *Conservation and Society* 18, No. 2, (May 2020): 71-76. <https://doi.org/10.4103/cs.cs.20.67>.

critiques, protectiveness and frustrations with this region, allowing me to blend multifaceted sociological, historical and environmental factors into meaningful hybrids, and in so doing, responsibly represent and investigate the Caribbean's multiplicity:

The complex diasporas of plants and peoples in Caribbean history render the term 'natural history' into an oxymoron if we define it as a space hermetically sealed from human alteration. Reading imperialism into the environmental imagination of the Caribbean shows the ways in which natural history is implicated in and in fact cannot be disentangled from the multiple settlements of human history.<sup>6</sup> (Deloughrey, 2004).

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<sup>6</sup> Deloughrey, 298-310.