

Dark and Perfect Memories

Tia-Simone Gardner



G44 Centre for
Contemporary
Photography

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Cover image

Tia-Simone Gardner, *Salt Water I*, archival inkjet print, 2019,
courtesy of the artist

Poster image

Tia-Simone Gardner, "...when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together, (I was near them at the time) preferring death to such a life of misery somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea", velvet on wood, 2019, courtesy of the artist

Tia-Simone Gardner is an interdisciplinary artist, educator and Black feminist scholar. Working primarily with drawing, images, archives and spaces, Gardner has made a practice of tracing Blackness in landscapes, above and below the ground's surface. Through her work with still and moving images, she brings together fragments of things and lives alongside the events and the places to which they gave meaning. Ritual, disobedience, geography and geology are the specters and recurring themes that cross her work. Gardner grew up in Fairfield, Alabama, across the street from Birmingham and learned to see landscape, capitalist extraction and containment, through this place. She received her BA in Art and Art History from the University of Alabama in Birmingham. In 2009 she received her MFA in Interdisciplinary Practices and Time-Based Media from the University of Pennsylvania followed by her participation as a Studio Fellow in the Whitney Independent Study Program. Gardner has been an invited artist at a number of national and international artist residencies including the Center for Photography at Woodstock, A Studio in the Woods and IASPIS Sweden. She has also been awarded a number of fellowships for her work including the McKnight Visual Artist Fellowship and the Smithsonian Artist Research Fellowship. Her current work brings the questions of Black geography to questions of geology in order to examine ideas of race and landscape along the Mississippi River and her home in Fairfield/Birmingham, Alabama.

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There is Something in the Water

Lillian O'Brien Davis

The carceral landscape had a water birth.

With the exhibition, *Dark and Perfect Memories*, artist Tia-Simone Gardner continues her exploration of the relationship between Blackness and the Mississippi River. Gardner's ongoing research suggests that water is the original site of the carceral landscape as riverboats and ships were used to transport Africans unwillingly from the African continent to Europe, the Americas and the Caribbean—what was known as the Triangle Trade. Reflecting specifically on the US American arm of the Triangle Trade, the Mississippi river, the second-largest watershed in North America, is a crack down the middle of the United States, linking east, west, north and south. Often, enslaved people were shipped up and down the river by planters and merchants in riverboats. These vessels were sites of Black horror, and being sold "down the river" was considered tantamount to a death sentence as enslaved labourers had a short life expectancy on the sugarcane plantations of the south where living conditions were particularly brutal.¹ Both of these vessels, the ship and riverboat, represent technologies of transportation and enclosure—imprisoning and transporting Black people as economic objects to further the development of the industrial revolution in America and abroad. Cotton crops and sugarcane were transported by riverboat from plantations to waiting ships who took the raw materials to England to be processed.

In her essay "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison writes,

they straightened out the Mississippi river in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.²

Along with understanding the vessels themselves as site of carcerality, Gardner reflects on the river as a place where

the economic boom of the slavery industrial complex is concentrated. The natural levee along the Mississippi is a mass grave filled with the the city's earliest river workers and slaves. Black workers who died while working or being transported along the river, were thrown into the river to avoid additional costs or prolonged work stoppages. Often the riverboat is framed as a romantic site of leisure, a slow and lazy trip accompanied by white linen suits and parasols. Gardner seeks to reframe this legacy in order to remember the Black labourers and enslaved people who lost their lives—and created their freedom—along its shores.

Carcerality & Surveillance

Theorist Simone Browne explores the view from "under the hatches" in her book, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (2015)—a view from the captured perspective. Browne asks us to think about what happens if we centre the conditions of Blackness when we theorize surveillance. Part of Gardner's work explores the role of perspective and an oppositional gaze through her use of footage from a body camera.³ This gesture is radical, using her own body in order to respond not only to the landscape of the plantation but also to the capitalist framework of the Black subject as an economic object being surveilled. Browne writes about surveillance as a mode of oppression, not inaugurated by new technologies, but rather, sustained by racism and anti-blackness. Gardner's body cam footage doesn't include images of people but reflects on the landscape, places that though devoid of people, depict the legacy of Black horror along the Mississippi.

With her use of a camera lens, Gardner acknowledges that photography was used in the conquest of nations, settler colonialism and Indigenous displacement—the use of the body cam unsettles the colonial gaze evident in the footage from a 1930s New Deal film superimposed over her own footage. Both films in the exhibition reflect the connections made between Blackness and the Mississippi. Included in Gardner's film is archival footage from a baptism scene in Saint Louis juxtaposed with a text from Zora Neale

1 Lee Sandlin, *Wicked River: The Mississippi When It Last Ran Wild*. New York: Vintage Books, 2011. pp.123

2 Toni Morrison, *The Site of Memory*. in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 99

3 Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Duke University Press, 2015), 32

4 The New Deal was a series of programs, public work projects, financial reforms, and regulations enacted by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States between 1933 and 1939.

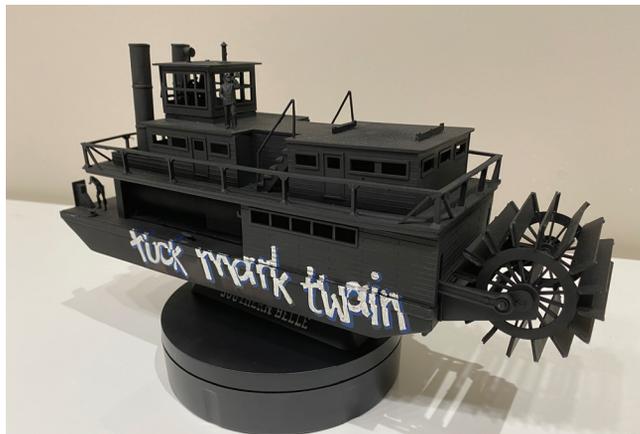
5 new world witchery, Author. "St. John's Eve - New World Witchery - the Search for American Traditional Witchcraft." *New World Witchery - The Search for American Traditional Witchcraft*, September 4, 2012. <https://newworldwitchery.com/tag/st-johns-eve/>.

Hurston that describes a ceremony on St. John's Eve, a High Holiday celebrated by Voodoo practitioners and Catholics. The Voodoo practice was initially outlawed in New Orleans around 1803 as white Louisiana lawmakers feared an uprising by enslaved Black people similar to the rebellion that took place in Haiti from 1791–1804.⁵ Marie Catherine Laveau (1808–1881), a Voodoo practitioner based in New Orleans is credited with bringing the celebration back into the public sphere by the late 1830s as it had been practiced in the swamps and vast cypress forests away from the white gaze. On film, Laveau is invoked as a great water spirit who rises from the water with communion candles burning in each hand, the narrator states; "Laveau? She must have seen you on her lake, in her river." These reports reflect Laveau's power in her spiritual practices as well as the impact of her public influence. Laveau's history has been infused with legend due to her status as a Voodoo practitioner, but she is known to have had significant political and social influence in both White and Black spheres in New Orleans which lead to her ability to practice Voodoo publicly.⁶

In addition to a site of containment and Black horror, the vessel is a location of Black subjectivity and Black resistance. Gardner focusses on this aquatic landscape as a tool of oppression, exploring the formation of oppositional geography with particular attention to the shore as a site of transmutation, what Tiffany Lethabo King terms "the Black shoal".⁷ Along the shores of the Mississippi and its adjoining waterways water becomes a site of ceremony and spiritual practice. The relationship to water depicted in this footage suggests how spiritual practices by local people were employed to redefine relationships with the water and the shore. Though many Black people during the period of slavery and directly after were not taught to swim for fear of escape, the water still offers a site of liberation.

Here is an image that tells part of the story.

As Toni Morrison writes "...memories and recollections won't give me total access to the unwritten interior life of



Tia-Simone Gardner, *Dark and Perfect Memory*, acrylic on plastic model, 2021, courtesy of the artist

these people. Only the act of imagination can help me." We need imagination to fill in what we don't know and what isn't told.⁸ Saidiya Hartman discusses how the very desire to understand or know the Black subject is a means of further effacing the suffering and pain of the enslaved whose body, though missing, is being called upon to provide the evidence that we as readers need in order to "understand" slavery.⁹ The show is a prompt to continue to unsettle coloniality and to seek forms of analysis based not on suffering but on human life.¹⁰ Imagination is bound up with memory. Many of the works in *Dark and Perfect Memories* reflect on the water as a site of both imagination and memory. Photographs included in the exhibition include salt crystal formations of the surface of the images, produced by chance and over time resulting in an image altered by its environment. As Gardner works to explore human social histories of place, she encounters the limits of what archival materials are available. Gardner's work reflects where imagination, slowness and chance are needed to help us uncover the meaning of these places. Though the shape and shores of the Mississippi have shifted over time, the graves in its depths remain.

6 From Smithsonian Magazine: "It is generally known that Marie LaVeau [sic] welcomed whites to this particular saturnalia, and it is often remarked that it was the decoy, the real worship of the Voodoo taking place at other times in remote regions of the swamp," Magazine, Smithsonian. "Voodoo Priestess Marie Laveau Created New Orleans' Midsummer Festival." Smithsonian.com. Smithsonian Institution, June 23, 2017. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/voodoo-priestess-marie-laveau-created-new-orleans-midsummer-festival-180963750/>.

7 King, Tiffany Lethabo. *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019.

8 Toni, Morrison. *The Site of Memory*. in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 2d ed., ed. William Zinsser (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), pp. 92

9 Patricia J. Saunders, "Fugitive Dreams of Diaspora: Conversations with Saidiya Hartman," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1, Article 7., 2008. Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol6/iss1/7>

10 Katherine, McKittrick. "On Plantations, Prisons and a Black Sense of Place." *Social and Cultural Geography*, 12:8, 947- 963.

