



Exercising shadows

By Chukwudubem Ukaigwe

the body skids where the light pools,
each bone has its lost dialect now,
untranslatable though I had so many languages
in the rooms above, / the hours spin their bangles,
supine, we listen¹

(Brand 2010, 50)

A shadow is a haunting, a measured testament to opacity. It is a partial/total absence or presence of light - a register consequent to illumination. Given a sonic register refers to the range of a musical note, pitch, melody, or an instrument -stretched and sustained through octaves; presented in this exhibition are Black notes in photographic registers achieved by way of experimental calls and responses to light.² In her Vancouver solo debut at W projects titled *In Self-Regard*, artist and educator, Rebecca Bair presents an amalgam of previous projects in conjunction with recently developed work.

In Self-Regard - the etymology of 'regard' finds its roots in the old French word *regarder*, 'to watch.'³ Thus, it is an active word, one that implies the work of noticing or taking into consideration. Moreover, the use of the word in the English language expands its meaning to a feeling of esteem, respect, or care towards someone, something, an idea etc.⁴ Therefore, this exhibition straddles the line between self-observation and admiration, between inquiry and reverential assertions. The artist employs the indexical imprints of digital photography, cyanotypes, and monotypes in an act of fragmentary witnessing and visual questioning of perceptions of her body; given the inherent political connotations of the Black image. In line with the following quote by Zora Neale Hurston "The stark, trimmed phrases of the Occident seem too bare for the voluptuous child of the sun"⁵, Rebecca employs framing reconstructions and close-up elisions as a map or method of unfixing meaning.

let me declare doorways,
corners, pursuit, let me say
standing here in eyelashes, in
invisible breasts, in the shrinking lake
in the tiny shops of untrue recollections,
the brittle, gnawed life we live,
I am held, and held⁶

(Brand 2002, 1)

A shadow performs movement - mirroring form in a silhouette changing with angularity to light. Rebecca's new body of work, *Imager*, is comprised of bodily frames arranged in situ, and in accordance with one another. These compositions suggest movement within each frame and flow into other frames. In a paradoxical presence of rhythm, and a lack of assembling symmetry, monochromatic bodily topographies are cast and printed on shiny sheets of metallic silver paper, hence they are luminescent. Besides these images being reflective surfaces and thereby implicating the viewer, they are also made with the use of mirrors: In a



tripartite arrangement, a distance-controlled camera connected to a screen is placed at an angle pointing to a mirror. The artist completes this equivalent triangle; positioned in adjacency to the mirror, Bair performs movements that are reflected and fed into the camera she controls via its monitor. Hence, the mirror is an optical transistor, while the artist assumes role of both subject and viewer, forging and articulating the body in familiar poses.

The production and performance of this work constitutes a circle of witnessing. There is a gentleness encoded within this negotiation of what is included in or selectively omitted from the frame. This work is intimate and personal; it is also autoethnographic, given that the artist is employing obstruction as a mitigative tool for resisting hypervisibility and surveillance of the Black femme body. Rebecca wields autonomy over her anatomy, building suggestive shapes, and truncated quasi-sexual terrains, utilizing abstraction and defamiliarization to short-circuit the fetishistic gaze that denotes the Black body within a controlling framework of popular culture and by extension, white supremacy.

They said with wonder and admiration,
you are still alive,
like hydrogen, like oxygen.⁷

(Brand, 2018, 224)

A shadow is an echo, it is an equivalent trace. Inspired by Deanna Bowen's use of negatives as a primary medium for making evidence, and interrogating the archives; Rebecca does the inverse, creating the photographic raw material referred to as negatives from digital positives.⁸ The *Imager* series was created by a digital simulation of the photographic technique of solarization, a process popularized by artist Man Ray, and one that entails an extreme overexposure of an image or a photographic film, leading to an effect of an acute tone reversal indicative of a negative.⁹ In essence of unearthing and self-examination, these bodily images are stripped of their colour and made to glow by an implementation of a sharply delineated tonal contrast, making them otherworldly, and reminiscent of X-Ray scans. Given the compositional redaction, and narrative deconstruction employed by Bair, the images become raw material to be processed by the exhibition visitors.

This shadow-work by the artist is as well evident in previous works included in the show. Bair refers to cyanotypes as a collaboration with the sun; considering her iterative process entails placing extensions of her body, like her hair on fabric surfaces treated with photosensitive chemicals; and then exposing the joint contraption to sunlight. Subsequently, the uncovered portion of the surface turns indigo blue resulting from the shadowed imprint of the hair absorbed into the material as memory. Through the course of solar witnessing, the coiled bodily extensions utilized in creating these cyanotypes become painterly stencils on diaries of fabric. One of the cyanotypes included within this exhibition; *Blue Sun* is a backlit circular frame with a cyan blue surface - totally photosensitized. The uncanny mimicry of the sun and circular planetary revolutions gestures towards portals, and by extension ancestral connections and returns. Hence, it can be extrapolated that the artist is invested in themes of worldmaking.

Included in this exhibition is a monotype print depicting a generative compositional notation, one that embodies the ghostly trace of ink-stained strands of hair rolled through an etching press. Held at a specific coordinate within this monotype is a blot of shea butter, a natural lubricant that will inevitably expand slowly within the frame, spreading and making the work non-archival overtime. This monoprint comes alive in organic molecules, evolving in dynamic composition.



Two things I will not buy
in this city,
mangoes and poinsettia;
exiled,
I must keep a little self respect.¹⁰

(Brand, 1983)

A shadow is a covering, an embracing shelter. Bair's practice explores Blackness as a function of solar interaction, as a romance privileged by the equatorial proximity of her ancestors. In successive experiments, the artist explores identity, community, and care, resorting to her hair as metadata for annotating this interaction with the sun.¹¹

The installation *Sky Light* entails encompassing canopies of hair in the oceanic backdrop of a blue sky. Each coil is magnified, appearing thick like roots or branches splitting into rhizomatic antennas – reaching and thirsty for light. Stretching off the ceiling, the installation towers over; becoming a shading tree. Light passes through the fibrous and keratinous network, casting shadows abaft as a performative trace or remnant. Abstract and charged with possibility, new forms emerge animated and are brought to life in and through light. These serendipitous footprints and iridescent methods of mark making are indicative of cosmic and ancestral presence. A shadow lingers oblique.

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4. "Regard Definition & Meaning." Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/regard. Accessed 24 May 2024.
5. Hurston, Zora Neale, and Cheryl A. Wall. "The Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934)." *Sweat*. Rutgers University Press, 1997, pp. 55–71.
6. Brand, Dionne. *Thirsty*. McClelland & Stewart, 2005, p. 1.
7. Brand, Dionne. "VERSO 55" *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos*. Duke University Press, 2018, p. 224.
8. Mowry, Crystal, and Deanna Bowen. "NOTES FROM THE MARGINS." DEANNA BOWEN, 1st ed., Steidl, Göttingen, pp. 25–29.
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10. Brand, Dionne. "WINTER EPIGRAMS" NOMENCLATURE; New and Collective Poems, Penguin Random House, Canada, 2022, p. 139.
 11. Sharpe, Christina. In the Wake: On Blackness and Being. Duke University Press, 2016, p. 113.