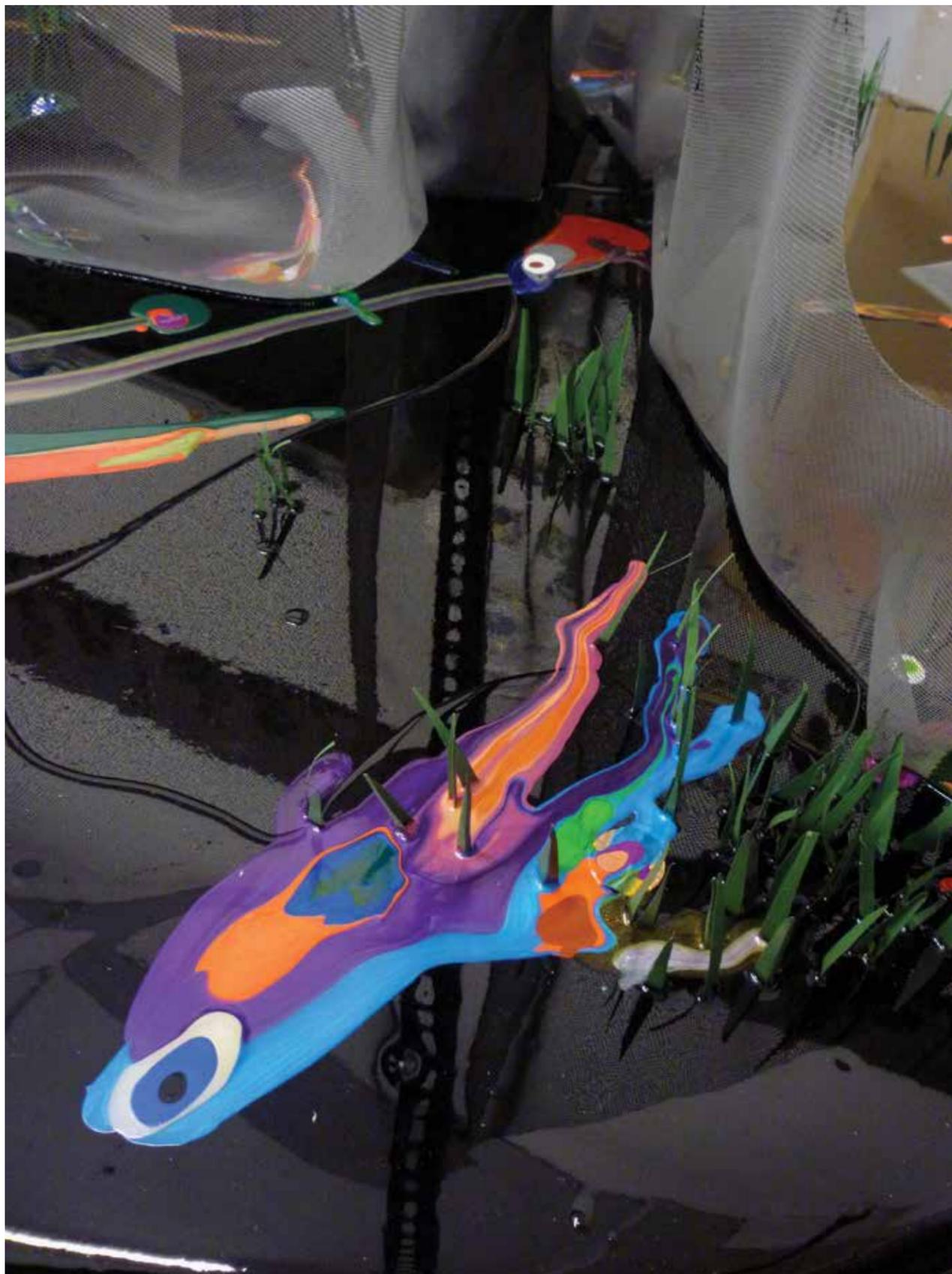


Overlooking the Miami River
in downtown Miami.



AVOIDING THE SHALLOWS

ARTISTS NICOLE AWAI & MARIA MARTINEZ CAÑAS DIVE DEEP INTO THE CURRENTS THAT SHAPE THEIR WORK



Nicole Awai, (Trinidad, born 1966), *Dream On - Happy Ending... / Sigue soñando - Final feliz...* (detail), 2011, acrylic paint, nail polish, resin, nylon netting, metal, construction foam, paper and wood, 53 x 58 x 27 inches. Courtesy of the artist. © Nicole Awai

By Graeme Kennedy, Director of Communications

Nicole Awai knows what

you're thinking when you hear the word "Caribbean." Growing up in Trinidad and Tobago, she was surrounded by the standard portrayals of the region. "I have no problem with people painting palm trees and beaches—go right ahead," she says as we walk through the Prizm Art Fair at Art Basel Miami in December 2018. "I grew up with artists who did that, whose works were in our living rooms. Those works gave me a respect for painting and art, but the ideas that I have right now are not going to come out in that way. As an artist, that's not what I'm interested in sharing with the world or looking at."

What Awai is interested in is exploring the multitude of influences, histories, and cultures that inspire her and have had a hand in the make-up of her country, while ensuring she has room to work outside the constraints of other people's perceptions and limitations. Primarily, she explains, most people just don't know much about the region at all. "I think people still think of the Caribbean as some monolith in a very fixed way, but we've had so many different influences, different histories, so many different political actions. The effects of so many European, imperial places that developed completely different characters: the Anglophone Caribbean is so different from the Francophone Caribbean, from the Dutch Caribbean," she says with a laugh. "People don't know it."

Awai is an easy laugher. As we walk around the fair, talking about her practice and the other work in the hall, her answers and observations are peppered with laughter, sometimes light and easy and sometimes tinged with a sense of release. "You might know this work," she says as we approach the African-American artist Dread Scott's performance *Money To Burn* from 2010. In it, Scott stands in front of the New York Stock Exchange and asks people passing by if they have any money to burn, before proceeding to light bills on fire. "It still cracks me up," she says. "They tried to arrest him and all this nonsense. They must have been pissed."

The dynamics of power, race, and representation have been at the fore of global culture over the past few years, and are prevalent throughout the Prizm Art Fair, which features international artists from the African Diaspora and various emerging markets who focus on sociopolitical and cultural issues pertinent to people of African descent. In addition to the artworks in the show, there are booths that sell novels by writers of color, as well as fashion capsules and even a wellness pop-up run by Black Lives Matter that offers free acupuncture to relieve stress.

Walking through the hall in the historic Alfred I. DuPont Building, Awai directs my eyes to the ceiling, where painted beams from the early 20th century heroically depict the Spanish colonization of Florida from the Spaniards' point of view. There are conquistadors unloading cargo from their ships, erecting buildings and steeples, and battling Native Americans—all depicted as one might expect from commissioned artists in the early 1900s. The effect of this backdrop was not lost on either of us. "It's like reclamation," Awai says with a smile.

Indeed, there was something powerful about being in an exhibition of artworks by artists of color and featuring artists of color, redirecting the visitor focus from the historically one-sided narrative above.

"I think that when you're geographically locked in, it's going to be 'we' or else it'll be nobody."

However, the lingering portrayals of colonial glory serve as a reminder that the legacies of colonialism, white supremacy, and racial inequality are not legacies at all—they are still very much alive, serving as the background for even the most progressive visions for the future.

The time it takes to reconcile these histories is a recurring theme throughout our conversation, as it turns to the impact of the current sociopolitical climate on *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago*, the PMA exhibition that features her work, "*Dream On—Happy Ending . . .*"

"The one thing you do see that's interesting," she says, "is the response to [*Relational Undercurrents*], everywhere it goes, is characterized by the community that is there. I was able to come down for the opening here in Miami, and the conversations were so different than, say, the one in New York or the one in Los Angeles... In a way, I think everywhere it goes, it highlights the quality of the interaction of Caribbean people in America and how that, in itself, is so diverse."

"On that note," I interject, "Maine?!?"

Awai laughs. "That's going to be a completely different interaction, as well."

I tell her how the state is one of the least-diverse and oldest populations in the country, although we do have burgeoning populations of East Africans immigrants and first-generation Mainers, an influx of younger professionals moving from major cities, as well as one of the largest populations of same-sex couples per capita than all but six states.

"I think it actually makes it more important that [*Relational Undercurrents*] is in those spaces," she says. "There's obviously this effect of all of these cultures on the

Americas that people are not aware of, but is active and is influencing all these communities in some way. We're in a moment in the country where that's the problem: people don't understand that even though you're not seeing all these people around, all of their culture and interactions have had an effect on your culture as a whole. That's something that's not recognized."

In an era of disconnectedness, Awai strives to connect the dots. As an Afro-Asian artist from one of the most culturally diverse countries in the Caribbean, her work creates opportunities to discover throughlines of history, culture, people, and even materials. Her work in *Relational Undercurrents*, for example, conveys the distinct natural resources of Trinidad and Tobago while speaking to shared experiences throughout the Caribbean and the elasticity of time, space, and place. The exhibition catalogue describes the work as "a hybrid painting and sculpture made of black polyurethane resin that resembles nothing as much as a congealed oil spill." This "black ooze," as Awai describes it, is a direct reference to the landscapes of Trinidad and Tobago.

"To this day," she says, "people are so surprised when I tell them I'm not from a tourist economy. Trinidad and Tobago is not a tourist economy. It is oil and natural gas—that stuff. Maybe that's part of why I'm so interested in materiality and always have been."

Whether the country's landscape and resources are a subject for Awai or a part of Awai's identity is a distinction that becomes complicated and intertwined. She is fairly adamant that issues of personal identity are not what her work is about, even though, she says, "it seems like all of our history, especially in the Americas, is beneath our feet. My work isn't about identity, per se, but, of course, every time somebody writes something, it's like, 'Oh, about identity.' I'm like, 'No, not particularly that.' I think all of that is naturally in there, but I think it's naturally in all artists' work—in all the white male artists' work [too]. In a sense, you're [always] talking about yourself."

It is exhibitions like *Relational Undercurrents* that can help transcend perceived cultural divides and create room for empathy through shared personal experiences. Specifically, for Awai and other artists throughout the Caribbean diaspora, there is opportunity here for connection, agency, and expression in terms that may be new to some regions such as Maine.

For example, Awai believes that the perception of a close knit and unified cultural tradition in the Caribbean stems largely from the geographic reality that these countries are islands and thus isolated, with the benefit of the shared experiences and understanding that create a deep sense of culture and identity. That doesn't mean it can't happen in other communities or regions, but, she warns, "If you're only thinking about cultures as these monolithic kinds of things, then that's also helping rob you of participating in all the changing and evolving culture."

In Awai's view, cultures develop and evolve when people have to deal with other types of people. "That might be the only thing that the Caribbean has a foot up on," she says, "but I think that when you're geographically locked in, it's going to be 'we' or else it'll be nobody."



"If somebody asks me about Trinidadian culture, I give you this whole thing. 'We have the influence of the African and the Indians, this, that, and that, blah, blah, blah.' You think about it. Do people here talk about culture in the same way, especially in places where it's predominantly white? Maybe now young people in your area might talk about it this way. 'Oh, OK, if you downtown, you could get Somalian food, you could get that. We could do this. We could do that. All right, we have this.' Do you see what I'm saying? That is the recognition of shared culture. That is what it is, where you say, 'we have.' That's when you know that people have understood and understand that their culture is evolving and they take ownership in it."

"That's a nice way of phrasing it," I say.

"We've known that for centuries," she says with a laugh.