

Erika DeFreitas

an object, a gesture, a scene (II)



September 8 - November 8, 2020
Curated by Sandy Saad Smith

Such a peculiar positioning an object, a gesture, a scene (II)

Recent Works by Erika DeFreitas

Essay by Sandy Saad Smith

It was in the way the figures were suggested. Draped in, then bounded by. Cloaked. Held. Shrouded. No holes cut out for the eyes. No breaths drawn, hollowing Os where the mouths might be. Postures outlined by pleats and puckers. It would seem still if not for the shadows and the gravel. Dust marking the tips of toes and narrow hems. Its scale unfair. Such a peculiar positioning. To be placed where it cannot be climbed and where no amount of leaning would stir it.

***It was curious, this thing.
All at once, an object, a gesture,
a scene.***

Erika DeFreitas's response to encountering two cloaked public sculptures expresses a sense of melancholy, curiosity, and optimism. Recognizing that they no longer fulfill their intended purpose, she finds in their ambiguity a peculiar positioning that gives space for new questions. Despite the sculptures' concealment, it is very clear that what lies beneath the coverings are figures, now unseen, misgendered, and deracialized. Evoking the dichotomy of absence and presence, Erika DeFreitas's recent works at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington are created through acts of scoring, fragmenting, rearranging, and redacting to reimagine the possibilities that arise through unknown elements. DeFreitas intuitively works across multiple disciplines and invites us to a staging of works void of didactic narratives. *An object, a gesture, a scene (II)* is an exhibition in which the unusual positioning between absence and presence gives way to a

merging of space and time and new interpretations found in uncertainty and ambiguity.

Our gaze is guided by DeFreitas's hands as they score public monuments and rearrange cut-out images of art objects in two videos featured in the exhibition. In *scores and motifs (after Roy Lichtenstein)*, DeFreitas guides us through various crevices and details within sculptures in Guild Park, located in her hometown of Scarborough. Going into meticulous detail without exposing the pieces in their entirety, DeFreitas offers us excerpts and leaves us with imagined possibilities. This notion of fragments is emphasized in *a more monumental scale*. The single-channel video shows DeFreitas's hands rearranging cut-out sculptural images from H. W. Janson's *History of Art*. Published in 1962, the popular art historical survey is now recognized as using a western lens which established an exclusive classification of art history.

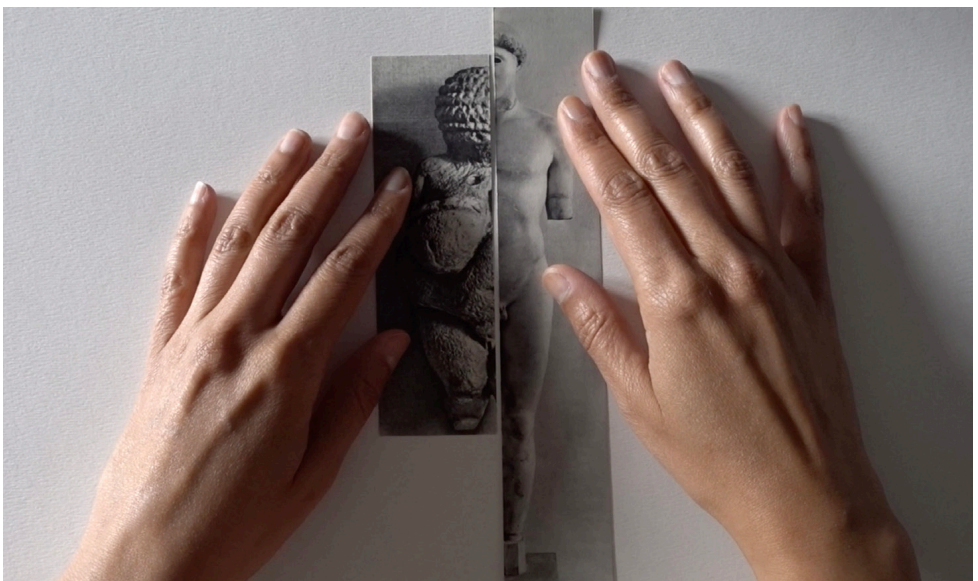


Image: Erika DeFreitas, still from *on a more monumental scale*, 2019, single-channel video, colour, no sound, 4:55 minutes.



Images: Erika DeFreitas, *she remains monumentally self-contained* No. 1, 2020, digital inkjet prints, 12" x 18" each.

Janson's book blatantly ignores works by artists of colour and women.

In her video, DeFreitas takes apart sculptures included in Janson's text, removes them from their historical contexts, and pairs them with other works found in the publication. Her new sculptures combine works across time, space, and medium, offering a counter-narrative to Janson's narrow overview. In both videos, DeFreitas's revisionist approach can be seen as an act of resistance. As a female artist of colour, DeFreitas uses her hands to direct our attention through the extraction and reconceptualization of monuments and canonized art historical works. In doing so, she becomes the composer of alternative outcomes that give space for new possibilities.

DeFreitas's use of her body in the process of directing our attention is most evident in *she remains*

monumentally self-contained. This series of photographs features the artist and her mother mimicking canonized art historical sculptures found in Janson's text. Presented in pairs, the series juxtaposes contrasting photos of DeFreitas and her mother quoting the sculptures in one image, and draped in an unraveling crochet blanket in another. DeFreitas's deliberate choice of using her body and that of her mother to engage with the exclusionary historical survey makes visible the black female body in a space where it had no presence. Here, DeFreitas asserts herself as the director of her refabrication, choosing the way in which the racialized body is framed and visually represented while placing an emphasis on process, gesture, the body, and documentation. The contrasting photos offer a comparison between absence and presence and reveal the implications of the unseen racialized body in visual representations. *She remains*



monumentally self-contained was shot in DeFreitas's living room due to her inability to access a studio. Created during the twin pandemics of systematic racism and COVID-19, this series reflects a time in which the world (particularly people of colour) finds itself living with uncertainty.

DeFreitas's mother is featured heavily in her work as a collaborator and subject. Her presence is a reflection of their intimate relationship, and DeFreitas's research on the human experience of loss and mourning. Meditating on her own fear of losing her mother, DeFreitas was drawn to images of the Virgin Mary in Janson's text. In her series *The Lady returned as well*, she removed all the representations of Mary from the publication, over eighty of them, creating black and white reprints of Mary's image while removing her body, revealing her clothing. DeFreitas notes the particular scenes in which Mary is depicted – her birth, the

annunciation, when she gives birth, at the crucifixion, and her death: moments of transition. Many of her moments are common in human experience, ranging from incredible joy to inconsolable grief. DeFreitas's absencing of the body in some ways forecloses the possibility of empathy for the Virgin Mary. In removing the figure from the scene she reframes the image and question the ways in which we relate to unseen bodies. Is the Virgin Mary's story of grief reduced in her absence? Does it open up her narrative for us to place our own projections on it?

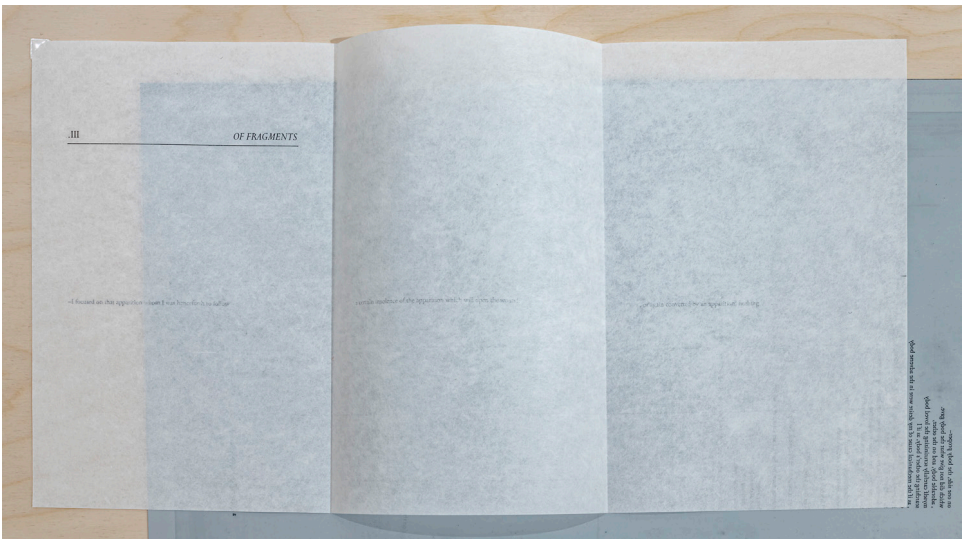
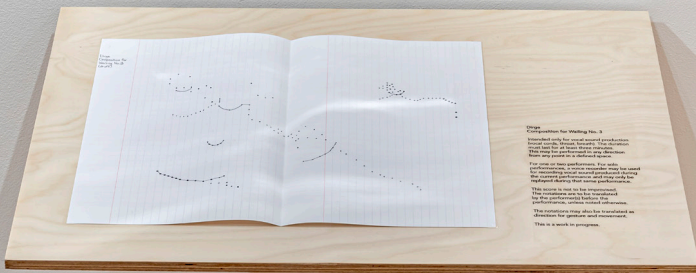
Recognizing Mary's life and grief as a dichotomy, DeFreitas processes her images while striking a balance between absence and presence. The series reveals a selection of prints in which Mary's presence is suggested while unseen. A selection of prints from *The Lady returned as well* hangs in a continuous line along the gallery walls, like a musical score to which various other works hang in relation.



This score is emphasized in *Compositions for Wailing*, an elegiacal response to the concealed public sculptures initially encountered by the artist. Through this work, DeFreitas creates gestures for wailing in compositions intended for vocal sound production by providing instructions on the notations that are to be translated by the performer(s)¹. The instructions are accompanied by graphs produced by DeFreitas. Her notes point to various highs and lows within a harmony and are paired with transparent acetate prints of abstracted shapes. Sourced from captured shadows of her body, she alludes to her presence in the work. In *Compositions for Wailing*, DeFreitas uses instruction to suggest sounds that are never actually heard, and shapes to propose the presence of her body that is never actually seen. In the space between absence and presence, this work occupies

the peculiar positioning DeFreitas is originally drawn to when she first encountered the cloaked sculptures. In contrast to playing with sound, DeFreitas plays with words in the series of *fragments*. Inspired by Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, DeFreitas takes apart the text by removing specific words and creating a new narrative. By fragmenting the text, she snags the reader's attention with the skipping of words and swift succession into the next passage. Viewers read a ghost of the original text and what remains is nuance;² the space in which the aura of the text gives way to new interpretation. Here, possibility arises in the peculiar space between what can be understood and what is left unanswered.

An object, a gesture, a scene (II) is an exhibition in which Erika DeFreitas invites us to enter a space that operates between past, present,



and future tenses, absence and presence, obscurity and revelation. In this space there is dichotomy and tension that elicit curiosity and reflection while opening up pathways to new what-ifs. In her play with detail, time, and narrative, DeFreitas recreates, reckons with, and reveals systems of visual and intellectual strategies. Her approach of scoring and unraveling in intuitive

and methodical order takes viewers on rhythmic ticks, through image, language, and sound, revealing with critical eyes an open and decolonized approach to possibility. In this space, viewers are invited to reflect on DeFreitas's approach to processing the realities of being human and to leave with a shift in perspective.

Footnotes

- 1 Erika DeFreitas, *Compositions For Wailing. No. - 4*
- 2 Wayne Koestenbaum, "In Defense of Nuance," Foreword to *Roland Barthes: A Lover's Discourse* translated by Richard Howard, Hill and Wang: New York, 1977.

Biographies

Erika DeFreitas is a Scarborough-based artist whose practice includes the use of performance, photography, video, installation, textiles, works on paper, and writing. Placing an emphasis on process, gesture, the body, documentation, and paranormal phenomena, she works through attempts to understand concepts of loss, post-memory, inheritance, and objecthood. DeFreitas' work has been exhibited nationally and internationally including at Project Row Houses and the Museum of African American Culture, Houston; Fort Worth Contemporary Arts; Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita; Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery. In 2017, she was longlisted for the 2017 Sobey Art Award.

Sandy Saad Smith is a Toronto-based curator and writer. Much of her work considers the ways in which artists disrupt and subvert hierarchical systems and narratives. Her curatorial practice aims to bring new perspectives to seemingly fixed or frozen accounts and systematic structures while creating more accessible and meaningful ways of engaging with art and asking questions. Sandy has held several positions in the arts including Curator of Exhibitions and Education at the Visual Arts Centre of Clarington, Public Engagement Coordinator at the Koffler Gallery, Education Coordinator at the Varley Art Gallery, and Curatorial Assistant at the Art Museum of the University of Toronto. Sandy has a Master of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto and is now an independent curator.

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