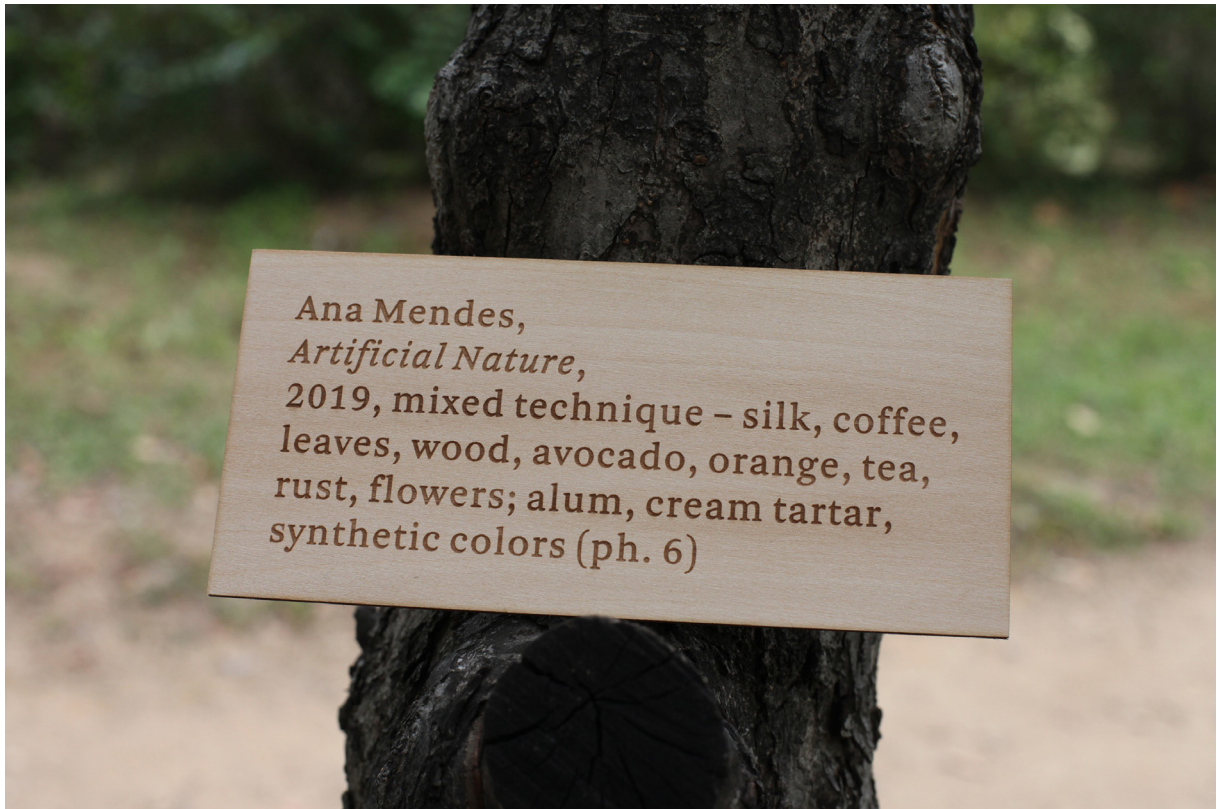




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 13 June 2020



Artificial Nature | 2019 | Ana Mendes (courtesy of the artist)

HISTORIES AT A DISTANCE: RACISM AND THE SERPENT'S FEAST

Bruno Sena Martins

The rising prominence of anti-colonial and anti-racist activism has unsettled the placid colonial nostalgia that has long prevailed in former European metropolises. Closely entwined with the waves of resistance that marked the end of the imperial cycle, black and Afro-descendant populations living in Europe have, in recent decades, engaged in a complex reconfiguration of practices of resistance. In broad terms, the generations who came in search of a better life in the face of adversity (racism,



xenophobia, economic precariousness), and who mainly engaged in “everyday forms of resistance” (1), are passing their testimony on to their symbolic and / or familial descendants. These descendants include, significantly, an emerging generation of black people who are today gaining increasing visibility in academia, activism and the arts across Europe. These people are articulating a collective affirmation of their identities alongside a public denunciation of institutionalized racism.

As might be expected, these uprisings have aroused obvious discomfort in those who think that mentioning racism is to re-invent a problem that has long been laid to rest, or that revisiting subaltern memories constitutes meaningless self-flagellation for imperial vanity. This discomfort is deeply embedded in the common sense of Eurocentric memory and has helped intensify political projects which are in open opposition to today’s anti-colonial anti-racism. These include, of course, the mobilizations of the extreme right and its political projects across the world, but also some left projects that see struggles based on identity as a distraction from a concerted confrontation with capitalism.

Our times cry out for the art of telling histories that come from afar: from the colonial times that are so close. *Canto de Ossobó* (2018) is a good example. In this film, Silas Tiny takes us on a poetic drift through the fields of São Tomé and Príncipe. These are spaces inhabited by memories that are proverbially elusive, where the forest bird, as the legend has it, has lost his voice as a meal for the serpent. The director, following the routes of decolonization, leaves Portugal to return, thirty years later, to the São Tomé and Príncipe of his childhood. With the uncertainty over the question of return, he has not kept photographs from his childhood, but recognizes the place thanks to the stillness with which time passes under his gaze. Plantations like Rio do Ouro and Água-Izé are not, however, held back by a narcissistic re-encounter with the past. Thanks to the demands of cocoa, for whose filthy needs people were brought in from across the empire, these are places twisted by the ghosts of endless subjugation and enslavement.

São Tomé is where the regime of sugarcane production that would drag millions of black Africans to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade was first tested. Only ingenuity will allow a recoil, in time, from the specters of slavery, forced labour, corporal punishment, carnage (2), and the humiliation of the men and women who served the colonial regime with no dignity, and no life other than misery, endless work and subjection to the foreman’s brutality. The film shows us independent São Tomé and Príncipe, far from the one where corporal punishment was enshrined in law until 1911. It begins with the birth of two



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kids and walks us through beaches, schools, churches, hospitals and lush gardens where life, although stripped bare by centuries of expropriation and racist exploitation, seems to go on without interruption. But, as we consume the contemplative directions that the film pretends to invite us to, what remains, for us, are the archival images: the photographs and film of mutilated bodies, the parade grounds where black bodies line up in formation, the cartoon uniforms of the domestic servants in the great house, the choreographed celebrations of the *Estado Novo*. When we think of the places of extreme violence that mottle the experience of modernity we always come up against the deathly silence imposed by the limits of a Eurocentric narrative. This silence is the clearest symptom of the gap that remains to be filled by a struggle to liberate Europe from its learned amnesia. We cannot conceive of a decolonization of the present without listening again to the songs that racism has long tried to silence.

Translated by Archie Davies

(1) Scott, James C. (1985), *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
(2) Such as the massacre of Batepá recounted by Inês Nascimento Rodrigues in the recent *Espectros de Batepá. Memórias e narrativas do «Massacre de 1953» em São Tomé e Príncipe* (2018, Afrontamento)

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