

Todd Gray: *Atlantic lullabies, Other tellings*

David Lewis
53 the Circle, East Hampton, NY
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David Lewis is pleased to present Todd Gray, *Atlantic lullabies, Other tellings*. It is the artist's third exhibition with the gallery, and his first solo exhibition at David Lewis' East Hampton location.

Expanding his work from his previous solo exhibition with the gallery, *the hidden order of the whole* this new series on and about the Atlantic Ocean, offers viewers entries to the past while recounting *other* tellings. "The past -- or more accurately, pastness -- is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as past." (Trouillot 1997, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995))

The series in *Atlantic lullabies, Other tellings*, provides multiple lenses for seeing and confronting the Atlantic: the gallery sits on the west, surrounded by Slavery memorial sites, while directly staring at the east – confronting history with the possibility of reconciliation while disrupting dominant narratives. Popular Western tradition of lullabies and folk songs were introduced by enslaved mothers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, and while those songs sit in the tongues of the dominant culture, the tellings of the *other* are consistently buried in United States history.

Gray's work opens space for us to have these fraught conversations – to shift our gaze and our ears to *other tellings* if we want to imagine new futures. Both ideas of Afro-pessimism and Afro-futurism exist in the work – oscillating between the two, trapping the viewer in between. We are given agency to make a shift in the way we *be* (as American academic Christina Sharpe suggests) in the wake, *in* the fight. "...I mean wake work to be a mode of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives". In the *wake work* we are interpolated into the narratives and frameworks presented in each work – forced to recon with the history of slavery, trade, and the American experiment/colonial project. The repetition of the Atlantic in each work centers and grounds this history that lives in the present day. The series directly asks viewers to take action -- to participate in a different way, to flip the systems of power.

Presenting Gray's work in the East Hamptons draws and highlights the current invisible line connecting the Atlantic — the historic line that the Atlantic bears each day – the ocean as a burial site, the east as the origin, and the west the perpetrator, and the ocean, the Atlantic as the archive. Gray's work is about seeing and witnessing - forming lines that draw parallels to the Triangular Trade routes - the work forces us to look and to make connections within those points of departure and to each image in Gray's work.

A myriad of doublings present themselves in the work, and the image of the Atlantic reflects back to itself, becoming a mirror. Gray has put a mirror up to the failed American dream. The work *Atlantic (Double Dutch)* (2022), feels like the anchor to this presentation – a doubling of vision, a failed proposition as the image of the Atlantic within each oval frame is collapsed onto one another - flattening the space between them — while the connected horizon holds the space in between, not forgotten. *Atlantic (Jesuits)* (2022) becomes the chain to this anchor, where Christianity works hand in hand with colonial history. Desmond Tutu, a South African Anglican bishop and theologian writes: "When the missionaries first came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. when we opened them, we had the

Bible and they had the land!" Gray's signature oval frames resemble windows, openings for a new afro-futuristic vision. In *Atlantic (Octavia)* (2022), Gray employs the image of Octavia E. Butler from his own archive in conversation with canons in the ports of Ghana stacked over imperial structures. Butler, with a soft smile gazes to the right, looking to the future – while *Atlantic (Keisha's Redemption Song)* continues to build on Gray's vision of the cosmos and the black body – the micro macro lens allows the viewer to build a new perspective – a reframing of the Atlantic. Keisha, with her eyes veiled with the depth of the cosmos, lulls us into a futuristic vision.

- Silvi Naçi