

Rhea Dillon

Heads

Arts and Letters

September 27, 2025–February 8, 2026

When Rhea Dillon first visited Jamaica eleven years ago, she traveled to her great-grandmother’s land. It was a site she was already connected to through family stories—collective myths that shaped Dillon’s perception of its guango trees and her ancestors buried beneath the earth. She continues to return there and, in recent years, has been thinking through Caribbean concepts of family and the histories that land can hold. These journeys might be why much of Dillon’s work begins from the proposition that any attempt to represent land is a process of abstraction. In *Heads*, new works made with natural materials significant to Jamaica rest on wooden book-shelves or hang on the paneled walls, serving as an intervention in the Library of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Like the room they are situated in, the sculptures reference residential interiors. They recall the mahogany cabinets filled with cut-crystal serving ware commonly found in Caribbean dining rooms in the United Kingdom, which Dillon previously displayed as a sculpture, tipped onto a gallery floor (*A Caribbean Ossuary*, 2022). With the series of sculptures in *Heads*, Dillon transforms a domestic object into a minimal form: Cut-crystal plates cast with resin and molasses or Jamaican soil lean inside a sapele mahogany and glass box. Interested in the mutability of gesture, she constructed the plates to morph and decay over time. Likewise, a work on paper suggests the stem of a leaf, a suture, or a route. This kind of slippage is fundamental to Dillon’s work.

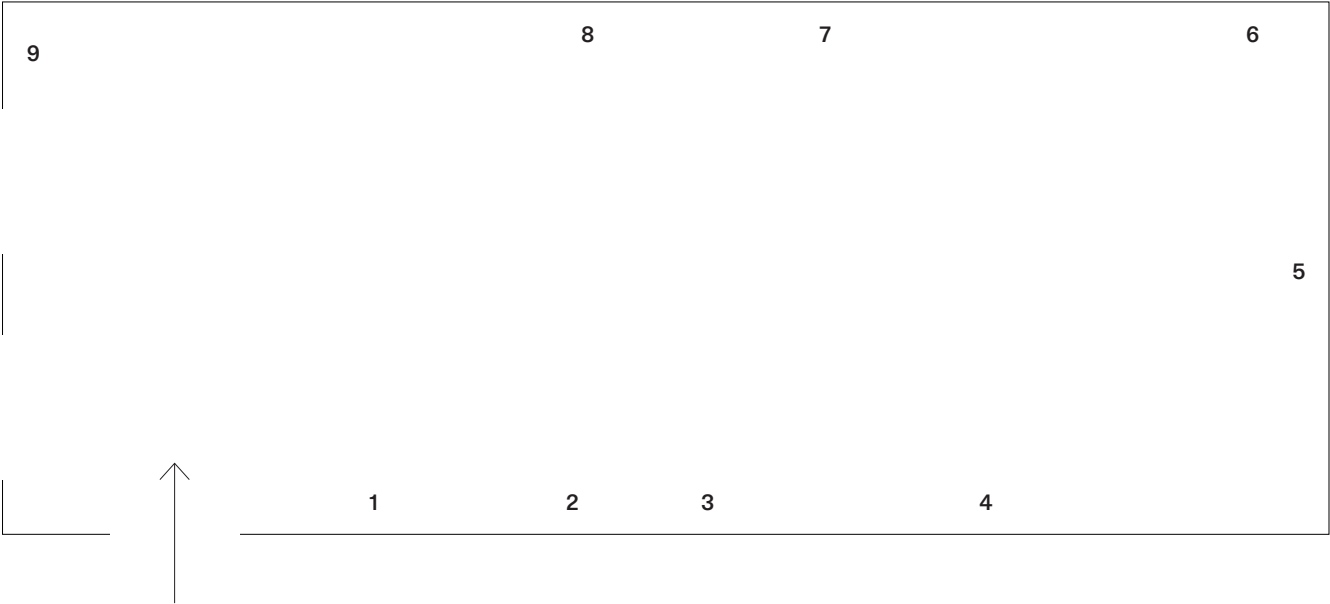
Positioned on the library shelves, Dillon’s sculptures tilt in unison, turned to face the cardinal directions of East and West. You could think of them as leaning figures—heads of another kind of knowledge system, replacing some of the books by Arts and Letters members that have accumulated since this space opened in 1923. In their place, Dillon selected books by current or former members that speak to the histories and ideas that animate her practice. And to supplement racial and geographic absences in the institution’s membership, she also presents books by non-member writers from the Caribbean or of Caribbean descent. Paralleling the titles of the works—scrambled latitude and longitude coordinates that refer to specific sites in Jamaica where Dillon sourced the soil and molasses—her reorganization reveals that disturbing order can in fact enhance clarity of thought.

When Dillon speaks of her works, she often frames them in relation to poetics and its imaginative, associative logic. We intuitively understand poetry as a form that chases feeling and those internal expressions that escape conventional structures of language. That pursuit of feeling is why the poet was first seen as a kind of prophet, as a conduit to the future. It is Dillon’s aim to make objects that communicate through that kind of feeling. With her works, she asks us what abstraction can concretize that other actions cannot.

As the exhibition continues to unfold, Dillon attempts to answer that question with the anticipatory temporality of a poet. With *Heads*, she finds ways to let instability endure. By constructing works with natural materials that resist permanent cohesion, Dillon ensures that temperature, humidity, and gravity will exert their inevitable force. They will transform throughout the show just like anything else in this world, which is destined to age and die and morph into something other than itself. In Dillon’s hands, that decay is a prismatic, many-sided mirror.

Noa Wesley

Library



1. 71°67'55.4"94°06'40.2"25: X, 2025
Sapele mahogany, glass, resin,
and molasses

2. 71°67'55.4"94°06'40.2"25: VIII, 2025
Sapele mahogany, glass, resin,
and molasses


3. 71°78'10.6"23°52'17.3"25: III, 2025
Sapele mahogany, glass, resin,
and soil

4. a ground space, 2025
Molasses, resin, ink on paper,
and sapele mahogany frame
5. Langston Hughes, “Goodbye, Christ,”
n.d. Originally published in *The Negro
Worker*, November–December 1932
Archives of the American Academy
of Arts and Letters

6. 71°78'10.6"23°52'17.3"25: IV, 2025
Sapele mahogany, glass, resin,
and soil

7. 71°67'55.4"94°06'40.2"25: XI, 2025
Sapele mahogany, glass, resin,
and molasses

8. 71°67'55.4"94°06'40.2"25: IX, 2025
Sapele mahogany, glass, resin,
and molasses
9. 71°67'55.4"94°06'40.2"25: XII, 2025
Sapele mahogany, glass, resin,
and molasses
- Throughout the exhibition, Dillon will
send small works and ephemera through
the postal service. To participate in
this mailing project, please sign up
with this QR code:



Rhea Dillon (b. 1996; London, UK) discovered she might like to be an artist when, as a child, she walked up the staircase in her uncle's council flat and saw the walls covered with photographs. It was an early lesson on how to tell stories through the arrangement of objects and transform cold, standardized architecture into a space for personal expression. In the work Dillon went on to create, she makes Black Caribbean diasporic experiences visible without directly representing them, often relying on the latent meaning of materials and forms to carry that message. In 2020, she made her first work with sapele mahogany, a wood enslaved people were forced to log to make room for sugar plantations throughout the Caribbean more than three hundred years ago. The material recurs—as a container for a spade or a mountain of marigold seeds. Dillon is also a poet and frequently makes exhibitions in response to texts or writers, including the American novelist Toni Morrison (*We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils*, 2023); the French theorist Gilles Deleuze (*The Black Fold*, 2023); the Jamaican writer and sociologist Erna Brodber (*Fractal Being*, 2024); and the collection of books by current and former members in the Arts and Letters Library (*Heads*, 2025).

Heads is organized by Noa Wesley, Assistant Curator. Support for the exhibition is provided by Desiree and Olivier Berggruen and members of Arts and Letters.

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