

# ARTFORUM

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Cameron Rowland  
ICA – Institute of Contemporary Arts, London  
Marina Vishmidt

**FOR THE GREATER PART OF A DECADE**, Cameron Rowland has been engaged in making not so much a museum of racial capitalism as a visitor center for it, where its artifacts are instructively pried free from daily use. In line with other projects by Rowland, the artist's institutional solo debut in the UK, curated by Richard Birkett, is minimally populated in terms of exhibited objects, despite ranging over two floors of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (and including a nominally priced stack of works [Enclosure, 2020] for sale in the bookshop). This sparseness in fact offers the viewer a space crowded with real abstraction. What is salient about Rowland's work, across all its different iterations, is neither the exceptional acuity of how it depicts this mode of production nor the totality of what is disclosed in its expansive research apparatus—it's the way it actually bores into the legal infrastructure of property. The opening line of the twenty-page exhibition handout tells us, "Abolition preserved the property established by slavery." If the system of property built by slavery survives its abolition and even thrives beyond it—as in the globalized free-trade boom experienced by Britain in the wake of the 1833 Abolition Act that is cited in the show's title, "3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73," which handsomely compensated slave owners "for the Loss which they will incur by being deprived of their Right" to forced labor, a ruling repeated in other abolitions throughout the imperial nineteenth century—then, like all capitalist relationships, the link between property and abolition must be racked by antagonism. In that sense, perhaps, the spirit of abolition can be extracted from property, but only by means of heightening those relationships' contradictions through the graduated and tortuous legal realism that Rowland's terms, such as disgorgement (the court-ordered return of ill-gotten gains) and encumbrance (a type of lien), evoke.

Rowland's primary media are not physical objects but the legal mechanisms that often serve as titles for the work. *Depreciation*, 2018, added friction to how a piece of land, a fictitious commodity, was able to circulate. *Disgorgement*, 2016, bought shares in a company holding profits still intact from slave-insurance policies, pending reparations. And in this show, *Encumbrance*, 2020, comprising unaltered wooden fixtures and a framed legal contract, indefinitely mortgages the mahogany doors and banisters of the ICA's Regency-era building, puncturing the value-retaining capacity of these goods—produced inside of the slave industry and now serving as assets of the Crown Estate. Mahogany, Rowland writes, "is one of the few commodities of the triangular trade that continues to generate value for those who currently own it." Here, the legal instrument of encumbrance becomes akin to a termite colony—commodity fetishism riddled with subterranean channels. The inescapable ownership relation between the ICA and the Crown Estate gets aerated by this parasitical one, which the institution has itself invited, sanctioned, and signed.

Law also performs as a medium in Rowland's work through the artist's reflexive incorporation of the ownership relations of contemporary art into some of the artworks themselves. If these pieces are made available to the market or to exhibiting institutions, it is often under conditions of rental. One such work, *Pacotille, 2020*, comprises a pile of glass beads and brass manillas manufactured "as a one-directional currency, which Europeans would offer as payment but would never accept." Now these valueless monies traded for African people can never be purchased. There is a marked recursion both in Rowland's reflexivity about the position of the artist as a market agent (an instigator and delegator of various types of canny, brand-building action) and in their resistance to separating this condition from the histories and actualities staged by the work. In its many-sided thoroughness, Rowland's practice puts one in mind of a crystal drill, if there is such a device: It creates sight lines by cutting through language, provenances, and histories, but the cutting apparatus is already a prism.

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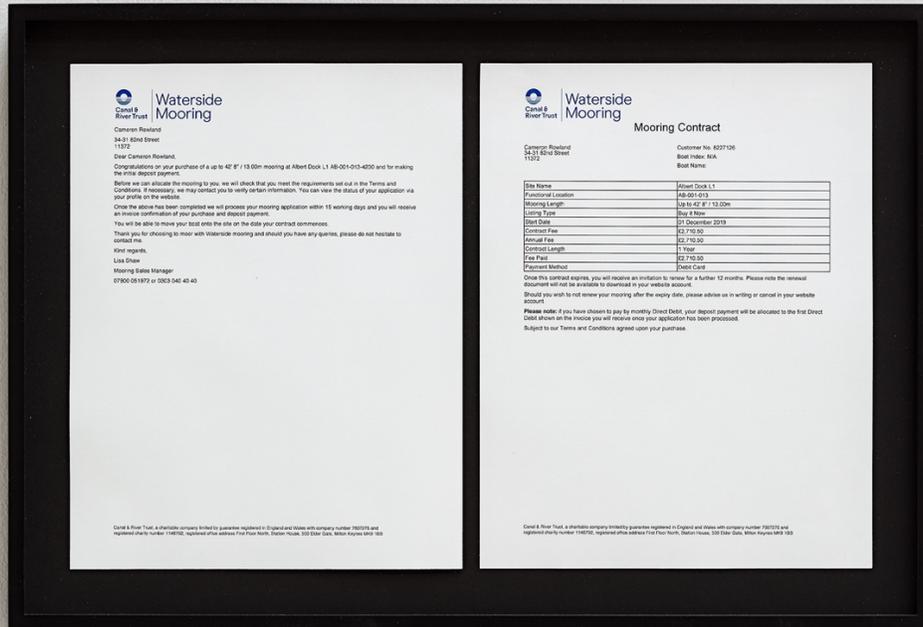
Rowland's work is informed by the critical theories of race and law put forth by scholars such as Brenna Bhandar, Cheryl Harris, Saidiya Hartman, K-Sue Park, and Robert Westley—a number of whom Rowland has been in dialogue with for some time. The earlier, groundbreaking work of Eric Williams's 1944 study *Capitalism and Slavery* has also been instrumental to their practice, tracing the economic trajectory of slavery's rise and fall, always asymptotic to the "arc of the moral universe" presented in received accounts of abolitionism. The discursive complexity of this exhibition, as in all of Rowland's projects, feels both generous and like a vortex, finely imbricated as it is with the affective undertow that somehow links the overt conceptualism of a wall installation of a legal document such as *Probation Order Under 18 U.S.C. § 3607, 2020*, with the relics of disciplinary terror mounted a short distance away. In the upstairs gallery, cattle brands used to burn marks of possession on people owned by a Church of England–run Barbadian plantation in the eighteenth century hang on a wall opposite *Behavioral Intervention, 2020*, an electronic monitor used by parole and immigrant-detention officers today. This juxtaposition seems to suggest an equivalence but not a symmetrical one—two punitive regimes superimposed across time. The contemporary object almost sears deeper, redoubling the violence of its history. These pieces create an echo of racialized terror administered via the flesh, which resonates painfully around the elegant room. Both objects recall Rowland's photographic suite *HandPunch #1–5, 2014–15*, which pictured biometric time clocks in various workplaces. That disciplinary gadget—which brings to mind Moishe Postone's 1993 study *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, a reinterpretation of Marx's concept of "abstract labor"—acts as a memento of Rowland's ongoing focus on how abstractions are measured, managed, and embodied. What makes these abstractions real, of course (as real, as Georg Lukács says, as the "car that runs you over"), are property relations and their violent enforcement in capitalist society, which, as political theorist Cedric Robinson consistently argued, have never existed in a form that wasn't racialized.

The materials in Rowland's projects can have a compelling tremor to them, as banal objects with distinct backstories in the slave trade. At other times, they testify to this history with an obdurate wit, as in *Mooring, 2020*, a canal-boat mooring "rented for the purpose of not being used," adjacent to the previous site of a warehouse belonging to the Rathbone company, a large player in the Liverpool node of the triangular trade as a timber supplier, cotton importer, and financial-services provider, in that historical order. These objects become dysphoric in the shadow of the historico-legal complex detailed in their extended captions; the asymmetry between the two is unfathomably huge. Among the artistic coordinates that could be cited here are the exhibition's oscillation between the functional, the critical, and the aesthetic, familiar from Michael Asher's, Seth Siegelaub's, and Adrian Piper's penchants for contracts and other administrative tools, as well as the institutional-critical strategies involving reorderings of space, inventory, and fixtures familiar from Asher, Fred Wilson, and John Knight. However, the distinct character of Rowland's approach, certainly with regard to Asher or Knight, is that it leaves the fabric of the exhibition space unmodified, because that fabric is not the addressee. Instead, Rowland invokes the property relations in which the institution is enmeshed and enacts modifications to those relations that the institution is in a position to support. The space itself becomes another of the sourced objects on display, whose aporetic histories the artist relentlessly filters and arrays. As curator Eric Golo Stone puts it in an essay for October, Rowland's items are shown "without alteration," which is to say they are presented in a nonproprietary way, where nothing is changed other than their means of circulation. The works thus come into view as evidence, or as transitional objects—crystals of abstract systems—a feature they share with all commodities. And yet, even abstract systems can dematerialize from one era to another, as in the shift identified by Gilles Deleuze from societies of corporeal "discipline" organized around factories to those of "control" dominated by ambient corporate forms. Today, the valorization process can shift from forced labor to self-branding and back, and capital becomes ever more "humanized" in proportion to its capacity to destroy all life.

Each of Rowland's solo exhibitions has centered on an institutional site's capacity to perform in its given role and to constitute a party to a new contract, a capacity lent to it by capital and state. "3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73" is the project most angled toward the state, which becomes available as a problem and even necessary as a question in a building leased from the British monarchy, an institution that was sustained for centuries by both the slave trade and the moral and economic capital of that trade's abolition across and beyond its imperial possessions. Real estate and nationhood are packaged together here in a way they couldn't be in New York, Los Angeles, Cologne, or Brussels. And what is it but real estate and nationalism that diminish the possibilities of earthly life, especially in London? These abstractions can't help but take a more congealed form in a building like the ICA, where Rowland's devalorizations slowly fill the rooms, as Deleuze might say, like "a spirit, a gas."

*Cameron Rowland: "3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73" is on view through April 12.*

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**Cameron Rowland, Mooring, 2020**  
**AB-001-013.**

William Rathbone and Sons was a timber merchant company founded in Liverpool in 1746. “[T]he foundation of the Rathbone fortune and business was built on the Africa slave trade.”<sup>1</sup> During the 18th century, they imported timber felled and milled by slaves in the West Indies and operated a number of trading ships that sailed to West Indian colonies as well as the Southern States of America.<sup>2</sup> Rathbone and Sons’ yard occupied a large portion of the Liverpool South Docks.<sup>3</sup> Rathbone and Sons supplied timber for slave ship builders in Liverpool until at least 1783.<sup>4</sup> These ships carried enslaved black people who were sold in the West Indies and in British North America. Ships built in Liverpool also carried the slaves who were sold on Negro Row at the Liverpool South Docks.<sup>5</sup>

Liverpool built the world’s first wet dock in 1716, allowing cargo ships to dock directly at the port. By 1796, Liverpool had built 28 acres of docks.

Liverpool’s proximity to Ireland also not only facilitated a profitable trade, but provided a relatively safer route that allowed Liverpool ships less chance to be captured by French privateers. Additionally, the copper and brass manufactures in Lancashire and Ireland allowed for local companies that manufactured African trade goods such as manillas to carry on a prosperous export trade, further giving Liverpool a competitive edge. The relationships forged with nearby merchants not only helped secure trade goods, but also valuable credit terms.<sup>6</sup>

In 1784, Rathbone and Sons imported the first consignment of raw cotton to England from the United States.<sup>7</sup> From this point, they became stated abolitionists and free trade advocates.<sup>8</sup> The abolition of the “West Indian monopoly” on the import of goods to the British Isles would allow for the expansion of U.S. cotton trading. Liverpool became the primary port of 19th-century cotton importation to England. Rathbone and Sons imported American cotton to Liverpool through the American Civil War.<sup>9</sup> The company continues to operate as the investment and wealth management firm Rathbone Brothers Plc.

The mooring at the Albert Dock: AB-001-013 is on the former location of the Rathbone warehouse. This mooring has been rented for the purpose of not being used.

1 Jehanne Wake, Kleinwort Benson: The History of Two Families in Banking (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.  
 2 Wake, 16.  
 3 Adam Bowett, “The Jamaica Trade: Gillow and the Use of Mahogany in the Eighteenth Century,” Regional Furniture 12 (1998): 22.  
 4 Wake, 16.  
 5 Eric Williams, Capitalism and Slavery, 2nd ed. (1944; repr. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 52.  
 6 McDade, 1094.  
 7 Eleanor F. Rathbone, William Rathbone: A Memoir (London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 1905), 11.  
 8 Wake, 15, 31.  
 9 Sheila Marriner, “Rathbones’ Trading Activities in the Middle of the Nineteenth Century,” Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire & Cheshire 108 (1956): 118.



**Cameron Rowland, *Pacotille*, 2020**

brass manillas manufactured in Birmingham, 18th century; glass beads manufactured in Venice, 18th century,  
40 1/2 x 26 3/4 x 1 1/8".  
Rental.

European goods traded for enslaved people were manufactured specifically for this purpose. Manillas were used as a one-directional currency, which Europeans would offer as payment but would never accept. The Portuguese determined the value of slave life at 12–15 manillas in the early 1500s.<sup>1</sup> Birmingham was the primary producer of brass manillas in Britain, prior to the city's central role in the Industrial Revolution. The British also used cheap beads acquired throughout Europe to buy slaves. Eric Williams describes the "triple stimulus to British industry" provided through the export of British goods manufactured for the purchasing of slaves, the processing of raw materials grown by slaves, and the formation of new colonial markets for British-made goods.<sup>2</sup> The production of European goods for the slave trade supported domestic manufacturing markets. British trade in West Africa was understood to be nearly 100% profit.

What renders the Negroe-Trade still more estimable and important is, that near Nine-tenths of those Negroes are paid for in Africa with British Produce and Manufactures only. . . . We send no Specie or Bullion to pay for the Products of Africa, but, 'tis certain, we bring from thence very large Quantities of Gold; . . . From which Facts, the Trade to Africa may very truly be said to be, as it were, all Profit to the Nation.<sup>3</sup>

Goods produced for the trade of slaves, which carried nearly no value in Europe, were called pacotille. Pacotille translates from French to English as "rubbish."<sup>4</sup>

1 A. H. M. Kirk-Greene, "The Major Currencies in Nigerian History," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria* 2, no. 1 (December 1960): 146.

2 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, 2nd ed. (1944; repr. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 52.

3 Malachy Postlethwayt, *The National and Private Advantages of the African Trade Considered*, 2nd ed. (London: John and Paul Knapton, 1746; London: William Otridge, Bookseller, 1772), 3. Citations refer to the Otridge edition.

4 Marie-Hélène Corréard, "pacotille," in *Pocket Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary: French-English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 594.



**Cameron Rowland, Encumbrance, 2020**

mortgage; mahogany double doors: 12 Carlton House Terrace, ground floor, front entrance.

The property relation of the enslaved included and exceeded that of chattel and real estate. Plantation mortgages exemplify the ways in which the value of people who were enslaved, the land they were forced to labor on, and the houses they were forced to maintain were mutually constitutive. Richard Pares writes that “[mortgages] became commoner and commoner until, by 1800, almost every large plantation debt was a mortgage debt.” Slaves simultaneously functioned as collateral for the debts of their masters, while laboring intergenerationally under the debt of the master. The taxation of plantation products imported to Britain, as well as the taxation of interest paid to plantation lenders, provided revenue for Parliament and income for the monarch.

Mahogany became a valuable British import in the 18th century. It was used for a wide variety of architectural applications and furniture, characterizing Georgian and Regency styles. The timbers were felled and milled by slaves in Jamaica, Barbados, and Honduras among other British colonies. It is one of the few commodities of the triangular trade that continues to generate value for those who currently own it.

After taking the throne in 1820, George IV dismantled his residence, Carlton House, and the house of his parents, Buckingham House, combining elements from each to create Buckingham Palace. He built Carlton House Terrace between 1827 and 1832 on the former site of Carlton House as a series of elite rental properties to generate revenue for the Crown. All addresses at Carlton House Terrace are still owned by the Crown Estate, manager of land owned by the Crown since 1760.

12 Carlton House Terrace is leased to the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The building includes four mahogany doors and one mahogany handrail. These five mahogany elements were mortgaged by the Institute of Contemporary Arts to Encumbrance Inc. on January 16th, 2020 for £1000 each. These loans will not be repaid by the ICA. As security for these outstanding debts, Encumbrance Inc. will retain a security interest in these mahogany elements. This interest will constitute an encumbrance on the future transaction of 12 Carlton House Terrace. An encumbrance is a right or interest in real property that does not prohibit its exchange but diminishes its value. The encumbrance will remain on 12 Carlton House Terrace as long as the mahogany elements are part of the building. As reparation, this encumbrance seeks to limit the property’s continued accumulation of value for the Crown Estate. The Crown Estate provides 75% of its revenue to the Treasury and 25% directly to the monarch.