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and a smirk
since 1949

ArtReview

Game for a laugh?



Roe Rosen

There are ghosts haunting the ICA, crowded into the mostly empty rooms of Cameron Rowland's first solo exhibition in the UK: those of countless people captured and abused in the British slave trade from the seventeenth century onwards, as well as the numerous merchants and clerks in the UK who processed and administered the industry. But foremost here is the spectre of Rowland himself, in the role of an exasperated history teacher. The primary element of this show is the handout, which contains a densely footnoted essay, in which Rowland posits the institutions of slavery as foundational to the British state, informing the police, prison and financial institutions that followed. The abolition of slavery in 1833 was primarily enabled, he states, by the wealthy players of the trade to avoid taxes, and changed nothing: 'Abolition preserved the property established by slavery'.

The exhibition comprises a few scant historical objects dotting the main gallery, effectively illustrating this text, each with lengthy explanatory captions: *Guineas* (all works 2020), a framed two-guinea piece, made from gold mined in Africa; *Credit*, a small eighteenth-century mahogany desk mounted on the wall at waist height (a gesture towards the bureaucracy that enabled the transatlantic trade),

made from wood derived from British colonies in the Caribbean. In the middle of the floor is *Pacotille*, a pile of bonelike beads and U-shaped bits of oxidised brass – objects that were used as a one-way trade for slaves, that 'Europeans would offer as payment but would never accept'. These are resonant and harrowing – but perhaps better contextualised in, say, Liverpool's International Slavery Museum or the Museum of London Docklands.

Alongside this minimal presentation are two transactions that form the more conceptual backbone of the show. *Mooring* is a year-long rental agreement for a boat mooring at the Albert Docks in East London, apparently the location of a former warehouse for Rathbone & Sons, a timber merchant who in 1784 was the first to import raw cotton from the US. The mooring is intended to remain empty for a year. More elusively, *Encumbrance* is a series of five works (represented in the gallery by framed legal documents) in which the ICA has mortgaged several mahogany doors, doorways and handrails in the building to a company Rowland has set up. The ICA leases its premises from the Crown Estate; their deal with Rowland effectively makes the property worth a little less.

At a point when racist and neoimperial rhetoric is swelling in the UK, the legacies of slavery do need to be brought more publicly into the present. But are an empty mooring, some artefacts and withholding a bit of cash from the royal family the means to achieve that? This, only a few metres from Buckingham Palace, an epicentre of wealth enabled by faith and given the protective veneer of legality (and who also must have surely been in on *Encumbrance's* mortgage deal to approve it).

There's a double bind in Rowland's work, where a desire to reveal the spectres of the past lurking in the present is smothered by a historical determinism, where history is a path to which we are unwittingly bound – as one-directional as the intended transactions of the 'pacotille' strewn on the floor. His legal transactions are symbolic gestures of reparation, counteractions to the contracts, affidavits and paper money that came out of slavery; bureaucratic acts that were themselves originally symbolic gestures, accruing enough belief to be enforced and perpetuated. It seems his teachable point is that we are all already underwritten, our fate was signed away several centuries ago. It's this belief that Rowland only ends up reinforcing, resigned to reinvest in the power of paperwork. *Chris Fite-Wassilak*



Pacotille, 2020, brass manillas manufactured in Birmingham, eighteenth century; glass beads manufactured in Venice, eighteenth century, 103 × 68 × 3 cm, 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.¹ 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.² The production of European goods for the slave trade supported domestic manufacturing markets. British trade in West Africa was understood to be nearly 100 percent 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 their 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.'³

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'.⁴

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