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OF GUILT AND DEBT

A show that makes a huge impact with sober facts about the transatlantic slave trade

Cameron Rowland: Amt 45 i, MMK Tower, Frankfurt am Main

By Sandra Danicke



Installation view

At first glance, you see nothing. Entering the exhibition by Cameron Rowland at the MMK TOWER, a branch of the MUSEUM FÜR MODERNE KUNST in Frankfurt, you first stand between white walls, a white column, and a white bench. You could now read a text about racialized slavery in the accompanying booklet, but it is too long and complex to skim over quickly. So you just start walking, turn right and discover - a barrier rope. Go further to the left, where two plastic buckets with corrosive contents stand alone. Again to the right: a giant rusting bowl. Continue in that direction: a pile of salt and pepper on the floor. An old loom. A display board chronicling Commerzbank's corporate history. There is no further signage or wall texts, only a framed loan agreement.

If you take a closer look at the document, you can hardly believe it: MMK has borrowed 20,000 Euros from a corporation called Bankrott Inc. (managed by Cameron Rowland), the interest rate is a hefty 18 percent. Since it is an on demand loan, no payments can be made until the company granting the loan demands repayment. A table shows that after 23 years, the debt will exceed 1,000,000.00 Euros, and after 100 years, 311,591,692,053.27 Euros in debt will have accrued. These are debts for which the city of Frankfurt am Main must take responsibility. But Bankrott Inc. will never demand the repayment, one assumes, and instead will let the debt rise immeasurably, What?!

Now, at the very latest, you want to know more. We reach for the booklet again - and sure enough, it contains detailed explanations of each work in the exhibition, and these explanations are even part of the works. The stated purpose of the loan agreement, simply put, is to burden the institutional heirs and successors of those who capitalized on slavery and thus to turn the tables. But what does the city of Frankfurt have to do with the slave trade? Quite a lot, as you will learn. For example, reparations were paid to slaveholders in Haiti, Brazil, Cuba, Washington, D.C., the British, Danish, and Dutch colonies, and in German East Africa to compensate them for the abolition of slavery. This was done by formerly enslaved people who had to pay high interest rates or continue to work as bonded laborers for their former owners - an inconceivable fact that has hardly ever been addressed in terms of its impact on the present. The compensation debts paid to slaveholders in Haiti, for example, have been bought and resold by various banks and continue to yield returns today. "The value extracted from the lives, labor, and reproductive capacity of slaves continues to be an integral part of European financial institutions, corporations, universities, museums, and governments," the text states. It is also an integral part of MMK, or as it is officially known, Amt 45 i.

Seriously? With the booklet in hand, you walk through the exhibition again. You learn that that the rusty bowl is actually a kettle, specifically one used for 400 years as a mill on sugar cane plantations, where the enslaved worked for up to 18 hours a day, under the whip. You read that the pile on the floor symbolizes a form of torture known as "seasoning," which was used to break the will of newly enslaved people by rubbing salt and pepper into the wounds inflicted on them. You read that looms, including the one on display here, were used to produce linen that was the largest German export produced for the slave trade and was the primary clothing worn by enslaved people. This clothing was called Osnaburgs, after its place of production, Osnabrück; it also served as an identifier for fugitive slaves. You have to imagine: People were captured, tortured because they wore cheap, coarse clothing from Osnabrück. They were forced to wear this clothing. The flourishing slave trade created a considerable demand for this fabric; the profit it produced created a boom on the stock market, from which Frankfurt, as a financial center, profited considerably.



Cameron Rowland
macandal, 2023
Oxalic acid
37.5 x 30.5 x 67 cm

Packets of materials that could invoke spirits, protect against punishment, and poison slave masters were called macandals. They were at the center of a plot in 1757 to poison all the white people in Haiti. The plot was organized by hundreds of enslaved and free black people. All macandals were subsequently outlawed. Their trade and use continued despite their criminalization.

Enslaved people throughout the Atlantic world used arsenic, manioc juice, ground glass, and oxalic acid to poison overseers, masters, masters' children, and livestock. Oxalic acid is a stain remover and household cleaner.

One also learns about forms of resistance. For example, the tense barrier rope, which within the context of slavery would appear to have been used as a hanging rope, turns out to have been used to make horse mounted slave patrols stumble. Or the two buckets of oxalic acid, is a cleaning agent with which enslaved people tried to poison their tormentors. Enriched with precise facts, the

objects, which previously seemed so sober, create a film in the mind that leaves one stunned. Also because one did not know much of it in its details. Cameron Rowland, a person who defines himself as non-binary and lives in New York, gets to the bottom of such connections, traces the structures that we encounter every day and to which we attach no importance. For four years, Rowland came to Germany repeatedly to research in various archives, stated MMK director Susanne Pfeffer. To find out how everything is connected to everything else, the terrible to the banal, the past to the present, the Caribbean to Frankfurt am Main. How our everyday life is literally based on the blood and poverty of people whose descendants have not been able to get rid of this curse to this day. It's not that you've never heard of it before. But the clarity with which the facts are stated here and can be read, strikes us to the core. Especially because they mean nothing less than that each and every one of us still benefits from the transatlantic slave trade today.

The exhibition Amt 45 i is a remarkable example of what art can do: For example, that it is often not enough to simply look at things in order to understand them. One also has to sometimes put themselves into the work to be truly moved by it. Art must not only be uplifting, but sometimes also tormenting.

Rowland, born in Philadelphia in 1988, previously exhibited the installation D37 at MMK ZOLLAMT in 2019, an ensemble of used bicycles, baby carriages, leaf blowers. Items that U.S. law enforcement agencies had confiscated from citizens who had been charged with a crime. The items were auctioned off and the proceeds retained by law enforcement. This is a common procedure in the U.S. that disproportionately targets low-income Black people. In other words, it targets people who cannot afford to sue.

Rowland's goal is to reveal structures and entanglements, literally: the MMK TOWER is located on the second floor of an office building developed by Commerzbank and the real estate company Tishman Speyer; and Rowland opened up all of its doors. One learns that the financial groups based in the building, i.e. successors to profiteers of slavery, pay the museum's rent. That the construction of the MMK, as well as a considerable part of the Frankfurt museum landscape, was financed with money that was also generated from the slave trade.

On the way out, one comes across a picture postcard that is sold as a souvenir in the city center. It shows the splendidly decorated colonial store Zur Goldenen Waage, built in 1619, destroyed in 1944 and reconstructed in 2014 to 2018 as part of Frankfurt's New Old Town. The postcard depicts a dark brown arm holding a golden scale protruding from the building's facade. No comment, just like that.