

Conversation: Conceptual artist *Rhea Dillon* speaks with friend and fellow artist *Tiona Nekkia McClodden* about film, the ethics of poetry, the genius of Toni Morrison and what it means to ground their work in the expanses of African Diasporic histories

**‘I want there
to be commas
in how
I approach
my practice.’**

Previous page
Rhea Dillon in her
studio, 2023. Courtesy:
the artist; photograph:
Sirui Ma

Below
An Unholy Trinity (the)
Imaginary, Symbolic
and Real, 2022, sapele
mahogany, 117 × 87 × 87 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Soft Opening,
London; photograph:
Theo Christelis



TIONA NEKKIA MCCLODDEN How do you re-enter the studio after producing a body of work?

RHEA DILLON I think when you enter into a controlled environment that you are building for yourself – whether that becomes defined by the classic term ‘studio’ or not – I’m more interested in its confinement. Solitude has come up recently in many conversations with people I care about. Folks are coming up against their own break, whether desired or forced. Coming back into the studio after making a body of work, that’s its own break. That was my irritation with video and moving image, as film and cinema have this desire for a full stop. I want there to be commas in how I approach my practice.

I was talking to my friend recently, and we were discussing my choice of working within fine art as a solo artist and the difficulty it takes to have your inherent solitude not fall into solipsism. So, coming into the studio after a large project, I try to sit and do a deep listening to what existed outside of this confined space.

TNM When you say that you feel like film has a desire for a full stop, what do you mean by that?

RD There’s such a purity of process. I’m coming from a place where I was labelled a filmmaker because I engaged in a lens-based practice in university. ‘You make films, you’re a filmmaker.’ But did I know that artists made films before that? Not really. Did anyone let me in on that? No. So were the films I made more akin to how artists choose to exhibit and present films? In the end, yes.

TNM I agree. This idea of not being able to move away from something that wants to push you towards reconciliation or conventions is the reason why I left the film scene at the time that I did. It’s interesting to think about the relationship between art and industry, and how it can inform a cutting-off of self, a lack of forming your own voice or identity so as to conform to a certain kind of format. My impulse was to figure out how to do cinema in a different way that allowed people to enter and exit whenever they wanted to, as well as to work out their own beginning and ending.

RD That’s a good point. Figuring out how to enter or exit my work boded well for figuring out what kind of film I was making, and that comes with devising your own language – or what other people call theory. It’s also how I understand and level with other filmmakers, artists or lens-based medium practitioners. For me, there’s video art, film and then there’s cinema. A while back I talked about this with my friend who’s a painter and musician, Jasper Marsalis, with regards to video. He was saying that he expects to be able to walk into the room at any point and engage with what’s on the screen: in other words not *have* to watch it from the beginning.

TNM For me, painting can be a time-based medium. In Jacob Lawrence’s canvases, moments are painted in a gesture towards re-memory – framed by Toni Morrison as the remembering of a memory, which prompts the mind to do the work of taking in the history, while also thinking about what’s happening beyond the frame. August Wilson’s *Century Cycle* [1982–2005] opened my mind up to think about the span of a Black historical narrative where objects become the focus as characters, and then appear in various forms throughout the ten plays in separate contexts and across different

Frieze, 2023

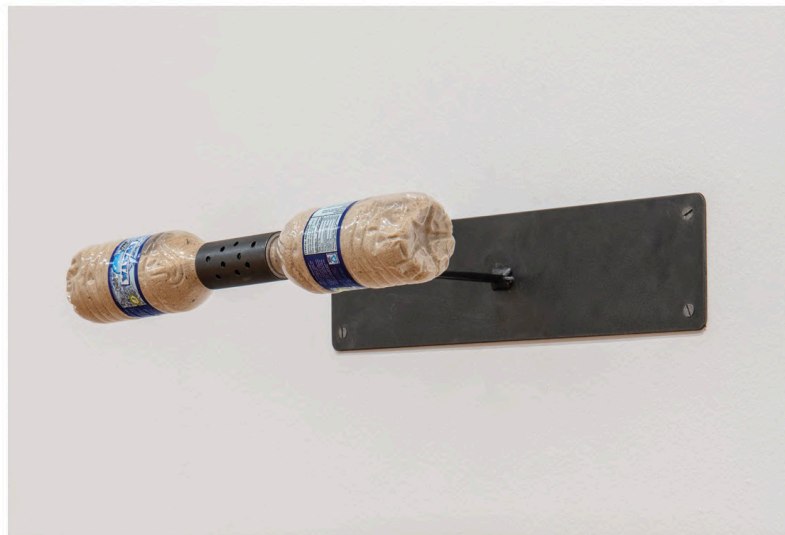


Left
'An Alterable Terrain',
2023, installation
view. Courtesy:
the artist and Tate
Britain; photograph:
Reece Straw

Below
As Wata to Wine, Wine
to Blood, Blood to Dirt,
Dirt to Sand, Sand
to Water; Wata (Bit),
2023, iron, plastic and
sand, 10 × 41 × 30 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Soft Opening,
London; photograph:
Theo Christelis

The Caribbean is a fractured place in constant flux.

Rhea Dillon





generations, like how the piano is featured in *The Piano Lesson* [1987], which holds the lineage of an entire family.

RD When you mentioned those two examples, the first thing that came to mind is Richard Wagner's cycle of four operas *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (*The Ring of the Nibelung*) [1869–1876], otherwise known as *The Ring Cycle*.

TNM For *Catgut – The Opera* [2021], you've written a libretto and it made me think of Toni Morrison's libretto for *Margaret Garner* [2005], an opera based on the life of a runaway slave. It was the first libretto I'd ever read by a Black woman.

I actually attended the presentation at the Academy of Music at the Kimmel Center years ago in Philadelphia. It was snowing and many couldn't make it, so I got a rush ticket. Morrison was there and it blew my mind to see her language elevated by the music and performance. It made me think of the concept of 'poethics' that you've mentioned to me before. How does that come together in your artmaking and writing practice?

RD I remember, in this early stage of understanding spirituals, seeing Georges Bizet's *Carmen* [1875] at the Royal Opera House in London with my mum. It's the only opera I've seen in person. I lost space for that in my mind and then it came back when I focused on Samuel Coleridge-Taylor – who grew up in Croydon, as did I, and was the first Black composer in the UK. That to me, sitting within the framework that I was born into – a Black working-class family – is needed when thinking about the UK.

**When you come from
an island nation, you can't
help thinking about sand,
land and movement.**

Rhea Dillon

I came across the term 'poethics' in a conversation with the poet Simone White whilst I was doing research for the libretto. She brought up Joan Retallack, who wrote the book *The Poethical Wager* [2003], in relation to my work. I was excited by this because poethics has this framework of a 'thickened' language; that's how Joan phrases it. She says it's language 'thickened with an "h"'. I liked how that could be embodied and how it made the word 'poethics' wider. I brought up class because, being a descendant of migrants, I find that there's a real possibility for Caribbean poethics to be given space. I looked at several poets, but I was taken by Jamaican-American June Jordan's poetry because I felt like she was the closest person to get into the diction of a descendant. So, I was scouring her poems to see if there were creole inflections or disturbances in her writing. I think that Kamau Brathwaite begins a lot of what could be the foundations of where I'm trying to collate a new extension that synthesizes an already existing plane. This is what I found with Barbara Ferland's poetry, where her writing was just so different from everyone else's. This is despite the fact that the school curriculum in Jamaica was the same as the UK, in that most of the poetry was quite banal and repetitive of this old English vernacular and stanza, whereas Barbara's was so *poethically* charged.

There's an ability to marry the poethical charge with a Caribbean charge, in that there have been great essays and conversations around how the Caribbean is, in its foundation state, a fractured place in constant flux. Other places say there's *something in the water*, but there's something in the spirit of those islands that has this poethical feel.

TNM On the notion of spirit, I want to talk about your work *As Wata to Wine, Wine to Blood, Blood to Dirt, Dirt to Sand, Sand to Water; Wata (Bit)* [2023]: two plastic water bottles filled with sand and joined together with a metal mouthpiece, like an hourglass but suspended horizontally. When I saw your current show 'An Alterable Terrain' at Tate Britain, it was the one work that gave me the most trouble but also the one that forced me to sit with that difficulty. I thought it was very successful, even though I didn't know what it was or what it was about. Where did you pull from historically to arrive at this final presentation?

RD I went to Ghana for the first time in 2021, where I visited the slave forts Elmina Castle and Cape Coast Castle. In the dungeon cells, they had these bottles of water that sat next to each other in clusters. No one was talking about them, but they were clearly there as offerings. It led me to a question: 'What is a drink of water to the dry mouth of the dead?' That stayed with me. Being from an island nation you can't *not* think about sand; you can't *not* think about land; and you can't *not* think about movement and transportation. I was thinking about sand when I was on this beach in Jamaica last year. I went away to do some intensive reading of Sylvia Wynter's writing and I bumped into a friend. She was telling me that the beach we were on had been 'stolen'. Heaps of sand had been taken away; it made international news. Then, years later, a hotel suddenly popped up on that plot of excavated sand. That was a bit of gossip in the way that gossip and news in Jamaica intertwine with politics.

Opposite page
Catgut – The Opera,
2021, performance
view. Courtesy: the
artist; photograph:
Rosie Marks

Below
*9/3 or I know how to
fall (3) and I was born
to nights (9)*, 2022,
sapele mahogany and
steel, 460 × 65 × 65 cm.
Courtesy: the artist
and Bold Tendencies,
London; photograph:
Deniz Guzel



Frieze, 2023

Right

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink—a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach., 2023, brass and polyester, 21×9×13 cm. All images in this spread courtesy: the artist and Sweetwater, Berlin; photograph: Joanna Wilk



For me, painting can be a time-based medium.

Tiona Nekkia McClodden



Left

Incomprehensible Sex Coming To Its Dreaded Fruition; nothing remains but Pecola & the Unyielding Earth, 2023, sapele mahogany and marigold seeds, 22×38×15 cm

Above

My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me., 2023, deadstock paper, rope and metal, 50×40×2 cm



Above
Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run, Jip runs. Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrester's blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes. Alice-and-Jerry-blue. 2023, anti-climb paint, paper and sapele mahogany, 91 × 91 × 6 cm

As Wata to Wine... shares a connection with the voiceless ancestry that I have, and this mouth that can't drink. I used the water bottles that we were given at the resort. I filled them with the same sand and I wanted them to be constricted by this mouthpiece. This mouthpiece then came to represent the mouth shackles that were used on enslaved people across Africa and the Caribbean, and subsequently in the US. This mouth bit feels like the continued constraint on the voices of postcolonial lands and nations, and how they're still stuck in that time.

The work is in communication with sand timers. Sand is a symbol of time, that's also why it comes out of the wall. It's then embodying this chaos of the language in postcolonial nation politics. When you look at it head-on, it will really fuck with the mind of anyone who enjoys straight lines, because it's slightly off. That was intentional in that it needed to be just off to create this irritation, perhaps what you were seeing as a sight line or shoreline. It then embodies this pause in the chaotic spin of time, evolving and descending.

TNM We both share an affection for Toni Morrison and you directly reference her work in object in your show at Sweetwater in Berlin, 'We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils'. It's the show I wanted to see the most but didn't get to. The exhibition focused on Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* [1970], which I read in the 11th grade – quite a daring thing to do in Greenville, South Carolina, where I was raised. The book

was eventually banned in much of the South. Could you just talk about your thinking behind that show?

RD I was raised Roman Catholic. I have my issues with it but one thing that provides a language for great feeling for me is the tome that is the Bible. I have several books that are mainly theory or nonfiction that I describe as 'Bible books' for what would be best described as my life's study. *The Bluest Eye* is the only fictional one, which, of course, can be argued is an example of poethics. It was also the first Morrison book that I read. It really affected me because it potently spoke to the feelings that I knew I had at some point engaged with in my youth – not in full, but always in time. There was something that was left unspoken to that reality that I felt compelled to give space to. I have such a deep respect for the feelings and the affectations of growing up as a dark-skin Black girl in a dark-skin-Black-girl-hating society. I got obsessed with the topography of *The Bluest Eye*. It doesn't have titles to the chapters but is split into parts spanning a year. It houses so much emotion in such a controlled framework. That's what I desire to achieve in my own works ●

Tiona Nekkia McClodden is an interdisciplinary research-based conceptual artist, filmmaker and curator.

Rhea Dillon is an artist, writer and poet. Examining and abstracting her intrigue of the 'rules of representation' as a device to undermine contemporary Western culture, Dillon seeks to continually question what constitutes as the ontology of Blackness versus the ontic.