

NARI WARD

Iris Hope Keeper

Opening: Saturday 18 May 2013, via del Castello 11, 6pm–12 midnight

Until 24 August 2013, Tuesday–Saturday, 2–7pm

Galleria Continua is pleased to host *Iris Hope Keeper*, a new solo show by Nari Ward. The exhibition features a large number of new works arising from the artist's most recent researches. Sculptures and installations conceived specially for the gallery's exhibition spaces weave fresh narrative strands and create a dialogue between viewer and object, staging a kind of choreography of shifting memories and of the present that is a reflection of it.

Iris Hope Keeper is grounded in very personal stories, memories and imaginative elements – aspects of Ward's family history and of an unbroken relationship with his land of origin, Jamaica – but then connects to the contexts and perspectives of a much broader community, also exploring the notions of the sense of belonging and of identity. Ward builds up an intimate, ironic, profound and multifaceted portrait of Jamaica. On the one hand there is the stereotypical view of those who experience the dream of a Caribbean holiday, on the other the reality of a complex country with lots of energy but also many contradictions, with 70% of its economy based on tourism and related activities – services, entertainment and hotels. The artist left Jamaica when he was a child and moved to America with his mother. The story of Nari Ward is that of a family of immigrants for whom suffering, nostalgia and sacrifice were the price to pay to ensure a better life for future generations.

Ward's work reaches beyond any possible single reading, moving towards reflections that go beyond appearances, as confirmed by the title of the show. The iris is a flower, and it is part of the eye. Iris is also an Olympian goddess who acted as a messenger for the gods, her task being to deliver fatal messages to humans. But Ward, who enjoys playing with and changing the meaning of words, accompanies 'iris' with 'hope keeper'. Iris is the name of the artist's mother. At a personal level *Iris Hope Keeper* is therefore also a tribute to his mother who, by working as a housekeeper in the United States, assured social freedom for her children.

Old bedheads delimit the surface of an impracticable bed. In it, a pile of radiators and working fans reproduce the tropical experience of wind and heat. *Jacuzzi Bed* is a closed space that leaves no escape. At once aggressive and inviting, it represents the dichotomous relationship between Jamaicans and tourists.

In *Iris Cutlass* hotel towels form the origami-like petals of a beautiful flower, concealing an underlying structure made up of dangerously sharp cutlasses. Used for cutting sugar cane on the plantations and hence a symbol of colonial slavery, the cutlass is recontextualized in the setting of the hotel industry, in which a large proportion of the Jamaican working class is currently employed.

The rounded shape of a tombstone is echoed in the diptych of doors lined with milk cartons. Written on the rear side are the words "Please Do Not Disturb" and "Please Make Room", a sardonic and provocative variant on the original "Please Make Up the Room".

The poetical potential of discarded objects inserted in new structures of meaning – formal but also linguistic – can be found in *Lemonade Windows* as well. The expression "to buy a lemon" means "to be ripped off, to buy something that will never work". The two objects, stripped of their original function, reverse the meaning and transform the expression into something positive.

In a new series of photographs called *Sun Splashed*, Ward appears in different domestic settings

holding house plants in his hand. The artist wears entertainer's clothes, the same ones used by his musician uncle during his shows. "I find these images distasteful, funny and noble at the same time", the artist comments. "I am interested in referring to the tradition of early twentieth-century anthropological portraits, but humanizing the character by revealing the image in its making. The fact that the plants are watered and the character is wet also makes the reading of what is happening more problematic. It is not clear who is controlling what. The entertainer is part of a show in which the spectator is asked to take a stance."

BEYOND is the title of the large installation in the gallery's stalls area: an aerostatic balloon made from scrap metal. The space above the sculpture is activated by a series of ropes which, left slack, connect the balloon to the ceiling and to the upper galleries of the former cinema-theatre. Hanging from the ropes are bottles, inside which the artist has placed pieces of paper with the word "BEYOND" written in hundreds of different languages. The use of the glass containers references the poetic gesture of the "message in a bottle". The aim is to produce a non-functional structure with a verisimilar appearance, associated with the desire for movement, for going beyond or, simply, for communication. The work positioned on the stage lends itself to an equally layered and complex reading. A series of juxtaposed steps form a *Wishing Arena*, a kind of very high altar studded with votive candles placed inside rubbish baskets (of the kind habitually found in hotel rooms). Baskets and candles are linked by a piece of rope that acts as a "cordless phone". This work dwells once again on the theme of communication, of ascent, of dialogue with one's inner self, but also of the social ladder and the relationship between those who offer and those who receive a service.

Belonging, emigration, the distinction between nationality and birth, identity (shattered, fragmented and multiple) are some of the ideas that find their way into *Canned Smiles*. "Belonging to one place or another is pure fiction ... the sense of belonging is given by the experience you have of a place", says the artist. *Jamaican Smiles* and *Black Smiles* – the former "made in Jamaica and distributed in Italy", the latter "made in America and distributed in Italy" – form a large-run diptych. This work introduces the themes of commercialization, of the ephemeral boundary separating "the fake" from "the original", but also opens the door to the creative vision that pertains to all artists, to Nari Ward as to Piero Manzoni, one of whose best-known works is clearly cited here.

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Nari Ward was born in St. Andrews in Jamaica. When he was an adolescent he moved to New York, where he lives and works today. In the last twenty years, his work has been showed in museums and institutions around the world, including, in 2013: *The Idea of Realism*, American Academy, Rome, and *NYC1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, New Museum, New York, USA; in 2011, *Food*, Musée Ariana, Geneva, Switzerland; in 2010, *Contemplating the Void: Interventions in the Guggenheim Rotunda*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, USA, *Trasparenze. L'arte per le energie rinnovabili*, Macro, Rome and *Terre vulnerabili*, Hangar Bicocca, Milan; in 2008, *Prospect 1 New Orleans*, New Orleans, USA; in 2007, *Dream and Trauma*, Kunsthalle Wien and Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, Austria; in 2006, *Whitney Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA and *Dirty Yoga: Taipei Biennial*, Taipei Museum, Taipei, Taiwan; in 2005, *Sharjah International Biennial 7*, Sharjah, Arab Emirates and the *Yokohama Triennial*, Yokohama, Japan; and, in 2003, *Landings*, Documenta XI, Kassel, Germany. The artist has had solo shows at the New Museum of New York, at Le Magasin, Centre National d'Art Contemporain di Grenoble, at the Institute of Visual Arts, Milwaukee, at GAM – Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin, at the Palazzo delle Papesse – Centro Arte Contemporanea di Siena and, this year, at MASS MoCA – Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in North Adams. Nari Ward has also received commissions from the United Nations and the World Health Organization, and awards from the Academy of Arts and Letters, the Penny McCall Foundation, the Pollock Krasner Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

For further information and photographs:

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