



Danielle Dean, *True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle)*, 2017, HD video, color, sound, 9 minutes 39 seconds.

Danielle Dean

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DETROIT (MOCAD)

Danielle Dean's solo show "True Red Ruin" consists of a two-channel video set above a display of multicolored cardboard cutouts, surrounded by drawings and sculptures used in their making. Simultaneously visceral and abstract, the installation explores black identity in relation to capitalism and colonialism through an uncanny superimposition of the histories of these two systems upon the present day.

Dean's subject is Elmina Castle, the Portuguese trading post erected in 1482 in West Africa, which later became an infamous node in the Atlantic slave trade. The castle was also the first prefabricated European building to be constructed in sub-Saharan Africa (its numbered components were shipped from Portugal), a fact Dean emphasizes here through her employment of mass-produced materials. In *True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle)*, 2017–18, for example, the choice of printed cardboard of the type used in standing commercial displays—not unlike the mailer packaging made into huts titled *Pop-up Houses*, 2018, clustered on the floor—evokes parallels between colonialism and advertising, and between physical and mental

occupation. *Sea Block*, 2018, a much larger sculpture, is made of the same cardboard material as in *True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle)*. Printed with an ambiguous pattern that suggests both faux marbling and the movement of waves, it recalls the network of transatlantic shipping in which slavery flourished.

The cutouts are arranged beneath two ceiling-mounted wide-screen monitors; they appear to represent the coast of Africa as seen by a colonizer aboard a ship pulling into harbor. Graphic and cartoonlike, they incorporate reinterpreted images of the castle alongside fragments of early modern European maps of the area. On adjacent walls, two framed grids of drawings, *The Landscape* and *The Castle*, both 2017, show how Dean altered the historical woodcuts and etchings of water, landscape, and architecture into backdrops and animations for her video, another component of *True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle)*, which shares the video's title.

While the sculptures and drawings examine colonial exploitation abstractly through appropriated visuals, Dean's video explores it personally by mining her family history to interrogate colonialism's uncanny effects. In a disturbing, allegorical, nearly ten-minute narrative, Dean—who was born in the United States but raised in England—“colonizes” the affordable housing complex in Houston where her younger half sister, Ashstress Agwunobi, lives.

The story unfolds as a kind of reality drama: It begins as Dean is planning to install a red cardboard castle display in the courtyard of the historically black community. Characters explain in interviews what is happening at the castle or what they are doing in response. Through various types of alienating effects—fake objects and backgrounds, live action mixed with text and animated drawings, and split screens that reveal other elements of the set design—the video weaves a colonial narrative into the interactions of two blood relatives. As the story develops, we scrutinize the half sisters' differing appearances, accents, and actions, wondering which of their many differences are a result of the African diaspora and which are simply “normal” variations not influenced by colonial history.

If, as writers as diverse as W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Paul Gilroy have argued, “double consciousness” lies at the heart of black experience, then art that explores this mode of existence is vital. What makes *True Red Ruin (Elmina Castle)* so compelling is how powerfully it speaks to questions of interpellation and resistance—of being defined by a dehumanizing,

capitalist, and racist system on the one hand, and of growing, developing, and asserting one's selfhood on the other. As Dean's video unfolds, the actresses are shown to be videotaping themselves, and sometimes surveilling one another, while the environment becomes filled with an increasing number of cameras and monitors. Power relations can change over time, the video suggests; the same tools that can colonize our minds can also create new means of resistance. By focusing on black identity while simultaneously doubling and complicating it, Dean implies that the way to overcome colonial history is to embrace difference while using the tools of mass media to oppose racism's violent effects.

—Matthew Biro

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