



HUMAN CARGO

Contemporary art interventions by **Jyll Bradley, Lisa Cheung, Raimi Gbadamosi, Melanie Jackson, Fiona Kam Meadley**

In the context of the Museum, and the wider social realm, the artists' commissions reflect critically upon the different histories of slavery and our relationship to contemporary slavery through everyday consumerism. They make a number of references to the changing global conditions of trade and migration, and the lasting effect of the Transatlantic Slave Trade as reproduced in contemporary culture.

The artists' interventions take place throughout the Museum's public spaces, and beyond, and have been conceived in relation to the institution's audiences, collections and architecture. These projects adopt context-led, participatory and socially-engaged approaches and have been developed through a process of research and development over the past year.

Lent Lily, by **Jyll Bradley**, designed with Claire Turner and George Hadley, is a screen print wallpaper which lines the walls of the Watercolour Gallery, providing a context for the objects on display and highlighting the way in which contemporary slavery is increasingly 'the wallpaper' to our lives. This hand-crafted hybrid design is printed, by Cole and Son, on gold paper making a connection with the term 'black gold' which was used to describe enslaved Africans. It reveals the different histories of slavery through its reference to items in the collections of the Museum, as well as to the 'local' industrialised cultivation of daffodils, involving Eastern European migrant workers.

Sweatshop, by **Lisa Cheung**, realised with Wessie Ling, and facilitated by the Museum's Community Learning team, is a process project which addresses issues surrounding consumerism and cheap labour, in particular child labour, to create a large flag installation which will decorate the Museum on the closing day of the exhibition. The production of the flags is taking place throughout the exhibition in Gallery 3 and the artist's mobile workstation sculpture is also travelling out of the Museum for workshops elsewhere in Plymouth. Each participant is invited to interpret the theme of the exhibition through the creation of their flag.

As artist-adviser to the exhibition, **Raimi Gbadamosi** has worked with the co-curators and museum staff on a two-way process of critical reflection throughout its development. As part of this process, he has selected Slave Trade legacy items, from the Museum's reserve collections. These include a 1/2 carat diamond from Kemberley, South West Africa; a pickled dogfish specimen from the Atlantic, a species which might have fed on the bodies of enslaved Africans pushed overboard from slave ships; clay pipes, in varying sizes, showing how the value of tobacco decreased as it was traded; an 18th century porcelain figure of 'Africa'; sugar bowls; coffee and chocolate pots. Some of the items are arranged as a place setting to show how slavery was an everyday part of people's lives then, as now.

Gbadamosi has also conceived a Museum trail and leaflet, *Drake Circus*, which explores the cultural legacy of the Slave Trade in the collections. The trail functions as a 're-map' of the institution, a bit like a remix in music, in which the artist takes the role of Master of Ceremonies, performing the spectacle of history. By bringing in different cultural perspectives and introducing the language of black street culture and everyday consumerism into the Museum context, the artist challenges the Eurocentric order and classification

of objects. He also presents *Theactre*, filmed by and edited with Alia Syed, a two screen audio-visual exposition of the 1807 Parliamentary Act of Abolition of the Slave Trade. The film records a reading of the Act, to attempt to animate the Act, contextualise the exhibition, and pull the mind back and forth between 1807 and 2007.

Located in the South Gallery, *The Undesirables*, by **Melanie Jackson**, is a large-scale panorama inspired by 19th century ship models and paper theatres, based on media images of the shipwreck of the MSC Napoli which ran aground in Branscombe, South Devon, earlier this year, on its journey to South Africa. It make a number of references to attempt to make sense of what happened at Branscombe. As an analysis of international trade, as a media event, as a shipping disaster, and as a personal event as evidenced by the accounts of people involved such as scavengers, fishermen and the police. To some extent the work is about the impossibility of 'telling' the whole story - of ever getting to the edges or representing it objectively. The artist has included interviews with eyewitnesses at Branscombe, and cargo workers at the Port of Plymouth. The work is commissioned in association with Arnolfini, Bristol, where another version is presented as part of the exhibition Port City, until 11 November.

Free or Fair? by **Fiona Kam Meadley**, is a 'Treasure Map' and competition, with hampers of fair trade goods as prizes, which explores links between today's fair trade campaigners and 19th century Abolitionists, and between fair trade goods and the plantation crops traded through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, sugar, coffee, chocolate and tea. By choosing the format of a competition and a publicity leaflet, the artist is adopting the language of everyday consumerism to engage people with ideas about fair trade and reveal the stories behind the production of commodities sold in shops. The leaflet includes interviews with Plymouth fair trade campaigners and has been distributed through Plymouth Fair Trade Network and Plymouth and South West Co-operative Society.

I would like to express gratitude to Arts Council England for supporting the development and production of these commissions; Judith Robinson and the Museum staff for facilitating and participating in the process; co-curator Len Pole for his openness to collaboration, and the artists for responding so generously to the context of this exhibition.

Zoë Shearman, co-curator