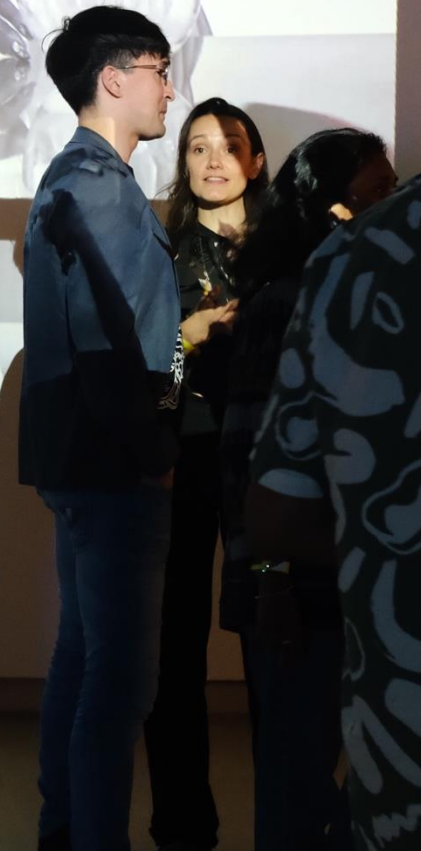


Food as Counter- Archives of Colonial Histories

Kosisochukwu Nnebe

Residency at G.A.S. Farmhouse

October – December 2024





Since 2020, my practice has been exploring the use of foodways as counter-archives of colonial histories.

Where official archives inherently bring about issues of accessibility, control, and power, a turn to food as an archive opens up subaltern perspectives and approaches to memory-making with which to re-write history.

I activate these counter-archives through performance, employing what Sadiya Hartman calls critical fabulation – the combining of archival research with fictional narrative to fill gaps left in the archives and, in my case, imagine alternate pasts, presents and futures.

One such counter-archive I have been using is cassava - a crop native to the Caribbean which was used by enslaved Africans in 18th century Jamaica to poison their slavemasters.

Having found the steps for creating the poison in a 1794 botanical catalogue of Jamaica (issued as a warning to British planters as to the threat of poisoning), I treated these steps as a recipe and replicated them as 6-channel video work/performance.

Through this work, these steps were reimagined as a recipe passed down from generation to generation for how to assert one's subjectivity in the wake of transatlantic slavery.

Kosiochukwu Nnebe, an inheritance / a threat / a haunting, 2022, 6-channel video installation



A more recent work explores what British slaveowners came to call the 'thumbnail method': a historical method employed by enslaved peoples in Jamaica to conceal the poison made from cassava under their thumbnails.

The history of this concealment method became the starting point for 'We Have The Cure', a site-specific installation of a nail salon within the gallery that reimagines it as an apothecary and site of resistance.

Kosisochukwu Nnebe, We Have The Cure, 2024, acrylic, LED signs, steel, herbs and seeds.



Establishing a parallel to the now ubiquitous long, acrylic nails among Black women, the installation translates the threat once posed by the sight of a Black person with long nails into a contemporary context.

The work also references how the nail salon has become a space of rest, refuge and self-care for Black women now. As a form of community care, I activated the installation by inviting local Black nail techs to provide free manicures and nail extensions to Black women in the community.

Kosisochukwu Nnebe, We Have The Cure, 2024, acrylic, LED signs, steel, herbs and seeds



Beyond the gallery walls, the exhibition involved a collaboration with Professor Menna Agha at the Azrieli School of Architecture at Carleton University to build a community pantry meant to address food insecurity in downtown Ottawa, where the exhibition was held.

The pantry is being permanently relocated to an at-need community in Ottawa to continue serving its mission.

This part of the project builds on my work in food security policy while in the Canadian federal government and seeks to explore how art can be used to build and strengthen our communities through the redirection of resources and funds.



Building on my interest in the history of slavery in Jamaica, in the fall of 2023, I participated in a residency in rural Jamaica where I began working with a new counter-archive: banana leaves.

Here, I was interested in using the materiality of the leaf and transforming it into a repository of archival images through chlorophyll printing (an alternative photographic process wherein photographs are developed on plant leaves through sunlight exposure).

Through this process, the leaves themselves become archival documents that speak to our entanglement with nature.

Kosisochukwu Nnebe, A palimpsest for the tongue (Jamaican market women), 2024, chlorophyll print on banana leaf



The first installation I've created with this technique is the 2024 'A palimpsest for the tongue'.

In the installation, banana prints with archival images showcasing the history of the banana industry in five countries (Jamaica, England, Panama, Martinique, and Uganda) are placed within sheets of acrylic suspended from a steel structure meant to mimic a banana plant.

Kosiochukwu Nnebe, A palimpsest for the tongue (Jamaica), 2024, chlorophyll print on banana leaf, steel, acrylic



Each leaf of the abstracted plant is in the shape of one of the five countries; when pieced together, they create a new cartographic assemblage that collapses time and space.

The installation can only be experienced from beneath the canopy of leaves; the viewer is forced to look up to see the photographic traces embedded within the banana leaves. This simple act encourages a re-think of how we engage with the natural environment (looking up reverentially, or down with a focus on control).

The goal is to eventually create a larger-scale, immersive installation that an audience can navigate through and that creates a new speculative cartography capable of communicating spatial information of a different kind.

Kosisochukwu Nnebe, A palimpsest for the tongue , 2024, chlorophyll print on banana leaf, steel, acrylic



As a conceptual artist, my practice touches on many themes, including the politics of Black visibility and embodiment, as inspired by Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Kosisochukwu Nnebe, since what I might be is uncontainable, 2019, laser-cut acrylic and light



I also work with a wide range of mediums and materials, including metal sculpture (steel, iron and bronze), which I use to speak to West African knowledge production and Black aliveness within the context of extractive economies and cultural restitution.

*Kosisochukwu Nnebe,
Fragments of a different self,
2024, steel*

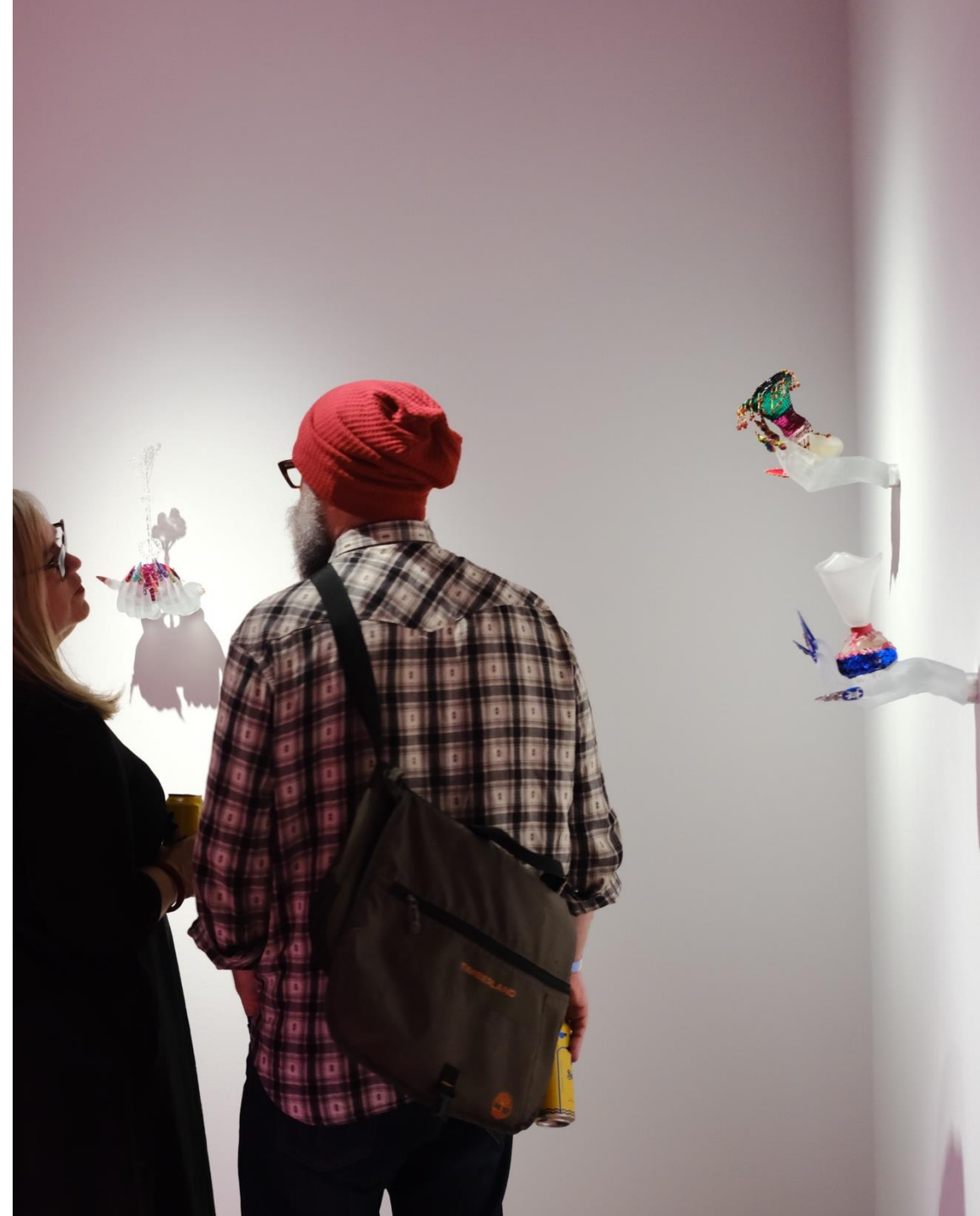


*Kosisochukwu Nnebe,
Sweet as Iron, 2024, iron,
sugar candy, soil*

Most recently, my work has been interested in the way plant life was used to navigate the realities of life under slavery. In addition to the use of cassava as poison, I've been looking at the use of certain seeds as abortifacients, as well as how these herbal concoctions were disseminated on plantations.

This work recreates the mojo bags and paquets that were used by root workers in the American south and Haiti.

Kosisochukwu Nnebe, the seeds we carry, 2024, blown and cast glass, sequins, beads, custom nail extensions, cassava juice, sugar apple seed paste





As part of my residency with the G.A.S. Foundation, I'm tracing the journey of cassava from South America/the Caribbean to the African continent, as brought over by the Portuguese in the 16th century.

I'll be experimenting with new textile works that explore how cassava became integrated into traditional Nigerian textiles, specifically adire eleko. The picture on the left shows how cassava paste is used as the resist in the tie-dye process for adire.

I will also be making chlorophyll prints of farmworkers in Ijebu to add contemporary images to the archival prints from other countries.



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Kosisochukwu Nnebe, *Ihe Anyi Hapuru*,
2023, Bronze