

Lawond

Eddy Firmin

curator Tamar Tembeck

September 16 – October 14, 2023

LET'S JOIN THE CIRCLE

Our histories are written in and on our bodies. Our identities are inseparable from our physical experiences, which are in turn shaped by genetic, cultural, and epigenetic heritages that we impart to the world again during our lifetimes.

In the work of Eddy Firmin, a Montreal artist originally from Guadeloupe, the question of embodiment is profoundly political. The body is a locus of contestation, but also of potential transformation. It is a site of both wisdom and powerlessness, a sentence or a source of liberation. Being in the world proves to be a constant negotiation between different beings-in-bodies, with their own baggage and experience, and their perspectives that are always necessarily partial. In such circumstances, what are the conditions that can lead to true encounters between beings?

The exhibition *Lawond* invites the public to consider this question. "Lawond" refers to a circle of participants in Gwoka, a Guadeloupean practice that combines dance, song, storytelling and music, and is associated to a form of resistance to colonial violence.¹ In keeping with the principle of improvisation, anyone in the audience can join the circle and share their experience with a sung or danced account.

At OBORO, *Lawond* unfolds as a mechanism that allows for sharing, for coming together and for transformation, in an approach that is fundamentally decolonial. Assembling sculptural objects that represent the artist and members of his family, as well as images subverting stereotypes that stem from anti-Black visual culture, *Lawond* offers a space and time to metabolize our colonial heritages.

Visitors can choose to linger in the installation *Tenir salon*, for example, in order to engage in discussion and consult the works in the bookcase, while enjoying a coffee or some chocolate, products directly connected to the triangular trade. Others can drop off racist or xenophobic objects that come from their own collections, or deliver a personal account in another participatory installation, which the artist and myself have informally baptized "the confessional." The public's offerings can be made in an entirely anonymous and voluntary manner. The idea is to create other possible outlets for the heritages we all possess, but don't know what to do with or no longer wish to keep. How can we transform such histories without forgetting or denying them? What can we do with these unwanted heritages? Through this installation and the exhibition overall, Firmin offers a potentially cathartic outlet for these complicated legacies.

In the absence of public spaces capable of sustaining an ongoing dialogue on the subject of "a veritable decolonization of knowledge and practices,"² as described by the feminist political scientist Françoise Vergès, Firmin offers a form of secular ritual through the framework of his exhibition. The elements populating *Lawond* come from his experience as an Afro-descendant artist: self-portraits, books and objects

from his personal collection, and sculptures that faithfully reproduce parts of his body or the bodies of his family. Yet through his specific narrative, Firmin opens the door to the possibility of a broader recognition and familiarity.

Without denying the particularity of our respective paths and the struggles in which we individually or collectively take part, who among us cannot relate to this questioning of our bodily and cultural heritages? Who among us does not bear a legacy of which we would like to rid ourselves, but which has also inevitably formed us? If we go back far enough, who among us is not a descendant of both torturers and victims? And with what measure of certainty can we claim, today, that we wouldn't break our own moral codes if it was a matter of life or death? How much agency do we really have in determining the direction of our moral and political actions?

Although our bodies bear the memory of what has come to pass, they also hold the potential of what may happen in the future. *Lawond* invites us to take a step by willingly joining the circle, and to advance with an eye that is both critical and full of compassion. We could certainly see *Lawond* in a passive manner, but this would risk missing the artist's point. It would mean refusing to take part in the ritual to which Firmin has invited us, where each one of us can find a place, as long as—in keeping with the fundamental rules of improvisational practices—we say "yes, and" to his proposition.

—Tamar Tembeck

Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

-
1. See Eddy Firmin, "Méthode Bossale : Pour un imaginaire et une pratique visuelle décolonisée" (PhD diss., Université du Québec à Montréal, 2019).
 2. Françoise Vergès, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*, tr. Kaiama L. Glover (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 68.

