

LAS TRES POTENCIAS AND THE (UN)SUNG WOMEN OF CARLOS BLAAKER

The power of vulnerability

A black woman, arms akimbo, feet in a pair of blue slippers, legs slightly apart and standing on a base, is proudly and boldly looking back at the observer with her chin up. The tight bun is fastened at the neck with a pink scrunchie, her pink sleeveless dress clearly shows the contours of her sturdy round body. The title of this sculpture is *Lady in Pink*. Another image of a woman bears the name *Jozefine*. This one is a white woman who's standing on an elevation with her arms crossed in front of her belly and her legs wide apart. She has a pony tail, and a light blue dress that reaches her thighs and high brown shoes. She's neutrally staring in front of her. At first glance, these are realistic images of regular people. Due to their slightly stiff posture and their placement on a plinth, they look like statues. A bit more frivolous are the sculptures *Woman with golden cap (black)* and *Woman with golden cap (white)*. The heads of the naked women are bent slightly backwards and the lips daringly protruding, those of the black woman painted bright red. Because of the fluttering movement of their arms, it looks as if they want to fly away like a bird from the open 'cage' in which they are. The cage is formed by white iron ribs that form an upright rectangular. In *Balanceando con mis cosas 2*, the main role is once again reserved for women. The installation consists of a black woman in a white dress who is portrayed from the waist up. On her head, she's carrying three large watermelon slices stacked on top of each other in the colours red, white and yellow. The artist probably has a fascination with watermelon slices, because they are prominently recurring themes in his works. On the uppermost watermelon slice on the head of the black woman, her lower body with lower legs is towering with feet pointing up – one is orange, the other purple. This acrobatic tour de force also plays out within the space of the white frame of an upright rectangular. The described works of art are a selection from the works of the Surinamese visual artist residing in Curaçao, Carlos Blaaker (1961). Mastering the métier is extremely important for him. A work needs to be done properly, because he considers craftsmanship as the basis to communicate an underlying message and create a convincing illusion.¹ And Blaaker likes to create illusions a lot, given the narrative character of his sculptures, paintings, installations and tableaus. For this he uses a variety of techniques and materials like bronze, synthetic resin, wood, metal, oil paint and clay. His pallet is multi-coloured, but in his sculptures, you can also find white guises who are very similar to the white cast human figures of the American pop artist George Segal. Blaaker gets his predominantly black models from his neighbourhood Otrobanda, 'the other shore' or the other side of the channel of Punda, an area of Willemstad at the St. Anna bay. Together with Punda, 'the point', Otrobanda forms the historic inner city of Willemstad. Otrobanda is a reflection of the rich, ethnic diversity in Curaçao and the Caribbean according to Blaaker. Unfortunately, it's also an area of socio-economic extremes in which many people are living in conditions of poverty. Blaaker's muses are the underprivileged people in this neighbourhood that he sees around him on a daily basis: immigrants, homeless people, illegal migrants and other needy people. Recognizable types that you can meet in the streets anywhere in the world, with a different ethnicity as the only difference.²

1 Nelly Rosa. "Carlos Blaaker gaat niet voor gemakkelijke oplossingen. Oog voor de schoonheid en kwetsbaarheid van de gewone man", Amigoe. Napa Interview, Saturday 21 October, 2017, 12, 13.

2 Jennifer Smit. "Schoonheid van wankel evenwicht", Antilliaans Dagblad, Monday 27 March 2017, 12.

At first glance it looks as if the models are literally imagined, but beneath the realistic surface of style, lurks a story through the context in which they are placed. Because of this, the literalness is transcended and the works get a certain layering from which they take their meaning. The interpretation of the work of art depends on the observer. 'I'm a storyteller in my work', declares the artist.³ He fortifies this by placing every sculpture in a separate open vitrine so that an imaginary closed space is created. In this way, he isolates the sculptures from their environment and creates each character's own social world. By means of his art, Blaaker makes the 'invisibles' at the bottom of society, visible again. He doesn't shun criticism about society in this. His motivation is to elevate these people who are muddling their way through life with great difficulty and creativity, by giving them a stage and putting them in the spotlight. They get a special status, because as sculptures, he literally puts them on a pedestal, sets them up in a showcase or colourfully pictures them in his paintings. It's an homage to these outsiders and plodders. Thus, the painted portrait *King of Otrobanda*, presents the local vagrant as a charismatic leader against a radiantly yellow background. The homosexual acquaintance, who like a 'Don Juan', brags about his female conquests to hide his sexuality, is manifested in the multi-coloured painting *Unveiling Juan* as a lonely but valiant man. He finally decides to come out of the closet or dares to remove his veil in the hot desert or the conservative Curaçao where homosexuality is taboo. The despondent illegal homeless man, Blaaker's ex-assistant, who always has to remain out of sight of the authorities, gets a face – although half hidden under his hoodie – with the tableau *No Papers*.⁴ This homeless man without a residence permit who can be seen from knee height, is standing against a wooden wall on which schematically shown flat wooden houses are attached. He is dark-coloured and more or less disappears against the wall in an identical colour. In his right hand, he holds a three-dimensional gold-coloured house. It symbolizes the fate of a homeless person who is always carrying his house with him.⁵ The golden colour gives a religious touch to the work of art. Associations with an icon of a saint are traceable. With the knowledge that some statues of saints hold a church model of the church named after them, the illegally homeless person could be regarded as something of a contemporary icon. As a universal identification mark that symbolizes our current time that is characterized by a constant flow of refugees, as a result of which many are forced to lead a miserable existence in illegality. The homeless man without papers also appears upright on a high red scaffold, but now painted white, like a ghost that needs to remain unnoticed, or like a Caucasian refugee, because, after all, the refugee problem is a global phenomenon. Hidden under his hoodie, inconspicuously placed against a dark wall, at a high level so that he can observe everything only from a distance; these are all metaphors for what Blaaker wants to address. Namely that the illegal person is standing out of society and must remain invisible to avoid being caught. In the meantime, he's longing for an unattainable treasure, his own home. Of course, the strong, resolute Curaçao women cannot be missed in Blaaker's creations of ordinary people. On the matriarchal Caribbean island, women are the foundation of the family; they mostly educate the children without men and are at the same time breadwinners.

3 Rosa. "Carlos Blaaker gaat niet voor gemakkelijke oplossingen", 12.

4 Carlos Blaaker, conversation, 10 October 2017, Amsterdam.

5 Rosa. "Carlos Blaaker gaat niet voor gemakkelijke oplossingen", 12

That their children have something to eat and can make something out of their lives is mainly thanks to them. They are among others embodied by the motherly type with melon slices on the head in *Balanceando con mis cosas 2* that still manages to stand firm in spite of her heavy burden and by the woman in pink. This *Lady in Pink* represents Blaaker's neighbour who's hanging the laundry in a pink shirt dress. She definitely does not look like a plodder with her bold posture and confident look which gives her dignity and allure. This is a strong woman who clearly commands. Such details determine the beauty of the whole figure. With the depiction of ordinary people from the lowest segment of the population, Blaaker stands in the tradition of nineteenth-century social realism in painting and sculpture. This movement developed together with a growing awareness of poverty in certain communities in Europe. The work of Gustave Courbet is an important forerunner of this. His paintings of ordinary, hard-working people originated from his political views on the prevalent social conditions among certain sections of the population. Artists such as Honoré Daumier, and later Käthe Kollwitz, also expressed the socially harrowing living conditions that the lower working classes were experiencing. It is also the theme of the Belgian artist Constantin Meunier who depicted the proletariat, the daily reality of common people and their work. Meunier expressed the engaged view of the world, and mainly of Belgium, not only in sculptures of the industrial labour of the plodding on the land, but also in *De Volksvrouw* (The common woman). This bust of an ordinary woman portrays misery and sadness in a universal way. The bust gets a little closer to Blaaker's figures, who are more realistic in nature than the workers in heroic poses that social realist art often displays. The drama of life is also reflected in the white plaster forms of George Segal. In this sense, Blaaker's sculptural work, which includes quite a few white figures, fits more with his figures than with those of Meunier. Life for Segal was an existence of struggle and toil. He tried to show the average American wage earner from the sixties of the twentieth century who led quite a dull existence and felt insecure and threatened. He therefore preferably chose his models from the working-class circles and if he couldn't find them there, he'd choose them from his nearest circle, just as Blaaker does. Segal's arrangements which 'were picked out of life' have titles such as *Ruth in her Kitchen*, *Woman Shaving her Leg* or *Man on a Bicycle*. It's all about everyday activities without standardized styles and heroic poses. His installations demonstrate the hardship of a certain way of living at an insignificant moment that doesn't say anything at all about the past or future. Segal's work presents us with the edge, the banality of the American culture, in which we can see the similarities with Blaaker's work.⁶ Besides the theme of the ordinary person and his harrowing story and the white figures, there is another significant similarity between the characters of Blaaker and Segal: no body meets the ideal of beauty, the viewer is presented with the unvarnished reality. In the attention to ordinary people, Blaaker goes one step further than Segal. What fascinates the Surinamese artist, is the facade that people construct to conceal their own reality, their identity. One example is the homosexual 'Don Juan' in *Unveiling Juan*. He wants to reveal the vulnerability behind the mask, without passing judgement.⁷ This very vulnerability of people at the edge of society is at the same time their strength. In short: Blaaker shows beauty in an ugly life.

⁶ See Jan van der Mark's "Signalement van George Segal", about the work of George Segal in tent.cat. *George Segal* (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 1972), 4-14.

⁷ Rosa, "Carlos Blaaker gaat niet voor gemakkelijke oplossingen", 12, 13.

'Power' is not the first thing that comes to mind upon observing the black and white version of *Woman with golden cap*, even though the white woman is Blaaker's ode to his girlfriend. On the one hand the naked women with their golden pointed hats, bright red lips (the black woman) daringly protruding and fluttering movement of the arms portray impertinence and self-assurance. On the other hand, the sculptures invoke an uneasy feeling, both because of the carnival-like hats and inelegant posture combined with their nakedness, but especially because of the showcase in which they are set, as if they are each put up for show in their own cage as a sort of attraction. In the distance, they are reminiscent of the personified figures in the same kind of fragile open cages of the prominent sculptor Alberto Giacometti, and then specifically of the standing statue *The Cage (premiere version)*. The pose of this bronze female figure with spread arms shows parallels with the woman with the golden cap, as well as the thin open framework in which she is situated. Like the pedestals used in other works by Giacometti and Blaaker, a cage has been used as a 'stage' for the act performed by the women in *The Cage (premiere version)* and *Woman with golden cap*.⁸ But how should the ambiguous sight of *Woman with golden cap* be interpreted? Is Blaaker referring to the many roles that the woman embodies; from mother and virgin to sex object, mistress and temptress? Is her performance intended as a free-spirited commentary on the machismo culture in the Antilles? In short: what indicates a tribute to his girlfriend? The meaning of the work must be sought in the well-known Surinamese men's tradition of the songbird competitions on Independence Square in Paramaribo. The men cherish the precious twas in their cage as their dearest treasure, as Blaaker does with his girlfriend, who shows up as the caged white woman with a golden cap. The cage is in fact a museum display case in which art treasures are displayed. It is Blaaker's form to elevate his girlfriend. The display case is deliberately open so that she is not trapped but can fly away whenever she wants. The various colour versions of *Woman with golden cap* represent an ode to all women, to their beauty, regardless of their skin colour. The role of the woman as a sexually desirable being is not missing; think of the (red) seductively pursed lips and the naked body, because the golden cap is a metaphor for the female sex organ.⁹ Once again, in *Woman with golden cap*, we see a union of strength and vulnerability that is so characteristic of Blaaker's signature. The trivial and ironic aspect in *Woman with golden cap* returns in his sculptures of black women with melon slices on their heads. Also in a sculpture of a bare-chested black man in jeans who has just taken a bite of the watermelon slice in his hands: *Watermelon Man / Hombre con Patilla*. They are somewhat like caricatures and could pass for 'Black Memorabilia', stereotypical images and figurines of black people, generally with a racist undertone. This idea is reinforced by the fact that Blaaker's characters are not portrayed in full size and, like Black Memorabilia, are relatively small in size. Previous works are easier to interpret than the work of art in which several culture-specific components come together. Certain works, sometimes explicit but more often veiled, are permeated with Christian symbolism and mythological and spiritual elements (Not surprising for an artist who gets his inspiration from his living environment). His visual idiom is connected with the Curaçao culture that goes back to the time of the European colonization of the Caribbean area in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The result of this very eventful social-historical past is a hybrid multicultural society that emerged from the three sources ('Las Tres Potencias') Africa, Europe and America.

8 Cecilia Braschi. "Het ogenschijnlijke tastbaar maken. Een blik op het werk van Alberto Giacometti" in tent.cat. *Alberto Giacometti* (Art hall Rotterdam, Rotterdam / Fondation Alberto et Annette Giacometti, Paris, 2008), 45-46.

9 Carlos Blaaker, phone conversation, 6 January 2018

They form the cultural and spiritual foundation of the island.¹⁰ Traditions, rituals, religions and motifs of these different continents have mutually influenced each other, have become intertwined, but can sometimes still be clearly distinguished.¹¹ Almost 90% of the population of the Leeward Islands is Catholic. Belonging to one of the Christian churches can go hand in hand with religious beliefs and practices that are not originally Christian.¹² Although the majority of Curaçao has an African background, it does not have an 'African' religion like the winti religion in Suriname. Winti is the religion of the Maroons, which is based on the beliefs of their African cultures of origin. It is for them the path to union with a higher power, the creator of the universe, their ancestors and the gods. There is, however, 'brua' in Curaçao, a collective name for all kinds of magical practices that transcend the boundaries of the natural. In brua, various objects are used to gain luck or ward off bad luck. All these 'heathen' elements mixed with the veneration of saints from the Catholic Church.¹³

O di C

The title *O di C* betrays the mythological element in this installation. It refers to the odyssey, the long and arduous retreat to the Greek home island of Ithaca or the main character Odysseus from Homer's classic poem *The Odyssey*. This Greek myth constantly changes content and function over the centuries. Odysseus is alternately a rational man, an unscrupulous villain, a tenacious Christ-like hero and an incurable vagabond. In this way, Odysseus became a symbolically malleable character, reflected in stories of many subsequent periods and often portrayed in visual art.¹⁴ Blaaker also gives his own version of the ancient mythological character of Odysseus. In *O di C*, Odysseus appears in the guise of his Cuban friend Angel, who left Cuba and ended up in Curaçao during his journey, his odyssey. There he has to make do with what he has without a residence permit. We see a bearded Angel, with a large A with two wings on the front of his shirt, kneeling in a rickety wooden rowing boat. The two oars on either side of the boat point their flat ends up; they no longer help him move forward, which is indicative of his existence in the margins of the Curaçao society. The line from mythology to reality is not difficult to draw. Blaaker has symbolically translated Odysseus into the migrant of this time and thus Angel has one foot in the mythological world and one foot in harsh reality. The motif of return, liberation and alienation in *The Odyssey* takes on a new meaning in *O di C*.

10 Jennifer Smit en Felix de Rooy. "Introductie van de conservatoren. Voorouders van de toekomst," in tent.cat. *Curaçao Classics. Visual art 1900-2010 / Arte Visual 1900-2010* (Amsterdam / Curaçao, 2012), 5.

11 René A. Römer. "Inleiding. 1. De cultuur in wording: het acculturatieproces," in *Cultureel mozaïek van de Nederlandse Antillen* (1977), 10, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/rome012cult01_01/rome012cult01_01_0002.php. (Consulted on 13 November 2017).

12 Römer. "Hoofdstuk 2. Godsdienstige gebruiken en opvattingen," in *Cultureel mozaïek van de Nederlandse Antillen* (1977), 53, 43, http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/rome012cult01_01/rome012cult01_01_0003.php. (Consulted on 13 November 2017).

13 André R.M. Pakosie. "Religie in beweging. Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van Marronreligies" in Alex van Stipriaan and Thomas Polimé, red., *Kunst van overleven. Marroncultuur uit Suriname* (Amsterdam, 2009), 46 and René A. Römer. *Een volk op weg. Un Pueblo na Kaminda. Een sociologische historische studie van de Curaçaose samenleving* (Zutphen, 1979), 44-45.

14 Eric M. Moormann en Wilfried Uitterhoeve. *Van Achilles tot Zeus. Thema's uit de klassieke mythologie in literatuur, muziek, beeldende kunst en theater* (Nijmegen / Amsterdam, 1987), 6.

Here it becomes clear how much Odysseus has become emblematic of an escape from a reality without perspective for many. Without becoming political, the age-old theme is given context: migration and the disastrous consequences it can entail is a universal phenomenon throughout history. By establishing broader connections, the work of art rises above its place of origin and acquires universal eloquence. Yet Angel does not function so much as a victim, because isn't The Odyssey written as an epic about the misadventures of the hero Odysseus? Angel can be interpreted as a modern Odysseus who also has to face tough conditions. For Blaaker, people like Angel are heroes because they give colour to life. He shows his admiration for these 'inventive survivors' by making them the subject of his art.¹⁵ In addition to aspects from Greek mythology, O di C contains quite a bit of Christian symbolism. In the early Christian faith, the ship was likened to the Church in which the faithful found a safe place and sailed to their salvation. Of this safety and salvation, Noah's ark was an obvious symbol. The church building itself was compared to a ship, hence the name 'ship' for the main space of a church.¹⁶ Seen in this light, the boat with a praying 'angel' takes on a religious dimension. One that expresses the hope that Angel's prayer will be answered and that there will ultimately be a future for him too. But is Angel's fate in God's hands? Could the winged A on the front of his shirt stand for Athena, the Greek goddess who, like a kind of guardian angel, is constantly available to advise and guide Odysseus and the course of events?¹⁷ And as an extension thereof: is Athena perhaps the personification of the contemporary Caribbean woman who actually carries the matriarchal land? Is it intended as the artist's indirect tribute to these extremely strong women?

Vicious circle / Catch-22

Vicious circle / Catch-22 can also be analysed from a mythological point of view. The installation allegorically portrays the hopelessness of the graceful Latina immigrant in Blaaker's environment. The Latina dresses up to perfection when she takes her children to school and with her sensual appearance knows how to be the centre of attention for every man.

At the same time, this is where her tragedy lies, because this attention is probably the only highlight in the poverty-stricken existence in which she is imprisoned.¹⁸ Although she is aware of her body as an economically deployable commodity, her erotic capital, once propagated by the Dutch feminist magazine *Opzij*, is not power but powerlessness. She is in a catch-22; an unsolvable situation, the chicken-and-egg story.¹⁹ In order to get out of her miserable life, she has to find a well-paid job, but because of her disadvantaged background, it is not to be. The Latina lies completely naked, stripped of all her outward frills, in a sideways position on the bottom or top of two rowboats fastened crosswise. Her head is raised just above the rim, her gaze is forward, as if wondering 'where am I going?'

¹⁵ Blaaker, conversation.

¹⁶ James Hall. *Hall's Iconografisch handboek. Onderwerpen, symbolen en motieven in de visual art*, vert. Theo Veenhof e.a. (Leiden, 1996 / Londen, 1979), 308.

¹⁷ Hall. *Hall's Iconografisch handboek*, 68.

¹⁸ Blaaker, conversation.

¹⁹ A catch-22 is a paradoxical situation in which it is impossible to achieve a desired outcome because the 'rules' do not allow it due to contradictions. The term originates from the debut novel *Catch-22* of the American author Joseph Heller (1923-1999), which describes a general situation in which an individual must accomplish two actions that are mutually dependent or the other action, which must be performed first, are completed. The title of the book has become proverbial for an unsolvable problem. See https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Heller. (Consulted on 12 December 2017)

Next to her are burlap sacks representing her ballast. She is flanked by two static women figures, completely white, standing in the bottom boat, holding oars. They bear a striking resemblance to Segal's white forms. There seems to be no contact between the three figures. The bottom edge of the lower boat is attached to a rotating pin that causes the two boats to spin around their axis: a metaphor for the life of the Latina.²⁰ An ominous atmosphere is emanating from the scene by the shadowy apparitions and the vulnerable naked woman who lies helplessly in their midst and seems to be at their mercy. The spectacle evokes associations with Charon's story. The ferryman in Greek mythology carried the ghosts of the dead by boat over the mythical river Styx to the Realm of the Dead of the divine ruler Hades, where they will be able to find rest. ²¹ Are the white forms the own ghosts of the Latina who are looking for redemption or the daily burden she is burdened with? Does her fate seem sealed with the crossing to the Realm of the Dead? Only, she doesn't look dead. Her skin is the only thing that still has the colour of flesh and blood. She seems to be hiding, crossing the Realm of the Dead but not reaching it. For now, she's wandering around. Does this mean that her fate is still averted and the white spectres are her guardian angels? Or does the meaning of the name Hades, the invisible one, presuppose a lifelong invisibility at the bottom of society?²²

Useless Still life

We also see white spectres and a strong woman in *Useless Still life*. But while in the previous work of art the titles still offered the viewer some guidance, the name of this work reveals little about its deeper meaning. Although culture-specific and historical references – for example to the slavery past and its impact – are on the surface, the work of art cannot be unambiguously explained. The tableau of the black naked woman, which is depicted from her hips, her arms crossed just below her breasts, carrying a huge slice of watermelon on her head and positioned on a low table, is too complicated for that. The first impression of the melon woman is the cliché advertising image of an exotic-looking woman with tropical fruit as an elegant headdress. However, the attitude of the melon woman says something else. She looks sideways, without the cheerful smile on her face that usually accompanies such commercials. Her face is painted white like a mask. What meaning is contained in this image? And what about the relief behind this bronze statue? Inside the white square, ten heads stand on long sticks, as if impaled on them. They look like long matches. The relief is gilded and together with the bronze glow of the tableau, the ensemble exudes a sacred atmosphere, like a three-dimensional icon. The ghostly white head relief in combination with the religious appearance and the title raises questions.

What does Blaaker mean by the title *Useless Still Life*? Partly because of its small size, the tableau is somehow reminiscent of the house altars that can be found everywhere in living rooms in Curaçao or elsewhere in the Caribbean region. Should we interpret such an altar here as a still life? With this association and the historical and social references the work contains, the question is whether *Useless Still life* is really that useless. It is striking that watermelons and especially watermelon slices regularly appear in conjunction with women in Blaaker's art. Among others, in *Balanceando con mis cosas 1* and *Balanceando con mis cosas 2*.

²⁰ Moormann en Uitterhoeve. *Van Achilles tot Zeus*, 118.

²¹ Blaaker, conversation.

²² Moormann en Uitterhoeve. *Van Achilles tot Zeus*, 118.

Sometimes a woman has one slice on her head, but more often she's balancing with three, six or eight slices. The feat of strength it takes to balance the fruits is metaphorical for the effort it takes women in the Antilles and South America to keep their heads above water. Blaaker himself says that balancing with the melons stands for balancing with things like money, work and love.²³ In summary, the melon stands for life. A metaphor of the writer Toni Morrison comes to mind. In her novel *The Bluest Eye*, the watermelon is the globe and the flesh, 'the red intestines', as 'the nice warm food for niggers'.²⁴ With the watermelons, Blaaker's women carry the whole world on their heads, as it were. Nevertheless, they proudly manage to keep the balance, especially the woman in *Useless Still life*. The watermelon (slice) may have a beautiful shape, but over time it has also acquired a less positive, cultural-historical connotation that deserves some explanation. There have been depictions of African-Americans with watermelons since the nineteenth century, usually eating a watermelon slice. They can be found on postcards and in advertisements, commercials and cartoons or even immortalized in ceramic figurines. Today these objects are called 'Black Memorabilia' or 'Negrophilia'.²⁵ The production of these stereotypical sculptures served a special political purpose during the process of emancipation of the slaves after the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. Initially, the watermelon became the symbol of freedom and perhaps the happiness of the free slaves. A writer remarked in 1853 that happiness could not be better represented than by a Negro enjoying his watermelon.²⁶ In the watermelon slice, the broad smile of the free Negro doubled. However, the new achievements of the free slaves felt like a threat to the whites and soon the Negro and his watermelon became a symbol for the 'lazy nigger'. The cultural anthropologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse summarizes this nicely: 'Fruit was the most commonly used symbol for the natural fertility and opulence of the tropics and therefore for the "natural laziness" of blacks. In the West Indies, pumpkins and melons symbolized tropical abundance. In American folklore, blacks often have an uncontrollable craving for watermelon. It belongs to the child-savage cliché. The watermelon suggests laziness, gluttony, lack of self-control, childish needs, and possible sexual symbolism.'²⁷ The watermelon became a cultural-historical symbol of the whites to ridicule the blacks for fear of their emancipation. A symbol that survived until Barack Obama's election campaign. The question arises as to what meaning should be assigned to the watermelon in *Useless Still life*. What does this piece of fruit on the head of a naked woman say? Is she a nature-favoured creature with the huge watermelon slice on her head? A natural being? Nudity suggests availability and fruit sexuality.²⁸ Does she only care about sex?

23 Blaaker, phone conversation.

24 Toni Morrison. *Het blauwste oog* (Amsterdam, 1984), 109. Original title *The Bluest Eye* (1979).

25 See for example Kenneth W. Goings. *Mammy and Uncle Mose. Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (1994). The Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia located in the Ferris State University in the state Michigan houses over 10,000 of these items. In the Netherlands such a collection is known as Negrophilia. The Tropenmuseum devoted an exhibition to this in 1989/90 under the name 'Wit over Zwart'.

26 William Black. "How Watermelons Became a Racist Trope" (2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/12/how-watermelons-became-a-racist-trope/383529/>. (Consulted on 5 December 2017).

27 Jan Nederveen Pieterse. *Wit over zwart. Beelden van Afrika en zwarten in de westerse populaire cultuur* (Amsterdam, 1990), 200.

28 Ibidem, 202.

Or is she proudly wearing the watermelon as a crown to mock the whites who used the watermelon to ridicule the freed black slaves? Is her watermelon crown a triumphal sign of the abolition of slavery, a sign of freedom? Is she possibly a goddess, an ever-present mother figure? Or is she perhaps the queen of the Curaçao matriarchy with all those male faces painted white like ghosts from a distant past that no longer matter or never mattered? A sentence from the well-known Curaçao writer Boeli van Leeuwen emerges: 'Curaçao is a matriarchy: we men are pathetic drifters, rebellious children of our own wife.'²⁹

It is of course also possible that she simply represents a watermelon seller. But why does she have a white-coloured face? The white make-up of faces occurs in all kinds of cultures and traditions, such as in the initiation rituals of tribes in Africa and the ancestor worship of the Maroons in Suriname. The ten white heads could simply represent ancestors who are approached for wise advice. The woman with the white mask evokes the title of a book by the French writer from Martinique, Frantz Fanon: *Black skin, white masks*.³⁰ Trained as a psychiatrist in Paris, he knew better than anyone what it was like to be born dark-skinned in a world dominated by whites. His books deal with colonialism, the relationship between white and black, the oppressor and the oppressed. In the chapter 'The Colored Woman and the White Man', he describes how it was common for black women to dream about some form of salvation that consisted of becoming white through magic. Elsewhere he states that a marriage with a white man from Europe was the big dream, because then the happy person would no longer be the girl who always wanted to be white, she was white. Pigment determined the social rank and the white values determined the tone and even the beauty ideal. Special creams were supposed to make the skin lighter in tone. They were sold under the slogan: 'You will never be lily-white, but you can always be lighter.'³¹ What Fanon wanted to say with his book is that black people in a society with whites are forced to wear 'white masks.'³² Is this what *Useless Still life* implies? Dreaming of white skin, being admitted to the white world by using the mask as a camouflage and survival strategy? Or does Blaaker turn it around and is it more about the black community that has taken over the bad qualities of the white colonial world? Blaaker's brief explanation of the white match heads points in that direction. With the white head relief, Blaaker criticizes contemporary politics in Curaçao. The political leaders use the citizens for their own good. They themselves are not the flambeau, the torch, that they should be to lead the people out of the darkness, but they use the population as matches to light their own path, according to Blaaker.³³ It is a well-known phenomenon in Curaçao that politicians make big promises to their supporters just to get elected. This political patronage often spills over into favouritism and corruption.³⁴ According to the Curaçao visual artist Tirzo Martha (1965), who also addresses social and political problems in his art, everything revolves around status and self-interest.³⁵

29 Boeli van Leeuwen, quoted in René A. Römer. *Een volk op weg. Un Pueblo na Kaminda. A sociological historical study of the Curaçao society* (Zutphen, 1979), 60.

30 Published in 1952 under the original title *Peau noire, masques blancs*.

31 Margo Jefferson. *Negroland. An autobiography* (Amsterdam, 2017), 205-206.

32 See Stephan Sanders, "De kolonie en de natie," *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 30 August 2017, <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/de-kolonie-en-de-natie>. (Consulted on 17 November 2017).

33 Blaaker, conversation.

34 See Leo Dalhuisen, Ronald Donk, Rosemarijn Hoefte, Frans Steegh, red. *Geschiedenis van de Antillen* (Zutphen, 2009), 118-119.

35 Alex van Stipriaan, "'There's always light at the end of the tunnel, but in our case there's often a power outage on the way through'. A meeting with Tirzo Martha," in Rob Perrée, red., *Tirzo Martha. I wonder if they'll laugh I'm dead* (Heijningen, 2017), 264.

The Revolt of 30 May 1969, the notorious strike in Curaçao as a protest of the black working class against white dominance, changed little over fifty years later. Worse, the black or coloured former colonized who took the place of the white elite instantly turned themselves into power-crazed potentates. The black population still lives in poverty.³⁶ If we see *Useless Still life* as a house altar and a still life, the title becomes less puzzling. Such an altar often consists of a mishmash of Christian statues of saints, pictures of relatives, masks, candles and incense. Catholic symbolism and brua are effortlessly mixed. In art, *Altar de San Martin y San Antonio* by the Curaçao artist Tony Monsanto (1946-2014) is an interesting example of this. Although *Useless Still life* is a lot more sober in nature, it still evokes associations with these house altars. The match heads could be interpreted as candles and the melons as fruit being sacrificed. It is possible that Blaaker suggests that for the solution of the social and political problems in Curaçao, salvation and redemption should not be sought in the worship of these altars. In other words: they are useless still lives. With her head turning away, the woman with the melon slice seems to want to place herself outside the still life. Is she the solution? If anyone can keep things going, it is the melon woman, symbol of the parent company and queen of the Curaçao matriarchy. In any case, her white mask remains a mask that ensures the distance between black and white. As if she wants to indicate that, despite the fact that she lives in a society shaped by whites, she always retains her black identity. It is equally conceivable that this woman in all her nakedness and with the gigantic melon slice on her head represents the more piquant meaning of fruit, with which she partly ties in with the women with golden hats. But be that as it may, she remains a goddess. *Useless Still life* may be useless as a home altar, but as a work of art it is a beautiful source in which many influences from the culture and history of the Caribbean area merge. All these influences are reflected to a greater or lesser extent in Blaaker's artistic creations. And not just in his. The artistic wealth that this environment produces also finds its way to other artists in Curaçao or of Curaçao descent, including Martha. In that sense, Blaaker fits into the general context of Curaçao artists who incorporate traces in their work of the continents of Africa, Europe and America with which Curaçao has a profound social-historical connection. In Blaaker's work, social engagement is never far away because of the issues he raises: the beauty of the underprivileged, the social abuses in Curaçao, the position of the woman and the black and white culture in connection with racism, colonialism, slavery and freedom. The power of his work lies in this mixture.

By Ingrid Braam and Roel Hijnk

As art historians, Ingrid Braam and Roel Hijnk focus on, among other things, the work of individual artists of Surinamese origin and their non-Western image codes.

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³⁶ Zie Dalhuisen, Donk e.a. *Geschiedenis van de Antillen*, 150