



Jade
Montserrat
*In Search
Of Our
Mothers'
Gardens*

BOSSE
& BAUM



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Gardens*

5 June-24 July
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*Her body coded, coloured, measured and contained*ⁱ

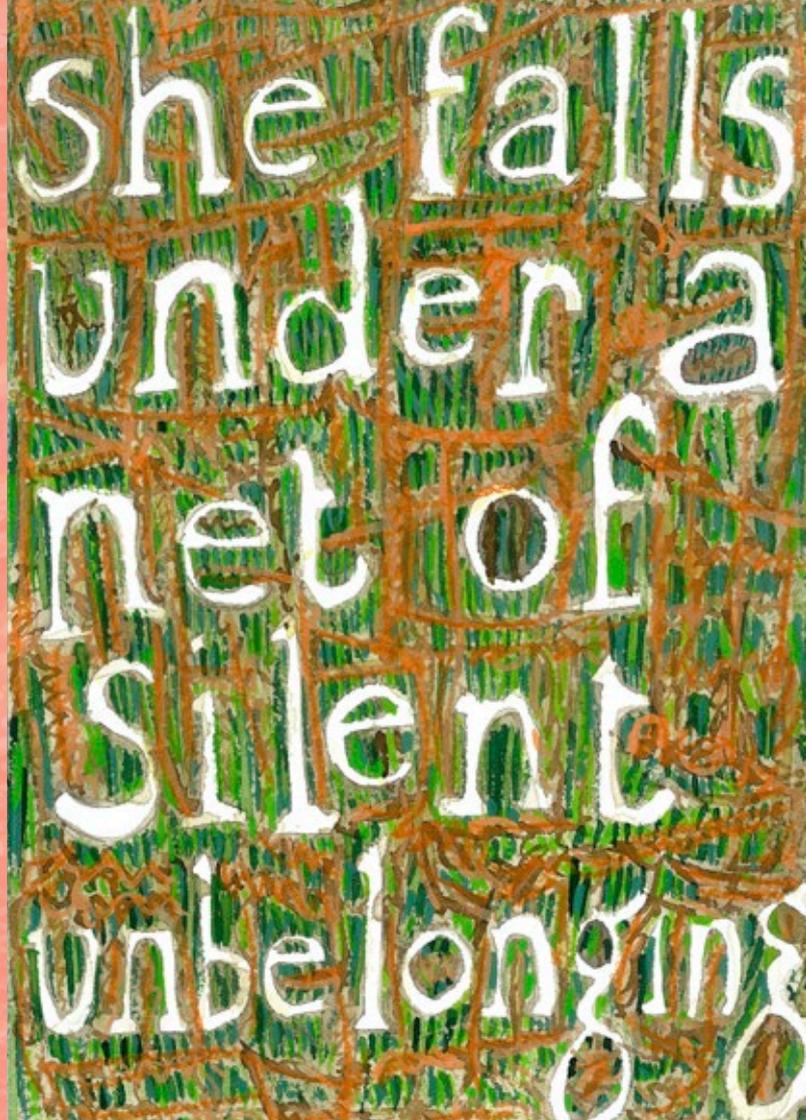
Throughout *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Jade Montserrat depicts her body in fragments. In her dissertation, Montserrat writes: "I suggest that our colonial and imperial amnesia has traumatized the body."ⁱⁱ There is a purposeful ambiguity here as she speaks not of *her* body, but *the* body, expanding her concern to the body of each person living within the afterlives of Great Britain's empire. Montserrat suggests that by not reckoning with our history and failing to acknowledge the various forms of alienation or pain we experience as a consequence, each member of the collective carries some unresolved trauma. Seen through this lens, her body within the paintings is an invitation for each viewer to see their own body as part of a larger whole. How can our interconnected and interdependent bodies heal?

Her body,
coded,
coloured
measured
and
contained



She falls under a net of silent unbelonging

Montserrat depicts her body entangled with various rural landscapes. In several pieces, she employs visual slippage between her body and the landscapes in which she grew up in Yorkshire. For example, in several pieces the wooded hill seen from her childhood window becomes an Afro, and planted spades or standing stones echo hair picks. And, in *In Tune with the Infinite*, her hand emerges from the water, gouges into the soil, and blooms branches of Sitka spruce. These representations of her body's interconnectedness with English landscapes declare her inherent belonging. Montserrat also includes palm fronds, banana trees, and pineapples on and around her body, knitting together the geographies of Northern Britain with those of the Caribbean and West Africa and using tropical aesthetics to claim an expansive geography of belonging.





Our journey to a real and savage land

Britain is responsible for transporting over three million people, including children, from the West African coast to enslavement in British colonies and elsewhere in the Americas. Glimpses of the ocean in paintings such as *Daishiki* and *In Tune with the Infinite* hold the memory of these transatlantic journeys. The ocean voyage is also present in the patterns Montserrat creates. For instance, in *In Tune with the Infinite*, the skin of the hand that stretches between sea and land is covered with delicate scales. Montserrat borrowed this motif from a 15th century print depicting the Christian story of Noah's ark. In the source image, ceramic roof tiles sit atop the main body of the ark, protecting the menagerie within. The tiles as scales on her hand reimagine the body as a vessel that has endured and the skin as an organ of protection and survival.



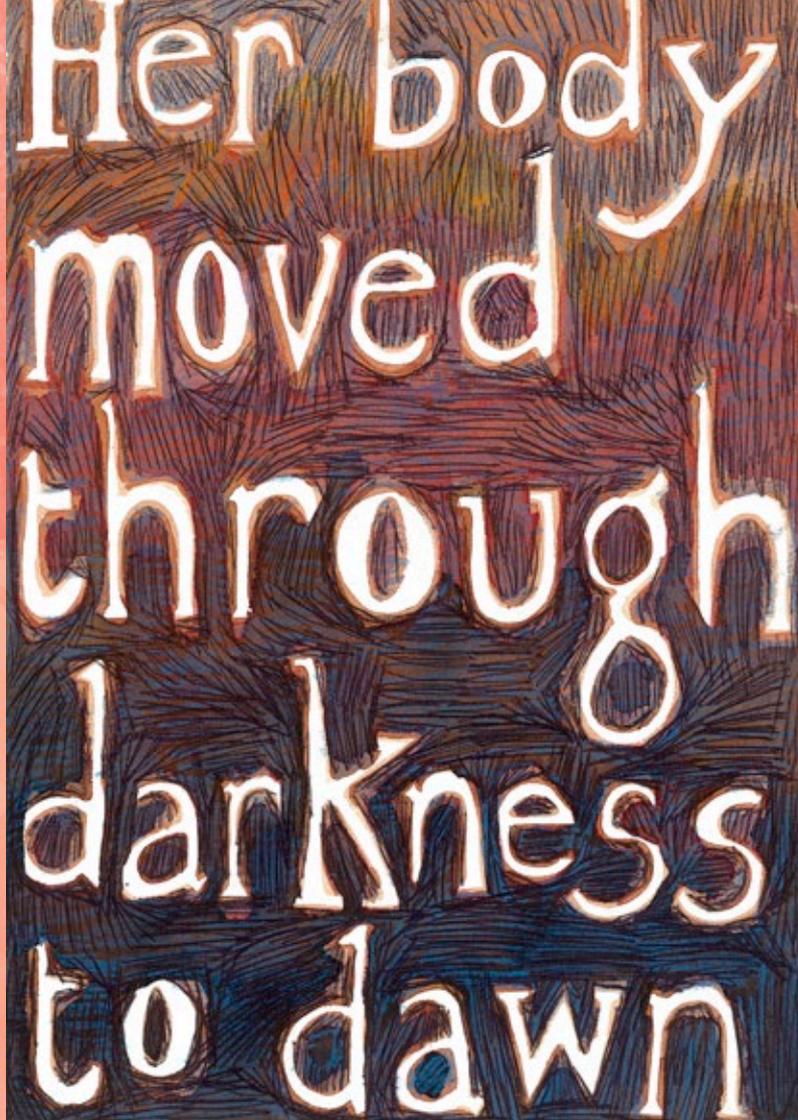
Not ornamental but symbolic, they were expressive and puzzling, striking and disturbing

Montserrat used a pixelated photograph of her unclothed body as a source for many of the paintings. Because there are many layers of mediation, the revelation of skin and focus on her pubic area does not render her body exposed or knowable. Instead, her painted skin is a surface of coded messages and visual play. The vibrant patterns dancing across the body cloak her in motifs that shield and nurture her interiority, while also acting as an interface with the worlds and experiences that have formed her. The repeated symbols draw from an array of religious and African diaspora iconography and the luminosity of the watercolours evoke the stained glass of a chapel—together picturing the body as a site of sacred refuge.



Her body moved through darkness to dawn

In her 1972 essay, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker looks back upon the generations of Black women before her who did not have the choice to be artists. She writes that some of these foremothers were, "Driven to a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them for which there was no release."ⁱⁱⁱ She imagines a woman who "cried out in her soul to paint watercolours of sunsets, or the rain falling on the green and peaceful pasture lands."^{iv} Through reflecting upon her mother's garden and then her own, Walker celebrates the resilience and resourcefulness of women who fed their creativity in the modes available to them: gardening, quilting, storytelling, singing. Montserrat's images, like Walker's text, interweave reflections on history, creative energy, and care.



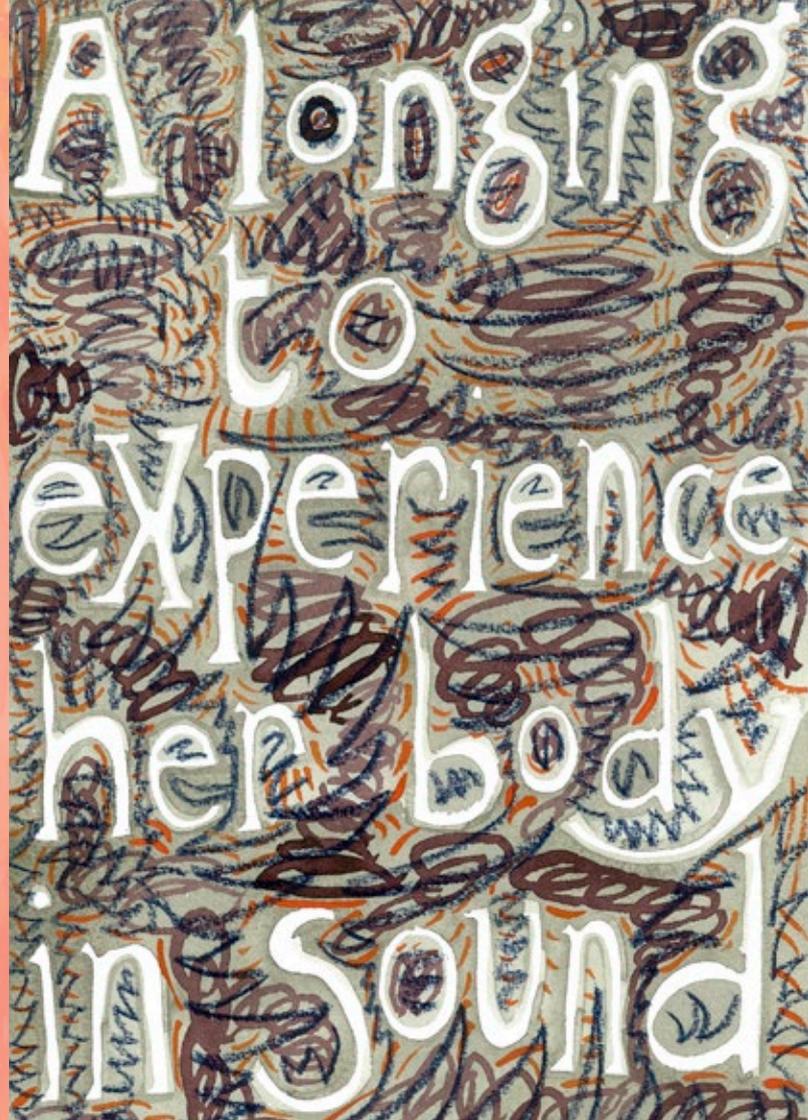
Her body
moved
through
darkness
to dawn



A longing to experience her body in sound

Emerging from the pubic region of several torsos, Montserrat painted a selection of hairstyles derived from African practices and sculptures. The placement of the hair is subversively humorous, conjuring the powerful possibilities of unruly female desire and abundant curls. In these pieces, Montserrat intends an allusion to the history of enslaved women who brought seeds across the middle passage by braiding them into their hair. Montserrat comments: “The idea of having seeds in your hair sounds quite melodic: that they could present a clatter or a heavy dredge.”^v This was a practice of futurity on the part of the enslaved and contributed to the establishment of garden plots in which enslaved people (often women) grew foods such as yams, okra, and rice. In her paintings, Montserrat intermixes human and plant forms of fertility and sustenance, honouring these gardens as sites for sovereignty and nurturing. As Montserrat states, a garden represents a plot of freedom and healing: “There’s something spatial about it whereby you are claiming a certain space to be able to tend to the histories, but also to tend to just being, just breathing, in a space.”^{vi}

Her body stretched out into an awakening



Text by Alexandra Moore.

ⁱRight-aligned texts taken from several of Montserrat's text paintings.

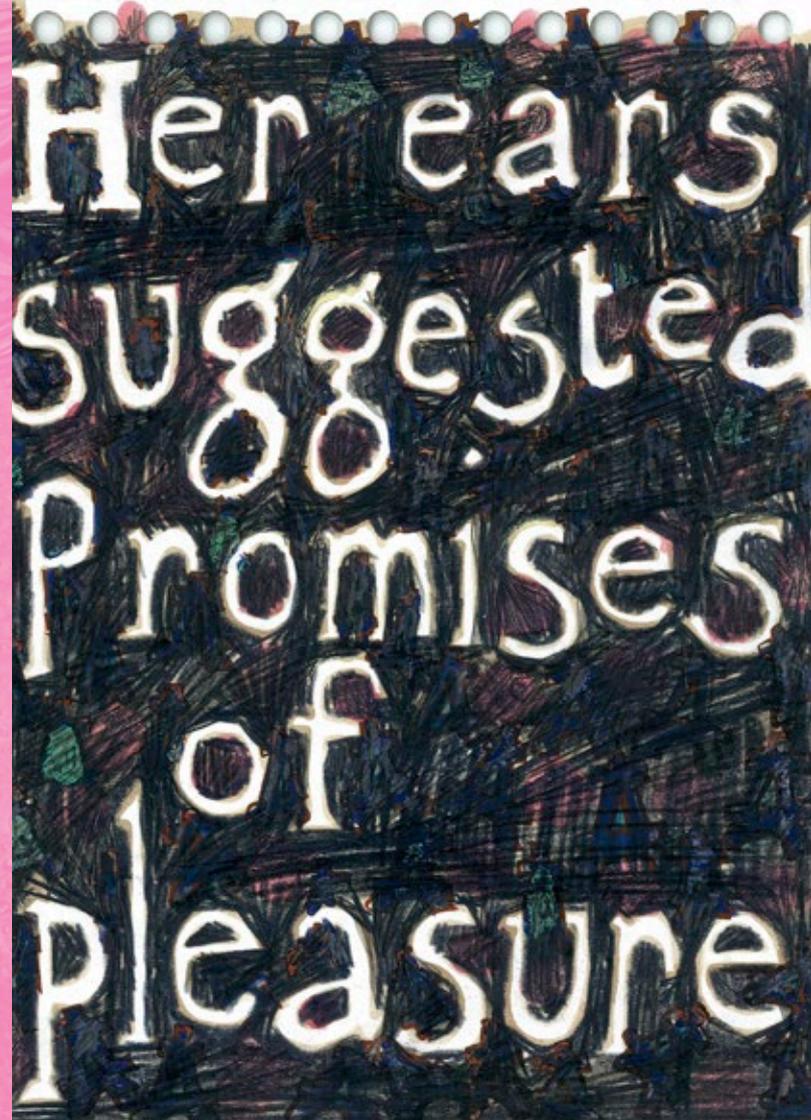
ⁱⁱ Jade Montserrat, "Race and Representation in Northern Britain in the Context of the Black Atlantic: A Creative Practice Project" (Lancaster, UK, University of Central Lancashire, 2020), 67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell, Edition Unstated (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1994), 402.

^{iv} Walker, 402-3.

^v Jade Montserrat, Virtual Studio Visit, interview by Alexandra Moore, April 29, 2021.

^{vi} Jade Montserrat, Virtual Studio Visit, interview by Alexandra Moore, May 3, 2021.



she made her fall glorious



LIST OF WORKS:

p.2.

Torso: Free figure, 2020-21, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, oil stick, oil pastel, ink, graphite and charcoal on paper 30.9 x 22.8 cm.

p.3.

Torso: Notre Dame D'Afrique, 2016, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, ink, fine-liner, graphite on paper 25.6 x 17.8 cm.

p.5.

Her body, coded, coloured, measured and contained, 2017-2021, watercolour, gouache, pastel on paper, 28.3 x 19.1 cm.

p.6.

In Tune with the Infinite, 2015, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, ink, graphite on paper 23 x 31 cm.

p.9.

She falls under a net of silent unbelonging, 2017-2021, watercolour, gouache, pencil crayon on paper 25.6 x 17.8 cm.

p.10.

Torso: Nest, 2020-21, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, oil pastel, oil stick ink, graphite and charcoal on paper, 30.9 x 22.8 cm.

p.11.

Torso: Power figure, 2020-21, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, ink on paper 30.9 x 22.8 cm.

p.13.

Our journey to a real and savage land, 2017, watercolour and ink on paper 25.6 x 17.8 cm.

p.15.

Torso: Wheat, 2020-21, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, oil pastel, ink on paper, 30.9 x 22.8 cm.

p.17.

Her body moved through darkness to dawn, 2017-2021, watercolour and biro on paper, 28.3 x 19.1 cm.

p.18.

Torso: Owl of Athena, 2020-21, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, oil stick, oil pastel, ink on paper, 30.9 x 22.8 cm.

p.19.

Torso: Reef-knot, 2020-21, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, highlighter pen, ink, graphite on paper, 30.9 x 22.8 cm.

p.21.

A longing to experience her body in sound, 2017-2021, watercolour and pencil crayon on paper, 28.3 x 19.1 cm.

p.23.

Her ears suggested promises of pleasure, 2017, watercolour, ink, pencil, biro on cardboard 19 x 25.8 cm.

p.24-25.

She made her fall glorious, 2016, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, ink, graphite on paper, 41 x 31 cm.

p.29.

Feet: Spectator, 2016, watercolour, gouache, pencil, pencil crayon, ink, graphite on paper, 25.6 x 17.8 cm.

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