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Un-Worlding and Becoming With: Beatrice Glow's *Rhunhattan*

Multimedia and installation artist Beatrice Glow's practice has often served to bridge worlds—from visual to olfactory worlds, from digital to analog worlds. She has also focused on community and coalition-building and amplifying and centering marginalized narratives in spaces plagued by histories of erasure.



Fig. 1 Beatrice Glow, *Banda island Archipelago, Spice Roots/ Routes Series*, 2016, Digital print on silk; ink, 49 x 49 in. 2017 installation view at the James B. Duke House, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University as part of the Duke House Exhibition Series. Image: Nita L. Roberts

If Spivak's notion of worlding creates the illusion of a colonial world of naturalized power asymmetries, Glow's ongoing multi-series opus *Rhunhattan* undoes this while bringing together and putting forth narratives from the world of one of the Spice Islands in the Banda Sea known as Rhun in a co-telling with the island that is part of the megatropolis on the Atlantic seaboard called Manhattan. It is a collaborative becoming-with, as suggested by Donna Haraway and extended here within the

co-narratives of Glow's work.[1] *Rhunhattan* conjures the interconnected stories of the colonial exploitation of Rhun, an island where the world until the mid-1700s sourced nutmeg and mace—both extracted from the nutmeg tree—and Manhattan island. Throughout her work, she references historical paths of global colonial trade, extraction, and erasure and their lasting ramifications among indigenous communities that inhabit these spaces. (Fig. 1)

Rhunhattan is a major multi-year ongoing series of works that has slowly and patiently expanded into a repository of richly researched conceptual art projects—ranging from object and olfactory-based multisensory installations to community-engaged digital virtual reality projects. (Fig. 2) Glow's process might be thought of as a "slow practice," in which the work of the artist is built steadily through relationships and trust—with the multiple series of works also accumulating into foundational materials and developing into a resource for study, community archives, and shared interwoven narratives. *Rhunhattan* has taken shape in a range of forms including her work *Rhunhattan Tearoom* (Fig. 3), a set of chinoiserie porcelainware embellished with acrylic paint and decal collage

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Fig. 2 Beatrice Glow, *Aromérica Parfumeur*, 2016, Olfactory art, cloves, nutmegs, archival digital print, glass bell jars and flacons, Dimensions variable, Installation view at Sala Vespucio, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Santiago de Chile, Image: Aertiron



Fig. 3 Beatrice Glow, *Rhunhattan Tearoom*, 2015, Acrylic and decal collage on ceramics, ink on paper, terracotta infused with scents of colonial commerce. Dimensions variable. Installation view, Sunroom Project Space, Wave Hill Public Garden and Cultural Center, Bronx, NY. Photo: Stefan Hagen

renderings of archival images of colonial architecture and Spice War atrocities in the colors of what she notes are “Colonial Brick (red), Taboo (black) and Nutmeg (brown).”[2] The imagery of nutmeg and mace are relayed in shades of what might be likened to blood-red paint and paired to the scents pervading the exhibition space based on the fragrance of the spices that led to the decimation of indigenous Bandanese. Throughout the project she has tied together the spaces of Manhattan and Rhun—which in 1667, the Dutch traded for Manhattan—through connected stories of the Bandanese in Rhun and the Lenape in Manhattan. The project is a reminder that the story of extraction, racial decimation, and environmental degradation is one that is all too familiar throughout history.

As a part of Glow's work on *Rhunhattan*, through dialogues in the US, Indonesia, and the Netherlands, she actively participates in the Banda Working Group consisting of an interdisciplinary group of culture bearers, community partners, and advocates in the cultural heritage field intent on bringing awareness to the 1621 genocide in Banda and the continuing global impact of Dutch colonialism. Glow's 360-degree photo collage series of Rhun and Fort Nassau collapse the past and the present underline the continuing legacies of colonialism. (Fig. 4)

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Fig. 4 *Rhun and Fort Nassau, Banda Islands, 2017*, 360-degree digital photo collage. Collaboration between Beatrice Glow and Alexandre Girardeau

Glow found that the Dutch utilized the architectural design known as “star forts” both for Lower Manhattan’s Fort Amsterdam, ironically a site now occupied by the current National Museum of American Indian, and also Fort Nassau in the Banda Islands. The parallel architectures of these forts form a physical and historic overlap and continuity within the narratives of Rhun and Manhattan that the artist underlines within her 360-degree work, tying the two locations. Her work focuses on actively bringing forth shared cultural heritages, histories, as well as environmental futures as both the Bandanese and Lenape communities find

themselves at risk due to progressive climate and environmental degradation. Her work *Mannahatta VR*, a collaboration between the artist, Alexandre Girardeau, Native culture bearers, The Wayfinding Project at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University, ecologists, and historians, develops a creative mapping of Manhattan, incorporating historic research into the ecological landscape of Manhattan overlaid in part with contemporary mappings of the city. (Fig. 5)

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Fig. 5 *Mannahatta VR*, 2016-Present, Interactive virtual reality experience, This is a collaboration between Alexandre Girardeau, Beatrice Glow, Native culture bearers, The Wayfinding Project at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at New York University, ecologists and historians.

The effect not only enables one to imagine precolonial life in Manhattan, but also compresses time and enables the viewer to viscerally experience the temporal linkages between the past and its concurrent existence in the present. Oral histories with Lenape elders are embedded within a VR experience through the use of volumetric scans, bringing elements of postcolonial archive, community knowledge sharing, and narrative documentation and exchange to her work. She notes: “We see this as an ever-evolving project, more like a group vision board that continues to update with new input from

the Lenape and Algonquin-speaking culture bearers to reflect our understanding of Mannahatta.”[3]

Glow notes that her diasporic positionality as a Taiwanese American artist led to her interest in Taiwanese Indigenous communities and transregional migrations and TransPacific colonial persecutions and erasures of Indigenous communities. Working beyond her personal history, her practice is centered on allyship through her coalition-building efforts and collaborative practice. There is a precarious space between allyship and co-option in which practices may usurp the voice of the other in the name of highlighting such stories.

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This has been at the center of recent debates in diversity in the museum and artistic practice, in which artists and curators in the name of amplifying the story of communities, are telling the stories for communities. The question that is posed is: What does it mean when artists research and are interested in the stories of other communities, when the voices from the communities are not included in the creation of the presentation and construction of the narrative?

Glow's sensitivity to underlining indigenous voices and asking of permissions and collaborating with communities, from indigenous to other communities, is compelling. The artist acknowledges the precarity and preciousness of her space with the care and understanding that if permission is not granted to her from a community in good faith and good will, she would not continue to pursue such a project. As of now, Glow continues with the process of becoming-with in co-building her slow project *Rhunhattan*.

Notes:

[1] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016. Kindle edition. Loc. 433. Haraway suggests that we "become-with each other" implying beyond human and animal-kind. I am inferring her "become-with" would imply becoming with beyond the self.

[2] Beatrice Glow, artist website. <https://beatrice-glow.org/works/#/rhunhattan-tearoom/> (accessed April 20, 2019).

[3] Email from Beatrice Glow to the author, April 25, 2019.