

A Memory of Elephants



Sol Archer

Metode

It's cool in here. It's quiet. It's still.

The air is sterile and clean, assiduously filtered by machines in some distant basement that maintain the humidity within internationally established levels and circulate it imperceptibly. To make it somehow abstract. The clunk of a reinforced door recessing into its airtight seal transmits through the concrete floor. Not a single hair on our heads is disturbed, no dust lifts on the scrubbed air. The attendant counts ten people into the huge room. Automatic lights respond and flicker on in sequence around the curve of the hall.

Outside, inaudible, "Windstorm Poly", the fiercest summer storm on record, is pulling trees up at the roots across the port town of Rotterdam, Europe's busiest harbour.¹ 150 km per hour winds, barely imaginable in here, despite having just cycled through them, are at this moment killing two people and causing one hundred million euros in property damage. Ten people in blue Tyvek®² shoe protection are quietly watching me. I connect a seismic microphone to exposed metal, I can hear voices with it, words muffled, transmitted through the material of the building. I start recording with the camera.

Two technicians in soft-soled trainers walk into the curved hall, counting. They gently pull open one of the huge rail-mounted rolling storage racks. Dampened bearings minimise vibration, but still the sound is shocking as chains rattle against the white powder-coated steel grid. The rubberised wheels mumble on nylon bearings through the seismic microphone from their recessed floor track.

I am in the Depot of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam to see a painting. The technicians lift it down for me and carry it to an easel. The height difference between the two of them is comical for a brief moment as one strains to reach up and match the grip of the other, who casually holds the frame at its middle with white cotton-gloved hands. Their jeans dissolve into a forest landscape below. Saints agonise around them, their eyes turned to God, hands pressed to breasts. An aristocrat pouts below his flowing golden fringe. A ship holds its position on mirror-still water. Towering clouds hang pendulous over low-lying horizons, peach, pink, green, luminous blue-cast dawn and dusk light spills off skies and reflects in the polished floor.

White foam pads secure the gilt frame on its easel. To the right, from a small frame, a pale-faced young merchant dressed in black looks directly at the camera, his white face cut from a black background. Jesus lifted from the cross

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OX9zPF-UwVU>
<https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/47143>

2 "Tyvek® is a 100% synthetic material made from high-density spunbound polyethylene fibers. Lightweight, durable and breathable, yet resistant to water, abrasion, bacterial penetration and aging, Tyvek® is an amazing material used to improve a variety of applications across multiple industries." <https://www.dupont.com/what-is-tyvek.html#>

is covered up behind the painting, and to the left a simian-faced Christ in a rose-coloured shirt casts an unfocussed gaze from one void into another. The frame of an Italian landscape through which a young man pursues a woman lines up perfectly with the roof of the sugar mill in the painting the technicians have carried for me. Another Jesus disappears into the reflection on his varnish above, and tucked behind the rack, another, carved or painted in something white, leans his head back to plead from the cross. The virgin peppers the scene; receiving the divine ray of light; seated with the infant god; lifting his body from the cross.

The painting I have come to see is a landscape. The horizon sits just below the centre line of the canvas, above it a hazy sky with scattered cloud fades from yellow to blue, reflected in the lakes and rivers that recede into the distance below. The viewpoint is roughly equivalent to the level of the second floor on buildings halfway up the well-lit hillside on the right side of the image. On the left of the painting a thicket of bushes and trees, punctuated by a vibrant red flower, partially conceals a more dilapidated building and hosts a menagerie of birds and a large snake, coiled and eating the bloodied body of an animal. The middle distance is populated by many small figures at work, each smaller than the birds tucked into the bushes, differentiated into type by dress and by skin colour. They work at a distance such that the observer, if truly at this floating viewpoint, may just be able to make out the loudest cries and shouts of their work over animal calls from the encroaching thicket.

The figure closest to the viewer, though still in the middle distance, is dressed in a white shirt and wide blue skirt, she has her back turned towards us and walks with two small children, who are either holding her hand or helping her to carry a bundle of sugarcane. Her skin is rendered in dark paint. The two children, wearing just white shorts, are rendered in paint a trace of a shade lighter.

The facticity of the label on the painting's frame – the name: *Een Suikermolen in Brasile (A Sugarmill in Brazil)*; the artist: Frans Post; the date: 1660; and the donor: bequeathed to the museum by B. de Geus van den Heuvel, 1938 – place it into the realm of the technical, the instrumental. It shows a scene conforming to the conventions of Dutch landscape painting, the theatrical staging of space, the waters, the stillness. Yet here, projected onto this stillness, is a fantastical tropical melange: climbing plants, crouching beasts and writhing snakes, and in the centre of this tropical projection, the processing mill of a sugar plantation. A plantation in Pernambuco, Brazil, painted in the Dutch city of Haarlem, overseen from the top of the well-lit hill by the plantation church, operated through the forced labour of enslaved African and Indigenous peoples by Dutch planters.

Later, in the employee break room, Lisa, the curator of education at the museum, who has organised my visit to film at the Depot, will tell me about their debate on whether to return the painting to display.

When people walk into the Depot, even if it's a storage facility not a museum, they think these objects are here because they're beautiful and important, so the assumption is "I should like this painting." How do you mediate that feeling as a museum? We had people working in the research presentation for the entire duration, for six months, so we have a lot of conversations with people about these paintings.

One person really, really couldn't understand why showing this painting to audiences could evoke strong emotions. And the researcher, who was very quick on her feet, asked them, "But would you be okay with having a painting of a concentration camp in your living room?" And he was like, "No!" And she was like, "Well..." And he really got it. Like "Oh, it's because I have a different emotional relationship to that history." If we only talk about these paintings from the perspective of art history the social and political context of when (and why) they were made by Post is not legible.

Post made 160 or so quite similar paintings, some, such as these, were given by Maurits [Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen] to Louis XIV as political gifts. They were propaganda and nostalgia for a time that had already passed. Everything looks very harmonious, nothing bad is being depicted, they were made to say "Look what we were able to accomplish." In the art history discourse, everybody focuses on the nature being represented. For example in this painting, this is a boa constrictor eating an opossum. This is really what a lot of writers focus on. The fauna, the flora, the different types of plants and birds. Carolina Monteiro,³ who we worked with, interprets this as the violence being displaced into nature. "Look what we overcame." "Look what happens if you overpower nature. And you put the logic of industrialism in there." This is a boiling room, one of the most dangerous parts of the mill. And it's really kind of put on the side, in the corner. As if it's sinking into this natural scene.

I'm assuming these are Portuguese, not Dutch clothes?

Yes, the people wearing clothing or a hat are probably Portuguese people who stayed [...] so they aren't enslaved, but they also aren't owners. You have these people here carrying a stick. This is a palanquin [i.e. covered litter] to carry the slave owners so they wouldn't have to walk anywhere or touch the floor. And here is a woman holding the hands of two children.

3 Monteiro, Carolina & Odegard, Erik. *Slavery at the Court of the 'Humanist Prince' Re-examining Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen and his Role in Slavery, Slave Trade and Slave-smuggling in Dutch Brazil*. 2020 https://brill.com/view/journals/jeah/10/1/article-p3_3.xml?language=en

[Carolina] found in newspapers in Holland at the time the fact that, in Dutch Brazil, you could be sold from the age of three. [Post] lived in Brazil for quite a while, he would have known this. His painting is not a picture, but a composition carefully crafted by the artist and painted after returning to the Netherlands. It was his choice to depict a woman with two children holding hands centrally in the painting.⁴

I record details of the painting under the crisp white light, using a German-designed, Japanese-made 85mm lens, built in 2016 according to a patent from 1929, a design named “Sonnar” after the sun. When I am done, the technicians lift the painting from its cradle and return it to the rack. While I film, the audience files out, their time limited by the amount of humidity the air conditioning can scrub. I’m briefly concerned that the papery sound of their wrapped shoes is audible on the recording. The heavy doors snick shut. The technicians roll the rack back into place. The lights, no longer sensing movement, flicker out.

+++



Een Suikermolen in Brasillie

Frans Post 1660

Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

4 Heinis, Lisa, *Conversation with Sol Archer*, 2023. Curator of Education at Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam.

The past dreams the present, the present dreams the past.

I am going to take a stroll around a garden that is on the one hand aggressively controlled, drenched with Roundup⁵ and surrounded by insurmountable walls, and on the other, charmingly bucolic, a little dilapidated, and all too convincingly comfortable. Tweed and razor wire. Linen, poplar, gesso, and oil.

I'm rooted in this garden. My taste has been formed by the canons of representation enshrined in museums. This text may be looking at landscape in the Dutch tradition, but it's a way to think through the modes of cultural production that have shaped me, and the expectations of access I have as an artist trained in white traditions from a European country, with a bachelor's degree in painting from a historic London college. An artist trained to appreciate the formal qualities, the gestural, the abstract. The restrained. I started this search thinking that I could make some connection between the contemporary ecological imagination and historical traditions of world building through landscape. To try to understand something of how these representational practices continue to haunt the imagination. To try to understand what I have been made into and what the things I make are doing. And so here I am, at the Boijmans van Beuningen Depot with a camera and microphones, during a record-breaking windstorm, looking through the hoard of objects in storage, searching for a film on "conservation and tropical nature as spectacle", in front of a painting of a forced labour camp in Dutch Brazil by Frans Janszoon Post. "A sugar mill."



Depot Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Image Sol Archer

5 Roundup is a brand name of herbicide originally produced by Monsanto. "Protect Beds and Borders from unwanted weeds" Roundup website, accessed 2025/01/27

+++

In 1630 the Dutch West Indies Company, or GWC (for Dutch *Geocrooieerde Westindische Compagnie*), seized the northeast of Brazil, principally Pernambuco, the largest and richest sugar producing region in the world, which they held until 1654. In 1636 the company appointed Johan Maurits von Nassau-Siegen, a minor German prince related to the stadtholder family (the forerunner of the Dutch royal family), as governor of the colony, renamed Nieuwe Holland, which he proceeded to run as his own private fiefdom. Frans Post was one of a stable of artists and scientists commissioned by Maurits to propagandise Dutch Brazil, and in that role is credited as being the first European artist to paint landscapes of the Americas.

Only six paintings by Post are known to have been made during his time in Brazil. Following his return to Haarlem, however, he produced somewhere between 160 and 250 paintings and engravings “of” Brazil for the European market. Other than cartography, there are very few other visual representations from the early colonial period of land in what became known as South America, so Post’s paintings, despite mostly having been painted in the Netherlands, apply a significant weight to the imagination of the tropical early-colonial period.

Dutch Brazil offers a compelling subject, for its position in the Groot Desseyne⁶ of the Netherlands companies’ colonial project, for its relative brevity, and for the significance which landscape painting held in producing both the imaginary of the tropical colony as spectacle, and thereby the imaginary of the nascent Netherlands, and Europe in general, as the not-there, the not tropical. The commercial colony is peculiarly little known in the Netherlands, despite Maurits building a palace with the spoils from Brazil – now the internationally renowned Mauritshuis Museum, which houses Vermeer’s *Meisje met de parel* (*Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 1665) – between the offices of the prime minister and the king in The Hague. In Brazil itself, when the Dutch colony is discussed, it is praised for its reputation for tolerance and humanism, an image carefully and expensively constructed by Maurits, who extensively patronised the arts and sciences to build his (still extant) reputation for orderly and tolerant rule, as the “Humanist Prince in the Tropics”.

Post’s work was “re-discovered” by the Brazilian elite during the post-war European reconstruction, while the father of leading Brazilian conservator Christina Penna was the Brazilian ambassador to the Netherlands. In this economically

6 The Groot Desseyne (“Grand Design”) was the scheme devised by the Dutch West Indies Company in 1623 to seize Iberian-occupied territories in South America and Africa in order to both undermine Spain’s ability to fund the Dutch/Spanish Eighty Years’ War, and to control both sides of the Atlantic enslavement and plantation economy

devastated period, Penna recounts,⁷ hard-up upper-class Dutch would come to the ambassadorial residence to sell artworks, carpets, and precious items which the Brazilian upper class, happy to obtain items they could use to construct a narrative of European cultural-scientific origin, purchased in large numbers. This post-Branqueamento period of constructing a Brazilian self-image, most famously represented by Oswald de Andrade's Cannibalist Manifesto of 1928,⁸ saw a great investment in the collection and consumption of European images of Brazil. Brazilian private collectors purchased works by Frans Post (among other artists), brought them to Brazil, and in the following decades turned their collections into museums. There are vanishingly few Brazilian collections from the 1950s onwards which do not contain at least one Frans Post, no small number being of indistinct post-war provenance. Thus, a large contingent of images of the early Brazilian colonial period were brought to the country by the inheritors of the plantation and enslavement wealth the paintings were originally made to veil.

“Só a antropofagia nos une. Socialmente. Económicamente. Politicamente.”
Says Oswaldo, rediscovering America.⁹



Poster for the Leões da Casa Verde samba school carnival 2021 courtesy Diego Martins

Lá, lá, rá, lá, rá, rá, rá	Lá, lá, rá, lá, rá, rá, rá
Pernambuco teve a glória	Pernambuco held the glory
Divulgando na história	throughout the history
Do Brasil colonial	Of colonial Brazil,
O governo altaneiro	The haughty government
Para o solo brasileiro	On Brazilian soil
De João Maurício de Nassau	Of João Maurício de Nassau
O progresso foi marcado	Marked by progress
E por ele foi deixado	And because of him, left
Na expansão comercial	Commercially enriched
Como governador	As governor,
Conseguiu incrementar	He increased
A produção nacional	National production.
Foi Maurício de Nassau	It was Maurício de Nassau
Que desenvolveu o Brasil	Who developed the
Na indústria açucareira	Sugar industry in Brazil
E o transporte da nossa madeira	And the transportation
João Maurício de Nassau	of our wood
Culto, sereno e jovial	João Maurício de Nassau
Deu assistência social	Cultured, serene, and jovial
Ao grande Brasil colonial	Who gave social assistance
	To the great colonial Brazil

Samba Enredo - Brasil Holandês, Homenagem a Maurício de Nassau Carnival song of Imperio Serrano Samba School. 1959. Autores do Samba: Mano Décio, Abílio Martins e Chocolate

7 Penna, Christina, interviewed in 2024 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil by Sol Archer and Tanja Baudoin. As yet unpublished.

8 Andrada, Oswaldo, *Manifesto Antropófago*. Revista de Antropofagia. 1928. English translation Bary, Leslie. 1991.

9 Cannibalism alone unites us. Socially. Economically. Philosophically.

Dutch Brazil's reputation for tolerance seems to be in stark contrast to the company's intention of consolidating dominance of the transatlantic enslavement industry, and to the lived reality that the colony was the first Dutch slave society, a place of "total violence"¹⁰ where the necropolitical enslavement plantation system that the company went on to impose on its later territorial holdings was systematised. It is also starkly in contrast to the cultural archive I am following, the visual record of the colony under the brush of the painters Frans Post and Albert Eckhout, feted for the beauty and botanical accuracy of their works. Works that almost entirely feature enslaved Africans embedded in scenes of generalised tropical nature, in depictions of forced labour that studiously efface the contemporaneously well-documented conditions of constant torture, Achille Mbembe's "Death in Life", which drove that labour and swelled the coffers of the Dutch West Indies Company's investors and their descendants. A cruelty noted by Post's contemporaries for its effacement from his landscapes. An anonymous note in the folio accompanying one of Post's paintings in Maurits' gift to Louis XIV reads "In the mouth of the kiln [i.e. the boiling tanks] the fire is so hot that the black slaves prefer to die, and for this reason they poison themselves when they are able, suffering as they do with that heat. The Portuguese, to prevent them escaping, cut their tendons."¹¹ Alongside effacing this racialised horror, Post's work veils also the unprecedented ecological devastation of the colonial sugar enterprise. For every kilo of sugar produced, 15 kilos of wood was burned just to fuel the boiling vats. In 1650 alone, 28,500 tonnes of sugar was shipped from Dutch Brazil to Europe, meaning that 427,500 tonnes of rainforest was burnt to fuel the refineries in that one year.¹² "[T]he war waged against Black lives was also an armed conflict with the forest itself."¹³

To counter the shortage of workers from the Dutch Lowlands, Maurits extended freedom of worship (that is relative freedom, but highly taxed) to Catholic and Sephardic Jewish settlers, instrumentalising these communities as racialised intermediaries in the psychotic cruelty of colonialism, while he commissioned his fleet to capture the slaving forts of Elmina (in present-day Ghana) and Luanda (in present-day Angola) and oversaw the capture and forced transport of tens of thousands of people from Africa to Brazil.¹⁴

10 Ferreira da Silva, Denise, *Unpayable Debt*. 2023 pg 16

11 Angela Vanhaelen, *Remaking Mountains and Necropastoral Worldscapes*, Joan Carlisle-Irving Lecture Series. 2024

Vanhaelen rightly asserts that this is an anti-colonial act, not simply suicide as escape, but a knowing attack against the institution of enslavement through the only means available to the enslaved.

12 Ibid.

13 Vanhaelen, Angela. *The Plantation Worldscope of Colonial Dutch Brazil*, In: *Art Museums and the Legacies of the Dutch Atlantic Slave Trade* 2024 pg 256

14 van den Berge, Lukas, *Dealing with Ambiguity: Johan Maurits, Black Pete and the Crisis of Dutch Identity*. 2018

What, exactly, is the meaning of tolerance and order, when applied to a racialised regime of total violence? A regime in which racialised violence was so total that it was to a large extent an uprising of the enslaved led by the self-freed Henrique Diaz, and the expense of launching (failed) expeditions to eradicate mocambos/quilombos, particularly Palmares, a community of 11,000 self-freed enslaved Africans, that brought the end of Dutch rule in Northeast Brazil. "Slavery under the Calvinist Dutch was more cruel than under the Portuguese."¹⁵

Is tolerance really ever anything more than hatred with good marketing?

+++

By the time Lisa showed me the Depot of Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, I had already spent months trying to gain access to conservation work on Post's paintings. It wasn't until a year later, while I was on residency in Brazil and still trying to work my way into collections, now in clumsy Portuguese, that it occurred to me to ask myself why I even expected to have access at all.

+++

I take a taxi uphill to visit Christina, with whom my friend Tanja, a Dutch curator who has lived for the best part of a decade in Rio de Janeiro, worked for a while. Carrying Dutch time, we are on time, which is to say, early. So we sit a while and talk and listen to the city laid out below us. It's almost exactly a year after my visit to the Boijmans van Beuningen Depot and I am on residency at a university in São Paulo. Winter is starting in Rio de Janeiro. The warm night settled early. Cicadas make their somnolent efforts to find one another around us, as sound from the city is softened by the hillside's forest cover. We are waiting near the Norwegian Sjømannskirken (Seamen's Church) which has some kind of event on. A dribble of taxis is delivering guests who are buzzed in in Norwegian, while Scandi pop music is playing in the background.

Christina's 1970s house is a curious melange inspired by Goan vernaculars seeded by Portuguese settlers when they invaded coastal India in 1510. On the steep Rio hillside it steps up a number of levels, and we sit in the garden at the top for a meal and drinks. Christina is working on a restoration of the 1851 Palácio do Itamaraty, which housed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The printed wallpaper of vivid tropical scenes, installed in the 19th century, has long since

15 Feuer, Lewis S, *The Dream of Benedict de Spinoza*. American Imago; a Psychoanalytic Journal for the Arts and Sciences. 1957 pg 232

faded, and the decision has been made to reprint rather than retain it. Zuber, the Parisian printing house that made the original paper in 1840 (48 years before the end of legal slavery in Brazil), still exists, as do the original pear wood blocks they cut in 1693 (18 years before France invaded Rio de Janeiro), from which the wallpaper was pressed. Over 330 years old, the blocks are ready to reproduce their original design in fresh vibrant colour, to be pulled from their shelf, inked, and imported again from France to Brazil. The designs feature beautiful renderings of the mountains and bays around (presumably) Rio de Janeiro, as well as lavishly detailed depictions of Europeans attacking indigenous villages. A little drunk from the heat and the iced “Antarctica” beer, we browse installation plans, nodding along to the bass pulsing from behind the tall garden wall, where a Baile Funk event is happening in the favela with which they share the hillside.

+++

While still in Rio I visit the Museu da Chácara do Céu, a small state museum in the former home of Castro Maya, wealthy industrialist and collector of modernist works and Brasiliana. The museum holds a painting by Post, the varnish of which has significantly darkened. It’s a struggle to discern the details listed in the catalogue, but the similarity to the painting in the Boijmans remains startlingly clear. The same landscape recedes into the distance, the same dark tangle of undergrowth on the left, the same hill of buildings on the right, overseen by the chapel, this time much smaller. The same mill, processing the same sugar. The museum catalogue describes the figures, still clearly racialised despite the darkened varnish:

“On the banks of a river, in a large courtyard, the Sugar Mill. On the right, in the foreground, the mill building with the mill, the purging house, and the porch (with plenty of firewood to supply the furnace). In front of the porch, the grinding counter associated with the drying platform. In the aforementioned section, black men and women work on specific tasks, namely: transporting and grinding the sugar cane, placing the ‘bread’ on the awning of the counter, macerating, breaking the clods with ‘toletes’ and spreading them out to dry. The work is supervised by the sugar master, overseer, and cashier. In the background, the two-story house of the sugar mill owner and in the third, the chapel. Around it, dwellings. On the left, compact tropical vegetation with a small anteatr standing out among the foliage. In the background, the floodplain.”

No mention is made of enslavement. The same sky, here yellowed, fades to a brown blue overhead. The same snake in the same tangled tropical undergrowth is barely visible through the aged varnish.

Denise, the collection librarian speculates that when the collection was made public in the 1980s, the then librarian, a white Brazilian, aimed for an objective, neutral, language, which now obscures the violence of the social organisation it describes.

Denise and I browse the extensive collection of this wealthy “industrialist”, particularly the Post catalogue, with seemingly endless pages of nearly identical paintings of plantations, the botanical engravings of the German botanist Carl Friedrich Philipp von Martius, and studies of the dress of enslaved Africans by French painter Jean-Baptiste Debret. The ageing air conditioning system strains against the heat and humidity of winter in Rio de Janeiro, roaring particularly heavily in the library to maintain the 19th-century folios and books in an emulated Northern European climate. We linger, chilly, in the library until closing time, where the dry air preserves German illustrations of the plants growing under the dripping exhaust from the climate control machine outside.



Paisagem Brasileira Frans Post ca. 1637 - 1669 Museu da Chácara do Céu

Michael Gaudio, writing about the aurality of the Atlantic world, brings specific attention to the stillness and silence of Dutch landscape painting, and specifically the almost total effacement of conflict in Post's work: "Alois Riegl [...] dwells on the lack of action in Dutch realism and notes that 'there is always just enough activity to distract us from noticing how little is really going on.' When Dutch paintings take us to 'boredom's threshold,' as Angela Vanhaelen puts it, [...] they produce that inner state of distanced and calm attentiveness that was for Riegl the proper mood of modern aesthetic experience. Post's Brazilian landscapes push this kind of viewing, which Riegl called 'distant vision' (*Fernsicht*), to its limits by removing nearly all of those small but distracting signs of activity."¹⁶

The Dutch landscape tradition departs from the Italianate proposition that landscape is the stage for history, and proposes instead landscape itself as history. As such, paintings of the high period of Dutch landscapes are conspicuously silent, static, conspicuously without action, the land is the story, what happens on it a footnote. The genre emerged during the Eighty Years' War, a period of extreme violence during which Dutch nobility fought the Spanish crown for control of the provinces that would become the Dutch Republic. Besides the nation-conjuring glorification of qualities of the famous Dutch light, the land, and the lives on it, Dutch landscape acted as an aesthetic space for escape into a reverential boredom, a realm predictable in its composition and only populated at a safe, quiet distance by small, barely engaging figures. Meditative. Calming. Detailed. Detached.

Post's paintings conform to these conventions of silence and appeals to realism. During a period of rapid and violent re-organisation of land in the Netherlands and extraordinary violence in colonised territory, they project a tranquil fantasy of pre-modern Holland onto South America: From a slightly elevated position the landscape steps into the blue distance, a flat expanse of winding streams and water, with patchworks of forest and field under towering skies, casting a nostalgic fiction of order onto the colony. Only faint traces suggest the war Post witnessed between Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese companies along the Brazilian littoral, and silenced are the horrors of the slave trade and the genocide of Indigenous peoples. Many paintings show fantastically embellished ruins of Olinda Cathedral, demolished by the Dutch West India Company (GWC) play-acting as Roman ruins, conjuring a specious European ancestry for the commercial enterprise of the colony. Maurits himself leans in heavily to both the colony's mythic Roman heritage and the moral uprightness of commerce, writing to his employer, "The die has been cast. We have crossed not the Rubi-

16 Gaudio, Michael, *Sound, Image, Silence: Art and the Aural Imagination in the Atlantic World*, 2019 pg 39

con, but an ocean.”¹⁷ This was quoted by Barlaeus, his court historian, who suffered from glass delusion, a psychiatric disorder of the period that led sufferers to believe they were made of glass (at the time, in the form of optics, a new and paradigm-collapsing technology) and as such that they were becoming fragile and transparent: “We differ from the Greeks and Romans in this aspect: for the former their main goal was glory, for the latter it was utility; for us the striving for glory is combined with the striving for profit.”¹⁸

The pastoral familiarity and peace of these landscapes is ruptured by bricolages of “exotica” – assemblages of singular Brazilian animals, each alone of their kind, naturalised in a condition without relation, and assembled for consumption by the eye. The exotic incursions, nestled in the foreground of the colonial plantation’s order and organisation, promote a “shopkeepers logic”¹⁹ model of “Nature” as an infinitely variable spectacle of resources, specimens, and violence to be abstracted, arranged, and exploited. Always already individuated, singular, outside the relational framework of society, always already in opposition to the relational and verbal order of culture laid out above it.

“[M]ore than guns, shackles, and whips were required to obliterate the past. Lordship and bondage required sorcery too,” teaches Saidiya Hartman.²⁰ The enlightenment illusion of nature as an ethical regime apart from culture, into which the technology of racialisation could administratively transform peoples from the African continent into beings available for kidnapping, enslavement, and transport, various Indigenous groups as more or less human, and subject to differing levels of oppression, and various Europeans as differentially White, is made a concrete technology repeatedly through these “landscape[s] of terror”.²¹ The viewer’s eye is led progressively from the bestiary in the foreground, through the productive space of the plantation, peopled by the enslaved in shorts, indigenous visitors and traders in long robes, up through Portuguese farmers, the armed Calvinist overseer in a wide-brimmed sun hat, and finally the focal point; the plantation church and mansion. Each body is differentiated by its position in the labour economy and by dress. Classed positions from the Dutch pastoral landscape (itself a representational regime “developed as a means to deny the mistreatment and dispossession of peasants and rural workers”²²) are translocated onto the racialised hierarchy of the colony, which, by applying this familiarity, works hard, in silence, to beautify the slave society’s “unspeakable extremes of violence”.²³

17 Weststieijn, Arthur. *Machiavelli in Dutch Colonial Ideology* (2017) pg 11

18 Barlaeus, *History of Brazil* (1647)

19 Goddard, Jean-Christophe. *A Scabby Black Brazilian* (2023) pg. 48

20 Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother* (2007) pg 155

21 Vanhaelen, Angela. *Art, Affect, and Enslavement: The Song of the Oxcart in Colonial Dutch Brazil*. (2024) pg 6

22 Ibid. pg 4

23 Ibid. pg 4

+++

It's mid-morning in Recife in Pernambuco, Northeast Brazil. The city was formerly named Mauritsstad, the administrative and military capital of the GWC occupation. There's a kind of metallic taste in the air that promises rain, the sky is flat and white and sound feels suppressed. The weather is giving me frequent migraines that will recur when I get back to Rotterdam in the height of the Dutch summer. Later today I will visit a private museum on the periphery of the city that holds possibly the largest collection of paintings by Frans Post in the world. Before this I visit the Palácio do Governo on the Praça da República. Busses heave and sigh around the square, and a pedestrian crossing signal beeps rapid time in the background. Birds quarrel from an ancient baobab tree, brought from Africa, which is reputedly the inspiration for the baobab in Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*. The Capibaribe River, whose black-soiled alluvial floodplain in Pernambuco provided perfect conditions for developing sugarcane plantations, saunters by behind a roadside stand of mangrove.

One of Maurits' first acts, after renaming Recife "Mauritsstad" after himself, was to construct a botanical garden using slave labour to transplant coconut trees and food-bearing plants from the Brazilian colony and abroad around his palace (called, with a characteristically staggering lack of conscience, Vrijburg, or "Free Town"). "No-one loves roses more than generals."²⁴ This was the first botanical garden in Brazil, and while operating as a source of knowledge, demonstration of wealth, and propaganda machine in producing the image of the scientist prince, it was simultaneously a siege machine, a food supply for the occupiers in the ongoing war against Indigenous and Portuguese enemies.²⁵ The garden: through one eye, a place of order and beauty; and through the other, the militarised assemblage of life ways, bent to the occupier's will.

I plant myself with my camera across the road from the site of this garden, the Praça da República. A curious dog plants herself beside me under the tripod to look at what I'm looking at.

The square is enclosed by a spiked, shoulder-height iron fence, and just inside the entrance a lower fence, more recent and with knee-high loops rather than spiked uprights, encloses a granite plinth in the form of intersecting pyramids, on which sits a darkly patinated bronze figure of a man depicted from ample hips up to a peakless cap. With his left hand he delicately holds a drape off to his left side, discreetly concealing all but the pommel of his sword, and reveal-

24 Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo, channelling Rabelais, in the introduction to: Goddard, Jean-Christophe. *A Scabby Black Brazilian*, Urbanomic (2023) pg 13

25 Angélica da Silva, Maria and Mota Alcides, Melissa, *Collecting and Framing the Wilderness: The Garden of Johan Maurits (1604-79) in North-East Brazil*, 2002

ing a garlanded plaque around where the fork in his legs would be, if the statue had legs. This figure, however, is not the type to be walking anywhere. His right hand is pressed upon his chest, as if expressing mild surprise, caressing a cross-shaped medal with flared arms.²⁶

He wears a filigreed suit of armour on which vining plants contour his body and guide attention to his shoulders. Here, a rupture occurs. The figure's shoulders are in the form of furiously frowning elephants. Their ears spread onto his upper chest and their pointed trunks curl around his armoured biceps. A small elephant pendant hangs from his sash.²⁷

Just below my eye level, the plaque reads "JOHANNES MAVRITIVS NASSOVIAE COMES BRASILIAE PRAEFECTVS MILES DUX PRINCEPS ARCHITECTVS FAVOR ARTIVM".²⁸ Below, mounted on the black granite, is another plaque, which reads:

**Johann Maurits von Nassau-Siegen
(1604-1679)**

**Governador do Brasil Holandês
(1636-1644)**

**Doação da Republica Federal da Alemanha
ao Povo Pernambucano
Recife, 17.06.2004²⁹**

This statue in the square infiltrates my attention. I can't shake the weirdness of Maurits, former governor of Brazil, memorialised for the ages as a body made up of elephants. A body enrobed in perhaps the most paradigmatically not-Eu-

26 The medal of the Order of Saint John is the German Protestant branch of the Knights Hospitaller, the oldest surviving chivalric order, which generally is considered to have been founded in Jerusalem in 1099.

27 The medallion of the Elefantordenen, Danish chivalric order, founded in 15th century, official since 1693.

28 "Johan Maurits, Count of Nassau, governor of Brazil, army commander, architect, patron of the arts"

29 Gift from the federal republic of German to the people of Pernambuco, Recife, 17 June 2004

ropean animal. The animal that since Hannibal's march on Rome represents the gigantism of the exotic, terrifying, and ultimately destroyed other, halted by the territory of Europe. Tamed. What is this fantasy I am witnessing here?

The statue faces the steps of the Pernambuco regional government building, itself on the site of his own palace, Vrijburg, in Recife. What was the intention of installing him in 2004, here, overseeing the operations of the Pernambuco government? Is it a threat? Is Europe waiting in the wings to waltz back in and re-introduce "order" to this garden?

As I pace around filming the elephant-themed statue of Maurits, the public square's maintenance team are on a break. They watch me from the shade as I attempt to find an angle that somehow frames the tension between Maurits, the government building, and the little fence that either holds him in or holds the Pernambucanos out.

It's only pointed out to me some months later, by the Brazilian curator Adriana Alves, that in facing towards the seat of power, this elephant-wrapped gift to "the People of Pernambuco" in fact has his back turned towards them. We look up the collective noun for elephants, and discover that it is "a memory".



Details from Bartholomeus Eggers (copy after)
Bust of Johan Maurits, Count of Nassau-Siegen (1604-1679)
Praça da Republica, Recife, Insituto Ricardo Brennand, Recife, and Mauritshuis museum Den Haag. Images Sol Archer and Mauritshuis, The Hague. Collage Sol Archer

+++

I am met at the gate to the Instituto Ricardo Brennand by Eduardo, a researcher in the archives. It's humid in a way that feels like the hot palm of a hand resting on your head. Heavy clouds hang on the horizon.

Once inside the gate we pass "authorised" reproductions of Michelangelo's *David* and Rodin's *Thinker*, and a pastiche mediaeval castle, which contains a collection of mediaeval weapons and nudes. The gardens, peppered with marble sculptures, are beautiful, nestled between Brazilian commando and military police training land, over the road from the Botanical Garden of Recife, the Federal University of Pernambuco, and two institutions affiliated with Ricardo's cousins – Cornelio Brennand's museum collection, currently under construction, and Francisco Brennand's ceramics workshop.

The Instituto Ricardo Brennand (IRB) holds possibly the world's largest collection of paraphernalia from Dutch Brazil, including a white reproduction of the same bust of Maurits by Bartholomeus Eggers that I visited in the morning, overseeing the regional government building, and a box of gold bars and florins stamped with the GWC blazon beside the hall of Frans Post paintings.

I go on to spend three days at the institute, filming, observing, and talking about maintaining paintings in this climate. One of the Frans Post paintings, *Forte Frederick Hendrik, (1640)*, was made in Recife (Mauritsstad). It shows a wide, flat territory, with the sea encroaching from the left. In the distance the titular fort sits on the horizon, the centre of the image is occupied by three figures, reflected in the still stream that fills the extreme foreground: a white man with distinctly defined legs, wearing a bright-red coat and sun hat and brandishing a staff taller than he is, a white woman in a long orange dress balancing a basket on her head, and the third, walking away from them, is just a silhouette, a figure depicted in paint so black it has neither features nor details, wearing only a white loincloth and carrying a basket. Like the rest of the paintings, which were all produced in Haarlem, this was brought here from Europe by Brennand's buyers. The paintings are kept behind glass in a large Pinacoteca. Periodically, frogs and snakes are found, cooled down to torpor in the exhibition hall.

I am trying to record a conversation in the Frans Post room on the weekly day that schools have free entrance. Hundreds of teenagers are hanging out in front of Post's paintings. Here, behind glass, beside a cabinet of actual gold bars, their history is presented as the beauty and peace of a landscape into which is nestled the "captive bod[ies] in the scene of subjugation",³⁰ the enslavement camp. Image after image, side by side, reproduces the colony's racialised structure as landscape, as natural, as aesthetic, sweetened for an aristocratic Eu-

ropean palate, allegorising the territory outside which humidity scrubbers and heat exchanges furiously keep at bay.

These images, imported into the territory they purport to show, operate as a strangely liminal historical document, *en-naturing* the colony's racialised hierarchy, not just *normalising* racialised violence, but forcefully *inserting it into*, or *encapsulating* it within the spectacle of nature. Subsuming into the aesthetic logic of landscape, the "sublime violence of colonialism."³¹ Introducing the state's contemporary school children to "their history".

The banality of repetition. The palm on the left. The church on the right. The balcony. The enslaved. The hat. The bricolage of animals. The birds. The bloodied body of a prey animal. The snake.

The paintings are hung a little lower than I am accustomed to, perhaps to better meet an adolescent's perspective. The glass protection in front of the age-darkened canvases reflects the room in such a way that it's only possible to see the image clearly by using the silhouette of your own body to block the reflected wall behind.

One image, revealed in my silhouette, stays with me. It's tiny, the catalogue lists 8 cm by 11 cm, but it seems much smaller, it has a dark wooden frame which emulates rattan weave that is in total perhaps ten times the image's area.

It is a landscape with just three figures, one tall, dressed in a blue skirt and white shirt, and two small children, wearing only loose shorts. Each has dark skin, they are facing away from us and walking along a path, that is to say, looking along with us to the horizon, towards which they have been walking for four hundred years. A patch of water in front of them reflects the sky overhead, the blue distance is cut by a palm tree curving over from the right. It's a rapid oil sketch in thick, gestural, and precise paintwork which still holds the presence of the painter four hundred years later. The figures of the woman in a wide skirt and two children in shorts are registered with simple strokes that barely lift them from the landscape.

Brennand's taste for collecting reputedly originates in him winning a knife from his father in childhood. He died from covid in 2020, at 92 years old. He was born just 39 years after the end of legal slavery in Brazil.

How quickly the past is made.

On my last day Eduardo encourages me to come back for an extra day because the Gobelin tapestry room, which has been under renovation, will reopen.

The tapestries, based on cartoons by Eckhout, were commissioned by Maurits – “The Brazilian”, as he called himself after moving to The Hague – as a gift for Louis XIV of France, “The Sun King”. A gift to show off the “glory” of his “striving for profit”. A gift to crow of “the humanist prince in the tropics” slaving. Of his “blatantly accepting bribes and enrich[ing] himself more than anyone else in the service of the company”. Of his kidnapping of tens of thousands of people from Africa.³²

Here it all starts to come together. These tapestries show Brazil as a generalised tropics. Birds of all sorts, vegetation, fish, and animals spill from the embroidered frame. Brazilian flora: bananas, vines, philodendron, but also coconuts (introduced from Asia by the Portuguese), and pomegranates – representing the Moorish population expelled from the Iberian peninsula. Big cats. Tapirs. Snakes. Monkeys. Crocodiles. One tapestry depicts two dark-skinned men, pushed almost out of the frame, conspicuously depicted without the Crowned IM (Johannes Maurits) brand which appears on the same figures in Eckhout’s sketchbooks, carrying a third man in a palanquin. And there, peering out from behind a tree... Dürer’s rhinoceros? In this Brazilian landscape? To its left a zebra rears, screaming, between a peacock’s tail and a lemon tree, suffering the attack of a jaguar. One of the figures carrying the covered palanquin turns his head with a smile on his face, showing off a large pearl earring, looking back towards where, tucked into the background – as much a part of the spectacle of tropical nature as the flowing river, the dripping red flowers, the screaming beasts, the tumbling birds, the bloodied zebra, and the sardonic rhino – a sugar mill squats, with people in forced labour rendered with dark thread.

The tree, the cashews, the pomegranates, the vine, the gourd, the snake, the capybara. The rhino. The elephants. The sugar mill. The woman in wide blue skirts and white shirt, her back to the painter. The two children in only white shorts.

Sold at three years old.

The school group visiting the institute, being shown their past as landscape. They photograph themselves and one another in front of the paintings. Each group is dressed in shirts with the name and colour of their respective schools. One group have “Escola Municipal Mauricio de Nassau” emblazoned across their backs. An alarm warns whenever someone gets too close to the enclosures as they strain to see through the reflective glass and oxidised varnish. Inside, laughter, paintings, alarms, chatter, phone camera shutter sounds. Outside, frog calls, the hot rain, the *David*. The favela. The trash collectors’ horse-drawn cart outside the gate. The radios of the armed guards in military fatigues.

32 Monteiro, Carolina Odegard, Erik: *Slavery at the Court of the “Humanist Prince”: Re-examining Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen and his Role in Slavery, Slave Trade and Slave-smuggling in Dutch Brazil*. 2020

“If spectators have the right to view photographed persons in scenes of captivity, Black people will forever be presented as ‘slaves,’” writes Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, “as potential slaves or as fugitive slaves who had to be returned to their ‘owners.’”³³



Le cheval rayé (The striped horse). Woven at the Gobelins Manufactory, France. After cartoons by Albert Eckhout and Frans Post. Instituto Ricardo Brennand.

+++

On the way back from Recife to São Paulo, where I am on residency, I sit beside Danilson, a Brazilian in his mid-thirties. He’s travelling to support a friend who is taking the entrance exams for the civil service in Brasília, the capital. It’s Danilson’s first flight, the first time he’s left his state. We switch seats so he can watch São Paulo emerge out of the darkness below us. Why on earth am I all the way over here, looking for four-hundred-year-old paintings beside Danilson, who has never needed to leave his state?

33 Azoulay Ariella Aïsha: *The Captive Photograph*, The Boston Review (2020) pg 5

+++

The permanent exhibition hall of the São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP) is wide and tall, the two longest walls are glass with floor-length blinds. Rows of paintings lead away from the door, ranked roughly according to period, each supported on a sheet of laminated glass inserted in a concrete cuboid foot. This is a display apparatus designed as a coherent part of the 1968 museum by the Brazilian modernist architect Lina Bo Bardi and also used by the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen Depot in Rotterdam in their 2020 mirrored bowl-shaped building. The glass easels mean that the viewing public can be seen behind each painting. It's a theatrical, forest-like experience, with legs passing beneath the frame: Walk a few steps. Pause. Shuffle your feet. Lean forward. Turn. Walk a few more steps. Occasionally, you unexpectedly come eye to eye with a spectator on the reverse of the painting as you both move together, and for a fraction of a second the act of looking at a painting resolves into a unexpected mirroring, until, faintly smiling at the unexpected intimacy, eyes avert. Move on.

Aline, one of the staff conservators, is showing me the Frans Post works. Four large landscapes with a now familiar composition form a wall.

We stop before one, *Paisagem pernambucana com rio* (*Pernambucan Landscape with River*, 1668). The horizon bisects the frame. Above, as usual, a graduated sky with light fluffy clouds. Below, a small hill rolls away to the left, an ochre floodplain occupies the right and centre.³⁴ Curiously, no tangled foreground hides animals, and no plantation equipment is depicted. A small cluster of people, carrying baskets on their heads, can just be made out as they walk away from the viewer. The fugitive quality of organic pigments over time, or perhaps some past intentional erasure has left the figures all but vanished. The landscape, still crisp, recedes into the distance.

Aline holds an LED torch above the image, raking the brushwork with steeply inclined light. The all-but-erased figures show only where white paint has pooled in the brushstrokes or the wood grain. Have they somehow escaped being fixed forever in this fantasy? Or has someone hidden them in it, spread their pigment as an atmospheric effect across the landscape?

In the very foreground, in the grooves of the brushstrokes, it is just possible to make out a wide skirt and two small pairs of legs in white shorts.

34 "Everything that one sees in the countryside which has a yellow colour is the cane, from which they press the sugar." Correa de Lago, Pedro & Bia, *Frans Post 1612-1610*. 2023

+++

Back in the Netherlands, in Voorburg, as these paintings are being made, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza grinds lenses for telescopes and microscopes. Devices for desensorialising, for *Fernsicht*, distant vision, for divorcing sight from the distances of the social body. It's 1664, six years before he too moves to The Hague. To the house in which he will die young, a 16-minute walk from Maurits' palace, of tuberculosis and silicosis brought on by exposure to glass dust. While working on *Ethics*, he writes to his friend Peter Balling:

“When one morning, after the day had dawned, I woke up from a very unpleasant dream, the images, which had presented themselves to me in sleep, remained before my eyes just as vividly as though the things had been real, especially the image of a certain black and scabby Brazilian whom I had never seen before. This image disappeared for the most part when, in order to divert my thoughts, I cast my eyes on a book, or something else. But, as soon as I lifted my eyes again without fixing my attention on any particular object, the same image of this same negro appeared with the same vividness again and again, until the head of it gradually vanished.”³⁵

How strange that Spinoza, the great rationalist, without reflecting upon it, identifies this unknown black phantasm, this “it”, as Brazilian.



Europe and America, Museu da Casa Brasileira (Museum of the Brazilian House) São Paulo, Brazil. Photos Sol Archer

35 Spinoza, Benedict, Letter 17 (1664) – translation Jean-Christophe Goddard, *A Scabby Black Brazilian* (2024)

+++

It's dawn, I'm on the train from Rotterdam, going to photograph a friend's exhibition where I'll drop and smash a rented lens. Light is infiltrating the early October morning. Arrow-straight water channels passing the window keep time like the on-beats of winter's waltz. A blue painted bench angled to watch the on-coming trains winks by in astounding colour. I read Eileen Myles write "Because we couldn't make a film I just had to decide that writing could be a film".³⁶

We zip past another elevated viewing platform, from which three elderly men with binoculars watch the train go by.

Frantz Fanon, who renamed himself Ibrahim,³⁷ tells us: "Only for the white man the Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self – that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable."³⁸

Before the mirror of the tropics was introduced, Whiteness, as used to describe/produce Europeans, did not exist. The earliest recorded use³⁹ of it is in *The Triumphs of Truth*, a 1613 play by Londoner Thomas Middleton, in which an "African King" looks out across the audience and declares: "I see amazement set upon the faces/ Of these white people, wond'ring and strange gazes."⁴⁰ The White subject conjured into being in words written by an English playwright, as spectator, as consumer of images of otherness, put into the mouth of an imaginary African.

+++

Six months after visiting Recife I go to help a friend pick up a second-hand couch in The Hague. Winter has set in in the Netherlands, its dark and biting cold. A snowy cold snap has stripped the last of the leaves from the trees. We load the van and go to visit the Mauritshuis, the museum in Maurits' Den Haag palace. To enter you descend a spiral staircase from the gated courtyard on the Vijverhof, pass through the level of the water surrounding the museum, and enter through tall rotating glass doors into a subterranean hall. Until recently another replica of the bust of Maurits in elephants that oversees the Government of Recife and the IRB tapestry room was the first thing a visitor would see, and is what I came hoping to photograph. Now it is a large-scale wall print of

36 Myles, Eileen, *Chelsea Girls*. 1994

37 Taylor, Patrick, *Frantz Fanon and Mythology*. 1982

38 Fanon, Frantz (Ibrahim), *Black Skin White Masks*. 1952 pg 161

39 Paris, Jamie. *Bad Blood, Black Desires: On the Fragility of Whiteness in Middleton and Rowley's The Changeling*. 2021

40 Middleton, Thomas, *The Triumphs of Truth*. 1613

the *Girl with a Pearl Earring* by Vermeer, which is upstairs. The bust of Maurits in Elephants is in storage. We go inside, climbing the central staircase made of dark Brazilian hardwood, which the ticket attendant tells us is all that survived a fire in the 18th century. Carved dogs chase carved hares through vining plants along the balcony. In a small room on the first floor is a landscape: *Gezicht op het eiland Itamaracá in Brazilië* (*View of Itamaracá Island*, 1637) by Frans Post. This is reputed to be the first painting by a European painter of Brazil. One of the six paintings known to be produced by Post while in Brazil. The first known landscape of the Americas by a European artist.

A wide yellow body of water drifts by under yellow skies. The island across the water almost floats on it in a field of golden light. Palm trees pop up from the distant crest of Itamaracá Island, the site of Portuguese America's first sugar mill, looking somewhat surprised and leading the eye to the suggestion of a cross on the top of a church building. The foreground is a brown beach, to the right an extinguished fire, to the left low scrubby bushes and plants.

The light in the room is low, the hall outside is lit with lamps held by disembodied outstretched arms extending from the walls. The painting features four people and two horses on a muddy beach. A barrel-shaped white man dressed in black with a broad black hat waves to the opposite side of the water, his other hand resting on the pommel of his sheathed sword. Another white man, well dressed, moustachioed, and wearing a broad straw hat, speculatively identified as Maurits himself, sits on a black horse holding a horsewhip. In front of him a black figure – naked except for loose, knee-length white shorts – and a white horse lean towards each other beside a basket of yellow fruit. They both face away from the viewer, looking downward.

A fourth figure – rendered in paint so dark that he appears as just a silhouette, and also dressed only in white shorts – emerges balancing a caged basket on his head from the undergrowth, his legs invisible in the tangled vines. The first painting by a European of Brazil, possibly the first of the Americas, here, on the littoral, already situates black bodies as emerging from a state of tropical nature through forced labour. It's twenty minutes before closing time. A white couple enter the room, he embraces her from behind and enthusiastically gestures at the detail in the foliage in the neighbouring Post work, *Brazilian Landscape with a House under Construction* (1655), a "Gift of Willem, Baron van Dedem to the Friends of the Mauritshuis Foundation" in 2002.

On the wall behind me are two large portraits featuring white royals being dressed by black children. In one, from 1664 by Adriaen Hanneman, Mary Stuart, the wife of Dutch stadtholder William II, gazes contentedly at the viewer. A black boy with a pearl earring wraps a string of pearls around her pearl-white right

wrist. She ignores him. Her other hand rests on a red-feather mantle, almost identical to one that in September 2024, after 339 years on display in Copenhagen, was finally returned to the Tupinambá people in Rio de Janeiro. In a gesture that seems studiedly unstudied, Mary slips her middle and ring finger into a dark fold between the feathers. To her left, a silk lining of embroidered European flowers stitched into this sacred indigenous object mirrors another chain of pearls spilling from an abalone shell to her right, casually laid in the window, beneath tall white clouds.

+++

It is notable that among the first extractions from the Dutch colonies were exotic images of the natural world. The tropics, a trans-territorial invention both overrun with newness and the primordial, one that is fecund, dark under the sun, filled with snakes and such over-abundance that plants grow on plants, a fevered collection of orchids, bromeliad and other epiphytes, awaiting a good mercantile cataloguing. Awaiting a good gardener.



Adriaen Hanneman
Posthumous Portrait of
Mary I Stuart (1631- 1660)
with a Servant
Detail. Photo Sol Archer
Courtesy Mauritshuis, The
Hague.

“Ultimately, aesthetics naturalizes representation,” writes David Lloyd in *Under Representation*, “forging the modern subject’s disposition to be represented through an aesthetic pedagogy whose end is the submission of the subject to the State. Above all, representation regulates the distribution of racial identifications along a developmental trajectory: The Savage or Primitive and the Negro or Black remain on the threshold of an unrealized humanity, still subject to affect and to the force of nature, not yet capable of representation, not yet apt for freedom and civility. They stand, in Hortense Spillers’s resonant phrasing, as ‘vestibular to culture’, serving ‘as the route by which dominant modes decided between the human and the “other”’.”⁴¹

What function do these transmissions now perform in national collections? Rippling across time and space from the first dip of the brush in the oil, bouncing back and forth across the ocean, reproducing the first impression of Columbus as, stepping ashore on 12 October 1492, he made the first negative,⁴² the cut between here, this side, and there, that side, registered through the inverting film, the pelagic pellicula of the Atlantic. His footstep on the beach, making the Tropics an imaginary Black, as dreamt by Spinoza, and Europe an imaginary opposite White by inversion. And where – if this painting is a transmission, is a broadcast – are the receivers? What is it that synchronises with it, that vibrates with these waves and, like the magnetic coil first reproducing human speech at a distance, two days before Christmas in 1900, re-voices these transmissions?

The fantasy of Europe as the orderly, good, gardening leader of the world is not much diminished in the dream life of the European political cadre, of white supremacists: In 2022 Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, warned students at the European Diplomatic Academy that “Europe is a garden. [...] Most of the rest of the world is a jungle, and the jungle could invade the garden.”⁴³ Besides the open appeal to racist myths of barbarism, the naturalisation of colonial domination through appeal to the “Garden of Europe” not only disregards the histories of violence and clearances that are (not so) buried in land across Europe, it also ignores the cultures, lives, knowledges, and ecologies plundered through European colonial plantation and extraction around the world.

+++

41 Lloyd, David. *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, Fordham University Press (2018) pg 07

42 Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. ‘Toward the Abolition of Photography’s Imperial Rights’. *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction*. Verso. 2021.

43 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration-pilot_en

2 April 2024. Callum Parslow, a right-wing extremist walks into a former asylum seeker hostel in the UK, and in cold blood stabs Nahom Hagos, an Eritrean national, in the chest and hand while he was eating lunch, in an attempt to murder him. Parslow’s manifesto reads: “I am but a gardener tending to the great garden of England. I removed the weeds.”⁴⁴

+++

Halloween, 2024, a shooting in France escalates into a huge brawl and gunfight. The interior minister, Bruno Retailleau, responds in the press, “These shootouts are not in Latin America, they are in Rennes, in Poitiers, in once-tranquil western France. We have a choice between general mobilisation or the Mexicanisation of the country.”⁴⁵ Nobody in the press seems to challenge the racism of the term “Mexicanisation of the country”, only it’s statistical accuracy.

+++

“He who does not mow the grass, the grass mows him”, says an Israeli politician about the imprisoned population they are massacring in Gaza, and have been massacring since 1948, when they took over from the British, who had been massacring them since 1840.⁴⁶

+++

Maybe there is no answer to this.

Maybe there is no answer.

There is no wall label to read “these are the things that were stolen in the act

44 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/oct/25/man-hitler-tattoo-convicted-attempted-murder-nahom-hagos-asylum-seeker> *The Guardian* accessed 2024/12/13

45 Henly, Jon, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/nov/01/shootout-several-hundred-people--france-poitiers-retailleau> *The Guardian*, accessed 2024/11/01

46 Malm, Andreas *The Destruction of Palestine Is the Destruction of the Earth* https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/the-destruction-of-palestine-is-the-destruction-of-the-earth?srsltid=AfmBOoo1mTqbpHngxxg_vipM8CHLyZ-F3yllfsNfF2g-gZFktfFDraRGF accessed 2024/12/08

of making them". In the act of making this field it was taken, and the lives that pre-exist it, the warp and weft of this canvas, the grain of this four-hundred-year-old dead poplar board continue, unappropriated but not autonomous. Beneath the micrometer-thick veneer of seed oil and powdered mineral, vines reach for the sun, the laughter and tears of generations haunts. Haunts the climate (out of) control, haunts the great echoing chambers of national museums. Waits beside the bedhead of sleeping philosophers. These figures in the middle distance will always be enslaved, four hundred years fixed in enslavement; removing them from the wall and replacing them with a less problematic alternative is not enough. A counter transmission needs sending, an interfering pattern, noise in the signal of this gargantuan squatting storehouse-radio-mast-world-museum-mill. To wash away the taste of sugar.

+++

I go back to the Rijksmuseum, the Dutch national museum, in Amsterdam.

On display is *Landschap in Brazilië* (Landscape in Brazil, 1652), a large canvas by Post. It has an arched top, emulating a Romanesque window. Clustering around the frame are vines, gourds, fruit, a pineapple, cacti, grasshoppers, philodendron, and lizards. A yellow-eyed bird, possibly a graveteiro ("gravedigger"), sits with its feet just inside the painted lintel, emphasising the illusion that this is, in fact, a window looking out across the centuries, over Pernambuco. Above, the sky fading from pale yellow to pale blue is stippled with white clouds, and small groups of birds circle forever on the updrafts. The near distance is occupied by a mirror-still lake, on it a small boat with a slack sail. The flat landscape shades gently to blue, fields peppered by plantation buildings and tufts of forest. At first glance, save for the single dark-skinned fisherman pulling up a net, the landscape appears unpopulated. In the distance, there is, of course, a sugar mill, in which, straining, you can just make out tiny human figures with dark skin. Oxen pull a small cart. To the right two black figures carry a laden palanquin. In front of the mill, beside the oxen, a tiny speck of blue at the very centre of the canvas, stands a dark-skinned figure in a wide blue skirt and a white shirt, with a child on either side of her, in only white shorts.

The Museum website currently has a video on their homepage, in which a young woman with dark hair and dark eyes, walking past the museum, is sucked in, accelerating through the revolving door and dragged along the pristine polished terrazzo floors. The black hole at the heart of the hoard, the hyper-dense gravity

well that inexorably sucks her in is *The Threatened Swan* of 1650 by Jan Asselijn, a painting of a swan, its whiteness fluorescent as it rears up in its dirty bracken nest under looming orange clouds. The painting is an allegory on Johan de Witt, a republican oligarch, who in 1672 was *lynched and eaten* in the Vijverhof, the square in front of Maurits' palace (now the Maurithuis museum) in The Hague, by supporters of Prince William of Orange, Maurits' cousin, stadtholder of the Dutch republic and soon-to-be king of England. This painting was the first acquisition of the national Kunstgalerij in 1800, 63 years before the abolishment of legal slave trade in Dutch colonies, 88 before the end of legal enslavement in Brazil, and 114 years before it was actually ended across Dutch occupied territory in 1914.⁴⁷

Whiteness that ate itself in the nest. Cannibalistic self-becoming, the purest, whitest creature which lives in the swampiest mire. Só a antropofagia nos faz. Alleen kannibalisme maakt ons.⁴⁸

In the video, deposited in front of this swan, the young woman has a transcendent experience. A dolly zoom pulls into a fisheye close up. Suddenly she is in the dark, lit by lighting flashes, Van Gogh's green eyes superimpose over her dark ones. She levitates. The floor of the museum becomes the wall, she scrambles up it, high kicks past disapproving men in black wide-brimmed hats. A monkey hugs a kitten, laughter resonates through the halls, speed ramps and rapid head movements with under-cranked shutter angles reproduce cinematic tropes of psychological breakdown. Beheaded saints, animals, the face of a young black girl in a bonnet. Painted eyes flash across the screen, she flies through the air, satyrs and nymphs cavort, Rembrandt glowers at her, a ceramic monkey hides its mouth, laughter continues to echo. She lands, quiet, in a dark hall silhouetted in front of stained glass, in the pose of Fortunata, the model from *Young Italian Woman, with 'Puck' the Dog* (c. 1886) by Thérèse Schwartz. Emulating the Roman model, embodying the European. The museum name and slogan emblazon on the screen, "Rijksmuseum, neemt je mee." "The Rijksmuseum, it takes you."⁴⁹

47 Slavernij en slavenhandel in Nederlands-Indië, 1820-1900 (research guide and index '[Slavery and Slave Trade in the Dutch East-Indies \(1820-1900\)](#)' (available in Dutch) the [National Archives of the Netherlands \(NAN\)](#))

48 "Cannibalism alone makes us."

49 Rijksmuseum website, accessed 7 November July 2024 <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/bezoek/story/rijksmuseum-neemt-je-mee> thanks to Rogier van Reekum for the alternative translation "It transports you".

Thanks:

This research has been made possible by the support of the CBK Rotterdam and the Mondriaan Fonds voor Beeldende Kunst, FAAP São Paulo, and the support and input of numerous friends, readers, conspirators, and interlocutors. Thank you all.

References

- Andrada, Oswaldo. *Manifesto Antropófago. Revista de Antropofagia*. 1928. English: Bary, Leslie 1991.
- Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. "Toward the Abolition of Photography's Imperial Rights". *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction*. Verso. 2021.
- Azoulay, Ariella Aïsha. *The Captive Photograph*. Boston Review. 2021 <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-captive-photograph/>
- Casid, Jill H. *Sowing Empire: Landscape And Colonization*. 2004.
- Chion, Michel. *Audio-Vision, Sound on Screen*. 1994. / *The Voice in Cinema*. 1999.
- Cole, Teju. *Tremor*. Faber, 2023.
- Dantas de Oliveira, Francisco Isaac. *Frans Post & as Paisagens do Brasil Holandês*. 2021.
- Descola, Phillippe. *In the Society of Nature: A Native Ecology in Amazonia*. 1994.
- Ewles, Catherine. *Landscape and the Moving Image*. 2022.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952.
- Ferreira da Silva, Denise. *Unpayable Debt*. 2023.
- Gaudio, Michael. *Sound, Image, Silence: Art and the Aural Imagination in the Atlantic World*. 2019.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. 2010.
- Goddard, Jean-Christophe. *A Scabby Black Brazilian*. Urbanomic. 2023
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. 2008.
- Graeber, David; Wengrow, David. *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. 2021.
- Gumbs, Alexis. *Spill, Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*. 2016.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Lose Your Mother*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 2007.
- Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection*. Serpents Tail. 2024, originally 1997.

- LaBelle, Brandon. *Background Noise: Perspectives on Sound Art and Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life*. 2006. / *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. 2018.
- Lloyd, David. *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*. Fordham University Press. 2018.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Tristes Tropiques*. 1955 / Penguin Books Limited. 2011.
- Angélica da Silva, Maria and Mota Alcides, Melissa. *Collecting and Framing the Wilderness: The Garden of Johan Maurits in North-East Brazil*. 2002.
- Malm, Andreas. *The Destruction of Palestine Is the Destruction of the Earth*. Verso. 2024. https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/the-destruction-of-palestine-is-the-destruction-of-the-earth?srsltid=AfmBOoo1mTqb-pHngxxg_vipM8CHLyZF3yllfsNfF2g-gZFktdFDraRGF accessed 2024/12/08
- Martius, K. Freidrich von; Spix, Johann Baptist von. *Travel through Brazil*. 1817–1821.
- Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press. 2019.
- Moten, Fred. *The Universal Machine*. 2018 / *Stolen Life*. 2018 / *Black and Blur*. 2017. *Perennial Fashion Presence Falling*. 2023.
- Monteiro, Carolina. Odegaard, Erik. *Slavery at the Court of the “Humanist Prince”: Reexamining Johan Maurits van Nassau-Siegen and his Role in Slavery, Slave Trade and Slave-smuggling in Dutch Brazil*. 2020.
- Oliveros, Pauline. *Deep Listening: A Composer’s Sound Practice*. 2005.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Time of the Landscape: On the Origins of the Aesthetic Revolution*. 2023. *The Emancipated Spectator*. 2009.
- Rolnik, Suely. *Cartografia sentimental da América: produção de desejo na era da cultura industrial*. 1987.
- Scott, James C. *The Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. 1985.
- Schama, Simon. *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age*. Vintage. 1997.
- Taussig, Michael. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. 1993.
- Minh Ha, Trinh. *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*. 1993, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender & Cultural Politics*. 1991.

van der Horst, Xanthe. van der Pol, Linda, Bosma, Ulbe. van Langen, Johan. *National Archive of the Netherlands Research Guide on Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Dutch East Indies 1820-1900* <https://www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/slavernij-en-slavenhandel-in-nederlands-indie-1820-1900>.

Vanhaelen, Angela. *Art, Affect, and Enslavement: The Song of the Oxcart in Colonial Dutch Brazil*. 2024.

Viveiros de Castro, Eduardo. *From the Enemy's Point of View: Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*. 1992.

Wekker, Gloria, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. Duke University Press. 2016.

Wilk, Elvia. *Death by Landscape*. Soft Skull Press. 2022.

Zetkin Collective, The and Malm, Andreas. *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism*. 2021.

Cite this essay:

Sol Archer, "A Memory of Elephants," *Metode* (2025), vol. 3 'Currents'

Metode

Metode (2025), vol. 3 *Currents*
ISSN 2704-0550

ROM