

WHERE ARE THE TENDERNESSES?

27. I must turn, anew, and anew, from the easiest out – apathy. The point of prayer, in its fundamental form, is to offer up to the inexplicable what else cannot be explained. To return to sender.

Get this gone.

Ark Ramsay, a prayer in motion, 2024

Some days, the world seems increasingly incomprehensible, and the notion of a shared moral compass is all but obliterated. At times like these, prayer-like supplications offered up as last-ditch efforts are often uttered in moments of urgency or despair. Contemporary Caribbean communities are reckoning with existential crises including debt, poverty, crime, gun ruthlessness, intimate partner violence, ecological catastrophe, mental health plight, and toxic masculinity; all amidst a quickly evolving technological landscape, the implications of which are not fully grasped. These are the societal coordinates from which this collection of art works invites us to recognise and reckon with our current temporality in a Caribbean context, where the ongoing struggle for liberation is one that feels incessantly illusive to citizens experiencing alienation or dispossession. This group of four artists, Simone Asia, Anna Gibson, Russell Watson and Ronald Williams, are the inaugural Fresh Milk / Clara Lionel Foundation Artistic Fellows who will begin their ten-month Fellowship on September 1st, 2025. This selection of work offers a window into their practices.

In Aaron Kamugisha's *Beyond Coloniality*, he writes, "The story about the Caribbean's retreat from a moment striving for revolutionary coherence in the 1970s to the decline and lethargy of our time is often tied to the advent of global neoliberalism, a global story in which we are all enmeshed." When direction feels inadequate, we must take up the practice of turning to the artists and their sensibilities in our midst—modern-day contemplatives imagining other possibilities beyond the scantiness that neoliberalism foment in our inner and outer lives. These visual supplications, like prayers, proliferate in the gallery as confessions or secular altars for our collective contemplation, solace and reckoning.



Ronald Williams, *All Dogs Go To Heaven I*, Digital Print on archival paper, 40" x 30", 2024

Ronald Williams takes us to the block, asking what it means to be a young black man in Barbados in the twenty-first century. How are codes of masculinity communicated in ghetto underworlds in the wider socio-political context in this post-Republic island state? Inspired by Greek and Egyptian underworld mythology, *All Dogs Go To Heaven I & II* teeters between the ubiquitous rusty zinc paling-protected backyards which surround many working-class abodes and kite-filled skies—heavenly realms accommodating those who find ways out. His mythological guardian-like creatures, sharply articulated in crisp digital collages, present three dog-men donning the bling associated with bad boy mentalities—wearing the uniform of (illegal) camouflage, pristine white sneakers, dog collars and a single shiny gold chain binding their destinies from neck to neck. Gangs are seen by regional governments as potential threats to the holy grail of the tourist sector, and while they might be under increased surveillance, the push factors attracting young men into this lifestyle are inadequately observed or addressed.



Ronald Williams, *All Dogs Go To Heaven II*, Digital Print on archival paper, 40" x 30", 2024

While some become martyrs in Bajan gang culture, Williams suggests others aim to transcend the ghetto. In *All Dogs Go to Heaven II*, one multi-armed dog-man floats above the paling, a halo of bullets and ganja encircling his head, holding a cutlass and a bottle of Hennessy — the cognac brand often associated with wealth, success and the gangster playbook. Alluding to a resurrected Christ, some gangsters have everlasting life after death, recognised as exalted figures. Several Caricom member states are currently working to reclassify gangs as terrorist organisations to access international anti-terrorism funding. This will potentially move island nations higher up on the international watchdog list, as we grapple with increasing gun violence and some of the highest homicide rates globally; indicative of violent outlets for toxic masculinity.¹



Anna Gibson, *Festering Fantasy: Sweet Fuh Days*, Acrylic on canvas, 72" x 48", 2025

Anna Gibson's *Festering Fantasy: Sweet Fuh Days*, and *Festering Fantasy: The Yard* compel us to wrestle with the artist's childhood memories, suggested by brightly coloured candy, a teddy bear, hair baubles and a bicycle. Precocious poses might be read as both brazen and performative — but performed for whom? Luminous yellow, oversized daffodils are often a sign of Spring's new life, but this blossoming of a young girl portends an inappropriate loss of innocence. Gibson's *Rebirth III*, affronting in its gaze, is somewhat less defiant. A buxom lingerie-clad woman wears post-surgery compression bandages on her face and a green wig while posing to show off her tightly bound abdomen, flesh bulging between the firmly wrapped twine. Girlhood is quickly propelled into the manipulation of young women's bodies, securing the desires of men.



Anna Gibson, *Rebirth III*, Acrylic and string on canvas, 50" x 31", 2020

Part of the Caribbean struggle for liberation necessarily includes the enfranchisement of our women. When the #Metoo movement in North America gave voice to gender-based violence survivors demanding accountability for perpetrators; the regional organisation, Life In Leggings: Caribbean Alliance Against Gender Violence established its office in Barbados with the goal to end rape culture and gender-based violence. It was like a dam burst, evoking the most graphic descriptions on social media by Bajan women of intimate partner violence, incest, abuse, and the transactional nature of romantic relationships. We might feel affronted by the directness of Gibson's brazen portraits from girlhood to young female adulthood and want to avert our gaze, but we do so at our own peril.

Simone Asia's *Lost + Found* and *Procession* — multilayered, belaboured and exquisitely detailed drawings — alongside Russell Watson's *The Temple Manuscripts*, shift our scrutiny to one of interior introspection. In these imaginings, the still palpable burdens of Caribbean history transmigrate to propose alternate possible futures that consider a new kind of self-defined sovereignty, informed by an intuitive understanding of the self and the world.



Simone Asia, *Lost + Found*, Mixed media, 30.5" x 24", 2023

Asia's intravenous lifelines of plants blossom into a mind's eye, while Watson's lone figure with translucent skin walks on water—we are journeying to other territories, ones that rise above yesteryear's chronicles or the physical realm of earthly sins and choices. Asia's dreamlike, magical domains suggest an obsessive nature in their manifestation but take curiosity as a way to perceive the inner workings of a compulsive mind and over-stimulated senses. In *Lost and Found*, a young man's mind's eye seemingly explodes with the hallucinogenic properties of the blooming red flower and a ball of string comes undone while sprouting a flowering thick green stalk. What has he lost and what is he seeking? In

Procession, a female saint wears lit candles on her head, her garment adorned with red flora, holding a ceremonial curved-top staff or plant-like crosier, typically symbolising the clerical role of guiding the flock. Are we witnessing a female guide striving to make sense of things—a matriarch steered or illuminated by the living world?

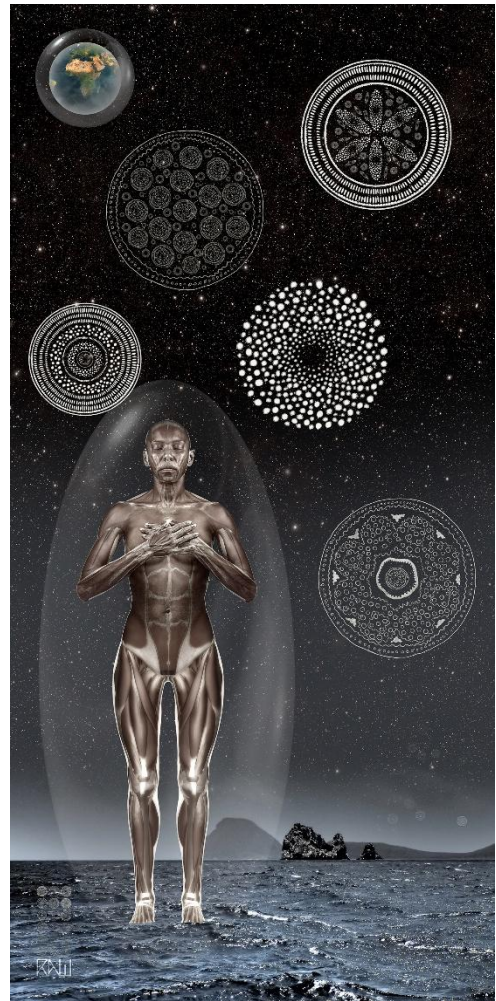


Simone Asia, *Procession*, Mixed media, 38" x 25.5", 2024

Conscious of the Caribbean's ecological crises — including an increase of sargassum on our coastlines, a loss of coral reefs, more intense and more frequent hurricanes, and rising sea levels — Watson invents otherworldly beings inhabiting a cosmic space. At once primeval and futuristic, we witness an ecosystem where the raiments of men are brain coral or conch headpieces and whose medium of communication is air bubbles from submerged salty waters. Arousing integral relationships with the more-than-human world, Watson's celestial and subaqueous imaginings of a post-Anthropocene world suggest more resilient connections *with* the natural world, ones where the skins of mankind are permeable to the celestial realm.



Russell Watson, *BG42023011M-A*,
Animation loop on framed monitor with
data drive, 33" x 21", 2024



Russell Watson, *DECOHERENT 02*,
Backlit digital film print in framed lightbox,
48" x 25", 2024

Asia, Gibson, Watson and Williams move us from the mundane to the otherworldly, responding to the "lethargy of our time," collectively addressing man-made challenges exacerbated by economic policies we are wading through – diminishing social safety nets, compounding environmental degradation and intensifying social unrest. As visual shamans building Caribbean mythologies to contemplate our evolving sense of self, we might recognise ourselves in these human bodies that shapeshift from animal to plant, to constellations of beings transcending the limitations of the physical realm. It is in these Fellows' contemplative acts of examination that the tenderesses manifest, beyond apathy, towards invocations for our fragile and very intertwined futures.

Annalee Davis, 2025

ⁱ Emmanuel Joseph, "Tourism at risk if gang legislation not carefully crafted, warns expert," *Barbados Today*, March 19, 2025. <https://barbadostoday.bb/2025/03/19/tourism-at-risk-if-gang-legislation-not-carefully-crafted-warns-expert/>.