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Black Futures and Spirit Guardians in Brianna McCarthy's 'Vétiver Night Women'

By Angelique Nixon Monday, June 15th, 2015 Categories: [Exhibitions](#), [Features](#), [Reviews](#), [Updates](#)

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Angelique Nixon reviews the exhibition 'Vétiver Night Women' by Trinidadian artist Brianna McCarthy, which was held at the Medulla Art Gallery, Port of Spain between May 14 – June 5, 2015. Blending spiritual, mythical and astrological imagery in this striking series, McCarthy's work celebrates and empowers Blackness and femininity in a way that manages to remain grounded in the present while sparking the imagination, allowing us to look towards and dream about possible futures. Read the piece written exclusively for ARC below:

*what can i do
when the night comes
and
i break into stars*

- nayyirah waheed, *salt*

*We are unraveling our navels so that we may ingest the sun
We are not afraid of the darkness, we trust that the moon shall guide us
We are determining the future at this very moment*

- Saul Williams, *Coded Language*

There is a place in Ville Rosa where ghost women ride the crests of waves while brushing the stars out of their

hair. There they woo strollers and leave the stars on the path for them. There are nights that I believe that those ghost women are with me.

- Edwidge Danticat, 'Night Women'



Brianna McCarthy, Oblispos's Guardians.

To envision Black futures, to see ourselves in the future, as people of African descent (and people of colour broadly) is to defy the dominant regimes of representation that continue to leave us out. Black writers, artists and cultural producers have long written, painted, sung, danced and wielded ourselves into existence (past and present), and also imagined Black futures. As the above epigraphs reveal, this imagining inevitably brings us to space, stars, the moon, and other planets and galaxies. Perhaps as funk and soul artists of the 1950s-70s brought to life what we now call Afrofuturism and as the late great Octavia Butler radically carved space for people of colour in science fiction, a number contemporary artists continue to visualize and complicate Black futures (through music, art, film, literature, etc.). From Erykah Badu and Janelle Monae to Nalo Hopkinson and Wangechi Mutu to name a few, Black female artists are at the centre of fantastical imaginings and representations of Black people.



Brianna McCarthy, Lovebound.



Brianna McCarthy, I am this lush.

[Brianna McCarthy](#) in her new collection 'Vétiver Night Women' celebrates Black female energy through landscapes of stars, sky, the moon and mythic gardens. This breathtaking series represents Black female subjectivity with intricate connections to ancestral and collective memories, as well as the earth and nature. I see the collection as simultaneously working through legacies of the past by offering radical and much needed representations of Blackness through female bodies and complex landscapes of present and future visions. The stars in each Night Woman's face bring forth a galaxy of possibilities, reflecting desires, hopes and dreams. Thus, I argue that the collection can be understood through an Afrofuturism lens or more simply as creating and guarding Black futures.



Brianna McCarthy, There is more of you here to remember.

Each Night Woman is a spirit guardian, evoking feminine magic and plant medicine – calming and earth grounding as vétiver itself, which Brianna describes as a major influence to her work.

The vétiver plant holds the earth together with its very fibrous roots. ... It's the idea of grounding, of foundation... For me, a lot of this series has been about mortality, in a way. Reminders of mortality,

of immortality, reminders of our legacies, and collective memories and remembrances, threads that bind us, threads that connect us.[\[1\]](#)

Through several of the paintings, we see threads of connectivity wrapped around the women's bodies, running through the leaves and intricate details and patterns on the clothing and jewelry. Each piece carries her own story, yet the series is carefully linked and beautifully woven together – speaking and reflecting herstories.



Brianna McCarthy, Garden of lost things.

Brianna is well known for her fearless and beautiful representations of Black women while challenging issues of colourism and white western notions of beauty. In her latest collection, Brianna has pushed the boundaries even more with her 'Vétiver Night Women' —described as “unmistakingly Black and unmistakingly powerful” by Amanda McIntyre in a very personal [celebration of the work](#).^[2]

I spoke with Brianna at length about her influences for the series and the title specifically, and she talked about nostalgia associated with the earthy fragrance of vétiver and Caribbean women both in her family and more broadly.^[3] Brianna also shared that it is through her dreams that many of her pieces emerge and often she will dream of a piece and the title will come through as well, especially for this series. She started working on the collection a year ago during her travels and time in Havana, Cuba, which we can see directly in a number of pieces alongside the moon, the sky and guardianship; Havana beams through.



Brianna McCarthy, For Sea, in Air.

Brianna attributes her vibrant dreamscapes to her travels and journeys as well, which all fuel her artwork. She said that she decided to call the new collection 'Night Women' after feeling all the pieces' guardian energy, and also after a friend said they reminded her of Marlon James' novel *Book of Night Women*. Vétiver came into place during Brianna's travels to Cuba and then Guadeloupe after it was referenced several times, and a new artist friend gave her a bottle of the fragrance to help her sleep, which reminded her so much of home and family. Brianna was also strongly influenced by Black poetry – she was reading nayyirah waheed and listening to Saul Williams as she worked on the collection. And so it is – among dreamscapes, travel, nostalgia, and poetry – Brianna McCarthy has brought to us 'Vétiver Night Women'.



Brianna McCarthy, 'Dream Moon' series: Ozlaria Waxing, Remy Waning, and Piritan Full.

I began my critical reflection with selected poetry and fiction epigraphs because Black literature has been and continues to be my starting point as a writer, poet, artist and scholar. The moment I read about Brianna McCarthy's 'Vétiver Night Women' and saw the poster, I kept recalling Danticat's short story 'Night Women' and her ghost women riding waves and brushing stars at night. I also thought of nayyirah waheed's poetry collection *salt* and her many references to the moon, stars and love of darkness. And I reflected on the powerful influence of the moon and the desire to imagine Black futures in my own work. The 'Dream Moon Series' pulled me into a familiar place of moon worship, feminine magic and darkness that the moon evokes. Hence, I felt drawn to writing about Brianna's work and intense serendipity during the opening at [Medulla Art Gallery](#) as I experienced the pieces all in one room.



Brianna McCarthy, I met myself in this sky.

At the opening of 'Vétiver Night Women', I was moved in and out of mythic realness, grounded earth vibrations, moon love and star-filled wonder. I was particularly enchanted by the spirit guardian energy of many of the pieces, the beautiful and defiant representation of Blackness, and the balance between masculinity and femininity in these Black female bodies. The Night Women evoke [Orisha](#) guardians and may be interpreted as female aspects of Orisha, but they can also be both. Brianna said that 'Laro' became the face of the collection because she is known as "the guardian of all" and female aspect of Legba. And 'Nana Buku' who is known as the great grandmother of Orishas and a very strong female protector took on a life of her own with a particular stern look that Brianna said she tried to change, but it didn't work. In response to my question about her relationship to Orisha and other spiritual references in the work, Brianna replied:

That's open to interpretation to be honest. I flow with the energy that comes through each piece – sometimes they tell me their names; sometimes the title is implied when I am able to read them a little better. At times there is a dream that brings clarity. I draw from shared and personal experience – belief or faith is often a shared experience and within that is the communion."[\[4\]](#)



Brianna McCarthy, Laro.



Brianna McCarthy, Nana Buku.

I asked Brianna more about her creative process in terms of time and materials, and she shared this reflection:

I started working on what became the 'Vétiver Night Women' in June 2014. I cannot honestly say that there was a conscious decision to have these forms appear as they are. I remember being moved by the vibrance of Havana – the fiercely alive quality that basically seemed imbued into every face I saw and every street I walked. Just prior, I had a dream of encountering a woman in stardust skin in a lush forest of gold and green leaves. Perhaps it was the imagery of that very rich dream or the tenderness of the person I met there that stuck with me through the early part of the process.[\[5\]](#)

There is such a magical and spirit-filled process to her work, and we can see the clear place of her dreams manifested. I asked her about her growth as an artist through this collection, and she said: "I feel incredibly open, but at the same time very guarded. A nakedness for sure. More than usual or previously."[\[6\]](#)



Brianna McCarthy with her piece Mutu Mori. Photo credit: Joshua Lue Chee Kong.

Brianna's work has been highly regarded as a celebration of Blackness and of Black women specifically. I was

struck by how much it mattered to me (and others with whom I went to the opening at Medulla) to see and experience all the wonders of Brianna's Night Women. I couldn't help but think of this particular moment and uprising against global violence on the bodies of Black people, youth especially, through the [Black Lives Matter movement](#). I see Brianna's work and representations of Blackness as being needed now more than ever. We must see and love ourselves now and into the future. As African American feminist thinker bell hooks reminds us, loving Blackness is indeed a form of political resistance. And as Jamaican writer and theorist Sylvia Wynters argues, we must decolonise our consciousness. I believe visual and literary representation is at the core of the business of decolonization and empowerment – it is a vital contribution to the struggle against oppression. I asked Brianna if she thinks of her work at all in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement that has grown rapidly in the U.S. and globally; and I asked her what it (her series and representations of Blackness) may mean for the Caribbean region and Trinidad and Tobago specifically. Her response was striking:

This is for the forgotten, the silenced. It is for the 'me' who feels story-less – for the ones whose names have been stripped from their legacies. This work is a shared burden, a purge, a thanksgiving. 'my ancestors made sure i was born the colour of their eyes' ('sight', nayyirah waheed). That said, I could not imagine the purpose of anything I make or my expending the energy to make it, were it not to empower and uplift Black people or people of colour. I would like to think that if one person can emerge from the pattern and distress of oppression due to any output from me, then there is some point to doing this. I aim to challenge the perceptions of beauty and value, which exist around women of colour, particularly women of the Diaspora. My work is also largely a personal endeavour to make and mend myself – much of my work can be seen as self-portraiture. It is about shared legacies, collective remembrance and my place on the continuum of it all.[\[7\]](#)



Brianna McCarthy, What's an exotic.

'Vétiver Night Women' – grounded in the earth, a sense of the past in the present, yet forging a space for us (Black people and people of colour) in the future – is a stunning body of work pushing/reminding/empowering us to dream, heal, create and share in this collective process of rememory and reimagining Black futures. The Night Women ask us to question, to defy boundaries, to pull from the past without apology, to wrap ourselves in

earth/moon/star and feminine magic, and to demand space for us/we to be and live with self-possession and love.

[1] Interview in Trinidad Guardian. 19 May 2015. <https://www.guardian.co.tt/lifestyle/2015-05-19/v%C3%A9tiver-night-women-hover-gaze-medulla>

[2] "Growing Up Together." My Caribbean Gateway. 15 May 2015. <http://mycaribbeangateway.com/features/92-growing-up-together>

[3] Personal Interview. 19 May 2015.

[4] Personal Interview. 21 May 2015.

[5] Personal Interview. 21 May 2015.

[6] Personal Interview. 21 May 2015.

[7] Personal Interview. 21 May 2015.



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