

Something Curated



Cameron Rowland Proposes New Models For Art To Engage With Justice Profiles 17 Feb 2020

American artist Cameron Rowland, selected as a MacArthur Fellow in 2019, endeavours to make visible the institutions, systems, and policies that perpetuate systemic racism and economic inequality through his work. The Wesleyan University graduate's research-intensive practice centres around the display of objects and documents whose provenance and operations expose the legacies of racial capitalism and underscore the forms of exploitation that permeate many aspects of our daily lives.

In a 2016 exhibition, *91020000*, Rowland presented a series of objects, including courtroom benches, desks, and leveler rings for manhole openings used in road construction, manufactured by New York State prison inmates, who are paid \$0.10 to \$1.14 an hour. Rowland also documents the procurement of the items from Corcraft, the market name for the Division of Correctional Industries within the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. Corcraft sells the items at below market value to government and non-profit agencies, meaning, in effect, that such agencies are complicit in perpetuating injustices of the criminal justice system.

Running until 12 April 2020 at London's ICA, Rowland presents his first UK show, entitled *3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73*, curated by Richard Birkett. A minimalistic display of paperwork and objects relating to the history of the transatlantic slave trade and the relationship between slavery and property ownership is supplemented by a meticulously written academic text composed by the artist. "Colonization and slavery expanded the definition of property throughout the British Empire. Colonized land and enslaved labor were made interdependent. In Barbados, by 1672, the enslaved were legally defined as chattel (moveable property) as well as real estate (immovable property). This exceptional legal status meant that the enslaved existed both as part of the plantation's value and as a fungible commodity," Rowland writes.

The artist has taken out a mortgage on the ICA's mahogany doors, fitted when Carlton House Terrace was built in the 1830s. Mahogany was felled and worked by slaves and the building that the ICA leases still belongs to the Crown. Expanding on mortgaging's use in British North America, K-Sue Park writes: "One way colonists imposed their own conception of property on land was first to impose their own conception of money and credit on indigenous people. Colonists extended credit to indigenous people to draw them into debt, inducing them to then take out "mortgages" on which they would later foreclose."

Elsewhere in the space, three police searchlights are installed against one wall. Strings of eighteenth-century manillas, brass armlets used as money, lie in a heap on the ground. A coin hangs on the wall near a framed lease for a mooring at the Albert Dock in Liverpool. The dock was historically at the centre of the British slave trade and the mooring will remain empty for the duration of Rowland's lease; the coin is a guinea, made from gold mined in West Africa; and the manillas were British-made, used as currency to buy slaves. Rowland is providing new models for art to engage with justice and, in the process, throwing into question some of the basic premises of Western art, including the edifying power of the aesthetic object and the autonomy of the work of art itself.

Cameron Rowland, *3 & 4 Will. IV c. 73* at ICA | Open until 12 April 2020.

Feature image: Installation view: *91020000*, 2016, Courtesy: the artist and Essex Street, New York