

this is tomorrow

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Cameron Rowland: *3 & 4 Will. IV c.73*

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3 & 4 Will IV c. 73, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, 2020, Installation view

Cameron Rowland's first solo exhibition in the UK, '*3 & 4 Will. IV c.73*', uses the provenance of objects, language, and laws, to underscore the artist's research into the afterlife of slavery. Making various references to cultural theorists such as Saudiya Hartman, the work supports the contention that the abolition of slavery was a nonevent. The exhibition traces the unbroken lineage of racial subjection from the enslaved to the disenfranchised. It evidences this subjection and reveals the complexities of systemic racism through an examination of trade and property relations, as well as economic, financial and legal systems.

That the enslaved are at the centre of this examination is worth emphasising. The trade that is interrogated is that of a people who were both enslaved and designated as a form of property. Their labour was in service of colonial interests that led to the creation of an economic system on which our current financial sector is built. This was facilitated by a legal system that recognised the enslaved as 'chattels' (movable assets) and made the interdependence of slave labour and land value possible. In consequence, the enslaved became immovable assets that were legally recognised as part of the real estate of the slave owner - the loss of which they were to be compensated for after abolition. This complex network of relations is the foundational evidence upon which Rowland builds his work. '*3 & 4 Will. IV c.73*' moves across centuries and maps out a web of systemic racism, always calling back and forth between time periods in order to articulate the remnants of slavery that continue to permeate society.

The terms by which we encounter the artwork are made evident from the outset. The ICA website presents no images of the work, supplies no explanatory text, nor artist statement. In their place is a 4000-word essay (with 57 footnotes) and extensive exhibition

captions. If exhibitions normally create a tacitly understood contract of engagement between institution, artist and viewer, '3 & 4 Will. IV c.73' sets up a different type of agreement entirely.

Although not evident in the exhibition itself, it is worth noting that the subversion of an established engagement extends to the mechanisms by which art is traded. Since 2014, Rowland has transferred his work through rental contracts rather than through private ownership, further critiquing the role of commerce and acquisition in the art world, as well as the means by which property rights are written into law.

By placing emphasis on the exhibition essay, the exhibited works are in danger of being read as an appendix, yet the essay-form and the captions supplied instead become subsumed into a sculptural practice. This is in part due to the conventions of exhibition display, such as the floating frame and the ambiguity of objects arranged in space, but more convincingly the complicity of the building and the transformation of legal statutes and administrative documents into acts of resistance.

In Rowland's 'Probability of Escape' (2020,) three police car search lights are used to create a correlation between legal positions in North America: in the first instance, two 17th century Acts that outline the conditions under which the killing of a slave is permitted; secondly, current statute in the state of South Carolina (2012) that permits any citizen to arrest a person under certain conditions, even if in pursuit of arrest a life should be taken. The conditions under which such an arrest can be made include "circumstances which raise just suspicion of [the perpetrator's] design to steal or to commit some felony".

Rowland further outlines the consistency of this legalistic lineage of 'slave codes' in the exhibition essay, underlining their use as a means to "secure enslaved people as property through their criminalisation". This proposition is further evidenced in the upstairs galleries, as comparisons are made between the practice of branding slaves as chattel and the current programme of tagging and monitoring used by the U.S. parole service. The disproportionate representation of the black population in American prisons is well documented, yet the depth of this institutionalised racism is particularly evident for Rowland in 'Probation Order Under 18 U.S.C 3607', an artwork that reproduces a legal code outlining the parole conditions for those found in possession of drugs. This framed administrative document highlights the socio-economic impact of two centuries of disenfranchisement and the continued exploitation of a people through probation fees and court costs.

Whereas most of the work in the exhibition draws parallels between the period of enslavement and the present day, 'Encumbrance' (2020) effectively inserts a rupture within our colonial history that seeks to stem the flow of profit and exchange. Rowland uses the legal act of encumbrance as a strategy for announcing the violence of colonialism, not only implicating the ICA through its site and connections to the remnants of Empire, but also exposing the extent to which our lack of perspective on such histories is embedded into our material understanding of culture. The caption for 'Encumbrance' (2020) outlines the history of 12 Carlton House (the site of the ICA) and its transfer under George IV from a royal household to rental accommodation that continues to provide revenue to the Crown Estate. Rowland stresses that in general the Crown Estate provides 75% of its revenue to the Treasury and 25% to the monarch. The artist then rolls into this exposition references to the trading of mahogany (synonymous with the slave trade) and five mahogany features within the interior of the ICA - four doors and a handrail. By assigning these features to a mortgage investment that is exempt from the historic contract, Rowland is able to disrupt the flow of profit to the Crown Estate, effectively and selectively diminishing the value of the property.

'3 & 4 Will. IV c.73' is at risk of getting lost in its complexity but this act of resistance is clear. Rowland's voice is uncompromising in its calling out of the causes and effects of subjection. It is a voice that exposes ingrained social and cultural divisions and the mechanisms by which they are created. It is a voice that needs to be heard.