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## Light and Shadow in Place



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"His name is Sebastian Onius and his story is like a fish with no tail,  
a dress with no hem, a drop with no fall, a body in the sunlight with no shadow.  
His absence is my shadow..."

(Edwidge Danticat – *The Farming of Bones*)

These images are part of a series of drawings created over a three-year period on location in Jacmel, Haiti. They were shown both in Trinidad and in Haiti in 2013 in an exhibition titled: *How the light enters – Visualising absence and continuity in the Jacmelian ruinscape. Jan limyè a rantrè – Nap montre sa ki disparet ak sa ki la toujou nan ansyen kay kraz Jakmel yo. Comment pénétre la lumière – Visualiser l'absence et la continuité dans les ruines de Jacmel.*

The exhibition comprised 20 graphite drawings on vellum each measuring 3 feet wide and 2 feet high. They were affixed between two sheets of perspex, suspended from free-standing wooden door frames and lit under a series of spot-lights with yellow gels. The installation included intermittent spurts of "fog" from machines in the gallery space. The two main images represented in these drawings were post-earthquake architectural structures and the depiction of the human form in motion with its accompanying cast shadow.

When I put the graphite point to the vellum surface what resulted was conceptually informed by many past visual experiences. One of them came from a newspaper column featuring a story of

Alphonse Quesnel who had recently published a book of songs titled “Songs of Love to get Through Times of Trial (Chants d’Amour pour Traverser les Preuves [*sic*] de la vie)” (Rodriguez-Soto 3). Quesnel stated: “There is an earthquake in our lives also every day – not only on Jan. 12. Through that ‘fault’ in our lives, the light enters” (qtd. in Rodriguez-Soto 3). This left an impression on me that would not only inform this body of work, but would materialise in various ways and on many occasions during my three years in Haiti.



**Figure 1:** *How the Light Enters*, 2013, installation, Soft Box Art Gallery, Trinidad

Photography by Soft Box Studios Ltd. Copyright 2013 Soft Box Studios Ltd.

The critical process of *plein air* work on location in Jacmel offered an interesting point of view in the context of the field and the people I interacted with, to explore how life continued in ordinary daily activities. On location I also explored light in space and its associations with an idea of “the beautiful”, thereby seeing it as another thematic exploration that added to the more dominant ones of darkness and suffering presented as emblematic of Haiti. At first glance, the works may suggest a romanticized idea of Jacmel, rooted perhaps in retrospect, in my then unconscious impulse to counteract the global flow of negative images of Haiti, and the attendant negative associations of a perceived ruinscape.

I have been mindful of Susan Sontag’s idea that: “To designate a hell is not, of course, to tell us anything about how to extract people from that hell” (114). This can be connected to Raoul Peck’s observations on the unbalanced flow of negative images of Haiti. It is against this background that I entered the field and also recognized its impact on how Haiti is seen in the popular imagination. A consistent comment from viewers at the Trinidad exhibition ran along the lines of “I never thought that place could look like that”. I also noted the use of the term “that place” as opposed to the name “Haiti”.

In these drawings, I have not excluded the harsh realities of life in the ruinscape. My research explored specific visual languages and technologies that presented the subtleties that make up a ruinscape. I have also been mindful that post disaster darkness and suffering, poverty and societal inequalities are not unique to Haiti. In this process that considered an ethics of knowledge production via the image, I was attentive to the fact that Haiti is a place which has not been represented through an evenly distributed flow of visual information. I was challenged to find a visual language to represent a balanced view of a lived ruinscape, while being open to accommodating loss or absence in that space.

Edward Casey’s concept of the “poetry of the place” (26) informed this visual exploration of the lived ruinscape and how specific material and technical choices visualised absence and continuity. In

rendering a specific visual lexicon for lived places in Jacmel, I sought not to essentialise an idea of what a landscape would look like in the wake of a disaster, but to explore the built, human and spectral elements that contributed to this poetry of the Jacmelian place. Similarly, Derek Walcott has referred to “the visible poetry of the Antilles” (75), in relation to which the theme of “survival” (75) has become emblematic of the built and natural landscapes of the Antilles.

During the process of representing Jacmel in the wake of a major disaster, what emerged was that trauma and loss were somewhat submerged in the lived places. Scholars have often referred to the silent nature of trauma. As Haitian art historian LeGrace Benson has noted, trauma “bides time like the tectonic plates underfoot” (89). I had to ask myself: Was this work about representing the aftermath of disaster in a place or simply representing a place? It became the latter, and so my subject matter, composition, choice of medium and installation then subtly pointed to the subterranean nature of how absence exists in a lived ruinscape.

By lived ruinscape, I mean not only the ruins of the physical environment but the continuity of human life and memories. This contextualisation constituted the most defined way in which I responded to Jacmel, as it allowed me to represent how people re-lived their places and spaces of meaning. The specific visual strategies in this mode of practical research thus employed light and shadow to represent the absence and continuity that made up the poetry of Jacmel.

Trauma’s inherent un-representability means that it cannot always be fully expressed or materialised. I explored how trauma was submerged and that it was in the routines of daily life that it could be represented – in the subtleties of light creating shadows which pointed to absence or “the shadow of death”. As this subtlety of trauma and loss was housed in the living, it allowed the coexistence of absence and continuity to be represented in people carrying out their routine and ordinary activities in the ruinscape. The cast shadow offered an acknowledgement that it was the everyday person who had perished in the earthquake, and was no longer physically present.

This type of conceptual engagement with the cast shadow allowed the deceased to form part of this ruinscape, adding a spectral element to the poetry of the place. This conceptual approach to trauma and representation has also been explored by Jill Bennett, who describes Doris Salcedo’s artwork as a secondary witness to trauma in that it “engages a much slower process of perception, in which the transformation of the object is itself gradually apprehended rather than instantly recognised” (61).

The compositional considerations in relation to the human form also added to the visual narrative of each drawing. In the piece titled *Marché en fer* (*Iron Market*), although the market is an active and crowded place, it is represented on a Sunday when it is closed. As an exploration of absence, as in all 20 drawings, large areas of the composition are also left empty, in order to record the figurative spaces left between the living and the dead. These compositional choices of empty spaces sought to find a space in which the unspoken and un-representable could be “placed” – the other voids that trauma leaves in its wake, that cannot fill the fissures or cracks left in the human lives and the physical environment.

Moreover, I feature the back view of a vendor walking away from the viewer as she steps off a piece of cast iron from the building. This ambiguous positioning of the human form on the top of a building is also rendered in other works such as *Rue du Commerce*. In that piece, I present a view from behind

two men on a motorbike. As they enter the scene they balance between the top of a broken concrete wall and the decorative buttress of a cast iron post, but they are also leaving the scene and the viewer.

In *Commerce, Alliance and Liberté* three girls in school uniform are also presented with their backs to the viewer and, as they walk away, a man on a motorbike enters the scene but he will also soon be gone from the viewer. This drawing is a montage of scenes from places on Rue du Commerce, Avenue de la Liberté and a door behind the Alliance Française, and the title adds to a coded reading of these three students in terms of the role of commerce, freedom and education in Haiti's continuity.

The depiction of a person walking out of the scene while carrying out an activity allowed one to figure a sense of continuity. But this sense of agency and walking away was also to say that Haitians haven't the time for our voyeuristic gaze. The disaster happened and one has work to do. Stop looking. There is nothing to see. Survivors symbolically manoeuvre the ruinscape as they have manoeuvred life and the balancing act it has often been.

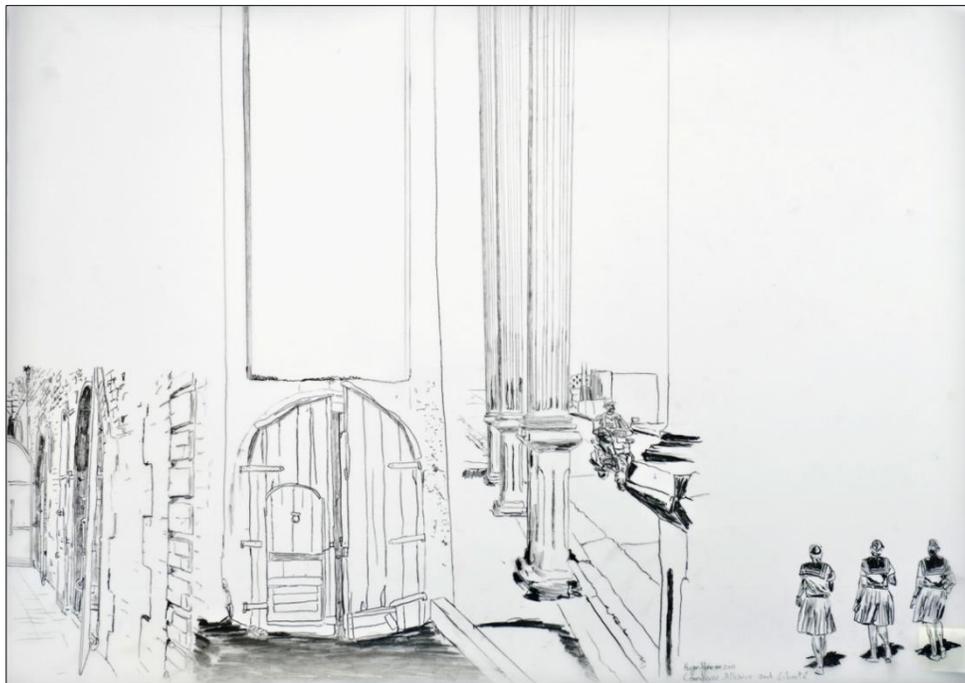
Jacmel – as the first town in the Caribbean to receive electricity – is known as the City of Light. We actually do not have electricity from 6 am to 3pm, sometimes longer, though should President Michel Martelly visit Jacmel there is 24 hours of electricity. Otherwise, life goes on with torchlights, candles and the flambeaux – the many other ways in which average people become their own agent in *how the light enters*.



**Figure 2:** *Marché en Fer*, 2011, graphite on vellum, 36 x 24 in.  
Photography by Soft Box Studios Ltd. Copyright 2013 Soft Box Studios Ltd.



**Figure 3:** *Rue du Commerce*, 2011, graphite on vellum, 36 x 24 in.  
Photography by Soft Box Studios Ltd. Copyright 2013 Soft Box Studios Ltd.



**Figure 4:** *Commerce, Alliance and Liberté*, 2011, graphite on vellum, 36 x 24 in.  
Photography by Soft Box Studios Ltd. Copyright 2013 Soft Box Studios Ltd.

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