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ANDIL GOSINE: Coolie, Coolie Viens

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The taunt of “coolie” is familiar to any Trinidadian. The act of turning the derogatory appellation into a revolutionary source of pride and defiance, exemplified of course, by the linguistic trajectory of the “n” word, has not taken root among Trinis in the Caribbean as it has in Guyana or within the collapsing boundaries in the diaspora. Indeed, throughout the Caribbean the word has multiple meanings ranging from neutral descriptor to racial slur. The title of Gosine’s solo exhibition, *Coolie Coolie Viens*, at the McIntosh Gallery, London, subverts the well-known verse used by Indians in the nuanced marking of difference inside the racialized arena of joking and mock-insults among Indians and Africans in Trinidad & Tobago.

The starting point of this exhibition was elaborated on two silk-screened posters but, not, ultimately exhibited: “Coolie Coolie Viens Pour Curry/ Le Curry Est Tout Fini.” Roti is a basic staple; “curry” promises more, suggesting maybe curried chicken or curried goat. The everyday jingle uses roti thus: “N..., n... come for roti, come for roti/ All done.” There is a coded symmetry in this riffing on the secret taunt that provides an interesting starting point, however puzzling.

Simultaneously showing with *Coolie Coolie Viens*, and considered to be part of the same body of work, ephemera from Gosine’s performance “Our Holy Waters, And Mine” is part of “Relational Undercurrents,” the comprehensive exhibition of contemporary Caribbean art that has thus far travelled to Long Beach, New York and, currently, Miami.



(<https://preelit.com/2018/11/15/andil-gosine-coolie-coolie->

[viens/img_2011/](#))



(https://preelit.com/2018/11/15/andil-gosine-coolie-coolie-viens/img_2015/)



(https://preelit.com/2018/11/15/andil-gosine-coolie-coolie-viens/img_2041/)

The performance itself, the filling of the jars, the series of movements, the vocals – all of it sounds really exciting. Unfortunately, I missed the totality of the immersive experience because I did not have the good fortune to see the work live. My comments are based upon my conceptual appreciation of the piece, as well as viewing some stills and a short videotape. Representing the several

crossings that migrant Indians took on the first voyage and their several succeeding journeys, by two sets of six Mason jars, each containing water, is intriguing. The Mason jar, now in use for trendy cocktails as well as on the street for paper bag wine, is a well-known domestic essential for the preservation of perishable foods especially in Europe and North America. Not so in places where indentured scuttled back and forth for survival, re-purposing any old jar for their creative condiments and chutneys. The formalism of symmetrical mason jars as repositories for the waters of several crossings imparts a certain gravitas to the simple historical facts being acknowledged. But why, though? Perhaps utilizing one of the most everyday tools of preservation from the master's kitchen outwits the planter who has enticed the gullible coolie into hard labor by the promise of curry. Gosine stresses in his work the necessity of exploring the space "after indenture." One is forced to contemplate the unsatisfactory results of numerous crossings that lead to the restlessness of these previously uninformed migrants, who now assert their agency by navigating multiple and continuous waterways. A further act of agency is that of preserving these bodies of water, museum-style, in jars labelled with those waters most vital to the experiences of the narrator/actor in motion.

These are contained and preserved bodies of water, dense with implied meaning, dense too with nuances never acknowledged or admitted even to those making the crossing. The waters are transparent, why? What would opacity have signified? Or perhaps different levels of transparency and opacity – mud, blood, contamination of any kind? We look through the clear water for the narratives, the suffering, rage and insurgency contained within these separate and continuous worlds. We look too for joy, for equilibrium, and perhaps for death, the end of suffering.

"Our Holy Waters, and Mine" has expanded recently to include a second part. Four years after it was presented at Queens Museum in New York, Gosine was invited to re-perform the work at the Museum of Latin American Art (MOLAA) as part of the Los Angeles/Pacific Standard Time (LA/PST) festival. In his words:

The piece told part of the story. At MOLAA, in addition to placing and filling the etched jars of water, I gently handed out flowers to some audience members. Midway through, the chant in the background changes to the names of the waterways and the phrase "je suis fatigué." My mood turns dark, I thrust the remaining flowers on the floor and slowly create a bed upon which to die...I think of the two parts as simultaneous enactments even if done years and coasts apart; the first speaks to that optimistic drive of the migrant, it's the story of survival. The second speaks to the encounters with brutality that, on many days, make many of us want to surrender.

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Coolie, Coolie Viens raises a profoundly vexing question to this viewer. Why must coolies come for curry? Who is producing the curry and offering the invitation/command? What does curry signify? Is there really an inversion? Why? And why “Le curry est tout fini?” “Coolies” are the owners of the curry brand, its inventors and the master improvisators of its seemingly infinite variety. “Coolies” can curry everything from vegetable scraps to the choicest cuts. I would argue that it is virtually impossible to deprive a coolie of curry, short of withholding the cooking pots. As well, the phrase invokes the delivery of the racialized taunt invoking the “n” word in a sotto voce manner, at which point the threat of withholding the roti surfaces, but the folly of enacting it is apparent, and it remains an empty threat. It seems that Gosine is utilizing one of the complexly navigated passages in race relations in the tight little colony from which the rhyme springs – housing 1.5 m people in just over 2000 square miles, not all of it habitable – its meanings always implied and always implicitly understood by both the races in question. Inverting and subverting this racialized “insult” is a truly subtle way of provoking racial dialogue especially in the Trini gayelle and its diasporic spaces where repressed racism on both sides is an insidious disease.

At the same time, there is something bitingly literal about the appropriation of this taunt for the process of indentureship – coolies were promised a bounty, pots of gold for easy work such as sifting sugar (chinny chalay) only to find privation and hard labor upon arrival. The Kala Pani jars provoke the viewer toward a necessary reckoning about the false promises of the difficult passage out of India, out of the known world into an unknown for which no preparation was offered. Water absorbs all: flowers from devotees in puja rituals as well as effluvia from sickened bodies. No mediation is offered. Tout fini is the inexorable shutting of a doorway, a promise, a full plate, the slamming of a door on an eager, upturned face.

Rare glimpses of plenitude occur, as they must in everyone’s lifetime, one hopes. This is the jar of Kala Pani – La Seine, graced by vivid red tulips, the narrative of this waterway signifying a lover now lost and commemorated by plain water and cut flowers.

Cutlass in water leaves no mark. Water finds its own level; it is polluted and cleansed continuously, often simultaneously, as with the Ganges itself. The miracle is its absorptive capacity and its infinite ability to renew itself. Functional Mason jars become vessels of water that hold the experience of generations and still remain unmarked. Coolies are urged to come for curry and receive no curry at all, but something remains within the transparent water, yet to surface within the contained space of jars designed to keep its contents preserved from contamination by external spoilers. In this work, Andil Gosine is offering another angle on the complicated question that ricochets through his art. What happens after indenture? The question, however, is not directed at those within the circle of indentureship. Instead, it can be read as a dialogic encounter with Martin Carter’s larger view that “All are involved/All are consumed,” as the question is flung into the four winds.

Images courtesy of the Museum Of Latin American Art, Long Beach, CA.

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