



A PRESENT

Tati El Mallab

A PRESENT

Critical Rationale

'A Present' (2024) is a multimedia installation piece incited by the rediscovery of a poem written by my grandmother. Acting as a dedication to my grandfather, within the writing she offers him her love, with all its complexities. In titling the work after her original poetry, I aim for a continuity of those same themes, though rather than for a partner or lover, my gift is for the mothers of my lineage. Birthed from an introspection into my familial, and more specifically my matrilineal archives, 'A Present' asks how we may heal the wounds of memory. Practising empathy, exchange, and a sincere acknowledgement towards those who came before us. The resulting work weaves together three generations of trauma, narrative, and growth through an interconnected dialogue.

Intended to be viewed in a contemporary gallery setting, 'A Present' is divided into two rooms. Room One is composed around a double-screened moving image piece, the work asserting itself as a conversation. The first screen, a nod to the past. Staging the original poem performed by my mother, her voice is overlaid by a series of still life's and self-portraits, isolating objects associated with the memory of my grandmother and collected in the family archive at the time of her passing. During the early stages of the project my mother shared with me that she refrained from touching the objects, only engaging with them a short time after my birth. This conversation sparked my interest in topological approaches to memory and became instrumental to the methods I employed when capturing the objects. Slightly out of reach and often obscured by shadow, they reference both the intangibility of memory, and signify iconoclastic remnants of my grandmother. 'In the theatre of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains characters in their roles' (Bachelard, 2014, p30). It is upon this stage that I invite the audience to understand the figure of the mother within my history as well as the intricacies of my mother's memories, and her attachment to affects that are physically laden with the post memorial.

In the second screen I perform my version of the poem, which acts as a response to the first. The love, pain and reflection which are present in my grandmother's rendition of the poem, are repositioned, aimed towards my maternal relationship. The pace of the imagery is slow, cutting between shots of thick foliage and closer studies of my mother. The imagery of plant life calls back to a foggy remembrance of my early life in Nigeria. It's nostalgic for care, but stays hopeful for what is to come. My mother is dressed in Igbo traditional wear, her clothes completed as I adorn her with a Gele as an act of care and empathetic forgiveness. The screens and their corresponding audio speak synchronistically, with consistency in the writing as well as its performance. A persistent exchange that still provides room for new positions, perspective, and healing. Resultantly the screens are constantly mirroring each other with an assertion that 'The choice to love is a choice to connect - to find oneself in the other' (hooks, 1999, p24).

Enveloped by the central two screens, are two letter pressed poems on their corresponding side of an abstracted wall vinyl. The vinyl, an image of the husk of a date palm, calls back to the ending of both narratives; that despite hardship, trauma, and pain, love, like a tree, provides shelter. In letter pressing the poems, I engaged in a slow and meditative approach, attending to each letter of my grandmother's original work. Transforming oral tradition into a physical, legible work that pays homage to her memory. A 'coming together of sacred parts, fragments'(hooks, 1995, p64) which entangles Eurocentric and West-African modes of hereditary communication.

In room two, I invite the viewer to partake in the development that was fundamental to the work. The second room is thin, provoking an intimate viewership of stills that lead down to a larger wall vinyl. The vinyl depicts the figure of a tree, whose branches wrap organically, once again employing the motif of shelter. Exhibited are two A3 digital C-Type prints taken during the filming process, paired with two A5 images from my mother's own archive. They are labelled as artefacts, different chapters of the same continuously moving story, as my matrilineal archive expands. The smaller prints bisect the larger, manoeuvring through my mother's memories, and mine, expressing the coming together of our perspectives. The larger images are heavily cropped or abstracted, mimicking the deterioration of the smaller archival prints and tying our histories into one hazy entity.

By situating the piece in a contemporary gallery I aim to blend personal, non western and diverse familial narratives with more classical forms of art production. My choices to overlap visual, audio, and written forms of communication was to have these components converse with each other. Melding together fragmented forms of memory and blending three unique lives into one moving, breathing work. 'It is important to read photographs not only as a record of choices, but also as records of intentions' (Campt, 2012, p6). That being said, the intention of the work is to transform the notion of a gift. By turning in on my own histories, and those of my mother and grandmother, I was able to process recurring patterns in our experiences. Looking at their trauma and inherited pain while asking how we can reframe the legacy of matrilineal care? How can we enact empathy moving forwards, providing for the women who have provided for us? I believe we achieve this through processing the importance of archives and securing passage of familial knowledge through any means necessary. As well as by looking backwards and acknowledging that memory, legacy, and empathy are the ultimate gifts that we can lend each other.

WORKS CITED

Bachelard, G., 2014. *The Poetics of Space*. New York City: Penguin Books. I Campt, T. M., 2012. *Image Matters*. Duke: Duke University Press. I hooks, b., 1999. *All About Love*. New York City: Harper Collins I hooks, b., 1995. *In Our Glory, Photography and Black Life*. New York City: The New Press

A PRESENT
Project Outcomes

2 x Moving Image Works
2 x Letter Pressed Poetry
2 x Digital C Type Prints
2 x Restored Archival Images



SCREEN ONE
For Patricia

Moving image
Duration 2:00
[Click to view](#)



with tall, cold, shimmering tresses

ROOM ONE

A Present: Patricia Oyolu 1981

Artifact One

Letterpressed Poem

21cm x 21cm

29.7cm x 29.7cm frame

A Present

Patricia Oyolu 1981

Give me something personal he said
I smiled sadly to myself,
Because for sixteen years he has had me

Sixteen years, I have lain in the shelter
Of his love and affection
And if my voice lacks the same warm
Inflection as his
It is the way life taught me to be

When young, younger than nine
I gave love to everyone -and reached out
For the same warmth
As a new lamb on new legs, gambals in the sun

But where I stopped there were shadows
And my hands grew cold, still I tried
Until one day - when young I grew old
And no longer looked for the sun -

But ran rather to the shadows
And walked with the rain, in the meadow
I grow as the poplar tree, with tall, cold
Shimmering tresses

Yet even poplar trees give love and shelter to the birds.

SCREEN TWO
For Dominique

Moving Image
Duration 2:00
[Click to view](#)



I smiled gaily to myself

ROOM ONE

A Present: Tati El Mallab 2024

Artifact Two

Letterpressed Poem

21cm x 21cm

29.7cm x 29.7cm frame

A Present

Tati El Mallab 2024

Give me something personal she said,
And all at once
There were twenty-one years
Twenty-one years she had lost me

Twenty-one years, I had slept-walked
Dreaming of her tenderness and care
And if my voice has the same ache
And longing as hers

It is the way she taught me to be

In a time closer than it seems
I kept my pain in solitude - and shut out
Her same stresses
As an aged ram, with thick horns
Anchored to the sun
Now where I step there are shadows
And my hand's are cold, now I try
This day — when old, to grow young
And look further down the path

Far past this horned shadow
And walk with the rays in her meadow
I grow as the date palm, with tall, warm
Shimmering tresses -
As even palms give love and shelter to the birds

ROOM ONE
A Present

Artifact Three
Wall Vinyl
250 cm X 100cm



ROOM TWO
A Present: In Stillness

Artifact One
Wall Vinyl
84.1 cm x 118.9cm



ROOM TWO
A Present: In Stillness

Artifact Two
Digital c type print
29.7 cm x 42cm



ROOM TWO

A Present: In Stillness

Artifact Three

Digital c type print

29.7 cm x 42cm



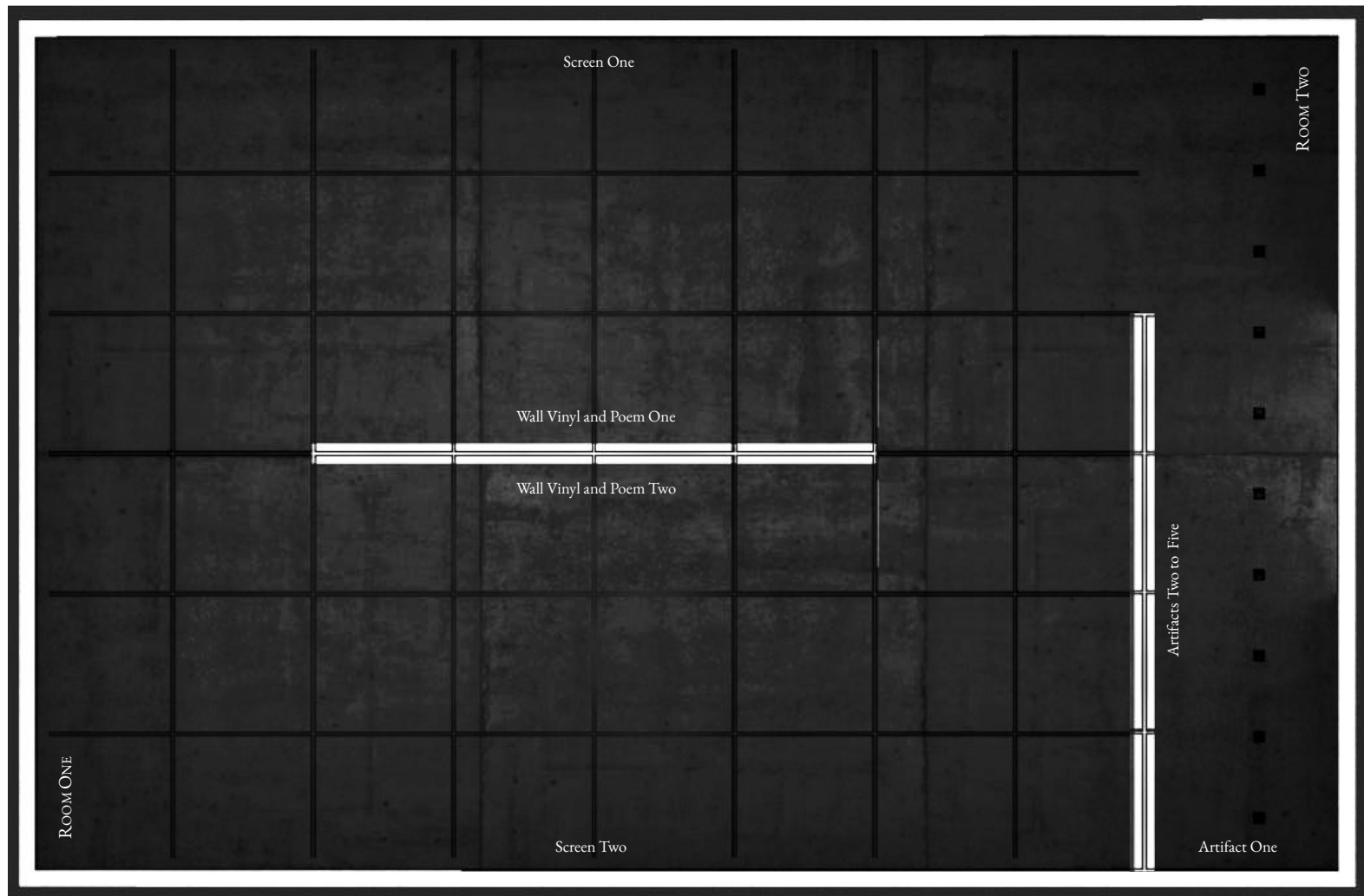
ROOM TWO
A Present: In Stillness

Artifacts Four and Five
2x Archival images
14.8cm x 21cm



A PRESENT
Exhibition Layout

20m x 11.4m



ROOM ONE
A Present



with tall, cold, shimmering tresses



I'm the lady to myself



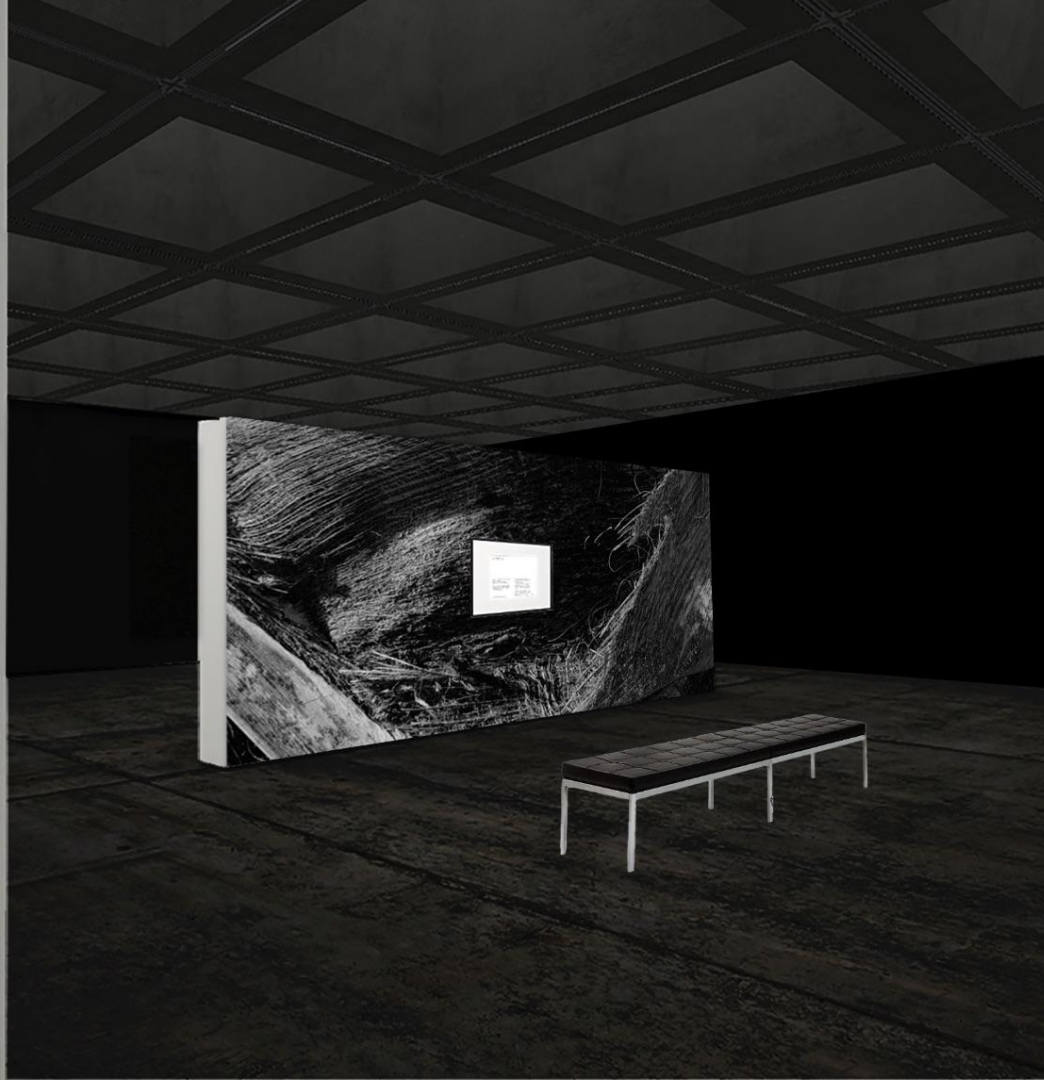
**A Present
for St. John's**

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A black and white photograph of a steep, eroded soil bank. The soil surface is dark and textured, showing signs of erosion with various ridges and grooves. Numerous roots are exposed, some running horizontally along the surface and others hanging down vertically. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on the roots and deep shadows in the soil crevices.

THANK YOU