

Joy Gregory

Lost Languages and other voices



Exhibition Guide



Self Portraits 1997

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Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s much of Joy Gregory's work was focused on identity and self, mainly through photographic self-portraits. In 1997 Gregory spent six months working throughout the Caribbean and made a conscious to leave this side of her work behind. Yet, somehow, and despite her best efforts, the tendency to picture herself just wouldn't go away.

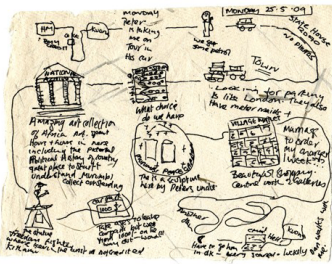
Over ten years later, Gregory came across a couple of these 'Caribbean snaps' which made her return to look at over two thousand negatives she had shot during these travels. What she saw were pictures that placed her as part of the scene. Often set up within her hostel room or its immediate environs these pictures were taken as a way of passing time. Gregory had always considered them to sit at the margins of her 'real work' because they were effortless and intuitive.

Made at a time when the internet was in its infancy, and texting from mobile phones not even imagined, meant that Gregory's contact with people she knew and loved was scarce. She would conduct conversations with her friends and family back home in her head and correspondence would be scribbled on the back of postcards. These photographs are a reminder of what it is to travel alone while constantly meeting new people, in new places, on an almost daily basis.

As Gregory says *"These photographs are a window to another time to which we can never return"*.



Journey to Kuona 2009



Six Weeks 2009

During summer 2009 Joy Gregory was the artist-in-residency at the Kuona Trust, Kenya. She arrived in Nairobi and realised she had forgotten the charger for her camera. Ever resourceful, and without her digital camera and limited film processing opportunities, Gregory decided it was another opportunity to re-think her photographic practice.

Journey to Kuona 2009 and Walk to 46 Matatu 2009

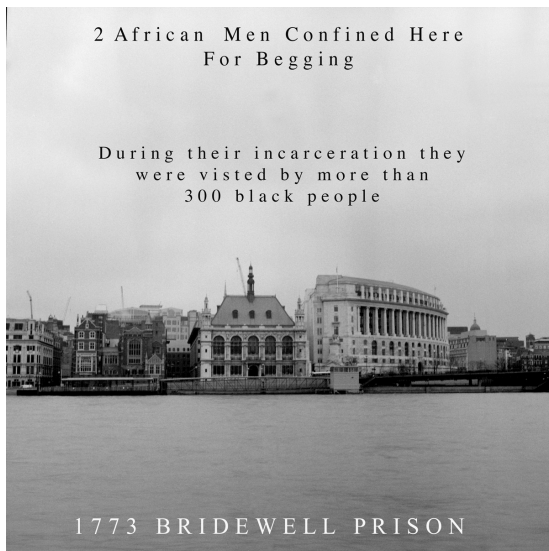
Her mobile phone became her camera which she used to document her forty five minute journey from where she was staying to her studio at the Kuona Trust. Freed from the constraints of a cumbersome camera, Gregory was able to record the minutia of her walk along the rough road - everything from a soft drink stall on the side of the road through to the building that houses the Iranian Cultural Centre.

Matatu's are the main mode of public transport for getting around Kenya and operate both local and national routes. The number 46 was Gregory's local route and would take her to the nearest Mall or all the way into town.

Presented as film strips both these work shows us a slice of Gregory's ordinary life as she went about her daily business, and as such we too are invited to negotiate these new places.

Six Weeks 2009

Every day for six weeks Gregory drew her experiences on any paper that was to hand. In a unique documentation these drawings, almost childlike and cartoon by nature, act as an amusing visual diary of her many misunderstandings and good-humoured adventures.



Sites of Africa 2001

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In this photographic series Joy Gregory brings to the city's surface an array of histories long buried; forgotten or unheard. Each of the London locations represent a site that was once associated with an African presence.

Spanning 400 years of history, "the stories that Gregory has chosen to reveal invite us to reflect upon the largely unacknowledged source of much of the City of London's wealth. We are reminded that the rapid growth of the City's commercial and material infrastructure in the 17th and 18th centuries was rooted in the transatlantic slave trade, and that the river and the docks are also part of this narrative... alerting us to the fact that the physical sites hold memory and that places bear witness - both to monumental events and to individual experiences. Gregory... takes on the role of both excavator and storyteller. Addressing the commonly held, but mistaken, perception that London's black population is a relatively new phenomenon, *Sites of Africa* asserts that there has been a black presence in London for hundreds of years"

Rohini Malik Okon, from *Critical Cites*, 2010

Originally designed as outdoor billboards, *Sites of Africa* has been re-designed for the gallery space.



Still from *The Fairest* 1998

The Fairest 1998

Duration – 22 minutes

Joy Gregory's film uncovers and probes eleven very different individuals' desire to be blonde. Asking a set of simple questions, such as *why did you choose to be Blonde?*, *what is your earliest memory of someone Blonde?*. This work uses the state of blonde as a way of describing notions of shifting identities.

Shot in 1998, a couple of years before the onset of Big Brother and the explosion of reality TV, this work presents, through simple talking heads and close up of lips, a time of innocence, whilst revealing through the interviewees unguarded moments and naked honesty our need to sometimes be someone other than ourselves.

Previously unseen and shot using analogue methodologies and equipment (which were the only ones available in 1998), *The Fairest* has been specially digitally re-mastered and edited for this exhibition.

The Fairest is dedicated to the memory of Paulita Sedgewick (1943 to 2009).



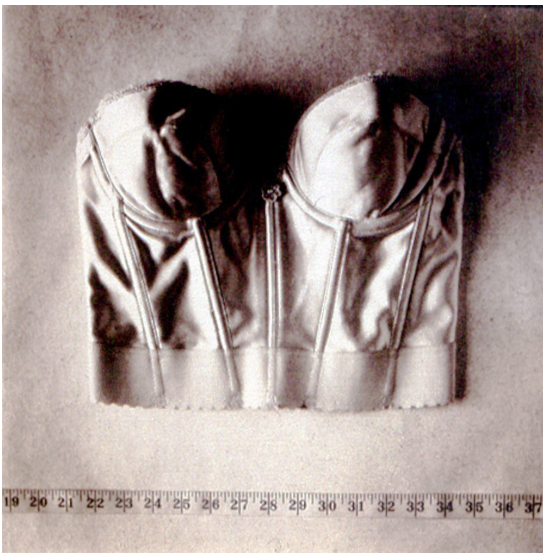
Bottled Blonde 1998

Bottled Blonde 1998

"The soft golden halo of blonde hair indicates an innocence, which has a limited life in a new century already savaged by senseless global wars, hunger and catastrophic health crisis. Beyond that small window of early childhood, innocence exists only in memory and in fairy tales – as indeed does the real platinum blonde beyond the age of twelve.

Blond is western's society's iconographic object of desire; both real and imagined it reveals the modern day acceptable face of contemporary fetish. It conjures up unimaginable visions of transient beauty, love, sexual availability, fun, fascination and envy." Joy Gregory 2008

Bottled Blonde is a sculpture based on photographic methodology. It consists of medical sample bottles filled with dyed blonde hair donated by peoples from different racial - African, Asian, European - backgrounds. The work's sculptural qualities are connected to photography, as each individual lock of hair has been dyed and toned blonde in a laboratory setting based on the timings and methods used within a photography darkroom. Like much of Gregory's work *Bottled Blonde* looks at notions of aesthetics, beauty, gender and race.



Objects of Beauty 1992 - 1995

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This set of twelve images uses the Victorian printing process of kallitypes to present beguiling images of objects often associated with the western fashion industry.

Who can deny the power of a pair of hairdresser's scissors, or the bewitching effect of a set of false eyelashes? These and other objects are isolated to produce a set of textured prints that raise questions about the meanings we attach to these objects.

Some appear alongside tape measures which suggests questions about ideal proportions and alludes to anthropological recording. Others have been chosen for the way they can change a body shape, or even the way a woman walks. The apparent simplicity of the work belies its complex message and lets us question the meanings we attach to these objects.



St. Mark's Square, Venice
from *Cinderella Tours Europe* 1997 - 2001

Cinderella Tours Europe 1997 – 2001

"My mother left us here and went to England in 1962, she never came home"

"And Paris, I hear they have good clothes there"

"I would love to see that place with buildings on the water"

This series of familiar tourist landmarks are decidedly less straightforward than they first appear. These photographs touch on the complex relationship between Europe and the Caribbean. On Joy Gregory's 'Grand Tour' a pair of golden shoes are transported around the major sights of Europe. These shoes act as both metaphor and surrogate for contemporary Caribbean people for whom the possibility of such a tour is difficult.

Cinderella is a character inspired by the numerous interviews Gregory conducted during a six month research trip in countries such as Jamaica, Haiti and Surinam. For many, Europe was a place of unattainable dreams. When questioned, people would almost always answer the same way; a faraway look would form in their eyes as they imagined visiting these mythical places. They would voice their desire to travel across the seas to Lisbon, Paris, London, Venice – the capitals and major cities of their formal colonial masters.

These nine visually stunning large-scale colour photographs touch on the complex relationship between Europe and the Caribbean.



Autoportrait 1989 - 1990

Autoportrait 1989

From the age of thirteen until her early thirties Gregory was an avid consumer of women's magazines. The features, quizzes, tips on fashion and beauty, along with the advice pages, offered a map of how she thought life was to be lived.

Throughout these years, Gregory's constant disappointment was that there was hardly a black woman to be seen. It was the 1970s and occasionally there would be discussions insisting that black faces would alienate the core readers and by implication, the advertisers.

Living outside of London, Gregory did not have access to black beauty magazines from the United States; the only images she came across were bad black and white newspaper photographs or drawings of women wearing wigs, in the small ads of her parents 'Jamaica' paper. As a teenager she dreamt of glossy, full colour pictures of someone like herself appearing on the pages of her favourite magazines.

Autoportait, consisting of nine individual black and white self portraits presented sequentially as one, is Gregory's response to the invisibility of black women in British fashion and beauty images that surrounded her as a teenager.



Still from *Gomera* 2009

Gomera 2009 10 minutes long

Language is one way of making sense of the world and since 2002 Joy Gregory has been undertaking research that looks at the complex relationship between language, the environment and survival.

Central to *Gomera*, a ten minute film that looks at language endangerment, is *El Silbo*, the whistled language used on the island of La Gomera; a small island situated off the west coast of Africa. It is a poetic look at the relationship between this language and the island's difficult terrain.

Carrying much further than the spoken word, this unique and indigenous language, once a source of ridicule and shame, has recently been revived and is now a marker of tradition and cultural pride. This tongue is explored in mesmeric footage that charts a journey to the island, penetrates into jungle-like natural landscapes, and captures the beauty of the whistled exchanges.

Gomera received its international premiere, May 2010, at the 17th Sydney Biennale; *Songs of Survival in a Precarious Age*.



The Handbag Project 1998

The Handbag Project 1998

Presented like religious relics, this work is a collection of one-off salt printed photograms. "While we are initially drawn to the beauty of the images, these seemingly exquisite and seemingly innocent objects take on a deeper and more disturbing significance when we learn that they were found by the artist in Johannesburg charity shops and had belonged to wealthy white South African women during the apartheid years.

Gregory collected the luxurious items while on a residency in Johannesburg at the time of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Subconsciously she began to make connections between the mountain of handbags growing in her studio and the abhorrent stories she was hearing on the radio and reading in the press... Unable to reconcile the gorgeousness of the bags with the horror of apartheid in any intellectual fashion, it became important to Gregory to make a series of work that engaged her body and her emotional energy."

Rohini Malik Okon *We Are The Camera*, Houston Center for Photography, 2004

Joy Gregory was attracted to these handbags because, to her, they are potent symbols of white woman advantage and general femininity. They represent a time in history where idleness, as well as the objectification of women, was ingrained in that society and contrasted with the lives of black women, who shared the same physical space, but were socially and politically separated. They represent in Gregory's words "*our desire to underplay the most distasteful elements of our past, by recording only a trace of the original object.*"



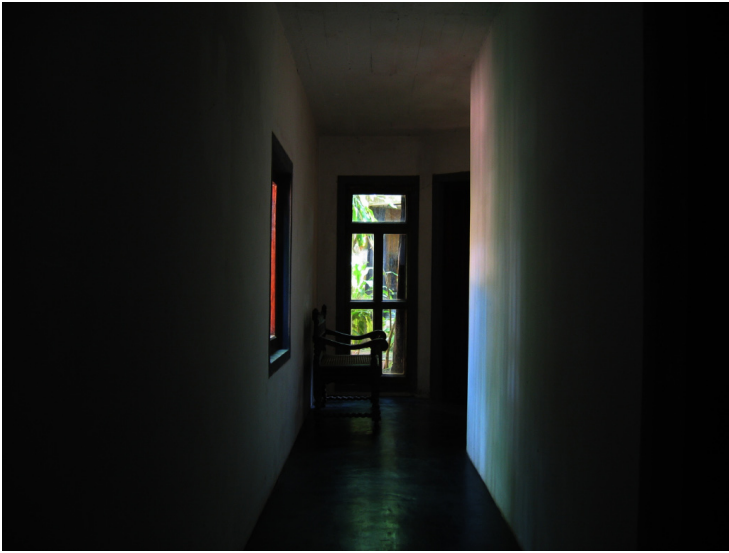
Girl Thing 2002 - 2004

Girl Thing 2002 - 2004

Much of Joy Gregory's work deals with the physicality of the object, its potency and associations with social and political issues, which goes way beyond the object itself. *Girl Thing* addresses the power of objects – in this case stereotypical feminine clothing like silk bras and corsets and feminine accessories, such as a delicate handkerchief. These photographs present perceived images of femininity and act as an exploration of gender through female belongings.

Gregory states that *"this work combines my tendency for collecting objects associated with the female form with my fascination with narrative and history. These seemingly innocuous objects placed within an historical or social context result in surprising and sometimes chilling implications."*

Much of Gregory's earlier work was made using Victorian photographic printing processes – in this case cyanotypes, a technique which involves placing her still life objects onto paper painted with light sensitive emulsion. When exposed to light, these objects of cultural and sentimental value are fixed in a deep blue shrouded by a deep blue ghostly aura.



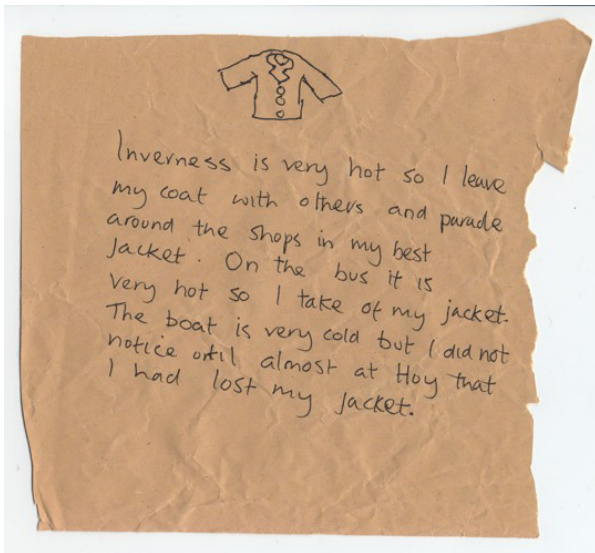
From *Interiors* 2004

Interiors 2004

Shortly after the death of her father, Joy Gregory stayed at Lanuganga, an isolated and old rubber estate that was once the residence of celebrated Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa. This colonial-type country house was a place of great beauty and privilege, in a stunning location with beautiful gardens and an air of considered serenity.

Forced to spend many days inside the house due to the monsoon rains, Gregory embarked on a body of work made within the confines of the house. Using only available light and long exposures (some over thirty minutes), these eight visually arresting photographs are an atmospheric exploration of the interiors of the house, while evoking Gregory's state of mind at the time - that of grief and a sense of loss and solitude.

Made as part of an artist in residency project, organised by the Lanuganga Trust and the Vibhavi Academy of Fine Arts, Colombo, Sri Lanka *Interiors* are exhibited, here, for the first time. This and other work from this residency are reproduced in *Translating Place*, Impressions Gallery new book with an essay by Rohini Malik Okon.



Tales of Loss 2008



Tales of Loss 2009 *Hoy / Hobart 2009*

In Spring 2008, Joy Gregory was one of twenty artists from various cultural and geographical backgrounds brought together on the island of Hoy, which is one of the islands that make up Orkney. They came to this remote place to experience and to gain a unique insight into inter-contemporary creative thoughts and processes. This creative exchange led to Gregory to make two new bodies of work. Both make use of material beyond Gregory's usual medium of photography and both were inspired by the time and distance from Hoy to London overland.

The first, *Tales of Loss*, is a series of small drawings that depict humorous events that Gregory encounters along the way when travelling by bus, train and boat from her South London home to Hoy.

The second, *Hoy/Hobart*, is a ten minute animation inspired by the onerous journey from London to Hoy, a trip that took the same amount of time as one to the other side of the world, Hobart in Tasmania.

Stills from Hoy/Hobart 2008



Kalahari 2010

Kalahari 2010

In 1997 Joy Gregory went on a research trip around the Caribbean curious to see if the cultural ties, which once bound that region with Europe, still persisted beyond language. From this grew her interest in the connection between language and identity, focusing on language endangerment and its impact on local knowledge.

This series of seven landscapes document the expansive plains of the Kalahari Desert, South Africa; the home land of the San people. † Nǀul is one of the oldest languages of humankind and is spoken by an ever diminishing group of elderly San people. In 1974 the apartheid government declared this language extinct. In 1991, however land claim activists used it as the main plank of evidence in a court case against the government and won.

Kalahari is part of a larger on-going project, which focuses on the San people's pain and loss of not being able to articulate their vision of the world in the words of their ancestors. These seven images document the landscape - the red earth of the desert and the locality of two elderly sisters Oumas Kies and Juna (both exhibits in the Johannesburg 1936 British Empire exhibition) - whilst alluding to the poignancy of the colonisation of their ancestral home.