

Dionne Sparks: RCA MA Painting Degree Show

By Rahila Haque

Dionne Sparks's work draws on personal and material relations that have been weaving through her life and practice for over three decades, her recent works part of ongoing dialogues with ancestors and the work of fellow artists. Formed from a continually evolving language of abstraction, the work is inhabited by a deeply subjective understanding of lineage against the myth of linear time. Sparks's paintings, sculptures and installations are a refusal of containment and use modes of application, folding and stitching that explore what both can and cannot inhabit a frame or canvas. They are flat and three-dimensional configurations that amass marks in paint, fabric, paper, thread, pencil, dye and other less expected mediums such as hand cream. The hand is always present in Sparks's palimpsestic approach to mark-making that fills and builds each surface or structure and finds a moving haptic language through accumulated materials—a palette of scraps and off-cuts of paint-blotted paper and screen-printed fabric from her college classroom where she teaches textiles, or rags from studio experiments and the miscellanea of everyday life.

These materials are used in a process of embodied composition; as she works Sparks listens to the rhythmic melodies of spirituals, the guiding voices of Black feminists and radicals, or the everyday sonics of her son playing basketball. Sound infuses Sparks's gestures; it mingles with the assemblage of heaped textile pieces and forms; it sits in the careful pull and pressure of an Afro comb as a painting tool, the lines appearing as empty staves awaiting their notation. These imbued elements of voice and musicality are part of Sparks's engagement with the Black aesthetic tradition, which also influences her visual language of collage and reuse, of a tendency towards the handmade and the 'making do', or towards what Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva name "a re/de/composition, a contaminated assemblage of citations and de/formations". It is a method of composition that speaks to the cultures of the African diaspora that commune across the long history of racial capitalism.

In the series *12 Generations: Letters to the Dead*, Sparks reprises her ongoing dialogue with, in Katherine McKittrick's terms, the unspeakable rupture of the Middle Passage and the watery geographies of slavery and its afterlives. Sparks's attendance to the unruly, complex undertaking of making is also part of working with and through the depths of embodied memory. Across 16 works, Sparks explores the blotted and washed surface of the canvas as the site of epistolary communications, with slight fragments and traces that suggest, but are barely legible as, words. Restless shapes and lines are drawn, painted, applied or rubbed—searching for a language that might be ciphered by the missing dead.

Rahila Haque is a curator, writer and researcher based in London. She is currently a PhD candidate at the centre for Transnational Art, Identity and Nation (TrAIN) at Chelsea College of Arts, UAL.