

Liminal Spaces

LAURA FACEY'S *THE EVERYTHING DOORS* (2006)

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Laura Facey's exhibition *The Everything Doors: Drawings in Wood*, which opened at the Institute of Jamaica's newly refurbished exhibition gallery in October 2006, was exceptional in every sense of the word.¹ Facey's exhibitions have always been thoughtfully conceived and presented, but this one made an unusually cohesive statement, conceptually and visually, as an exhibition that transcended the individual works presented in it and reflected her commitment to personal and communal healing, renewal and spiritual transcendence. It was a stunningly beautiful display by an artist at the peak of her technical and imaginative powers. With its evocative use of local natural materials, the exhibition strongly appealed to the senses, and some visitors rightly observed that one could actually smell the wood of the carvings. The exhibition was an assertion of Facey's artistic and political self-confidence which made active reference to *Redemption Song* (2003), her much-debated emancipation monument in New Kingston, and even sought to elaborate on its significance.² This, inevitably, added an element of controversy to an otherwise well-received exhibition.

The exhibition had three major components. The first was a group of sixteen

large relief carvings or “drawings on wood”, as Facey called them, which had been mounted on the walls of the gallery. Most of these consisted of paired symmetrical panels – the “doors” from the exhibition title – that represented characteristic details of various Jamaican plants or of the local built environment, as in *Breadfruit Kingdom*, *Worm Wood*, *Bull Foot*, *Fret Work* and *Blood of Zinc*. Two works deviated from this format: *Crucifixion*, which comprised three paired panels, or a triptych of ‘doors’, adorned with carved banana leaves, and the spectacularly beautiful *Crown*, a large, flattened crown shape carved from mahogany, which consisted of eight panels. The second component consisted of a group of giant, roughly hewn and red-stained cedar tree roots, straightforwardly titled *Roots*, which had been turned around so that they radiated towards the centre of the room rather than from it, as it would have been on the tree, thus providing a physical and symbolic connection between the wall panels and the centre piece. The third and central component was *Their Spirits Gone Before Them*, an installation which incorporated a traditional cottonwood

PREVIOUS PAGE Installation view of *The Everything Doors*, with *Their Spirits Gone Before Them* (2006) in the centre and *Crucifixion* (2006) in the back

TOP *Redemption Song* (2003), Laura Facey’s emancipation monument

MIDDLE AND RIGHT details of *Their Spirits Gone Before Them*



PHOTO BY MARK WEINBERGER



PHOTOS BY DONNETTE ZACCA

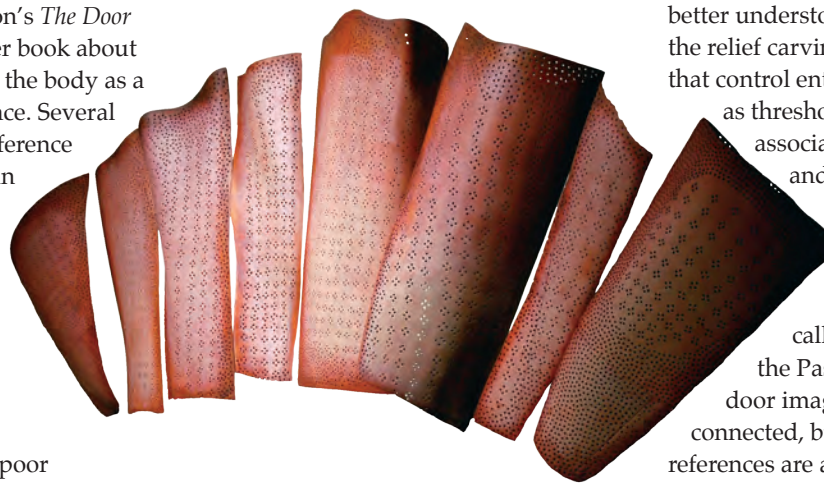


canoe, which had actually been acquired from a St Elizabeth fisherman. The canoe rested on a bed or, rather, a ‘sea’ of sugarcane stalks and inside, Facey had placed a multitude of miniature male and female figures, 1,357 in total, which she had recycled from the souvenir miniatures she had produced of her *Redemption Song* monument. The patterned arrangement of the figurines echoed the slave ship diagrams that were published in the abolitionist literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³ As a minor fourth component, the four columns that support the exhibition room were wrapped in banana trash, which added visual and conceptual unity to the space, thus reinforcing the sense that the exhibition should be experienced as an installation in its own right, but also cluttered what was already a visually rich environment.

The works in *The Everything Doors* were created in a short but intense period of activity, which had started around Easter 2006 and originated in Facey’s spiritual life. The specific point of departure was a phrase in Ian Wilson’s book *Jesus: The Evidence*, namely “that door is always open, and we have but to walk through to find our past failings forgiven and our daily earthly cares as nothing”.⁴ Christ is thus defined as a symbolic door, the gateway to healing and renewal. The title and concept also

related to Ruby Nelson's *The Door of Everything*,⁵ an older book about the spiritualisation of the body as a means of transcendence. Several of the works made reference to traditional Christian iconography, which was reinforced by the titles. *Blood of Zinc*, for instance, was inspired by the corrugated metal that is extensively used in dwelling and fence construction in poor neighbourhoods, but there was a blood-red, 'slashed' cavity in each panel that resembled the conventional spear wound in the torso of the crucified Christ, thus linking the redemptive suffering of Christ to the hopes for renewal in Kingston's troubled inner cities. Other examples were *Crown*, which evoked the crown of Christ, and the *Crucifixion* triptych, where the format itself reminded of the crucifixion scene of Christ flanked by the two thieves while the tattered banana leaves were suggestive of their abused bodies. Although the 'doors' represented a departure from Facey's previous focus on the human figure, some of the imagery thus retained anthropomorphic characteristics and most of these involved Christian symbolism.

One did not have to share Facey's religious convictions or be familiar with the literature that inspired her, however, to find meaning in the works in *The Everything Doors*. Much of the informal critical debate about the exhibition pertained to the central installation with the slave ship canoe, which was certainly its most provocative component, but its general significance is perhaps



better understood by starting with the relief carvings. Doors are devices that control entry and exit and are, as thresholds, symbolically associated with transition and transformation, or with "liminal" experiences, as anthropologists such as Victor Turner have called them.⁶ This is how the Passion of Christ and the door image are symbolically connected, but other related references are also implied.

The double doors consisted of planks that had been cut consecutively from the same tree trunk and flipped open, thus creating near-symmetrical 'butterfly wing' panels that often had ovoid openings in between them. Several visitors rightly observed that these forms resembled vaginas. The canoe installation was more ambiguous and could alternately be read as a vaginal



or a phallic form. These allusions were consistent with the general symbolic tenor of the exhibition, since conception and birth are among the essential threshold experiences in human existence. The Middle Passage can also be regarded as a liminal space or experience, as the violent 'birth canal' of modern Caribbean culture and society, which is how the imagery of the 'doors' related to the central *Their Spirits Gone Before Them* installation. It is of note that many of the plants depicted on the 'doors' were themselves transported from elsewhere, as part of the colonial mercantile exchanges that included the Middle Passage



PHOTOS BY DONNETTE ZACCA

TOP *Crown* (2006)

MIDDLE *Crucifixion*

LEFT *Blood of Zinc* (2006)

and thus became part of the natural environment and economies of the New World. The whole exhibition could thus be understood as a grand, hopeful metaphor for Jamaica's past, present and future, which is represented as a potentially fruitful transformation process, guided by a strong belief in the power of spiritual transcendence.

Slavery, the Middle Passage and emancipation are, as is to be expected in a predominantly African diasporal society, important subjects in Jamaican art and visual culture, although they are more often alluded to than represented literally. Many of the artists who have focused on these subjects symbolically reclaim their diasporal origins, in a way that is meaningful to the present. Neville Garrick's album cover design for Bob Marley and the Wailer's *Survival* (1979), for instance, juxtaposed the slave ship diagram with the flags of the then-independent African nations (minus South Africa, which was still under white minority rule) while the Intuitive painter Albert Artwell's *Black Star Liner* paintings conflated the biblical Ark of Noah with the idea of Garvey's Black Star Line, thus symbolically reversing the exile of the Middle Passage.

Others have paid more attention to the equally political subject of the role of slavery in the cultures and societies of the New World. Chief among those is David Boxer who has made it a crucial thematic concern in his work since the 1970s. This interest had been vividly demonstrated in the epic, three-room installation *Passage: A Chorus of Souls*, which was shown at the National Gallery as part of the *Curator's Eye I* exhibition in 2004. This installation narrated, in a series of tableaux that juxtaposed graphic depictions with more aestheticised and evocative imagery, the horrors of slavery and its legacy in the troubled cultural and racial dynamics of a creolised Jamaican (and Caribbean) society. As Boxer explained, in considerable



PHOTOS BY DONNETTE ZACCA

detail, during his opening speech for Laura Facey's exhibition, there is a strong connection between his *Chorus of Souls* and *The Everything Doors*, in terms of the general concept, the sanctuary-like quality of the two installations, and details such as the massing of the *Redemption Song* figures, which specifically brought to mind the *Chorus of Ibejis* component of Boxer's installation. The uplifting, forward-looking focus on spiritual redemption made Facey's *The Everything Doors* very different, however, from Boxer's more ambivalent and pessimistic vision.

Laura Facey's thematic interest in slavery developed only recently, with the *Redemption Song* project. Prior to the late 1990s, Facey was known for her finely crafted, subtly poetic carvings and assemblages of animal or human figures, usually made from wood and found natural materials. Her work was essentially autobiographical and told "a personal story of family trials, inner suffering, and eventual recovery".⁷ Around the year 2000, as she found healing in her spiritual life, Facey's work changed dramatically. She turned exclusively towards the human figure and religious themes and produced several large, boldly celebratory Christ images, such as the polychrome relief carving *Prince of Peace* (2002) and the ten-foot-tall gilded torso sculpture *Body and Blood of Christ* (2004), which was shown as part of *Curator's Eye I* at the National Gallery of Jamaica. Her work, which had until then been life-size or smaller, became increasingly monumental, and she also started experimenting with new, manmade materials, such as styrofoam, the medium used in the latter work. Several of these recent works, such as *Earth to Earth* (1999), a large-scale female nude figure at the University of Technology, and *Christ Ascending* (2000), at the St Andrew Parish Church, were commissions,

TOP Bull Foot (2006)

MIDDLE Banana Trash (2006)

LEFT Detail of Trumpet Leaf (2006)

which gradually repositioned her as a public artist whose work addresses collective rather than private concerns. *Redemption Song* fitted readily into these general developments and it is not surprising, given her own experiences with healing and spiritual transcendence, that she sought to represent emancipation in those terms.⁸

Although the general theme of *The Everything Doors* obviously follows from *Redemption Song*, it also marked a return to some of her earlier interests, particularly her use of nature as a source of metaphors and of materials and, as remarked earlier, a departure from her previous focus on the (literal) human figure. The overall effect of the installation was a mysterious, forest-like atmosphere. Forests are rich with symbolic potential, as archetypal liminal spaces that connect the material and the spiritual world. In Afro-Caribbean culture, forests and certain trees, such as the cotton tree, have traditionally been the sites of religious rituals and mythical historic events. The forest of Bois Caiman in Haiti, for instance, was the site of the Vodou ceremony that marked the symbolic start of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. Such symbolic forests also appear in the work of Caribbean artists. The Jamaican Intuitive Everald Brown presented an animist view of the Jamaican hills, in which the vegetation and the rocks are abounding with hidden spiritual messages, which are to be revealed by the artist-mystic. Brown shared with Facey, a belief in the redemptive, transcendental potential of spirituality, as a means to give meaning to the events of the past and to give direction in



meeting the challenges of the present. Similar imagery can be seen in the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam's famous *The Jungle* (1943), which represents a spiritually animated grove or, more correctly, a 'plantation' in which sugar cane, tobacco and papaya plants morph into the divinities of Afro-Cuban religion. Lam's imagery is, however, more aggressive and overtly

sexualised than Facey's, and his ominous 'warrior spirits' represent a politics of resistance and rebellion rather than of transcendence.

I asked Laura Facey if she considered herself a political artist, and while she was at first taken aback by the question, she ultimately answered in the affirmative. She explained that she wants her work to make a positive intervention into Jamaican society and asserted her belief in the importance of transcending Jamaica's past as a plantation colony, the emancipation from mental slavery she had also referred to in the *Redemption Song* monument. One of the criticisms of her *Redemption Song*, however, had been that she had

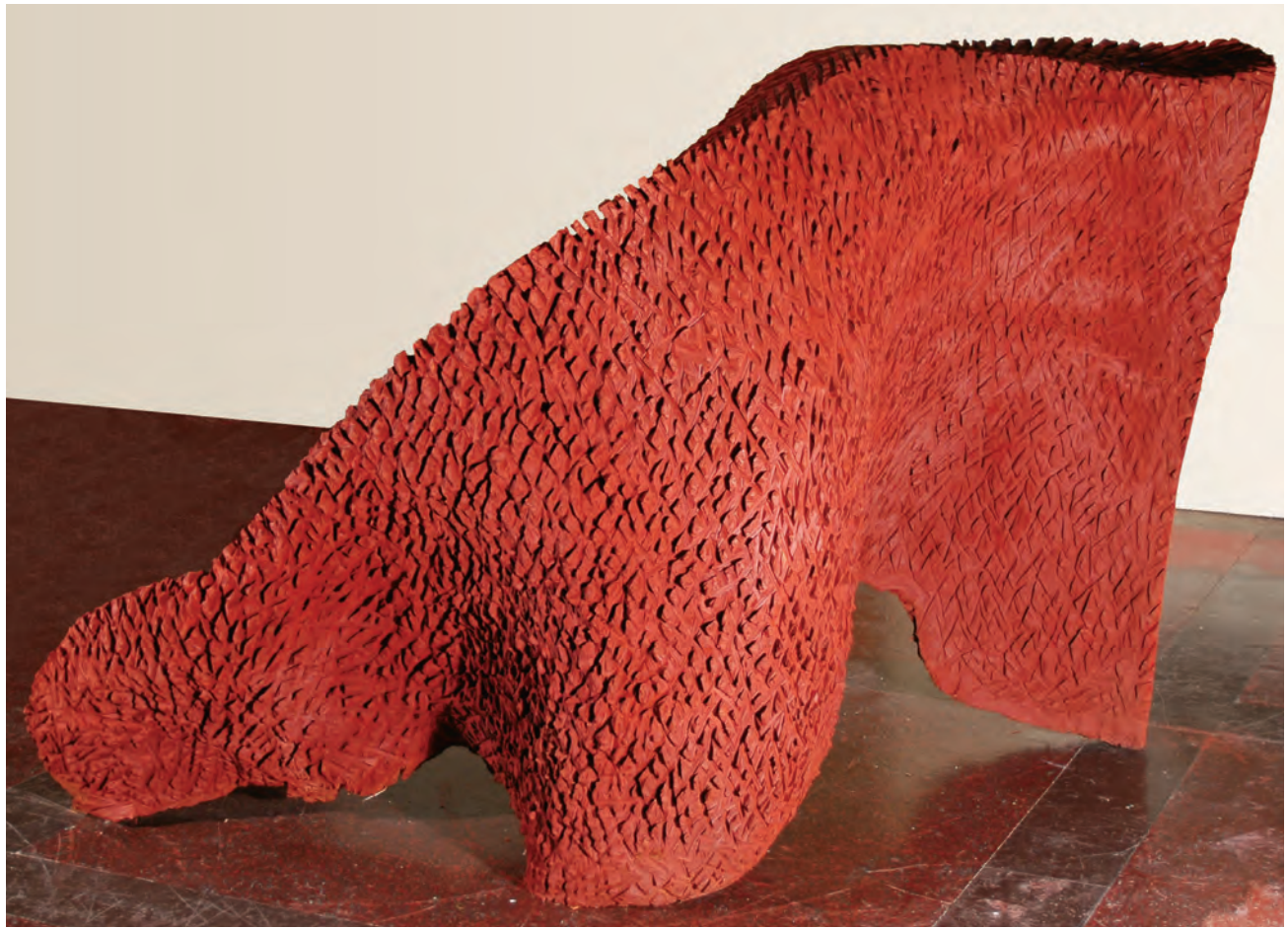
de-historicised emancipation and thus diffused its political significance. David Boxer, in his opening speech, argued that the massing of the *Redemption Song* figures in the canoe and its placement on a bed of sugar cane re-historicised the subject and clarified its significance in a manner "that hopefully will not be beyond the understanding of her critics [and will] emancipate their



TOP Installation view with Cocoa Walk (2006) in centre, flanked by Breadfruit Kingdom (2006), and with detail of Roots (2006) to the right

MIDDLE detail of Crown

LEFT Installation view with Star (2006) in centre, flanked by Fretwork (2006)



minds as they recognise how in one fell swoop she has reclaimed her own and her monument's history. By filling the canoe with a slave ship full of her contemporary figures she has compressed time and brought the past forcibly into the present and directed her monument's future."

Conflating the Middle Passage and emancipation is, however, not without its problems. *Their Spirits Gone Before Them* effectively modified the meaning of the *Redemption Song* monument, to the point of ostensible contradiction. A few critics of *Redemption Song* – Carolyn Cooper chief among them⁹ – had argued that the monument represented slavery rather than emancipation and, specifically, that the passive, naked figures looked like slaves on the auction block. The inclusion of the *Redemption Song* figures in the canoe unwittingly gave greater credence to these criticisms. Carolyn Cooper wrote in the exhibition's visitors' book:

[*Their Spirits Gone Before Them*] superbly confirms my reading of the alleged 'emancipation' monument. These figures, here entrapped in a canoe, perfectly enact the dreadful dehumanisation of African people in the holocaustic Middle Passage. . . Perhaps the artist is publicly acknowledging what I've always argued about the monument. It embodies enslavement – not emancipation.

She, however, added:

Altogether, the exhibition is a magnificent achievement. My singular regret is that the spirit of grandeur so resplendently evident here did not ennoble the conception of the 'emancipation' monument. The ancestral spirits who have, indeed, gone before demand a much more dignified reincarnation than their naked objectification.

To Facey, however, the association of the *Redemption Song* figures

Detail of Roots (2006)

with the Middle Passage, as the key moment of enslavement and diaspora, was not contradictory because she obviously regards both as part of an ongoing, deeply meaningful process of suffering, transformation and transcendence. While I am inclined to agree that the slave ship canoe was a compelling and ennobling representation of the Middle Passage, the inclusion of the figures was undeniably an ambivalent gesture which, not surprisingly, received mixed reactions from the audience. A fellow artist who preferred to remain anonymous strongly felt that the figures were thus demeaned and the significance of the monument compromised.

Laura Facey implied a symbolic connection between the Middle Passage and emancipation and the Passion of Christ – a connection which is not uncommon in religious

perspectives on the African diasporal experience. That is, as such, a legitimate perspective, but it could never be the only 'correct' interpretation of these inherently contested subjects. Even if we stay within the realm of religious interpretations, there are those that, for instance, regard the experience of enslavement and transportation as exile, akin to the Babylonian exile of the Old Testament. One of the dangers of construing slavery as redemptive suffering is, furthermore, that it represents it as a necessary event. This may seem to justify what amounted to one of the largest, most systematically targeted and most protracted genocides in human history, even though it did, in the process, create a remarkable new world. Recognising this historical injustice for what it truly was is as empowering as Facey's transcendent interpretation.

I was therefore troubled by the defensive, unreflexive and almost missionary tone of some of the statements that supported the exhibition and *Redemption Song*, particularly the claims that her critics somehow did not 'get it'. While the polemic about *Redemption Song* was clouded by hurtful personal attacks and narrow-mindedness about how difficult historical subjects should be publicly represented, the more significant criticisms did not stem from a lack of comprehension but were informed by alternative and equally valid perspectives on the issues at hand. This desire for vindication, to me, weakened the otherwise powerful statements made by the exhibition and the monument alike, which would have been better served had they been presented as a proposition, as a part of a necessary public dialogue and not as the final word. I do not subscribe to the essentialised view that Facey's conciliatory, transcendent representation of slavery and emancipation amounts to a deliberate ploy on the part of the Jamaican elite to downplay the injustice of transportation and slavery and its

present-day social consequences. However, persons of different socioracial backgrounds inevitably have different investments in how slavery and its legacy are represented and how such representations are, in turn, understood. A more deliberate, self-reflexive perspective on how this informed both her representational choices and audience responses would have helped the exhibition and the emancipation monument alike.

The political implications of the exhibition also extended to its location. *The Everything Doors* exhibition was presented at the Institute of Jamaica as a part of its Museums Division's Museums and Communities programme and was accompanied by a much smaller exhibition of photographs of community life made by youngsters from the adjoining Southside community, a project that was directed by the photographer Donnette Zacca. Laura Facey chose to have her exhibition at the Institute of Jamaica, because she wanted to have it in downtown Kingston, to contribute to the current urban renewal efforts there. She emphasised the collaborative nature of *The Everything Doors* exhibition. At her studio in rural St Ann, she employed studio assistants from the community and students from the Edna Manley College to assist with the production of the works. In Kingston, she was assisted by Melinda Brown, who curated the exhibition's installation, and by members of the Southside community who helped with the mounting. Melinda Brown is an Australian artist who had her studio in Central Kingston for some time and who is now developing a community-oriented contemporary art space in West Kingston, a project in which Laura Facey is also involved.

The involvement in the production of the exhibition and the association with the photography project, which was also concerned with urban renewal, seemed to generate a greater sense of ownership

among the members of the Southside community, as was illustrated by the presence of a substantial community contingent at the opening function. However, the small photography exhibition, which was mounted on the walls of the landing of the staircase leading to the exhibition and lecture halls, was completely overwhelmed by the adjoining Laura Facey exhibition. In addition to being presented in a marginal space, it was also awkwardly presented and, among other problems, mounted too high for comfortable viewing of the small-format photographs – a striking and regrettable contrast with the meticulously produced and curated exhibition in the adjoining exhibition gallery. Presenting this exhibition as an ad-hoc 'side-dish' to the main event did not do justice to the merits of this project and its casual, tokenist treatment undermined the credibility of the Museums and Communities programme.

Cultural institutions today are challenged to be more community-minded and to play an active and inclusive social role, a mandate which is even more urgent in socially troubled, postcolonial societies such as Jamaica. It is commendable that the Institute's Museums Division is responding to this mandate, but the Museums and Communities project that comprised these two exhibitions seemed insufficiently concerned with the true, active empowerment of the communities involved. There is a broad assumption, here in Jamaica, that art – or, at least, certain types of art – makes a positive, uplifting contribution to society. I am not discounting the potency of such symbolic interventions – Bob Marley's musical legacy is living proof of that – and *The Everything Doors* was in many ways inspiring, but the question arises how such a project may *actually* contribute to urban renewal and broader social change. Much more attention needs to be paid to the mechanisms and effectiveness of such social interventions if the Museums and



Communities project is to have anything more than a temporary feel-good effect.

On a final note, I need to remark on the use of the Institute of Jamaica's exhibition gallery for one-person art exhibitions. Until the establishment of the National Gallery in 1974, it was the only public art gallery in Jamaica and it has, as such, played a major role in the development of Jamaican art. Many artists had their first major local exhibition there, such as Albert Huie (1943), Ralph Campbell (1945), John Dunkley (1948), Karl Parboosingh (1952), Eugene Hyde (1963) and Kapo (1970), just to mention a few. The gallery also hosted the pioneering exhibition of *West Indian Painting* in 1945 and the annual All Island (1941)

and Amateur Artists exhibitions, the former since 1941 and the latter since the mid-1960s. While the National Gallery had taken over some of the functions of this exhibition space, it was heartening to note that it is now again available for art exhibitions, since there is a desperate need for substantial, suitably appointed non-profit spaces in Jamaica that can accommodate major, essentially self-curated one-person exhibitions.

I asked Wayne Modest, the director of the Museums Division and initiator of the Museums and Communities programme, about the availability of the space. He explained that the gallery is not available as a venue but that externally generated proposals for art exhibitions can occasionally be

LEFT AND MIDDLE Southside community members assist with the exhibition installation.

ABOVE Laura Facey at work on *The Everything Doors* in her studio.

entertained, if there is a "confluence of ideas", as he put it, with the Division's programmes. While I can fully understand that the Museums Division does not wish to be flooded with exhibition requests that are beyond the scope of its own programmes, the uncomfortable question arises whether artists who do not have the social clout of Laura Facey would have been similarly accommodated. Nonetheless, Laura Facey's exhibition simply could not have been held anywhere else, and I am grateful that the opportunity was created. ❖

NOTES

1. The exhibition was on view for one month, from 26 October until 24 November 2006. Parts of it – namely, *Roots*, *Crucifixion* and *Blood of Zinc* – were subsequently included in the 2006 National Biennial at the National Gallery of Jamaica, where Facey had been granted a special display to mark her 2006 Silver Musgrave medal. This special display also included an earlier work, *Family Portrait 3* (1996). *Roots* is at the time of writing on display in open air, in the gardens of Devon House.
2. The exhibition was discussed with the artist in two interviews, on 1 December 2006 and 9 April 2007. Some questions were also answered via e-mail on 19 April and 30 April 2007. Unless otherwise mentioned, information pertaining to the genesis of the exhibition and the artist's intentions was derived from these sources.
3. The best known such diagram is of the *Brookes*, a Liverpool-based slave ship,

which was published repeatedly in the late eighteenth century, as part of the evidence presented in 1791 and 1792 by the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson to a subcommittee of the British House of Commons. The diagram effectively invoked the inhuman conditions of the slave trade, particularly the very limited amount of space available to each individual in the ship's cargo hold, even after the 1788 Regulation Act, which had for the first time established the minimum amount of space to be allocated per person.

4. Ian Wilson, *Jesus: The Evidence* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2000), 179.
5. Ruby Nelson's *The Door of Everything* (Los Angeles: DeVorrs, 1963).
6. The terms 'liminal' and 'liminality' are derived from the Latin word 'limen' which means 'threshold'. They derive from the theories of anthropologists such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor

Turner, who concerned themselves with the study of rituals and other moments of symbolic transformation and the new understandings and identities that are created in these significant but often also brutal and traumatic processes. See, for example, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Edison, NJ: Aldine Transaction, 1995).

7. Petrine Archer-Straw, "Beauty and the Beast", *BWIA Caribbean Beat* (March–April 2003), 36–43.
8. Petrina Dacres, "An Interview with Laura Facey Cooper", *Small Axe* 8, no. 2 (2004): 125–36; Petrina Dacres, "Monument and Meaning", *Small Axe* 8, no. 2 (2004): 137–54.
9. Carolyn Cooper, "Enslaved in Stereotype: Race and Representation in Post-Independence Jamaica", *Small Axe* 8, no. 2 (2004): 154–69.