

Binta Diaw

La plage noire

Essay by Simone Frangi

Le mouvement de la plage,
cette rhétorique cadencée d'un rivage,
ne me semblent pas gratuits.

Ils trament une circularité qui m'attire.

Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation (Poétique III)*, 1990.

At the heart of the forms and materials manipulated and constantly recombined by Binta Diaw over the past five years of production, there is an insistent and non-literal concern with freedom, its multiple concepts and variable emergences, whether expressed in the form of resistance, self-determination or alliance. Here, freedom is not conceived as absolute, as individual, as private property but primarily as relational, modeled on another, and more specific, thought of emancipation.

As Hourya Bentouhami states in her essay "Feminisme marron. Du corps doublure au corps propre", such a collectivized freedom is definable as the right to have "a body of one's own within a community of belonging" and to locate this community in a place of care, a *territory-shelter* that cannot be taken, in the present and in the future, by those who would have the power to destroy it and turn its hosts into domesticated labor force.

Here, Bentouhami evidently refers to the necropolitical economy of the plantation and the transatlantic trade - material, speculative, and symbolic spaces to which Binta Diaw has been directing her critical gaze since her first major installation work *Chorus of Soil* [2017-2019] - but especially to the acts of its subversion. The notion of collective freedom is indeed informed by the historical reality of the *marrones* communities, composed of slaves who escaped from the plantation and gathered in "mimetic landscapes" that are not too far from the plantation itself: for Bentouhami, the existence of fugitives invalidates without mediation all those theories and practices that consider the enslaved subjectivities as unworthy and incapable of freedom. As a matter of fact, the *marrones* and the *marrons* were those instances that made this possibility visible and sensitive and instilled in those who were still imprisoned the desire to "free themselves together" and not merely the desire to free themselves in order to be individually recognized.

In her first solo exhibition at Prometeo Gallery Ida Pisani, Binta Diaw materializes this complex thought through the synthetic figure of the mangrove (the tangle of which was historically a *marron* refuge) that physically represents, for Gauthier Tancons, an epistemological revolution towards the whiteness that has structured the colonial modernity and, by colonial extension, also the global South. For Tancons, to drag the white master into the mangrove tangle is to make his orientation impossible, to neutralize his frontal gaze into darkness, to allow "fleeing" subjectivities to reveal themselves in invisibility. Recalling the reflection advanced by Tancons, Olivier Marboeuf in his paper "Décoloniser c'est être là, décoloniser c'est fuir, marronnage depuis l'hospitalité toxique et alliances dans les mangroves" for the anthology *Décoloniser les arts*, takes up the figure of freed slaves, and refugees in the mangroves, as a new site of sociality and "political recomposition". It is in this exact place - "uncertain and moving soil [...] strategy of subtraction from the spaces, rules and affections of the plantation" - that for Marboeuf the possibility of new alliances takes place. Binta Diaw's plastic reflection takes as the starting point for the development of her installations the aesthetics and the physicality of the mangrove, its dual form of life, suspended and rooted between water and air, and its capacity for multidirectional evolution. In Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, Diaw finds a complementary understanding of what the mangrove helps us to think about: a rooting entity that localizes its growth in marginal latitudes and rejects the idea of a totalitarian root in favor of the idea of dynamic, systemic, multi-potential territorialization that Marboeuf also seeks to account for. For Diaw, the symbiotic growth of the mangroves is the architecture of an alliance collectivity that always proceeds together and by referrals of interconnectivity: just as Rivers Solomon celebrates, in his novel *The Deep*, that underwater world born of the heirs of the pregnant women thrown into the Atlantic by the slave ships of deportation, Binta Diaw celebrates that chthonic yet supra-marine world made possible by the morphology of the mangrove, which replicates its long underground roots in the mirror-like structure of its bare branches stretching skyward. Binta Diaw's capillary mangroves, lightly floating in shallow pools of stagnant water, take up and reintroduce the reflections addressed in her recent installations: *Diàs p o r a* [2021], that aimed to trace paths and routes that African women in diaspora carried encrypted in the tangles of their hair; *Uati's Wisdom* [2020], where weaves of hair created symbolic architecture; or *Black Powerless* [2017 - ongoing], on the censorship of postcolonial bodies in their legitimate desire for citizenship and cohabitation in Italy. Binta Diaw's mangrove beach is about the possibility of being rooted in spite of movement. Or rather, because of it.