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Tourmaline's 'Pleasure Garden': communing with past, present and future

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About the author(s)

is an independent curator, writer and art historian based in New York. She was the Assistant Curator of *Homemade* at Magazzino Italian Art, New York (2020); the co-curator of *A Fractured Sigh* at BravinLee Gallery, New York (2020); and the Assistant Curator of *Non-places and the Spaces in Between* at the Italian Cultural Institute, New York (2019). She was also a speaker at the 2020 CHASE Feminist Network Conference (Foundling Museum, London) and a moderator of *Reflections on Homemade: Artist Conversations*, hosted by Magazzino Italian Art (2020).

Tourmaline's 'Pleasure Garden': communing with past, present and future

by Chiara Mannarino • 14.01.2021

Pleasure Garden marks two major firsts for the artist, activist and film-maker Tourmaline: her debut solo exhibition and her first experiments with self-portraiture – the latter of which indicates a significant shift in her practice. Although her work has always centred Black queer and trans people and their contributions within both historical and contemporary contexts, she has never turned her attention directly upon herself. As an influential member of this community, Tourmaline has greatly influenced how marginalised histories are understood in our present moment. As such, the decision to incorporate her body is significant: 'Frequently my work isn't about me, but it felt really important in this moment to say: if we are going to talk about all of us, this includes every single person. The self-portraits are about letting myself feel as full in this dream and in its realisation as I joyously do with my greater community. They are the most important works I've ever made'.¹

Entering the exhibition at an off-site pop-up location of Chapter NY, New York on 126 Madison Street there is a sensation of transcending into an entirely different realm. Here, possibility, dreams and care imbue the space; past, present and future collide. More than an exhibition, *Pleasure Garden* is an act of worldbuilding. The self-portraits on view are vivid and surreal, showing Tourmaline in an unfamiliar, other-worldly landscape. Amidst this landscape, she assumes a variety of seductive poses, donning both Victorian-inspired [FIG. 1](#) and astronaut-like clothing [FIG. 2](#) that only further challenge our sense of time and space.

This series was inspired by the various pleasure gardens that existed in New York throughout the nineteenth century, where people would go to be outside, to cruise and to socialise. Although some were exclusively for wealthy or white people, Tourmaline's self-portraits are inspired by Black-owned pleasure gardens, which provided refuge for Black people in Lower Manhattan in the 1820s. The social space of the pleasure garden is a subject that Tourmaline first explored in her film *Salacia* (2019), which is also on view in the exhibition.² Here, the self-portraits and film are displayed in adjacent rooms, framed by the brickwork of the gallery's walls – the reddish-orange colour mirroring the saturated hues of Tourmaline's images [FIG. 3](#).

Set in the 1830s, *Salacia* focuses on the life of Mary Jones (played by Rowin Amone), a Black trans sex worker who was born in New York in 1803 **FIG. 4**

FIG. 5. Jones lived in Soho until she was placed on trial for allegedly stealing a wallet from one of her male clients. Subsequently she moved to Seneca Village in Manhattan, a community of free Black, Irish, and German immigrant landowners that originated in 1825.³

During a time in which slavery was still legal in the United States, Seneca Village was full of promise for Black people, who had few places where they could own land in the city and, by extension, vote.⁴ This territory was ultimately claimed and demolished, its residents displaced by the City of New York in 1855 through eminent domain – the law that gives the government permission to take private land for public use in return for compensation paid to the landowner – in order to create Central Park.

Made in collaboration with members of the same creative team in the year after *Salacia* first screened, Tourmaline's self-portraits expand on the visual language of the film. Both demonstrate her characteristic blending of meticulous archival excavation with what the artist refers to as 'freedom dreaming' – 'the deep knowledge that conditions will change'.⁵ Her dedication to neglected archives challenges the dominant histories we are so often taught, drawing upon theorist Saidiya Hartman's notion of 'critical fabulation'. In her essay 'Venus in two acts' (2008), Hartman describes 'critical fabulation' as a writing methodology that combines historical and archival research, critical theory and speculative fiction. The intention of this practice is to fill the gaps and silences that pervade the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery, giving voice to enslaved women whose stories have been suppressed. Through her film-making Tourmaline inscribes the names and lives of marginalised people into the mainstream narratives that they have historically been excluded from. In doing so, she collapses time itself and, with it, the realities, circumstances and modes of resistance that queer and trans people of colour have experienced and employed throughout history.⁶

Through a tangled web of perspectives and visual references, Tourmaline tells and retells Jones's story. Using a split screen, she juxtaposes archival footage with dreamlike historical narratives and landscapes of lapping water and brilliant moonlight. One scene, in which Jones is locked behind bars, seamlessly transitions into footage of the water that now surrounds Castle Williams, the fortification where she was held prisoner.⁷ This is followed by archival footage of the Puerto Rican trans activist Sylvia Rivera as she looks out onto the Hudson River. Rivera materialises in a small rectangular frame, layered on top of footage showing the river's shores. Surrounded by friends, she laughingly says 'You got to keep fighting, girly, 'cause it's not time for you to cross the River Jordan' **FIG. 6.** Rivera was known to frequent the Christopher Street Pier that once served as a haven for queer and trans

homeless people in New York. She also co-founded the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) – a mutual aid and activist group for homeless youth – with Marsha P. Johnson, a Black queer and trans sex worker and anti-police activist. As the film transports us back to an imprisoned Jones surrounded by other inmates, Rivera’s message resonates; the film allows her to speak directly to her elder Sister, transcending the bounds of history.

Salacia opens with a quotation taken from Virginia Hamilton’s 1985 collection of Black folktales, *The People Could Fly*: ‘They say the people could fly. That long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. They would walk up on the air like climbing up on a gate. They flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black shiny wings flapping against the blue up there’. Crossing centuries and blending disparate moments in time, Tourmaline describes *Salacia* as existing ‘in the genre of Black folklore’.⁸ Hamilton’s tale of enslaved people of African descent who fly to freedom through words of ancient magic introduces Tourmaline’s intentions both for the film and her practice as a whole. This speculative cinematic portrait of Jones serves as a substantiation of the idea that ‘Black people have access to magic [and] are magic’.⁹ Tourmaline’s previous film work similarly delves into the lives of notable activists and icons of colour.¹⁰ Collectively, they serve as a testament to Black magic, power and potential.

Pleasure Garden channels a network of intertwined individuals, communities and histories, creating a space in which Tourmaline’s imagined world of possibility becomes reality. Through film, photography and archival footage, her work investigates care and community, access and aid, home and refuge. Her fluid perception of time, space and potential encourages us to revolutionise our ways of thinking and existing in the world.



Fig. 6 Still from *Salacia*, by Tourmaline. 2019. 16 mm with sound, duration 6 minutes 4 seconds. (Courtesy the artist and Chapter NY, New York).

Exhibitions details Tourmaline: Pleasure Garden
Chapter NY, New York
14th December 2020–24th January 2021

Footnotes

- 1** Tourmaline, quote from an interview with the present reviewer, 22nd December 2020.
- 2** *Salacia* was co-commissioned by the Brooklyn Museum and High Line Art, New York, and acquired by Tate in 2020.
- 3** For further information see ‘The Story of Seneca Village’, available at <https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/seneca-village>, accessed 28th December 2020.
- 4** In 1799, New York State ratified gradual emancipation, meaning that slavery was not entirely abolished until 1827. Voting rights for Black men were contingent upon ownership of property valued at \$250 or more. See B. Staples: ‘The death of the Black Utopia’, *The New York Times*, 29th November 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/28/opinion/seneca-central-park-nyc.html>, accessed 8th January 2021.
- 5** See Tourmaline: ‘Filmmaker and activist Tourmaline on how to freedom dream’, *Vogue*, 2nd July 2020, available at <https://www.vogue.com/article/filmmaker-and-activist-tourmaline-on-how-to-freedom-dream>, accessed 8th January 2021.
- 6** See S. Hartman: ‘Venus in two acts’, *Small Axe* 12, no.2 (June 2008) pp.1–14, available at <https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe/article/12/2/1/32332/Venus-in-Two-Acts>, accessed 8th January 2020.
- 7** See Tourmaline and T. Lax: ‘Anything we want to be: Tourmaline’s “Salacia”’, *MoMA*, 25th June 2020, available at <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/360>, accessed 8th January 2020.
- 8** Tourmaline quoted in L. Garcia-Furtado: ‘Tourmaline believes in the power of this moment’, *GARAGE*, 28th June 2020, available at https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/3azapy/tourmaline-believes-in-the-power-of-this-moment, accessed 8th January 2021.
- 9** Tourmaline quoted in M. Mire: ‘Tourmaline summons the queer past’, *Frieze*, 16th October 2020, available at <https://www.frieze.com/article/tourmaline-summons-queer-past>, accessed 8th January 2021.

- 10** Some examples include: *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018), a narrative short film made in collaboration with artist Sasha Wortzel that re-envisioned how Marsha P. Johnson spent the hours leading up to the Stonewall uprising; *The Personal Things* (2016), an animated film that highlights Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, a trans woman activist who also participated in the Stonewall riots; and *Mary of Ill Fame* (2019), which also explores the life of Mary Jones.

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