Interiors

Indelicate truths – an artist's depiction of slavery on fine china

Jacqueline Bishop's alternative dinner service brings history starkly to life

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Warning: this article contains graphic imagery

When Jacqueline Bishop looks back to her childhood in 1970s Jamaica, one image springs to mind. For an imaginative child, her grandmother's china cabinet exerted a particular fascination. Behind its glass doors lay another world. The gold-rimmed porcelain plates with images of carriages, castles and waltzing couples offered glimpses of an exotic, faraway Europe.

Today Bishop, a writer, artist and academic, has a different perspective. While recently researching the history of her grandmother's collection she uncovered uncomfortable facts. "In the 18th century, fine china was made for the luxury market. That prompted the question: where did its consumers get their money?" In many instances, "it came from sugar and the plantations worked by slaves", says Bishop, a professor of liberal studies at New York University.

“This was a time when Londoners aspired to be as rich as a West Indian planter. [Alderman] William Beckford — whose wealth came from his Jamaican plantations — twice held the office of Lord Mayor of London,” says Bishop, who undertook her research in Britain. “The French, British, Dutch and Spanish families who for many centuries governed the Caribbean are all in one way or another, implicated in — and benefited from — slavery.” The royal families of those countries often featured on the plates, she says.

Jacqueline Bishop, writer, artist and academic: ‘I wanted my dishes to be as appealing as conventional china, even though their history is difficult’ © Jermaine Dawkins

To reveal the truth behind her family’s pottery, Bishop designed an alternative dinner service. For this month’s British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke-on-Trent she has produced 18 plates that depict the history of Caribbean enslavement by “reversing the narrative”. Stark images of hangings or auctions are juxtaposed with vibrant flora and fauna. The results, while printed on delicate Staffordshire porcelain, are shocking.

“I wanted my dishes to be as appealing as conventional china, even though their history is difficult. My grandmother’s plates gave her a great deal of pleasure. For her generation they were some of the finest things you had in your home. I’d be lying to you if I didn’t say that I also love those ceramics,” she says.

A catalyst for the project was the discovery of 19th-century postcards brought back from Jamaica as souvenirs by visitors. Artists such as the French engraver, lithographer and printer Adolphe Duperly, who established his photography studio on the island in the 1830s, depicted a tropical Arcadia of lush vegetation and “picturesque” inhabitants.

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“The postcards presented a particular view of the island. They were painted to lure others to come to Jamaica while obscuring the truth. I wanted my plates to tell a different story,” says Bishop.

She drew on historical images: illustrations, paintings and watercolours found online were cut out to make collages which were then digitally tweaked before being printed on to the unglazed pottery. The effect replicates transfer printing, a mechanical method of decoration using copperplate engravings developed during the 1750s in Stoke-on-Trent, hub of Britain’s ceramics industry, where Bishop’s plates were made.

I wanted to render their beauty, however horrible their circumstances

In the 18th century, the Staffordshire “Potteries” or “Six Towns”, (Burslem, Fenton, Hanley, Longton, Stoke and Tunstall, which now make up the city of Stoke-on-Trent), also produced one of slavery’s most prominent opponents. Sir Josiah Wedgwood could have chosen to obey market forces “and run with the money”, says Bishop. Instead, the potter became an abolitionist.

In 1787 he designed a medallion in which a chained slave is accompanied by the inscription: “Am I not a man and a brother?” Thousands of these protest cameos were distributed for free at meetings. A batch was even sent to Benjamin Franklin.

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The horrors of slavery are brought to life on Bishop's ceramics. One plate depicts a flogging, another the branding of a slave. From the next, a woman gazes out, her neck clamped in an iron brace, a mask strapped across her mouth. Instead of carriages and castles, we see man's cruelty. Bishop does not spare us the details. Women dominate the vignettes. Subjected to beatings and rape, female slaves suffered greatly at the hands of their owners.

Bishop also emphasises their grace and fortitude. At a slave auction, a mother and daughter are clasped in a farewell embrace before being sold. "White artists often eroticised black women. They failed to convey their essential femininity," says Bishop, whose most recent book is *Gift of Music and Song: Interviews with Jamaican Women Writers*.

"I wanted to render their beauty, however horrible their circumstances." There is beauty too in the violet-blue lignum vitae or scarlet hibiscus flowers that frame the figures: a contrast to the cruelty.

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Bishop chose these vibrant motifs for their historical significance. Jamaica's national emblem, the hummingbird, was catnip to white hunters who displayed their exotic, taxidermied trophies in cabinets. Orchids were sought by plant hunters to be cultivated in hothouses as emblems of wealth.

Bishop learnt about her family's history of slavery from her great-grandfather, a farmer of Scottish-Irish descent. "He'd take me on walks in the countryside and tell me stories. He believed in a world you could not see. He brought my ancestral world vividly alive."

Until their emancipation in 1838, Jamaican slaves grew their own food on often meagre provision plots. Surplus was sold via the market woman — a colourful figure in Bishop's pottery — balancing a tray of produce on her head, a child strapped to her back. "The market woman is a constant in Jamaican society. By selling produce she laid the foundation for the peasantry after emancipation," says Bishop, whose great-grandmother was a market woman. "Inevitably, she wanted something different for her children." Bishop was the first in her family to go to university.

A photograph of sugar cane cutters in Jamaica, c1905, Adolphe Duperly & Sons © The Print Collector/Alamy

At the biennial her dinnerware will be shown in antique cabinets made from mahogany in a former 19th-century warehouse. Bishop hopes they will entice visitors to look again: “Slavery is a fraught subject. But if we confront history squarely in the face we can all learn and start to move forwards. I hope my plates will be part of that process.”

“History at the Dinner Table”, part of British Ceramics Biennial, September 11-October 7; britishceramicsbiennial.com

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