

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

REVIEWS LOS ANGELES

Alberta Whittle

Regen Projects

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View of "Alberta Whittle: Learning a new punctuation for hope in times of disaster," 2024. From left: *Lagareh—The Last Born*; *Taking a breath to rest*; *(pause)*, all 2022. Photo: Evan Bedford.

The title of Alberta Whittle’s solo exhibition “Learning a new punctuation for hope in times of disaster” served as a poetic cipher that ballooned in meaning the more one sat with her work. A collection of nine paintings and a video installation, the exhibition proposed forms of warmth—from rich colors to gestures of care—as reparative methods for addressing lineages of trauma wrought by forces of racism and colonialism. While this theme represents a momentous conceptual undertaking, Whittle approaches her subjects—both people and places, filmed and painted—with tenderness, infusing her work with humanity while nonetheless maintaining a tenor of critical sharpness. Emerging in both material (through painting, video, and sculpture) and linguistic form (through shifts in speech and narrative), punctuation here functioned as a connective tissue that united discrete bodies, experiences, and gestures, offering a symbolic structure for examining expressions of care as antidotes to legacies of power.

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Six large paintings lined the walls of the main gallery space, which was painted in deep, vibrant hues of magenta, coral, and apricot. These color-soaked walls complemented Whittle's equally vivid palette. Just outside the main gallery were three small tondo paintings variously adorned with beads, cowrie shells, and cascading trails of raffia: sculptural components that repeated throughout the exhibition. Taken together, the paintings (all 2024) dexterously fused languages of figuration and abstraction, shifting seamlessly between them like a string of interconnected clauses. Some works, such as *Genealogies of Chosen Family (Blessing Amos aka Precious)*, incorporated representations of female figures, while others, such as *Red Sky at Night, Shepherd's Delight*, depicted meandering plant forms.

The largest painting in the exhibition, *Genealogies of Chosen Family (Tracian Meikle)*, featured a portrait of Jamaican curator Tracian Meikle peacefully asleep atop a bloodred blanket, her body afloat in a teeming sea of sapphire brushstrokes. In this work, the passive act of pausing or resting—particularly when engaged in by a woman of color—defies, according to the artist, colonial capitalist metrics of labor and productivity, manifested by Whittle's representation of a state of intense bodily vulnerability. As such, her depiction of her subject points to a shared experience of sisterly intimacy—underscored by bodily safety—with the act of painting doubling as a gesture of genial care.

Inhabited by material connections to specific places, Whittle's paintings collectively formed a visual sentence with multilayered narrative and historical meanings. For each, she mixed water gathered from the Osun River in Nigeria—so named after the Yoruba deity of fertility—with acrylic paint, thus situating the work in relation to the river's history as a site of both traditional ceremony and colonial enslavement (it once functioned as a crucial artery in the transatlantic slave trade). The large-scale paintings included wooden frames ornamented with fretwork, a vernacular form of architectural embellishment traditional to Whittle's native Barbados. These carved, curved forms resembled a series of commas or apostrophes—a silhouette that also recalls the shape of cowrie shells—that protruded like thorns from the paintings' perimeters. Here, the fixed punctuation mark and the fluid river water could be viewed as allegorical ligatures: Together, they functioned as dual material and conceptual tethers for compounding diverse, and often painful, cultural narratives.

These threads coalesced in *Lagareh—The Last Born, 2022*, a film installation comprising beautifully poetic vignettes organized by the days of the week. Occupying its own large, darkened gallery space adjacent to the paintings, the film was joined by an arrangement of plush lounge furniture shaped like various punctuation marks, directly inviting viewers to literally and metaphorically pause. The invitation was echoed by a large freestanding sculpture (*pause*), 2022, a green metal fence in which the title had been embedded. Handmade blankets and quilts crafted by members of Whittle's family accompanied the furniture—a gesture of generosity that found echoes in the film. In one sequence, Whittle soberly recites the names of victims of police violence, pointing to the power of language as a humane and reparative force. In another, a queer couple, limbs interlaced, joyously banter about their budding love for their future child. Here, buttressed by Whittle's nuanced use of grammatical frameworks, the exhibition's titular notion of hope took hold, a sense of tender anticipation that looks toward the future, undeterred by the brutal tragedies of the past.