

# Oozing between Dimensions: Multiple Perspectives on the Real in the Works of Nicole Awai

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In a work from Trinidadian-born artist Nicole Awai's years-long series of drawings *Specimens from Local Ephemera* (2003–11), a conjoined female figure looks through two holes as two screws hover menacingly behind her (see fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> At first glance, this 2007 work, titled *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Backward)*, has a visual style, a set of visual and symbolic codes that are familiar and help to orient the viewer. The technical style of the drawing implies a *geometral* perspective, one that schematizes, orders, surveys, and maps three-dimensional space onto a Euclidean geometrical plane, also ordering the relative location and priority of the objects or figures contained within that space.<sup>2</sup> “Euclidean” mathematical laws govern the representation of two- and three-dimensional objects according to certain rules, as mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot glosses in *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*: “A point is that which has no part. A line is breadthless length. The extremities of a line are points,” and so on.<sup>3</sup> Euclid's definitions essentially describe the laws

1 My special thanks to Nicole Awai for the time she took and the thought she put into sharing her work with me. Awai has been a well-reviewed and well-published artist in the past decade, with work featured in such publications as *Nka*, *BOMB Magazine*, *NY Arts*, *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, *Small Axe*, the *New York Times*, and the *International Review of African American Art*. This essay represents my reflections on the deeper philosophical implications of Awai's work, based primarily on our unique collaboration consisting of a studio visit, immersive conversations, and a joint editing process.

2 For more on the geometral perspective, see Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, book 11, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 86–87, 92.

3 Benoit B. Mandelbrot, *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1982), 409.

that govern *dimension*, that is, how we comprehend and analyze objects in three-dimensional space and also how we map them onto two-dimensional surfaces.

This geometral perspective, mediating as it does between human vision and our perception of reality, undergirds our representations, on flat surfaces, of objects that are in the world. Much like the holes in Awai's *Pinpoint Black (Backward)*, linked to the heads of each figure and then to the screws by a series of dotted lines, this geometral perspective functions as a kind of code, as a symbolic filter or screen that covers over and veils the real world by creating a kind of lens through which we see. In the technical style of her drawings from the *Local Ephemera* series, Awai pulls our attention to the fact that there is something about this geometral perspective that is troubling. The works in the series display the artist's deeper interest in troubling the lines between imagination, perception, and reality, an interest that characterizes Awai's overall artistic project in multiple ways. In the essay "E-mail from HERE," she describes her method: "I make art about ideas, but for me, in some way, it is 'perceptual' art more than it is Conceptual Art. I am aware of the way people take things in, process, and live with—and in—situations."<sup>4</sup> Here, Awai expresses a very subtle observation: between reality and representation, or reality and imagination, lies *perception*, that is, a space of interaction between mind and world that shapes, and reshapes, the individual meanings we bring to what we see in the world and how we translate that world, ultimately, into an object in our minds.

Psychoanalytic thinker Jacques Lacan described this almost as an amoeba-like organ, a constantly morphing, psychic, and sensorial processing of reality as it seeps into and out of our perceptions, in a transitional third space he termed the "real." Awai's project writ large could be seen as an effort to capture this process of perception itself in a material form, imaging the subject's perception of the real as a viscous, tactile, oozing relationality that moves back and forth between viewer and world.

Born in Trinidad and educated in the United States, Awai populates her work with Caribbean references and diasporic themes. But the Caribbean is, in her eyes, somewhat incidental, one influence among many on the ways her own perceptual world has been shaped by her background. If anything, perhaps what is most "Caribbean" about Awai is her awareness that creole subjects were often handed an external reality not completely of their own making, and yet they have transformed and made unique sense of that reality simply by owning the validity of their experience. As an artist, then, Awai is less interested in history's formative role than in the transformative impact of her mind on aspects of her history and experience, since both are reshaped in an artistic medium and in the perceptions of the viewers of her works.

Take for example the trope of "woman" as it appears in a work such as *Pinpoint Black (Backward)*. The most prominent figure within *Pinpoint* is that of a conjoined female who, at first glance, appears marked by certain visual conventions that make her "familiar" or recognizable as Woman to the viewer. Female breasts reference her gender; certain facial features and different hair textures suggest her biracial physiognomy. The artist chose to use herself as a "convenient model" for the

4 Nicole Awai, "E-mail from HERE," *Small Axe*, no. 24 (August 2007): 109; quoted in Courtney J. Martin, "Nicole Awai: Assembled Material," in *Nicole Awai: Almost Undone*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Vilcek Foundation, 2011), 10.



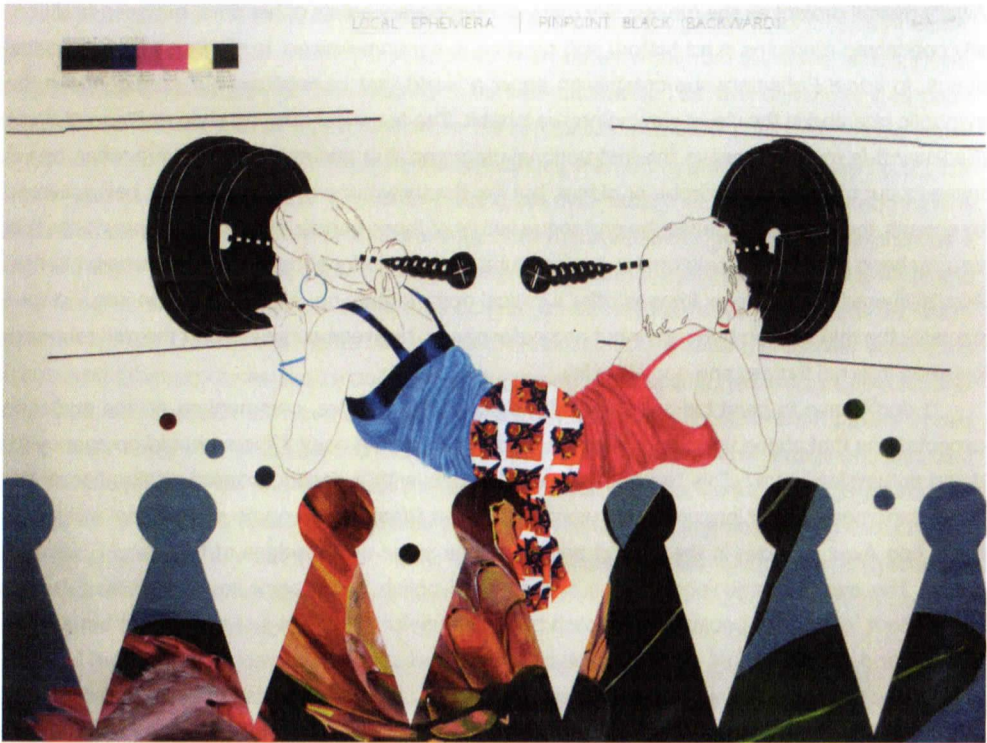


Figure 1. Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Pinpoint Black (Backward)*, 2007. Graphite, acrylic paint, and nail polish on paper; 38 × 50 in. Courtesy of the artist

face and torso of the figure on the right, and yet Awai is emphatic that this is not a self-portrait.<sup>5</sup> To see it as such is to fall into the very trap the piece and the artist are working against, namely, our failure to question the meanings we already bring to what we see, the representational associations we attach to what are really imaginary images. Awai believes that once you place a black and female body in an image, inescapable, eroticized readings and sexualized meanings become attached to it. Awai's conjoined female figure, however, is not sexy or erotic. She is literally unsexed, since neither part has genitalia and neither end represents a full woman. Awai creates a figure that, while seeming at first to reference the female body, even aspects of her own body, is not a body at all. Or alternatively, the figure is suggestive of a different kind of (perception of, experience of the) body—as fractal, fragmented, disaggregated.

Awai's pieces in the *Local Ephemera* series are a useful starting point for thinking about the philosophical implications and larger trajectory of her work, for they demonstrate her interest in zooming in on the symbolic operations that govern how we see, how we construct what we think we know of the material world. As such, matter and medium are themselves unstable elements in

5 All quotes from Awai without citation are taken from a conversation we had on 13 June 2014.

Awai's overall project as she moves, like many contemporary artists of her time, between traditionally conceived mediums in art history and practice in a manner meant to disrupt their categorical status. In *Local Ephemera* she creates on paper a world that destabilizes our confidence in the symbolic grid and in the visual viewpoints we inhabit. The technical drawing style of *Pinpoint Black (Backward)* is meant to evoke the instructional diagrams that accompany hardware when one is trying to put together a wardrobe or closet, but like the threat of a body and a head being pierced by screws, the drawing captures the grotesque nature of those gendering symbolic instructions that visually hang the female body on the sociocultural representational bar. In a much broader sense, Awai's layered and complex images offer a critical commentary on, and intervention into, how we perceive the relationship between inner and outer space, between ourselves and the natural world, between internal fantasy and social reality.

"I don't have to paint black bodies all the time," Awai states, commenting on the audience expectations that shape the contexts of reception for artists of color. "There should be agency for doing something more." This "something more" begins with a deeply textured exploration of the secondary meanings of language and words. "Pinpoint Black" is the name of a L'Oréal nail polish color, one Awai includes in the legend printed on the sides or top edges of the *Local Ephemera* works. The evolving meanings of Awai's use of nail polish in her work are neither singular nor self-evident, especially because nail polish becomes useful to her not just as content but also as material and medium. Most obviously, the nail polish grid implies a social narrative about femininity as appearance. However, the label Awai gives to this color bar, "sensation code," also points to the tactile properties of nail polish as a viscous, colored material. The sensation code focuses our attention not just on how nail polish looks as color on the hands but also on how it feels, as a fluid stickiness on the fingers. Awai's use of nail polish as both visual content and actual medium captures perfectly her artistic interest in collapsing the symbolic into a world of experience, of real dimensions, of bodies and depths, a world of matter.



Figure 2. Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Resistance with Black Ooze 1*, 2005. Graphite, acrylic paint, glitter, and nail polish on paper; 51 × 53 in. Courtesy of the artist



As a signifier for the world of materiality and sensation, the nail polish color “Pinpoint Black” could also refer to the strange entity that appears in an earlier work from the same series, *Resistance with Black Ooze* (2005). This uncanny “chemical materiality,” as Awai describes it, appears as a black ooze that bubbles up from between the two torsos of another conjoined female figure, almost seeming to grasp them at their necks, preventing them from pulling apart (see fig. 2). The ooze is also evoked in the pool of reflective, dark, but also watery liquid in the painted, framing lattice that runs across the top of the drawing. Here the conjoined figure directly references a piece of racist Americana, the double-ended topsy-turvy doll that typically combined a white and black female child sewn together at the hips or, later, a mammy figure with a mistress. In *Resistance with Black Ooze*, Awai wants viewers to think about, and situate themselves within, the bizarre world that produces such a doll. The works throughout *Local Ephemera* picture a fantasy landscape, somewhere between the imaginary and a material reality, in which such bizarre tropes as the topsy-turvy doll, which are the internal objects and images of a racist imaginary, first take shape in people’s minds and then take physical form in an outside world. Again, what Awai is pointing us to here is a space that crosses the barriers between imagination—as productive of racist imaginaries as any other—and reality, seen as outside the self. It is in such a perceptual space that the nightmarish objects from our conscious dreams can intrude on reality to become new objects in and of the world.

Awai incorporated another such figure, the black male drummer shape used for old Angostura rum bottles from Trinidad, in an earlier piece, *Oozing Red, White, and Blue: Recession, Incursion, Infraction* (2003), that was part of another set created for the Biennale of Ceramics in Contemporary Art in Italy in 2003.<sup>6</sup> While the Angostura rum bottle may reference Awai’s Caribbean background, it is less an organic fragment of her own personal history than a figure imposed, both literally and symbolically, from the outside. Awai’s first encounters with both the topsy-turvy doll and the Angostura rum bottle were as gifts from others: “People gifting you,” she describes, “with who they think you are.” As gifts they revealed more to the artist about the perceptions of the donor than anything about her own cultural, racial, or gendered experience. They entered her own imagination as found objects, incursions from the material world that are then transformed, reshaped, and placed back in the world as fragments of her own embodied perceptions. In this new form, they are as much perceptions of the world she sees as they are of herself as a subject-object seen by and in the world. In *Oozing Red, White, and Blue*, Awai conjoins the rum bottle with a Disney Tarzan figure to create an amalgam of these two tropes as a representation of colonial histories moving in and out of each other. However, her subtitle is key here, for as *Recession, Incursion, Infraction* asserts, the “oozing” is also about what the *movement* of these conjoining histories of encounter looks like—their interaction, their interactivity, their relationality, their intertwining.

In more recent works, the landscape motifs that formed part of the backdrop in the *Local Ephemera* works—decorative frames with angular and repetitive geometrical designs that then

6 The sketches for the standing pieces, *Oozing Red, White, and Blue: Red Recession, White Infraction, and Blue Incursion*, became the basis for her drawing series *Specimen from Local Ephemera*.



layer over more tranquil, tropical scenes of foliage—have begun to fall apart. This process began in Awai's 2011 exhibition sponsored by the Vilcek Foundation, *Almost Undone*, a show she describes as signaling "the demise of [the] drawings" from *Local Ephemera*. In an important transitional piece, *Go Go Green Compression: Mix More Media!* (2010), the landscape background is replaced by what Awai describes as construction debris "releasing [its] detritus" (see fig. 3). This detritus now moves from the backdrop to crash into the white space of the painting itself. The conjoined figure lies on the debris in a puddle of black viscous material somewhere between water and oil. Here, water and oil do mix, through the in-between medium of the piece of green patterned fabric draped around the midsection of the conjoined body. Darkened at the bottom as if drenched in blackness, this fabric, the artist's reproduction of a sarong-like wrap from her own wardrobe, forms its own permeable, in-between space connecting the body of the figure and the oily/watery dimensions of the puddle.

The fabric also retains associations with Awai's Trinidadian background and the tropical landscapes from earlier drawings. As she relates, the pattern on the green fabric repeats images of the leatherback turtle from the beaches of the island of her birth. For Awai, the turtle is a metaphor of the Caribbean diaspora, since the turtle always finds its way back home, much like the Caribbean subjects who carry some aspect of home with them wherever they go.



Figure 3. Nicole Awai, *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Go Go Green Compression—Mix More Media!*, 2010. Graphite, acrylic paint, nail polish, and glitter on paper; 38 × 50 in. Courtesy of the artist

In the show *Almost Undone*, however, when *Go Go Green* becomes the piece *Go Go Gone*—a mix of paper; actual pieces of wood; a puddle of black ooze on the floor composed of acrylic paint, polyurethane resin, and nail polish; and grey blocks and other three-dimensional pieces constructed from wire form, wood, and construction foam—Awai is not simply mirroring the collapsing images from a two-dimensional surface in three-dimensional space. Rather, she is continuing to represent the sliding movement between two-dimensional space and three-dimensionality that she believes is the larger domain of painting itself. *Go Go Gone* manifests Awai's desire to cross the boundaries of painting as it has been traditionally conceived as a medium. This entails a movement back and forth between two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality, a movement that repeats in another register her interest in the complex and mobile, ever-changing relationship between (physical) dimension, (subjective) perception, and (visual) imagination that animates her work. In these works from *Almost Undone*, the black ooze captures and enacts not only the movement of painting—and the painted—through and beyond the flat surface of paper but also the perceptual apparatus by which we move between the real and our own subjective interests and imaginaries.

In the catalogue for *Almost Undone*, Courtney J. Martin observes that the ooze in *Go Go Gone* appears “to have slid out from the larger paper and found object construction to solidify on the ground” and describes this as “Awai's alight into sculpture.”<sup>7</sup> However, Awai does not envision this as a change in generic form, a shift from painting into sculpture. Rather, for her this is all part of her perception and conception of painting as an elastic form beyond medium. When asked if she sees herself as a sculptor, Awai is explicit that the chemical materiality of the ooze reflects a movement against a vision of painting, à la Clement Greenberg, that would privilege the canvas, the flatness and two-dimensionality of the painting surface, as the only medium for the purity of painting as a form. Whether working with ceramics, resin, paper, drawings, or paint, Awai asserts, “It's all part of painting—it moves in and out of 2D and 3D sometimes; sometimes it wants to come out into physical reality, oozing between mediums, but this is because painting is not restricted by medium.” For her, the question of whether her work qualifies as painting or sculpture is uninteresting because painting is an “expansive” form, and both media are “part of a contiguous language.” For her, ultimately, “there is something in the gesture of painting that is beyond medium.”

In *Haul* (2011), also from *Almost Undone*, the ooze is itself the “gesture of painting” that demonstrates this movement between mediums. Consisting of multiple parts, *Haul* includes a two-dimensional painting; a three-dimensional solid that lies on the bottom edge between the picture and the frame, flattened out by its insertion behind the glass; a blob of ooze that has dripped onto the floor of the exhibition space; and a rubberized tire flap with a trucker's version of Awai's conjoined female figure visible as a green silhouette on its textured, ridged, two-dimensional surface. The “figures” in *Haul* repeat and recur across dimensions almost infinitely. In the picture itself, a grouping of branchy trees are framed by a hole with irregular edges, itself a fragmented and irregular porthole from which one looks out onto nature as a space of irregular shape. Through the secondary porthole created by the break in the trees, Awai recreates a photograph she took—an image she

7 Martin, “Nicole Awai: Assembled Material,” 15.



created through another set of portholes, the lens of her camera layered over the lens of her eye. What struck her in this photographic image was the juxtaposition of trucks lined up in the midst of a pastoral center. Physically used to haul materials, the trucks for Awai also function as signifiers of conveyance, vehicles, mediums that move things from one world to another. As a flatbed, eighteen-wheeler moves back and forth in the real world, so too does it move back and forth between the worlds of two- and three-dimensionality that constitute Awai's piece.

The truck mat lying at the outermost edge of the piece and extending fully into the exhibition space now repeats Awai's conjoined female figure as the, in her words, "sexy girl configuration" one sees on the tire flaps of trucks. Awai refigures the truck as a mobile conveyor of the trope of (conjoined) Woman she worked with in the earlier *Local Ephemera* series. Woman's appearance on the surface of a real physical object in the world, the mat, uncannily extends her virtual, symbolic reality into solid, three-dimensional space. Like the topsy-turvy doll, she becomes a bizarre trope made real.

The mat itself, in its very physicality and ordinary everydayness, is another found object. As such, it demonstrates Awai's clear movement away from the "virtual" or symbolic realm of visual codes and even further into their real materialization in the world as objects perceived and experienced with senses and sensibilities beyond the visual. The mat sits at the pivot point of other kinds of dimensions than merely the second and third—the visual dimension versus sensory, more tactile, bodily registers; the aesthetic dimension (the image as an internal object of the mind) versus the everyday dimension of actual material objects. These are objects, organic and manmade, that lie around on the ground and are thereby grounded, in a real world.

In Awai's most recent series, *Vistas* (2013–), the ooze represents an even deeper engagement with the sticky materiality of the world of matter, objects, and things, represented in a visual medium that does not flatten it out or aim to make it stand for something else. Rather, the black ooze works its strangeness on the viewer as a new vista on the world as a material, mobile, permeable, multi-dimensional landscape.

For Awai, as always, the inspiration for titling her series began with the play of language, her fascination with the word *vista*, which typically means "a large and beautiful view of an area of land or water." Awai, however, was intrigued by its secondary meaning as "a mental view of a succession of remembered or anticipated events."<sup>8</sup> Once again, it is the conjoining of a "mental view" with nature's self-display, one might say—the seeing self standing alongside, intertwined with, impinging on, and being impinged on by the showing world—that captures Awai's attentions. The more mundane use of the word *vista* to describe the picturesque is in stark contrast with the world Awai evokes in this series, as described by Holland Cotter in the *New York Times* when the first three works from the *Vistas* series were exhibited in *American Beauty* at the Susan Inglett Gallery in Chelsea. For Cotter, a piece such as *Vista 1: Curling* could best be described as a "gorgeously sinister wall sculpture" (see fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> This is not an aestheticized view of a natural world that has been

8 Both definitions are Awai's.

9 Holland Cotter, "American Beauty," *New York Times*, 23 January 2014, [www.nytimes.com/2014/01/24/arts/design/american-beauty.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/24/arts/design/american-beauty.html?_r=1).



tamed for the all-encompassing eye. Rather, one experiences *Vista 1* as a form in an in-between state, with amorphous boundaries, contradictory textures—fuzzy, glossy, prickly, bulbous—and an almost unnatural location: growing out of the wall, about to fall on the floor. The wall itself appears to be peeling off and transforming into paper. It as if the tropical foliage of the alternative reality that populated the fringes of Awai's *Local Ephemera* pieces, barely impinging as flat surfaces on the white space of the paper, is now peeling like old paint from one reality and creeping and seeping into another, new, visual and tactile world.

Inspired by the secondary meaning of *vista*, Awai found herself thinking about, while working on these pieces, other possible resonances for the ooze, such as the Pitch Lake in Trinidad, the largest natural deposit of asphalt in the world. The Pitch Lake is a dreamscape rather than a literal imaginative source for Awai because, as she recounts, she never actually visited the Pitch Lake as



Figure 4. Nicole Awai, *Vista 1: Curling*, 2013. Acrylic paint, nail polish, resin, vinyl, filter charcoal, flocking, and graphite on synthetic paper; approximately 22 × 22 in. Courtesy of the artist

a child growing up in Trinidad. Since she missed the school trip on which her classmates did see this natural site, if anything, the Pitch Lake survives in her imagination as her own kind of internal vista, her own personal “mental view” of a simultaneously “remembered” and “anticipated” event. Since its discovery by Walter Raleigh in 1595 on his way to find El Dorado, the Pitch Lake has been a source of fascination for European travelers and modern tourists. It served as a painterly vista for the Trinidadian artist Michel-Jean Cazabon in the nineteenth century. It has been treated, measured, and assessed by scientists as to its size, its source, and the origin of the asphalt it produces. Multiple modes of perceiving the real, in other words, have been applied to the Pitch Lake.

In 2013, Awai spent some time in Trinidad on a fellowship from Art Matters and in a residency at Alice Yard. While there, she visited and took pictures of the Pitch Lake from multiple angles. Researching old geologists’ reports from 1884 that described the lake’s oozing quality, Awai found that their accounts of the inertial, imperceptible movement of the pitch resonated with her attempts in the *Vistas* series to create in black resin the rippling and viscous effects that she had previously created on canvas and paper, as early as the shimmering pool in *Resistance with Black Ooze*. Awai continued to work through her fascination with the barely perceptible shifts in state of the Pitch Lake, the slow movement between solid and liquid forms, resulting in her creation of a temporary piece at Alice Yard that materialized, in visual, painterly form, the natural world of the lake. Inspired by her own photograph *Pitch Pot*, the work *Asphaltum Glance* (2013) was an attempt to capture “everything about the mythology and chemical, physical reality of the Pitch Lake [that] resonated in that image,” as Awai describes in Marsha Pearce’s profile for *ARC* magazine.<sup>10</sup> Awai drew and painted on the walls of the small gallery space at Alice Yard so that “a dark, glimmering, slick ooze engulfed visitors.” The painting’s trompe l’oeil effect is dramatic: what appears to have three-dimensional surface and texture from a distance—blobs of color built up to produce the wall painting’s globular effect—reappeared in close-up as flat, two-dimensional streaks. The painting retained a connection to the lake’s chemical materiality in Awai’s use of asphaltum paint, made at a plant beside the lake and often used in masonry and construction. The smell of the paint added a strong olfactory dimension to the viewer’s sensory experience of the piece. *Asphaltum Glance* was a powerful representation of Awai’s vision of a painting beyond medium, the image itself simultaneously photograph, painting, and performance art: “[It] moves beyond any medium. So alive—it can choose whatever medium it wants.” While *Asphaltum Glance* was on view, it represented the complete transformation and subsuming of white space by the materiality of a physical world.

Since her return from Trinidad, Awai continues to create in subsequent pieces in *Vistas* a multidimensional, multisensorial experience of an oozing blackness, each viewer’s own “glance” at a viscous, perceptual, transitory, bodily, natural, and uncanny phenomenological reality. This is perhaps the most ephemeral, the most magical, of the meanings of the real for Lacan. Referencing also the work of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Lacan describes a world that rather than being encompassed by our vision and our symbolic filters is at first “not exhibitionistic—it does not

10 Marsha Pearce, “The Origins of Nicole Awai’s Ooze,” *ARC*, 7 July 2013, [arcthemagazine.com/arc/2013/07/the-origins-of-nicole-awais-ooze/](http://arcthemagazine.com/arc/2013/07/the-origins-of-nicole-awais-ooze/).



provoke our gaze.” But when it does begin to “provoke” it, “the feeling of strangeness begins.”<sup>11</sup> This is the uncanny, amorphous world of the so-called unclassified residuum that William James recounted, that “dust-cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences minute and irregular” in natural phenomena that no symbolic code is quite able to capture.<sup>12</sup>

In *Vista 3: Emerging Properties A* (2014), the large glob or bubble at the center of the ooze is filled with its own “dust-cloud of exceptional observations”: trinkets, paper-plant-grass stems, and nail polish drips (see fig. 5); in other *Vistas* pieces, there are also geometrical blocks of debris. The sense that the ooze is releasing the detritus, the solids captured within it,



Figure 5. Nicole Awai, *Vista 3: Emerging Properties A*, 2014. Acrylic paint, nail polish, resin, filter charcoal, flocking, and graphite on synthetic paper; approx. 25 × 28 in. Courtesy of the artist

11 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 75. Here Lacan also references Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

12 William James, "The Hidden Self," *Scribner's Magazine*, March 1890, 361.

keeps each piece in *Vistas* anchored to some specific history or time. For Awai, these associations with groundedness become even more literal when she thinks of the glossy black substance as the chemical residue left behind when the human body joins with the earth after death. In *Vistas*, Awai also associates the black ooze with the bodily fluids produced by the cut and healing body. This body serves as a site that holds multiple histories together, in a time that is elastic and stretches between the colonial past and the present, with a viscosity not unlike that of the “mother of the lake” formations Awai captured in photographs at the Pitch Lake.

On the other hand, as in *Asphaltum Glance*, Awai also wants to convey a sense of these pieces as “momentary, temporary”; like the phenomenal world, “they can slip out of sight.” These vistas, then, reflect both the elasticity of time and the impermanence of memory. The engulfing feeling of the black ooze conveys the histories of things buried within that have become covered over. At the same time, littered with debris, the ooze releases surprising remnants from those histories such that, while sinister in their unrelenting darkness, the *Vistas* are also teeming with life. Awai asserts that the *Vistas* are not collages. Rather, they convey incursions of spaces. Mounted to floors and walls, Awai’s black ooze *Vistas* represent layers of dimensions—the imaginary and the real, the two- and the three-dimensional, the seen and the showing, the remembered and the anticipated, the natural and the grotesque—all impinging on each other. Perhaps the most active piece, *Vista 6*, is mounted in a right-angled corner, the ooze that stretches between both walls evoking both a pulling and an anchoring, the elasticity of time and the groundedness of history (see fig. 6).

In its very first appearances in her early works from 2001, Nicole Awai’s ooze was a multicolored affair. “The ooze [in its solid form] turned black around 2008,” she recalls. “It first started as a red, white, and blue amalgam of tropes in the ooze, or engulfed by the ooze, the red, white, and blue representing political nationalist colors.” Red, white, and blue are the colors of a variety of nations and empires—Britain, the United States, Cuba. As such, the ooze, in its red, white, and blue form, also indicated something about the sticky, engulfing materiality of colonial and nationalist histories: “You’re part of the ooze. You’ll enter it where you enter but it’s always been there.” In *Oozing Red, White, and Blue*, the ooze itself enacts national and colonial histories that are still in motion, that continue to move in on, link with, split off from, and intrude on each other in multiple ways.

As Awai’s perspective on the ooze matured, it came to represent something of the sticky ephemerality of reality, where what we see of the world barely captures what the world is showing of itself as a scene, and reflecting of us as part of that scene. It is in this phase that we see a Caribbean aspect of Awai’s intervention, in her understanding of the power of the environment—the outer world broadly conceived—to overwhelm our most secure fictions with the less governable materiality of the physical world. Hence Lacan’s observation that, far from the geometrical vision in which the subject’s eye/I is at the center of the visible world, the eye cannot fully encompass, and the human subject can barely envision, an “existence” in which he or she is the one the world looks at “from all sides.”<sup>13</sup> In her focus on the perceptual rather than the conceptual, Awai maintains that it is the particularity of subjective experience that is at the center of existence. To feel that “to see is

13 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 72.





Figure 6. Nicole Awai, *Vista 6*, 2014. Acrylic paint, nail polish, resin, filter charcoal, bubble wrap, flocking, and graphite on synthetic paper; approx. 28 × 22 in. Courtesy of the artist

to believe,” as Mandelbrot also asserted, means answering the call for systems and modes of representation that can capture those spaces and objects in nature that fall outside of neat, Euclidean lines.<sup>14</sup> Many aspects of Caribbean reality fall outside the “unclassified residuum,” as Awai went on to explore in her studies of Trinidad’s Pitch Lake.

The ooze has continued to morph and mutate over the course of the artist’s oeuvre, with new movements and meanings in her most recent work. Appearing in different shapes, mediums, and forms, it has become a paradigmatic figure for the elasticity of painting itself, a way for Awai to concretize her sense of painting as an artistic gesture that can evoke something about the nature of human being as a perceptual relationship to the world of matter. From its first sticky and pooled appearances to its recent bulbous and viscous consolidations, the ooze has moved from paper to floor to wall and back, blurring the boundary between two-dimensional surfaces and three-dimensional space. More so than even the space between dimensions, as it has developed Awai’s ooze marks a quality, an action, a motion, that is, the permeability of the boundary between two-dimensional, surface stereotypes and three-dimensional, material objects, between psychic landscapes and physical reality, between what we (think we) see and the inapprehensible world of the real that we can never quite capture straight on in our vision. In the ornamental fringes of her drawings throughout the *Local Ephemera* series, Awai creates the suggestion that we exist in worlds that are constantly being reshaped by different orders of reality and modes of tactile perception. The ooze, in its most recent manifestations, seems also to suggest something about human mortality as a medium itself, one that, like the “mother-of-the-lake,” is always in flux but that also resists and constantly pulls back against time as we strive to maintain some subjective hold on the tether of our ever-evolving, tactile, experiencing selves.

14 Mandelbrot, *Fractal Geometry*, 21.