



Blood on the leaves and blood on the root: Barthélémy Toguo's 'Strange Fruit'

[Barthélémy Toguo](#)
By [Gontse Mathabathe](#)

September 19, 2016

[STEVENSON](#), Johannesburg

01.09.2016 – 14.10.2016

Barthélémy Toguo's solo exhibition, 'Strange Fruit' at STEVENSON Johannesburg, is a haunting protest against the inhumanity of racialized violence. It presents a social stain of racialized violence that exists not only in Africa but across the world. Inspired by Billie Holiday's 1939 song, *Strange Fruit*, the exhibition evokes brutal imagery of violated bodies. The song, *Strange Fruit* began as a poem composed by a white, Jewish high school teacher from the Bronx, Abel Meeropol, as a protest poem created to expose American racism and the lynching of African Americans. It rose to fame in 1939 when Holiday recorded and performed it.



Barthélémy Toguo 'Strange Fruit' installation view

Toguo's work, similarly, transcends purely African social issues and draws from and echoes global racialized violence. Employing painting, sculpture and video, his works draw you into feelings of death and violence. The exhibition explores a visceral and yet dreamy world of human, animal and vegetal metamorphosis. It spreads across STEVENSON Johannesburg's entire ground floor gallery and includes acrylic and watercolour paintings, tree installations and a video installation.

His watercolours, hung from the branches of his tree installation, simultaneously have a subtlety to them and an aggressive presence. As the blood-stain paint oozes, seeps and dissolves into the paper, it depicts the human and animal form in a state of dynamic transformation and traumatic reconfiguration. Human-like forms transform into creatures and abstract forms, which evoke a mixing of identities and experiences. The blood vessels in his drawings that connect the figures to the branches and leaves of the trees dissolve the boundaries of human, animal, plants and nature.

The trees, hung strategically from two corners of the room, become an allegory for racism and Toguo uses these installations as a physical way to depict the complex social stain that grows to produce strange fruit. Devoid of their trunk and roots, the trees remind us how this violent phenomenon against black bodies can also be destroyed, just as these trees have been.

Alongside his larger watercolours, are a series of wood gun sculptures that cement the phenomena of violence across that globe that has been threaded through the exhibition. Their stillness and organic material severs the function of guns and reminds us that weaponry only holds power when activated by humans.

His video, *Sugar Cane Sweat*, shows the artist running through sugar cane fields. Drenched in sweat and dressed in white, the running figure becomes a representation of the thousands of slaves and violated bodies that have attempted to escape slave farms. Zoomed in to highlight the sweat on his forehead and the fear in his eyes, the video becomes a poignant reminder of the suffering black bodies have and in many ways are still going through.

'Strange Fruit' holds its significance by being an exhibition that tackles ongoing violence, social and economic tensions of minority groups and people of colour and poignantly reminds us of the

entrenched pain and suffering in our society. Not only does its blood red paintings of skulls, animals and amorphous creatures remind us of the upsurges of racialized violence but subtly alludes to our connections with nature through its tree installations that are at the heart of the exhibition. The exhibition simultaneously becomes openly provocative and subtly subversive. Additionally it give a voice to people who live in the periphery to the traumatic history of black bodies that have been and remain racially violated and excluded. 'Strange Fruit' becomes a compilation of images that are loaded with energy in their forms.

Filed Under: [insight](#), [New Media](#), [Painting](#), [Review](#) Tagged With: [Abel Meeropol](#), [Barthélémy Togo](#), [Gontse Mathabathe](#), [Stevenson](#)