The Ambivalence of Care

The first thing you'll notice is the smell: chocolaty, but not chocolate exactly—it's more intense, less sweet and slightly fermented. For many who walk into the gallery in which Allana Clarke's work is installed, it will evoke vivid memories; for others, it may remind them of their own bodies. It is, of course, the scent of cocoa butter, a product widely used in the pursuit of self-care. Cocoa butter originated in South America and traveled with European colonizers to West Africa, which is now the source of 70% of the world's supply. Often produced with the help of child laborers, its history reflects the worst parts of our own collective past. Even so, we slather it onto our skin, where it melts on contact. We rub it in, slowly and deliberately, allowing its emollients to not just moisturize, but to heal. Or, perhaps, our mothers—like Clarke's own—massaged it into our flesh, as a daily ritual of touch.

Clarke casts cocoa butter in letter-shaped molds. She creates poetry with these letters, yet the words belie the soothing quality of the material in which they are formed. "My mother taught me to hate blackness in myself and others," reads a pale yellow array of block-style text installed on a chocolate brown wall. The statement is painful, but perhaps not shocking to anyone living in a body that is marked in ways that precede her existence in the world—ways that in the West have always connoted the things one should not be. Blackness and femaleness preexist the self—they are categories that people enter into when they emerge into the world. So how to reconcile one's own sense of being with these molds, into which a self must be poured and in which a self eventually hardens? The hardening won't happen all at once or in a systematic way, of course. As a shallow vat of liquid cocoa butter on the gallery floor reminds us, it coagulates in fits and starts; the pale yellow blobs emerging and collecting in the amber liquid surround almost imperceptibly, but more quickly than one expects.

Another accumulation of text reads "black" in one direction, "lack" in another. When letters become things to be arranged on a wall instead of symbols printed flat on a page, they can be manipulated, played with, inverted, reversed—or dropped—the most concrete of concrete poetry. It is the mirroring of these two terms: looking at blackness and seeing a lack, or vice versa, that counts here. The most insidious thing about racism is the way it replicates itself, its relentlessness, the messages coming at us from all directions eventually being absorbed into one's skin so that we smell of it—we take on its ideas and even pass them onto our children in ways that look like care. This is certainly true of white parents and of brown parents, but it is even true—as Clarke reminds us—of black parents. Clarke remembers her mother rubbing cocoa butter into her skin, grabbing the folds of her flesh in a simultaneous gesture of affection and disgust. She remembers her mother pinching the bridge of her nose to make it narrower

(and therefore less “African”). She remembers having her hair straightened, her skin bleached, her body slimmed. And she remembers doing all of this to herself as well, having inherited a notion of what caring for the body and its appearance should be.

“Yet here we were/Not as you imagined.” These words wrap around a corner in another part of the installation. Who is this "we," exactly? And who is the "you" that imagines that undefined we? I stand in that corner, turning my head back and forth, contemplating the two statements, caught in the intersection of the phrases, trying to confront my role as a non-black person doing the imagining and a non-white person being conjured by those fantasies. I stand, for a moment at least, in the complexity of Clarke’s deceptively simple statement: taking in its scent and understanding the ambivalence of the gift she offers me.

– Aruna D’ Souza