

Moving through Space

Maya Cross-Lovelace
in conversation
with Marsha Pearce



In October 2022, Maya Cross-Lovelace's first solo exhibition *Moving Through Space* opened at A Space Inna Space, a gallery located in Trinidad's capital city of Port-of-Spain. The show, curated by Ashraph Ramsaran, featured sixteen works primarily executed on paper. The following is a conversation between the artist and Dr. Marsha Pearce, a scholar whose research focuses on Caribbean visual culture. They unpack the exhibition, discussing compositional form, the search for connection, and space as memory and belonging, among other image making considerations.

Cover image: *St Ann's Scene*

Marsha Pearce: This is an intimate exhibition. In one sense, the viewer is invited as a companion to join you on a journey, but it also feels infinite and open because the artworks prompt a heightened awareness of the expanse of space around us. The piece *Mermaid Dreams*, for example, looks out to space beyond the horizon, while *Nebula* and *Moving through Space* appear as snapshots of scenes that continue beyond the edges of the paper. What physical spaces are you referencing in this exhibition? What journey are we called to?

Maya Cross-Lovelace: The exhibition is related to my own perspective and worldview. The spaces shown are representative of my immediate surroundings, and of the wider environment in which we all exist. The physical spaces I am referring to in the exhibition are my home – my home being St. Ann's, my home being Trinidad, my home being the Caribbean. A lot of the scenes reflect my observations from St. Ann's, and yet they represent scenes I feel you may see anywhere in Trinidad. So, although the visual settings are specific to me, I feel that they can be very relatable images. For instance, seeing how we walk down the road and how that looks in the Caribbean.

MP: That makes me think about the late Jamaican dance choreographer Rex Nettleford. He says, "there is a logic and inner consistency in the way Caribbean people move that gives to the commonplace crawl, hop, skip, jump, and walk distinctive aesthetic significance."



Dexter, acrylic on paper.

MCL: Yes. How we travel with our whole bodies is a noticeable feature, like our verbal language. It's a unique mood and attitude to our environment. I like how Nettleford says "crawl" because it is a deliberate steady movement. The focus is not on the destination, but on the journey and our approach to it. I think you see this in *St Ann's Scene I*, *Nebula*, *Dexter*, and *Moonlight* especially.

The journey to which I am referring, is that of transiting space; the journey of walking from your home, of going to another place regardless of the purpose. The journey is the primary focus. Although in some of the paintings, the destination, the place of rest or the moment that they capture, is also important. The experience of everyday moments that you might take for granted, things that might seem banal in relation to what you think your purpose might be. I feel that walking down the road is one of those experiences.

I am also exploring how we relate to space and each other. The background of *Nebula* is a nebula, which in outer space is a giant cloud of dust and gas. As much as we are situated here—we are in Trinidad, in the Caribbean, in the world—the world is situated in space. We are essentially on a rock in space, so I chose the background in *Nebula* to represent a deconstructed universe.



Nebula, acrylic on paper.



Mermaid Dreams, acrylic on paper.

Nebula and *Mermaid Dreams* are about where we are in relation to the people around us, and in relation to all the other things that exist and are important. In *Mermaid Dreams* the figure is connecting with things in the space, and beyond the space: looking out to the horizon, looking at the sea that binds us together. It is a self-portrait that conveys my personal connection to the ocean. At the beach I feel rejuvenated, revitalised, cleansed, focused. There is also the history of the sea in the Caribbean and how our ancestors—and we ourselves—have gotten here, and even those who did not make it. The painting becomes a space of reflection and contemplation. It also addresses space as being where you fit in.

MP: Space as a question of belonging?

MCL: Yes, I think it is a question of belonging, of identity, of how we interact with our environment; how it affects us and how we are affected by it, and how that is reflected in our behaviour. That is to say, how we exist within a space, our actions and choices in that space. I mentioned that we are essentially on a rock in space. I think that is tied to the futility of our existence in the grand scheme of things. Therefore, the choices we make in space are really about what we make of our existence. Sometimes those choices bring us together or keep us apart. In *Moving Through Space*, there are two figures walking away from each other. I am considering how we allow space and things to come between us. Many of the paintings are about searching for connection and this is one, as well. Everyone is so on their own beat that when you might be looking to connect, you are also walking away from things that are very close to you.

"Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me is a maternal family portrait. The figure is my mother and the anthuriums are my grandparents."



MP: Along with physical space, you seem to also be thinking about the space of memory and what it means to move or navigate one's way through a cache of experiences and feelings. What can you tell me about the role of memory in these works? The significance of memory?

MCL: I would say particularly *Don't Let The Sun Go Down on Me*, *Waiting For You*, and *Miss Lady* have a lot to do with memory. My mom passed away a few years ago and I think painting is a way that I am processing that. Memory for me is a way to connect with my mother. I think about her all the time. I have been very influenced by all the things that she has done for me, and by all the things that I have heard about her. I remember her; the part that she played in my life. Memory through painting is a way to reflect on the things that have come before me and let them guide me forward. It is also a way of paying tribute to my family.

Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me is a maternal family portrait. The figure is my mother and the anthuriums are my grandparents. They are waiting for me and protecting me. It's a connection to nature, to blooming and growing and being accepted. Caring for my environment is something that they passed on to me. *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me* is a very happy painting for me because it presents these people I love so much. It is also sad. It is about grief and mourning.

Memory and the idea of home are connected. Memory is created through experiences. These memories create a sense of home or belonging to a place – a place to which you are attached. *Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me* has the strongest sense of that in terms of the elements that I have included in the painting, and how different it is from other works in the show. The family members in the painting have all passed away, so it is the memory of them that remains and all the knowledge that they have imparted.

MP: A look at your paintings reveals that you are also playing with space through compositional choices. In some works, there is a strong vertical line that divides the surface of the paper into spaces, large and small. Such pieces as *Miss Lady*, *Crossroads* and *Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me*, shift our eyes from side to side. Your use of closeup images in *Wet*, *Waiting for You* and *Miss Lady* also causes our eyes to move between foreground and background. In *Eating Rice*, our eyes move from the diamond shape in a chain link fence—seen at close range—to a man seated in the distance. In *After Jouvert*, a diagonal line leads the eye deep into the space of the image. In a formal, technical sense, the viewer moves through a presentation of line, shape, and space. Tell me about these decisions in your image constructions.

MCL: There are many lines in the compositions. The works are about how we interpret space. By putting something in that space, we are connecting through those divisions of the space.



Eating Rice, acrylic on paper.

I definitely broke up the paintings a lot by using strong horizontal lines to focus on certain elements. In *Eating Rice*, for instance, the man is seen through a chain link fence. That is one of the most true-to-life scenes in the show. It is based on my looking through my own fence at a man, who had a plate of rice in his lap. I watched as he threw the food at his mouth. Living near the psychiatric hospital in St. Ann's, it is a regular occurrence to see people with mental illnesses roaming the streets. This man sat on the pavement across from my house. It felt very voyeuristic to me because if he were in his house, or if he had privacy to eat in the way that he did, the interpretation of his actions would be different. I use the shape of the fence to get into his world. The fence— who is it keeping in and who is it keeping out? Also just using that fence adds a little Caribbean aesthetic. I think it is something we so commonly see. I am using the lines to divide different elements of the story that the painting is narrating. It is kind of like a comic book in that sense, different panels, but all part of the same story.



Wet, acrylic on canvas.

MP: This collection of images is dominated by a strong colour palette of blue and yellow. Why these hues? How do they factor into your spatial considerations and your address of movement, if at all?

MCL: I was extremely drawn to the colour blue—this specific ultramarine blue. I felt as though I had to explore it more. At first, I was mixing it with other colours (I used that mix in *Mermaid Dreams*, *St Ann's Scene*, and *Nebula*) but then I stripped it down entirely, specifically in the figures. I was using yellow and red to create this rich skin tone, and then I stripped that down too. I was layering the paint and then I stripped that down even more. I liked the contrast that it gave me. Being able to experiment and stretch the paint and go in that direction, it was more of a technique than a concept. There is also the idea of light and darkness on a spectrum and the yellow and blue played into that. I find the blue so intriguing and complex and mesmerizing. It adds a sombre depth to the other colours I use.

MP: A number of the works feature a speckled treatment of pigment. Dots radiate. Blots bleed. They bring an energy to the work. What can you tell me about your use of this visual approach?

MCL: I was playing with the idea of using the dots to represent outer space, and incorporating colour, without it being overwhelming. I went on to use the technique with other ideas in mind. Although space seems empty, it is full.

Space is not empty. I use the dots to represent all the things that are there that remain unseen, and those things that are present but intangible. In *Mermaid Dreams* the dots aren't so much a literal interpretation of space but used instead to represent thoughts and feelings that I am experiencing within the painting—it is happening in a very contemplative way. There are also blots and bleeds and those are a step away from the idea of perfection. There are things that have a mind and movement of their own that I cannot control. They can spread out, they can take up more space or less space, or intertwine with other elements.

MP: In several pieces there is a lone figure on the move. Tell me about this compositional choice.

MCL: These are definitely influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns—ideas of being alone. There is that idea of space as well, in terms of physical space, and during the pandemic the practice of isolating ourselves contrary to our nature. We are social beings, and we need other people to survive. I think a lot of that was lost during lockdown. A sense of community and a sense of connection. The lone figure in the artworks is a person in search of connection through space. For example, in *St. Ann's Scene I*, the man is walking down the road alone, and he only has the sun to accompany him. The idea of solitude, loneliness, being estranged and purposefully isolating is something that is present in the paintings even when there is more than one figure in the image.

MP: I mentioned colour earlier. The painting *Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me*, which you talked about in terms of memory, family, and loss, includes your repeated blue and yellow. Yet it is distinguished by vibrant reds. It is, as you have described, very different from other paintings in the exhibition. It stands out. This image is reminiscent of the heat and motion of a lava lamp, its pigment buoyant and animated. What can you tell me about your specific use of colour in it?

MCL: I remember my granny was very fashionable and she loved red and pink. I've had a difficult relationship with the colour pink—how feminine it felt and not wanting to be perceived in that way. I am embracing the colour more (I mean, my hair is pink), and part of that is also in the painting and trying new things. I loved how the colours melted together. I wanted it to feel like the sunset. The title is based on the song, *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*. My mom loved that song. The sun is going down no matter how much I may not want it to, but another day is coming. The painting feels less final and more like a new beginning. It transforms the finality of the sunset, and of death. There is the element of another world. It is meant to be a vibrant appreciation of my ancestors.

MP: In terms of the layout of the works in the exhibition, some pieces are hung on the wall separately, while others are hung close together, as if to link their spaces,

to connect their individual narratives into a broader picture. How have you considered space in relation to how we experience the paintings within the gallery space?

MCL: Some of the paintings are connected in the way they feed off each other. The paintings are on paper and unframed, so they required thinking a little more innovatively in terms of the viewing experience. I think of it more as a stream of consciousness, in the way my personal story accompanies the story of the paintings.

Maya Cross-Lovelace is a visual artist born in 1990, Trinidad and Tobago. A lifelong painter and multidisciplinary creative, she held her first solo exhibition, *Moving Through Space*, in 2022. Her practice explores experiences of disconnectedness, including loneliness and isolation. Her recent exhibitions include *Represent Vol. 4*, ThinkArtWork, 2021 and *A Proud Tradition of Art 1 From Sybil Atteck to Sarah Ali*, Castle Killarney, 2021 and *A Most Resilient Nature*, 2022.

Marsha Pearce is a scholar, educator and independent curator based in the Caribbean. She holds a BA in Visual Arts and a PhD in Cultural Studies. Her research and critical writings about visual culture have been published in several art catalogues as well as peer-reviewed academic journals and books.



Moving Through Space, acrylic on paper.