

## From the Mythic to the Personal, Two Artists Envision Womanhood

Jessica Lynne April 28, 2015



Amaryllys DeJesus Moleski, "Instructions for a Home Team" (2014), gouache, watercolor, tea, marker, and acrylic on paper, 114.75 x 41.75 in (all images courtesy MoCADA) (click to enlarge)

The [Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts \(MoCADA\)](#) has long dedicated itself to serving as a home for early-career artists exhibiting in New York City. The institution extends this commitment with its current exhibition, *Vision Quest*, a two-woman show featuring works on paper and hand-drawn animations by [Amaryllys DeJesus Moleski](#) and [Sheena Rose](#). Placed in conversation, their works yield a refreshing rumination on (time) travel, mythology, and self-defined womanhood.

DeJesus Moleski's "Instructions for a Home Team" (2014) is among the first artworks to greet viewers as they enter the gallery. The striking watercolor and gouache painting spans more than nine feet in length, combining subtle and in some cases not-so-subtle references to Greco-Roman mythology. In this first of three scroll pieces by DeJesus Moleski in the show, nine woman-like figures pose playfully, armed with [labryses](#) and clutching golden celestial objects. The painting is a clear allusion to the nine muses of Mt. Olympus; however, DeJesus Moleski's muses are brown and fuller bodied — a dismissal of conventional Eurocentric representations of the nine sisters — and marked with a third eye resting atop each forehead.

Lynne, Jessica. "From the Mythic to the Personal, Two Artists Envision Womanhood." *Hyperallergic*, 29 Apr. 2015.

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Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski, "Instructions for a Storm," (2014), gouache, watercolor, acrylic, and marker on paper, 72 x 42 in, from the collection of Justine Harris Richburgh ([click to enlarge](#))

Keeping the muses company are several three-headed cats, another Greco-Roman allusion: DeJesus Moleski has replaced Cerberus, the three-headed dog which guarded the gates of hell, with the feline figures. The painting's foreground and background are peppered with skeletons and free-floating eyes, symbolic of ancestral spirits and omniscience, respectively. The work suggests that the relationship between past, present, and future is far more intimate and fluid than we might initially consider.

The muse as motif continues in DeJesus Moleski's "Instructions for a Storm" and "Instructions for a Freedom," as the artist expounds upon what curator Isissa Komada-John referred to, during a tour, as "queer-femme futuristic myth making." With their invitation to reject normative understandings of desirable bodies and power, DeJesus Moleski's paintings of the full-bodied, three-eyed women call to

mind the drawings of Chitra Ganesh. Yet the series also operates in the same artistic tradition as, say, Audre Lorde's *Zami*, a biomythography that posits the act of myth making as critical to the formation of black women's narratives. Despite their ability to exist as standalone panels, I would have enjoyed seeing DeJesus Moleski's works — which at MoCADA are shown in three different rooms — grouped together, as they are a contiguous reflection on the act of self-fashioning.

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Installation view, 'Vision Quest' at MoCADA (photo by Roy Rochlin)

Still, Komada-John has successfully balanced DeJesus Moleski's larger works on paper with Sheena Rose's mostly smaller drawings. The uncluttered nature of the installation prevents any overwhelming impositions by one artist, which is a real danger in a show featuring only two women. Rose's more subdued, often black-and-white drawings come as a welcome compliment to DeJesus Moleski's fantastical images. While DeJesus Moleski employs fantasy time travel as her central tool for self-definition, Rose makes use of her personal stories of home and transnational travel.

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Sheena Rose, still from “Town Part II” (2009–10), hand-drawn animation, 1:52 min (click to enlarge)

In her practice, the Bajan draftswoman is preoccupied with the ways in which culturally specific idiosyncrasies — the unwritten rules governing a city’s street market, for example — inform identity. This includes the physicality of a place as much as it does the intangible nuances. Nowhere is this theme more fully realized than in Rose’s hand-drawn animations “Random Town” (2010–11)

and “Town Part II” (2009–10).

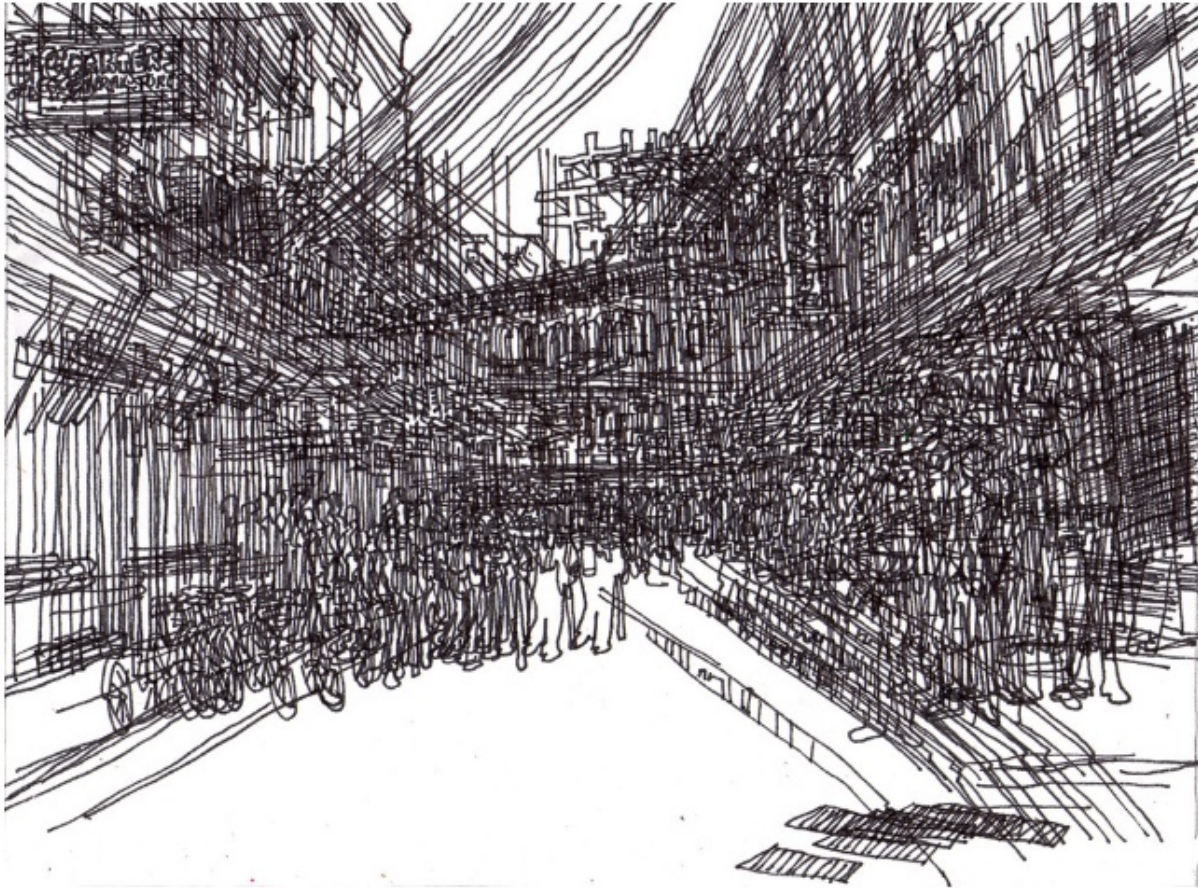
The animations blend sharp black lines and photo-color transfers (what the artist refers to as “mixed-media interventions”) to re-create scenes from the streets of Rose’s native Barbados. Each short spans a day in the life of a female protagonist shopping in street markets, riding public transportation, and getting cat-called. Most interesting is the way Rose illustrates the tension between community expectations and her personal desires through the inner monologues of secondary characters (expressed via thought bubbles). In their treatment of the mundane, Rose’s animations reckon with varying notions of womanhood amid increasing levels of Western tourism and development that quietly infiltrate life in the island nation.

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Sheena Rose, still from "Random Town" (2010–11), hand-drawn animation, 1:30 min

With *Vision Quest*, Komada-John has organized an exhibition that relies not on didactic interpretations of a singular feminism. Instead, the show insists on the existence of multiple feminist narratives that arise when women have the opportunity to tell their own stories.

*Vision Quest continues at MoCADA (80 Hanson Place, Fort Greene, Brooklyn) through May 31.*

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