

M. Florine Démosthène

# **WHAT THE BODY CARRIES**

Didier William



**“They are the people of Creation. . . . Their Maker . . . gives them the sky to carry because they are so strong. These people do not know who they are, but if you see a lot of trouble in your life, it is because you were chosen to carry part of the sky on your head.”**

—Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Soho Press, 2003), 25.

When home won't let us stay.<sup>1</sup> When the land we seek refuge in becomes inhospitable. When we are called not by our names, the ones bestowed by our ancestors, but indicted as other and much worse. When the spiritual practices that we turn to for meaning in a world of chaos become demonized. And when, at the same time, our displacement has allowed a vibrant cultural heritage and value system to spread around the globe. How does the body carry the weight of it all? How does the body resist an unwanted inheritance? What is our capacity to hold it all up? What is our right to lay it all down? How do we reclaim beauty and redemption? How does the body find rest, retreat, reprieve from this multiplicity of indignities?

These are the questions, probings, and provocations laid bare in the majestic beings created by Haitian American artists M. Florine Démosthène and Didier William in the exhibition *What the Body Carries*. Within their figures, we witness that the most profound thing these bodies carry is liberation. As one response to the questions above, writer

Ta-Nehisi Coates relayed what his ancestors told him, “That this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the *all* of it.”<sup>2</sup> Démosthène's and William's imaginations offer up brilliant bodies doing just that—live in, live out, live through, live beyond. They place their figures in

spaces that traverse sky, earth, and sea: a multiverse made of otherworldly galaxies, dark underworlds, fiery forests,

**Fig. 1 (Below):** Didier William. *Moult I*, 2023. Acrylic, ink, oil, and wood carving on panel; 52 x 72 in. Private collection, courtesy of Altman Siegal, San Francisco. Image courtesy of the artist and Altman Siegal, San Francisco. © Didier William





underwater aquatic abysses, nebulous seascapes, heavens and hells. Perhaps they are metaphors for earthquakes, hurricanes, state-sanctioned violence, elections, death, poverty, dreams deferred. Within all of it, however, these bodies are boundless, untethered by gravity, weightless, grounded and groundless in the face of scorched earth, buoyed by water instead of drowned by it, choreographed and spontaneous, restless and at rest, vulnerable yet formidable. They are agile, not fragile. They fight hard and they play hard. They are free. And they exist within these

confluences and contradictions despite what they must carry.

### **What do these bodies carry?**

Haiti, its people and cultural traditions, have long been a fixation of the American psyche and treated as a threat to the United States' nationhood. Southern plantation owners were afraid that the 1791–1804 Haitian Revolution, which made Haiti the first independent Black nation in the Western Hemisphere, would ignite slave revolts in the antebellum South. So, they worked to silence any knowledge of it. In Tennessee in particular, the state assembly passed an act in 1803 making public discussions of the revolution and, in fact, all slave rebellions illegal, for fear they would incite insurrections. American popular culture has become obsessed with zombies, figures rooted in Haitian Vodou's beliefs about the spirits of the dead and the afterlife—beliefs shared by many religions that have not been subjected to the same level of stigmatization. And recently, even the most benign small-town Haitian communities were thrust into the nation's political discourse, with immigrants cast as invaders, becoming collateral damage in the 2024 election. "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is *heritage*," writes Coates.<sup>3</sup> The body becomes a container for all this history. These are just some of the historical and

contemporary contexts that inform the worlds, imaginary as they might be, in which Dèmosthène's and William's



**Fig. 2 (Left):** M. Florine Dèmosthène. *What We Know & What We Don't Know*. Installation view in *Mastering the Dream*, SCAD Museum of Art, 2023. 3D-printed sculptures with mixed media. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: SCAD Museum of Art





figures must simultaneously exist in and steel themselves from.

To steel oneself is to brace for hard things—those known and unknown. It also means to physically protect the body as well as its psyche. In his 1953 novel, *In the Castle of My Skin*, Barbadian writer George Lamming recounts how as a young boy he had to steel himself as he witnessed British colonizers devalue the island's African heritage. He wrote, "They won't know the you that's hidden somewhere in the castle of your skin."<sup>4</sup> Intuitively, both Démosthène and William steel the body by turning to the castle of the skin. For Démosthène, that steeling comes softly in the form of a body overlayed in an aqueous second skin—a body cloaked in shades of blues, greens, aquas, and turquoise; a body that is water resistant, waterproof, water defiant; a body that can both camouflage and want to be seen; a body luminous and iridescent despite the historical traumas of the sea for Caribbean people.

**Fig. 3 (Left):** Didier William. *Redemption, Resurrection*, 2023. Acrylic, ink, and wood carving on panel; 106 x 70 in. Courtesy of the artist and James Fuentes Gallery. Image courtesy of Pilar Corrias Gallery. © Didier William

For William, that steeling comes in the form of a body shielded with eyes. The artist's shift to armor his figures by carving a galaxy of eyes onto their skin was borne of a grief and grievance: the 2012 murder of, and subsequent lack of justice for, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin in a Sanford, Florida, neighborhood not far from where William himself grew up as a young boy in Miami. These eyes are an act of refusal. They indict the gaze that others the body and return the stare back to the gazers themselves. *Watch me watching you watching me*, they seem to provoke.

Démosthène also finds strength in Haitian, and by extension West African, spiritual practices, as evidenced by her evocative modern-day shrines and the inclusion of votive figures in her collage work. Both she and William engage the Haitian Vodou concept of Marasa—sacred twins related to the Ibeji twins in Yoruba beliefs—via twinning and doubling the figures in their work. They are guardians of liminal spaces where the world above meets the world below—where the world of the living meets the world of the dead.

Démosthène's and William's figures are in constant movement as they migrate through time and space. Notice how William's figures move about their worlds with both strength and tenderness. How they step gently and yet can trample what's in their path with fierce determination. How their open palms both softly invite and firmly push away. Such is the dance all too familiar to the immigrant. So too do Démosthène's bodies writhe, twist, and contort. Some are entangled, others struggle with each other; some embrace, others repulse; some are shadow figures, others mirror. *Catch us if you can*, they seem to provoke.

Within their own individual migration arcs and their families' immigration stories, these are two artists whose constellation of experiences orbit each other. Démosthène was born in the United States and raised between Port-au-Prince and New York City. William, in turn, immigrated from Port-au-Prince to Miami as a child. Like the spectacular figures in their work, they themselves traverse liminal spaces. This triangulation of place—Port-au-Prince to New York to Miami—maps the Haitian diaspora. It also marks the cities where Haitian

immigrants continue to honor the beauty of their culture, build twenty-first century lives, raise their families, love on their loved ones, make their art, and chase after their dreams, all in pursuit of that universal right to life, liberty, and happiness. This too is what the body carries. We will find ourselves in worlds that betray us, that position us at perilous crossroads. Worlds that can quickly become, to borrow the title of William's 2022 series, cursed grounds. Instead of crumbling under the weight of it all, to the contrary, Démosthène and William offer us bodies that thrive in both harmony and dissonance. Whether in ascension, at rest, in flight, or in fight, fused in community and interlocked in solidarity, they are their twin brothers' and sisters' keepers. In *What the Body Carries*, Démosthène and William assemble supernatural titans ready to avenge, their bodies poised for defiance and for embrace.

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### Notes

1. The line "when home won't let us stay" is drawn from a line in the poem, "Home" (2019) by Somali-British poet Warsan Shire where she writes, "you only leave home / when home won't let you stay."
2. Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Letter to My Son," *The Atlantic*, July 4, 2015. Accessed at: <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/07/tanehisi-coates-between-the-world-and-me/397619/>
3. Ibid.
4. George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953, pg. 261.

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