

A photograph of a wooden table with various legs and a tilted top, overlaid with text. The table has a light-colored wooden top and a dark brown wooden base. The legs are made of dark wood and are intricately carved, resembling animal paws. The top of the table is tilted upwards, and there are several other wooden pieces, possibly drawers or shelves, attached to the top. The background is a plain white wall.

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Cover image: Sonia E. Barrett, Table No. 6, 2013, wood and metal.. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss.

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Figure 1.

Sonia E. Barrett, Table No. 6, 2013, wood and metal. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).

These sculptures are an intervention in the furnished spaces of multigenerational European wealth dating back to the eighteenth century. They respond to the great estates in the UK, the USA, and the Caribbean that have been part of my research.

I, my name, and countless others are a product of these kinds of estates.



Figure 2.

Sonia E. Barrett, Chair No.33, 2016, wingback chair. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).

These works reveal comfortable spaces uncomfortably.

They disrupt the furnished rest that happened in them. The furnished rest of the visitor's eye in what are now roped-off spaces in great houses. The furnished rest in certain gentlemen's clubs, educational institutions, and establishment boardrooms.

These spaces are full of mahogany, carved and embellished to the Queen Anne style.



Figure 3.
Sonia E. Barrett, Still from Furniture Performance 17, 2013.
Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).



Figure 4.

Sonia E. Barrett, *Fanon's Bed: Being the Bed and Getting "Beauty Sleep"*, 2013, video still. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).

I researched Queen Anne style and found it is the most revived form of furniture style in Europe. I started performing this furniture and discovered that my brown, floored fist translated into the lion paw of these chairs and tables. When I paired these legs, they started to look like black and brown feet.



Figure 5.

Sonia E. Barrett, Table No. 6, 2013, wood and metal. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).

My process involves sitting with furniture that is made up of trees ripped from the Tropics and shipped in the same ways that people were in the triangular trade.

The profits from slavery and the profits from tropical hardwoods created the excess wealth, which enabled the extravagant furnishings we see in so many great houses.

I sit with, and not on, until I know what the chair or table wants to articulate, wants to do or share.

Often the chair, table, or tray becomes a singular body. One that stands for many that we cannot find, name, know, or hear from—all as a result of slavery.



Figure 6.

Sonia E. Barrett, Table No. 2, 2014, rope, table, and packing foam. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).

My research in Crime Fiction theory led me to understand the cathartic value of the single knowable victim and perpetrator in the face of many unknown bodies and multiple causes of death.

These “corpses” hover in their materiality and form between the plant (tropical tree/wood), the person (black or brown figure), the animal (lion feet/leather), and the object (chair/table). The plants, persons, and species that were ripped from their homes are objectified in stately homes.



Figure 7.

Sonia E. Barrett, Table No. 2, 2014, rope, table, and packing foam. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).

Without words, some works voice multi-species trauma, the impossibility of escape, the defiance, the resistance, the labour of living.

The wholly undepicted.

The works are often “corpse popping”—expanding the ideas of what passes for the living and what can be mourned.

Embodying their own response to the totality of the devastation that enabled the great house and its estate.

The “body” should be laid in the drawing and reception rooms of the great house, reconstructing them as the scenes of the crimes. I consider this placement of the work to be part of the intervention.

I have been working towards such an intervention for four years now. Mostly, I have been dealing with the UK's biggest landowners in attempts to return these bodies without success. Up until now, the works have intervened in galleries, outside villas, and festival off-spaces, speaking to those furnished houses from afar.

Only this year did it dawn on me that trying to situate this work in the great house is perhaps my attempt to belong. Within many Indigenous societies, to create a grave somewhere is to enter into a sacred contract with that site. A contract that requires a commitment and labour that is lifelong, that is to be passed down to the next generation. I realised I don't know if I am ready for that. Close to my goal now, I find I hesitate.

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