

This text accompanies
the exhibition

Ésery Mondésir: Choublak

Curator
Julia Eilers Smith

September 3, 2024 –
January 18, 2025

Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery

For commentary on the works and issues raised in the exhibition as well as suggested readings, please consult *Ways of Thinking* on the Gallery's website.

Plants as Documents of Existence

Julia Eilers Smith

“Isn’t every image the product of a transfer,
a migration?”

—Ésery Mondésir

“I’m on the side of the men and women who are
not allowed to move.”

—Jean-Claude Charles

“*Bay kou bliye, pote mak sonje* (he who strikes
the blow forgets, he who carries the scar
remembers).”

—Haitian proverb

Ésery Mondésir first discovered the mimosa flower while visiting the San Donnino Church in Pisa, Italy. He was there to see the grave of Marie-Louise Christophe, Haiti’s only queen and widow of the self-proclaimed king, Henri Christophe. A commemorative plaque at the church states that she was the “queen consort of Haiti (1811-1820) and the first Afro-descendant female head of state on the American continent.” After her husband’s tragic death, Marie-Louise Christophe sought exile in Europe with her two daughters, Françoise-Améthyste and Anne-Athénaïre Christophe, and their maid, Sabine Zéphyrin. She first found refuge in London, then in Pisa, where she died in 1851. On the day of Mondésir’s visit to the chapel, a woman who was attending the service gave him a mimosa branch, explaining that the flower was a symbol for women. Mondésir then placed it next to the queen’s grave.

Growing up in Haiti, Mondésir has a personal relationship to plants. The flower garden of his childhood home always bloomed under his grandmother's care. She grew plants and vegetables and concocted all sorts of infusions for healing a range of ailments. When Mondésir realized that plants could also be used to develop photographs and film, without chemicals, it opened up new avenues to creative experimentation with plants and images.

Mondésir's exhibition at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery takes its title from *choublak*, or hibiscus in Haitian Creole. Thought to originate from Asia or Africa, this ornamental, edible, and medicinal plant is deeply rooted in contemporary Caribbean culture. It is Haiti's national flower and considered a cultural symbol. For the Haitian-Canadian artist, *choublak* also embodies the fundamental subjects of his practice: in-betweenness, hybrid origins, uprooting, migratory paths, as well as Creoleness and diasporic communities.

Choublak presents Mondésir's recent body of work, produced in collaboration with members of the Haitian diaspora in Montreal, Toronto, Tijuana, and Havana. A series of abstract portrait films and photographs captured via a pinhole camera while travelling through Chile and Trinidad and Tobago were developed with various image processing techniques, often incorporating plant residues. These interventions on the actual film reveal latent shapes and nascent stories buried deep within the materiality of the celluloid.

Shared affects

Mondésir was born in 1974 in Martissant, a working-class neighbourhood in Port-au-Prince. The grandson of an evangelist, he regularly attended church, a place that also served as a cultural hub and an important social hub. The church was also where he formed close ties with other artists and young university students with whom he could discuss art, poetry, music, and literature.¹ At university, Mondésir studied education while teaching French and Haitian literature to high school students. In the late 1990s, he met the writer Rodney Saint-Éloi and worked as a graphic designer for the publisher Mémoire.² Then in 2000, when a window opened for him to leave Haiti, he went into exile in North America, in the United States and in Canada, where he worked with a labour organization active in both countries.

After living in Toronto for a few years, Mondésir returned to university, this time to study film—a long-held dream of his. Since then, his practice has oscillated between still and moving images, and maintains deep ties with Haiti through his connections to individuals who, like him, were forced to leave Haiti. Using a mix of documentary and experimental approaches, his work gravitates towards the Haitian diaspora's transitional zones and settlement areas, from the neighbouring cities of Toronto and Montreal to countries that have been marked by waves of Haitian migrants throughout their history. For instance, Cuba, where nearly half a million Haitians fled in the early twentieth century when Haiti was under American occupation; Brazil, which gave humanitarian visas to Haitian citizens during the MINUSTAH mission in Port-au-

1. Among them, Jean Phareau Dumond, the Jacquet brothers, Smith Champagne and Tony Jean-Baptiste.

2. Rodney Saint-Éloi founded Éditions Mémoire in 1991 in Port-au-Prince. In 2003 in Montreal, he founded the publishing house Mémoire d'encrier, which still operates today.

Prince;³ Chile, where, for many years, Haitians were allowed to enter without a visa;⁴ and Mexico, specifically Tijuana, a key crossing point for asylum seekers hoping to enter the United States. Mondésir's works unfold through micro-narratives of exile, resistance, and clandestinity, but also of belonging and of the legacies linked to his native country. These story fragments emerge from his encounters with those who live precarious lives on the margins of society, and whose realities often reflect his own experiences as a refugee. At the core of his practice, the notion of marginality, borrowed from the activist author and poet bell hooks, is seen as a "space of resistance" and a "space of radical openness."⁵ This view of marginality is reflected in Edward W. Saïd's thinking. In *Culture and Imperialism*, referencing Theodor W. Adorno's ideas, Saïd states that an exilic, peripheral position is strategic for resisting dominant structures and for liberating thought.

Thus the emigré consciousness—a mind of winter, in Wallace Stevens's phrase—discovers in its marginality that "a gaze averted from the beaten track, a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern, is the last hope for thought." [...] There is then not just the negative advantage of refuge in the emigré's eccentricity; there is also the positive benefit of challenging the system, describing it in language unavailable to those it has already subdued.⁶

3. After the eviction of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide following a coup d'État in 2004, Brazil became head of the United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) by sending a military contingent to Port-au-Prince and by revising its immigration policy in favour of integrating Haitian migrants.

4. This would change in 2018 when conservative Chilean President Sebastián Piñera introduced a bill to regulate the influx of migrants and require Haitians to obtain tourist visas before entering Chile. Prensa Presidencia, "Presidente Piñera anuncia Reforma Migratoria," April 9, 2018, accessed August 18, 2024, <https://prensa.presidencia.cl/discursos.aspx?id=73020>.

More than just a theme, migration is a prism through which Mondésir addresses issues of displacement, marginality, (in)visibility, and agency. It's also a visual strategy that allows him to probe the very shape and materiality of his work. Whether through the inclusion of personal or institutional archives, the manual processing of film, the transfer of media or the overlapping of plants, his images are the result of an array of successive migrations and interactions with different materials.

Many of Mondésir's films appropriate online archival documents relating to Haiti. He makes the most of their availability in digital format by recirculating and recasting them in a new light, a move partly motivated by Haitians' lack of access to their own archival history.

For example, his video diptych *The Mother was Feeding it Alright* (2019) is based on a television news report by Haitian journalist and writer Jean-Claude Charles, shortly after the arrival of a vessel carrying Haitian "boat people" on the coast of Florida in 1981. By isolating segments of Charles' interview with the on-site lieutenant, Mondésir highlights the warden's dehumanizing language and insensitivity towards the passengers' fate.⁷ The video touches on issues of xenophobia and anti-Haitian racism—recurrent in the artist's work—and the media's role in legitimizing discriminatory behaviour.

5. bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 15-23.

6. Edward W. Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 333.

7. The reality of "boat people," and of this specific episode with Lieutenant White, are more closely examined in Jean-Claude Charles' 1982 narrative report *De si jolies petites plages*, republished by Mémoire d'encrier editions in 2016.

Everyday gestures

In a series of recent films often referred to as the “Haitian trilogy,” Mondésir collaborates with groups of Haitian migrants as he accompanies them in their shifting reality. Lingering on the gestures, conversations, and routines that give rhythm to their days, he highlights moments of resurgence and dialogue, of “*enracinerrance*,” an expression coined by Jean-Claude Charles to describe a “rooted kind of wandering.”⁸ These spaces of self-assertion transpire through ceremonies, while taking breaks between tasks, in conversation, and when cooking and sharing a meal. They help anchor what would otherwise be a period of suspension, temporarily hovering in a time that is tied to a place we no longer quite belong to, or one we don’t identify with.

Una Sola Sangre (2018-2024) deepens Mondésir’s research on collective memory and the diasporic subjectivities that are shaped by post-migration experiences. Mondésir collaborated with the Garde family, originally from Haiti but established in Santiago since the 1920s. Their ancestors were part of the great Haitian migration to Cuba, going to work in the sugarcane and coffee plantations, depending on the season. Although the family has lived in Cuba for four generations—over a century—they have kept their Haitian traditions alive: Haitian Creole is widely spoken, and Santería and

8. “The concept of ‘enracinerrance’ is deliberately oxymoronic: it simultaneously considers root and wandering; it expresses both the memory of one’s origins and the new realities of migration; it sees a rootedness in the wandering.” Jean-Claude Charles, “L’Enracinerrance,” *Boutures* 1, no. 4 (2000): 37-41, accessed August 20, 2024 <http://ile-en-ile.org/jean-claude-charles-lenracinerrance/>.

Vodou coexist. But the Gardes still live on the margins of Cuban society and survive mainly through an informal economy.

The video *Pariah, My Brother, I Follow You, Show Me the Route to the Springs* (2019) follows a man and his father-in-law, both Haitian migrants, as they set up a temporary stall to sell second-hand running shoes at a market in Tijuana. Mondésir documents each step of their daily ritual, which starts before dawn and is marked by movement and transition. Snippets of conversation reveal some of their migratory adventures and the discrimination they faced along the way. This piece is in dialogue with the poem “L’île déchaînée” by Villard Denis, aka Davertige, a member of Haïti Littéraire⁹, and draws its title from one of the poem’s verses.

In *What Happens to a Dream Deferred* (2020), a group of young Haitian men in exile in Tijuana prepares a batch of soup Joumou to celebrate the New Year. Once reserved for enslavers, the dish became a powerful symbol of Haitian identity and independence. Mondésir translates the convivial atmosphere and the men’s conversations as they prepare to cross the border into the United States to pursue their dream of making rap music. Text messages between them and Mondésir detail the men’s journey from Haiti to Tijuana, across nearly a dozen South and Central American countries (including Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, and Mexico).

9. Haïti Littéraire was a circle of Haitian poets and writers founded around the poet Anthony Phelps during the dictatorship of François Duvalier in the early 1960s. Many of its members went into exile and settled in Montreal, where they formed fertile relationships with Quebec’s avant-garde literary scene. They gathered every Monday night at Le Perchoir d’Haïti, a restaurant-bar (initially on rue Bleury, then on Metcalfe), for live poetry readings and discussions.

Practicing migration

In terms of its materiality, *What Happens to a Dream Deferred* underwent several transformations before arriving at its final format: first shot with a digital camera, it was then transferred onto film before returning to a digital video. This technological migration redefines the image, metamorphosing and blurring the boundaries between each medium. In an email from 2023, Mondésir mentions some of the inherent questions he faces in the process of migrating videos from one format to another, a constant factor in his work:

But what's the "real" identity of this image? What do you call the product of these multiple transfers? Is it a hybrid image, since it carries the mark of the spaces it has lived in? Or is it Creole, a new, multi-rooted creature? Why does it even have to be named? What's the difference between this image and other images in existence?¹⁰

Mondésir questions the act of naming the image and the search for an origin in its otherness or alterity. Naming implies recognizing, attributing, and classifying through language. However, the place-less, root-less image's identity is self-evident; it represents and experiences itself, thus calling for an interpretive approach that lies beyond the conventions of clear, accessible narratives.

In his short film *Katherine* (2020), Mondésir used a Bolex 16mm camera to film a screen where an archival film about the dancer, choreographer, and anthropologist Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) was projected. After developing the film with natural solutions such as coffee, he projected it on a wall and filmed it again, with a digital camera. Each step of

10. Ésery Mondésir, email from February 13, 2023.

the process, from the initial take to the projection, effects a gradual degradation and transformation of the image while making room for a new visual reality to emerge.

Characterized by the image's transformation and digression, this approach brings to mind bell hooks' broad interpretation of "home" in her essay "Choosing the Margin as a Radical Space of Openness." For hooks, home is not a fixed place, but rather a constantly evolving plural space.

Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal, fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting.¹¹

In Mondésir's work, the image's home, as both subject and interpretive context, is also varied and ever-changing.

Using plants in the image-developing process also becomes a way to prolong their migration into unexpected contexts. In his series of anotypes on fabric from 2024, Mondésir used natural pigments—from spirulina, spinach, turmeric, and hibiscus—as photosensitive materials. Images of cities and landscapes captured with a pinhole camera while travelling through Santiago and Talca, in Chile, as well as Belmont, in Trinidad and Tobago, appear ghost-like due to their long exposures. Belmont, a suburb of Port-of-Spain, is where C.L.R. James wrote *The Black Jacobins* in the 1930s. As an account of the slave revolt and the anticolonial struggle

11. bell hooks, "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 36 (1989): 19.

that led to the creation of Haiti—South America’s first independent State and first Black republic—the book had a profound impact on the perception of Haiti in the Commonwealth Caribbean and in North America.

Imprints of hibiscus petals, leaves and pistils on long light panels (*Choublak #1, #2, and #3, 2024*) reveal the plant’s subtle anatomy with the precision of an X-ray. Mondésir created these phytograms by dipping sections of the plant in coffee and washing soda and placing them on unexposed 35mm film. The subsequent chemical reaction with the photo emulsion, along with exposure to light, prints the hibiscus directly onto the celluloid, transforming the plant into the subject, material, and catalyst behind these camera-less images.

Marks and gestures

“The language of the eyes grows richer every day
a hand gesture says so much more than a speech...
Oh my Country so sad is the season
that it is now time to speak in signs”

— Anthony Phelps

While Mondésir first used coffee to develop his films and photographs, he quickly expanded his process to include plants such as mint, goldenrod, and ferns, each of which contributes its own textures and contrasts. When coming into contact with the film, these plants can generate dark shadows, milky hues, or deformations, superimposing their effects in multiple layers. In his more experimental films, the density of these interventions and the degree of abstraction are such that the subject becomes less immediately recognizable and harder to read. Added to these visual manipulations are desynchronized voices, sonic divisions and bifurcations that create an impression of instability and dissociation that hold us in a state of heightened awareness.

In one of the galleries populated with abstract images, a “garden” of films processed with plant residues evokes a scattered Haitian diaspora and its cultural dissemination beyond tangible borders. In the background, *The Marks Remember* (2023) draws a parallel between marks left on the film by the hand-developing process, and marks inscribed by life on human experience. Shot in Port-of-Spain, Nassau, Toronto and Montreal, the work locates the body and the gesture as vectors of memory and transgenerational knowledge. It juxtaposes actions related to sugarcane cultivation—marked by a long history of colonial violence and exploitation in Haiti—with those associated with medicinal plants, of which the local,

traditional knowledge is often passed down orally. The film was developed using extracts of the flamboyant tree, known for its vibrant red flowers, and vitamin C, resulting in highly unusual colours. Mondésir then immersed the image in the ocean to fix it naturally with salt water.

In another piece, Mondésir also looks at how biased, sensationalist, or stigmatizing media coverage can leave deep scars on a community. Both an intimate portrait and a posthumous diagnosis, *Of What Death We Die* (2022) explores the circumstances surrounding the death of his father in the 1980s, when the artist was a child. By combining family photos, press archives, and accounts from loved ones, Mondésir creates a parallel between his father's personal experience with illness and the global HIV epidemic. The work exposes the stigmatizing discourse and rhetoric of blame that was directed at Haitians, classified by the scientific community at the time as being among the "4H"— "Homosexuals, Heroin addicts, Haitians, Hemophiliacs"—groups at risk for AIDS.

Mondésir's works amplify the voice and presence of people, such as Katherine Dunham, who had a positive effect on international perceptions of Haiti. The American dancer embraced Haitian culture and made it a place of belonging. In 1992, at the age of 82, she went on a 47-day hunger strike to protest the forced return by the US authorities of thousands of Haitian asylum seekers who had fled the country's military regime. Mondésir pays tribute to her with his short experimental film, *Katherine*.

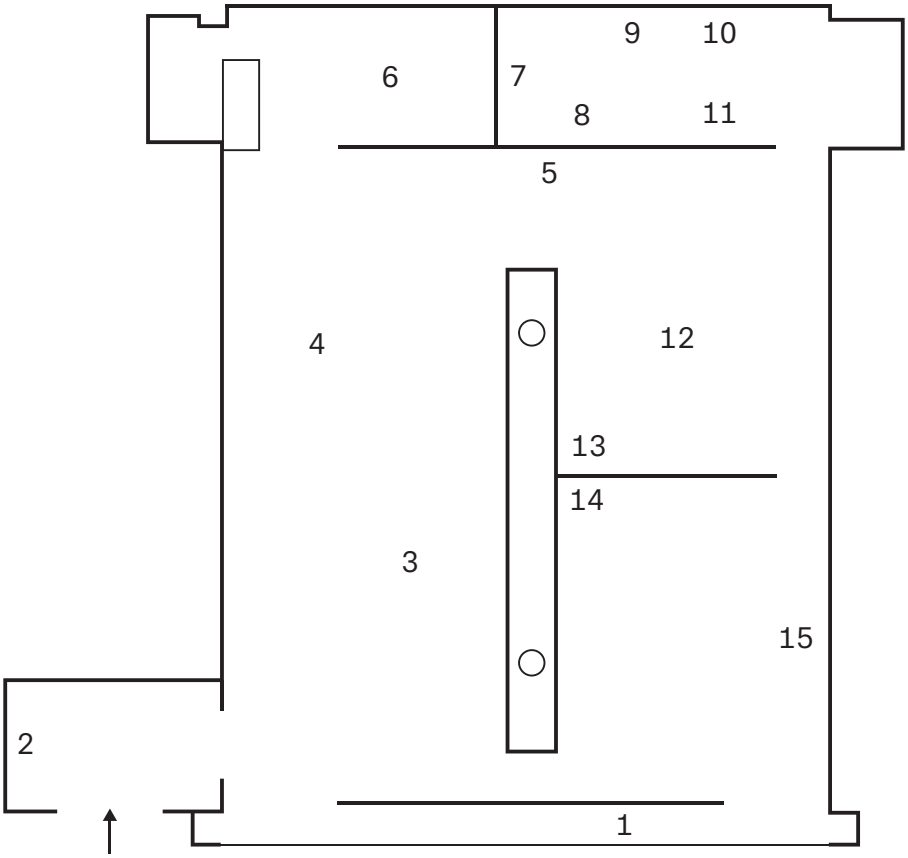
The inclusion of this work in the garden of films is no accident. Plants also occupied a central place in Dunham's life. In the 1950s, she purchased a forested property known as Habitation Leclerc in Martissant,¹² Mondésir's childhood neighbourhood, with the dream of converting it into a botanical garden. In the decades that followed, her dream became a reality: the site is now a garden of medicinal plants and a public park that is also home to the Katherine Dunham Cultural Center. Today, however, the area is threatened by the country's political instability and its future remains uncertain.

After leaving the San Donnino Church in Pisa, Mondésir headed to the home of Yesser Sipriano, an old friend he had met in San Francisco de Paula in Cuba about fifteen years earlier, and with whom he had collaborated on *Una Sola Sangre*. Mondésir wanted to show him the finished work, which Sipriano hadn't yet seen, having left Cuba to settle in Italy shortly after officiating the Vodou ceremony that features at the end of the film. At the top of the mountain where Sipriano lives with his girlfriend, the two men reunite like brothers—not related by blood, but by a common ground, a revolutionary heritage, and a shared experience of *enracinerrance*.

Translated from the French by Jo-Anne Balcaen

12. Habitation Leclerc also served as a medical clinic for the local community, opening in 1961, and was a tourist destination. Katherine Dunham, *Dances of Haiti*, Los Angeles, CA, Center for Afro-American Studies University of California, 1983, ix; Molly E. Christie Gonzalez, "Katherine Dunham Technique and Philosophy: A Holistic Dance Pedagogy" (Dance Master's thesis, Brockport, 2015), 105.

Exhibition Floor Plan



List of Works

1. *Choublak 1*, 2024
Digital print from a
phytogram created on
35mm film
Courtesy of the artist
2. *The Mother was Feeding
it Alright*, 2019
Two-channel video, colour,
sound, 2 min. 20 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
3. *What Happens to a Dream
Deferred*, 2020
Single-channel video,
HD video transferred to
16mm film and redigitized
in 2K, colour, sound,
25 min. 2 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
4. *Pariah, My Brother, I Follow
You, Show Me the Route to
the Springs*, 2019
Single-channel
video, colour, sound,
19 min. 50 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
5. *Choublak 2*, 2024
Digital print from a
phytogram created on
35mm film
Courtesy of the artist
6. Archives from the
Centre international
de documentation
et d'information
haïtienne, caribéenne et
afro-canadienne;
video: Champ libre
broadcast, Société
Radio-Canada, May 26,
1965; accordion book:
University of Illinois at
Urbana-Champaign
7. *The Marks Remember*,
2023
Single-channel video,
sound, hand-processed
and digitally coloured film,
koko paper, 5 min. 13 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
8. *Nocturne*, 2018
Single-channel video,
sound, hand-processed
and digitally coloured film,
koko paper, 3 min. 17 sec.
Courtesy of the artist

9. *Kale Kann Kale*, 2023
Single-channel video,
hand-processed and
digitally coloured film,
kozo paper, 1 min. 38 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
10. *Katherine*, 2020
Single-channel video,
sound, hand-processed
and digitally coloured film,
kozo paper, 3 min. 11 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
11. *Joséphine*, 2023
Single-channel video,
sound, hand-processed
and digitally coloured film,
kozo paper, 1 min. 53 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
12. *Building Santiago*, 2024
Talca, 2024
Street Santiago, 2024
Belmont, Trinidad 1, 2024
Belmont, Trinidad 2, 2024
Belmont, Trinidad 3, 2024
Belmont, Trinidad 4, 2024
Belmont, Trinidad 5, 2024
Belmont, Trinidad 6, 2024
Anthotypes on textile
Courtesy of the artist
13. *Of What Death We Die*,
2022
Single-channel
video, colour, sound,
9 min 36 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
14. *Una Sola Sangre*,
2018-2024
Two-channel video, colour,
sound, 37 min. 42 sec.
Courtesy of the artist
15. *Choublak 3*, 2024
Digital print from a
phytogram created on
35mm film
Courtesy of the artist

Design: Karine Cossette

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Concordia University, 2024

ISBN 978-2-924316-67-2

Support: Canada Council for the Arts

Legal Deposit

Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec
and Library and Archives Canada, 2024

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ésery Mondésir for his trust, his generosity, his tireless spirit, and his profound sensitivity. I would also like to thank my esteemed colleagues Pip Day, Yasmine Tremblay, Hugues Dugas, Lynn Kodeih, Larissa Dutil, and Steven Smith Simard for their invaluable support and expertise that allows us to produce such high calibre exhibitions. Special thanks go to Jo-Anne Balcaen, Coutechève Lavoie Aupont, and Bonel Auguste for their translations, Karine Cossette for her impeccable design, and Olivier Longpré, Philip Kitt and Christine Boudreau for their technical assistance. Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to Frantz Voltaire and the team at CIDIHCA for their generous contribution to this exhibition.