

[slide 1 Simitiere] At the turn of the eighteenth century, as the San Domingo revolution raged, a travelling Frenchman was walking in Kingston Jamaica, and stopped to make a visual record, drawing at great speed. Jean du Simitiere sketched the scene from just over a crossroads, looking back at the corner where a sort of show gallows had been erected. A heavy cart loaded with barrels crosses the centre of the street. In the bottom right foreground is a slatted fence with a standing figure next to it. A tracery of light abstract lines indicates a few lacy clouds in the sky. All of these areas are set out in a dancing parade of light swirling marks and scribbles **[Slide 2 gallows detail]** The gallows is drawn differently, massively, clumsily. The wood of the gallows is incised in thick lines, the central shaft heavily shaded, the support struts almost completely filled in. The gibbet carries two iron cages each shaped to hold an adult human form. The left hand one is empty, the metal structure drawn in with short, thick but wiry lines. The right hand cage carries another body shaped cage, filled with human remains.

This little drawing, buried in an archive in Philadelphia, never before reproduced, seen by very few pairs of eyes since it was made, is one of the very few eye witness accounts, in visual art, of the habit of exhibiting the bodies of executed slaves in public spaces. How is this work to be read? Is it a holiday sketch, a moving piece of abolition propaganda, a curiosity? How far can art go in describing the trauma of Atlantic slavery. du Simitiere didn't leave his drawing as an open sign, but provided an explanation written in red ink and brown chalk, now all but illegible, which translates:

One of the company of mulattos who were on the night watch shouted out 'Who goes there' to a black who appeared in the dark, the negro did not respond to him so he shot at him and killed him. He was a new black who was carrying a fagot of wood to sell. After he was dead they put him on a gallows, planted at a place in the road which was half way between what is called Montgomery's Corner and the other road which is called Rockport near the One Mile Stone [where he remained] for two years. He was called 'Fortune'...the blacks who passed by took him to be a relic...

This is all rather peculiar, the human remains in the cage now have a history. The body on display is indeed that of a slave, but he was not executed as a criminal, or even a runaway, the normal motives for placing an executed corps on display in this manner. He was shot by accident, by other blacks, presumably free mulattos who had been given the responsibility of keeping the night watch, and who were entrusted with guns. The black is apparently a fresh import from Africa, 'un negre nouveau' in the original French, who was simply carrying out a task he had been set. It is likely then that he did not understand the night watch's challenge, and because he was carrying goods it was assumed he was stealing. He is innocent, his death is an

accident, and yet the Jamaican planters decide to have his body displayed publicly, as a warning, but a warning of what, a warning that it is advisable to learn the language of the masters very quickly or you are in constant danger? He is placed symbolically at the crossroads, again why? It had long been the custom in certain central European countries for those refused a sacred burial - murderers, suicides, violent criminals - to be buried at the crossroads. Crossroads were also associated with sacrificial ceremony in pre-Christian Europe and had consequently become used as places of public execution. But why display this unlucky slave there, maybe because he was a new African and consequently a Pagan. The end of the quotation provides a new perspective, that of the blacks, and destabilises the body in the cage further, it moves from being an object of horror, of warning, a testimony to the slave power, to become an object of veneration to the other black slaves. The body now has a name, Fortune, but who gave him this name, and why? Was it the white slave holders who thought up this nick name, as a sort of ironic joke for a man who was anything but fortunate. Or was it the blacks, who designated him fortunate in that he had escaped the life of a slave without ever becoming fully integrated into the systematics of slavery? His status as a relic, presumably an object of fetishistic power for the blacks, makes a lot of sense in this context. Blacks who died very soon after arriving in the slave Diaspora, having experienced the middle passage, but without ever having been seasoned, that is integrated into the society of the slave power, were regarded with special reverence. The remarkable night of the silent drums outside the Church of the black people in Recife, North East Brazil, is dedicated to the remembrance of precisely those slaves who died soon after arrival in Brazil. Fortune may hold a tremendous significance for the Jamaican blacks if he is read as a conduit back to Africa, and the world of the ancestors.

And so this drawing is located at its own symbolic crossroads, in both stylistic and narrative terms it is wonderfully indeterminate, as sketches often are, and this is the source of its continued power. But the reason this sketch has remained unseen, and undiscussed, until I came across it in Philadelphia, probably results from the fact that in aesthetic terms it has been designated ephemeral, a visual diary entry in an obscure man's papers. It is produced by a competent draftsman, who had clearly learned, as many gentleman did, how to sketch figures and landscapes, in the picturesque style, but who was also capable of developing the new spontaneous art of sketching in the context of a traumatic subject. But is this fragmentary visual response art, and if it is not, does anything beyond the curiosity of its subject matter give it value?

Du Simitiere's little sketch introduces the issue I want to focus on for the remainder of this talk. Was there a major Artist during the Romantic period who was capable of harnessing the dynamic resources of the new style of drawing, what might be termed the Romantic art of the sketch, to the

subject of Atlantic slavery? With the terrific exception of Turner's painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying*, did European Romanticism provide the aesthetic resources for an art of slavery which could go beyond the empathetic, illustrative, forensic or sentimental limitations of the archive of abolition propaganda?

Jean Baptiste Debret is, without a shadow of a doubt, Atlantic slavery's most significant draftsman, a creative artist who produced the most valuable, the most extensive, and in semiotic terms the most complicated visual archive ever created to record the day to day operations of the slave systems of Brazil, or indeed of any part of the slave Diaspora at any point of its development. Because he is relatively unknown outside Brazil, I will just very quickly sketch in some background. Debret grew up in Revolutionary France, he had a classical training, falling first under the influence of David, he then travelled to Rome as a teenager and worked in the Academia, producing classical history paintings. He then returned to Paris, was a great success at the Salon, and caught up in various vicissitudes and outfalls of the French Revolutionary wars he ended up travelling to Rio, in 1816, after the fall of Napoleon, where aged 48, he forged a spectacular career for himself as court painter and subsequently founder of the first Brazilian academy of Arts. He worked on court portraits, masques, and popular entertainment, employed by the transplanted court of the Portuguese king, Dom Pedro which had been moved wholesale to Brazil under the protection of the British when Napoleon's troops invaded Lisbon. For fifteen years Debret also produced a sustained uniquely intense body of work in which he observed the day to day life and workings of Rio. In 1827 and 1828 he undertook an extensive set of journeys into the coasts and interior of South Brazil. **[3 slide lithograph]** He returned to Paris in 1831, and from then until 1839 was involved in the writing, and the production of the plates for his massive multi-volume *Historic and Picturesque Voyage in Brazil*, which appeared from 1834 to 1839. Debret is remembered, when he is remembered at all, through the illustrations for this volume, which are frequently stagey and melodramatic lithographs, drawn in crayon. Yet it should be emphasised that he worked across a great variety of styles, both as a draftsman and painter. There is a vast body of water colour sketches he produced in Brazil, on the spot, spontaneous visual annotations work highly reminiscent of Delacroix's Algerian sketchbooks if one is looking for high art analogies. **[4 slide sugar cane factory]** There is an equally large body of single sheet water colour drawings, arranged thematically along conventional narrative lines, describing a substantial range of slave life and work in Rio, many of which incorporate details from the sketchbooks. These range across a variety of different styles, and narrative strategies. **[5 slide building]** Outside this there are topographical landscape and architecture studies. These again cover a huge stylistic range, from impressionistic sketches, to starchy formal studies reminiscent of Turner's very early apprentice work drawing his patron's estates. **[6 slide lizard]** Debret had also mastered the detached styles of enlightenment scientific draftsmanship, and used these skills to record the flora and fauna of Brazil, and the indigenous peoples. The finally there were the works he produced for the court, formal oil portraits, theatrical designs, still lifes featuring the marvellous fruits of the New World, and plantation scenes in the style of eighteenth century country-house landscape. It was, however, in his revolutionary approach to the aesthetic potential of the sketch, in the context of slave life, that he produced what I see as a new, and unprecedented art of trauma.

One of his great insights was to think about urban slavery, and time, and to explore the implications of the endless processes of waiting, which slavery enforced. **[7 slide coachmen]** The

life of the domestic slave, the aptly named 'waiter', at table, the maid, the wet nurse, the coachman, the sedan chair porter, is intimately bound to the life patterns, the temporal fluctuations, of the master and mistress and their children. Masters and mistresses owned their slaves, and consequently owned their time, all of it, past, present, and future. **[8 Slide waiting interior]** Debret was fascinated with how he could explore through art the collision of free time and slave time. Urban domestic slaves in Rio lived in intimate relation to their owners, which means that they existed in relation to the ways in which the slave owners expended their time, and all this time was quite precisely free time. On the face of it that might seem like an easier life than the deadly slog in the sugar plantations and factories, the coffee plantations, the quarries, the mines, the saw mills, or any of the emergent industries of Rio. **[9 slide table scene]** The house slave enjoys privilege, possesses a chance to build emotional bonds with the master and mistress, and gets to spend a large amount of time with them. But viewed from another angle this might be, a living death. To be constantly around, and in and out of freedom, and free time, is to see into the precise nature of what, in absolute terms, you may never possess. To be a house slave constantly dominated by the erratic, emotionally driven, and unpredictable dictates of your absolute owners, people of all ages and both sexes, might in reality constitute an agonising and agonistic, a tantalising, existence. What, after all is free time when you are enslaved?

The existence of the house slave involves a lot of waiting. The house slave's torture through waiting is a subject peculiarly suited to the art of the sketch. A fast sort of art might be the perfect form to describe a slow form of social death, and so it proved. The eloquence of stillness, of a visual silence horrifying because it is not peaceful, lies at the heart of Debret's approach to the depiction of the processes of an enforced waiting.

[10 slide single man] In the remarkable small sketches he made of individuals, or groups of slaves hanging around, the message seems to be, to recast Milton, that they only serve, they only stand and wait, or sit and wait, or kneel and wait. Like flies caught in the honey of their owner's leisure, up against walls, within doorways, on the ground, these slaves are left suspended but sinking, untethered, but otherwise like horses or dogs, awaiting the return of the master and mistress. While the rest of Brazilian history passed them by, and still passes them by, and while the sensational art of the abolitionists produced later in the nineteenth century could not see them for its cascades of whipped, raped, weeping and bleeding blacks, Debret was intensely fascinated with what slaves do with themselves when they are required to do nothing. **[11 slide, slave holding head]** He made their significant silence eloquent. These actively inactive people are a counterbalance to all that ceaseless activity in the illustrations to his travel book, and in the illustrations in all those travel books which set out the labour, leisure, punishment and business of the slave. These people are resting but not at rest, because they never know when the person who owns them is coming round the corner of through the doorway. **[12 slide sketchbook]** Some of the leaves of the sketchbooks set up fantastic visual dialogues around the active and the passive human form. This sheet is peppered with enforced inactivity. **[13 Slide sketchbook detail]** Over on the right set in a wedge, are four figures, testimony to how the human body can become a terrible burden to its inhabitant, when that inhabitant does not own itself. Debret is fascinated by the ways in which such paradoxically tense relaxation can articulate the despair of enslavement. As with the pages of any great sketchbook the elements combine and recombine in an infinite number of semiotic patterns which, despite their spontaneity, seem planned at the deepest aesthetic level. The figures on the right, for example, are in visual dialogue with the resting figure middle right.

[14 Slide, girl] The pretty girl who folds, and clasps, her right hand over her raised left

knee in order to provide a cushion for her chin, and who gazes askance out into the street, seems locked softly but solidly into a position she has held over and over again. The Rembrandt like speed of the brushwork and the fluidity of the washes, merely serves to emphasise her stillness, all that youthful beauty, grace and potential human energy, bundled up into an apprehensive human lump, a patient knot which can only be untied at the re-appearance of the master or mistress. It is in fact a perfect little essay in the potential of slavery to consume human life and hope, while being totally oblivious to the enormity of its crime.

What make the hundreds of surviving sketches of waiting slaves so important is their silence. The rhetorics of trauma and brutalisation which emerged from abolition, seem so loud and vulgar against Debret's quick and quiet notations. [15 slides, torture] The scenes of torture, of beating, or rape, of murder (and as we see Debret contributed to this archive as well) appear so loud and melodramatic, so extreme, when contrasted with this horrible still point at the turning world of slavery. And it is only in the sketches, made on the spot, in response to catching something suddenly, in the raw, that the full force of the terror of waiting comes out.

Extraordinary symbolic intercommunications occur in the pages of the sketchbooks. **[16 slide, sketchbook]** Take the following, the head of a donkey, a naked squatting slave, and a gorgeous tropical finch. How can these three elements not talk to each other? The harnessed head of the beast of burden moving into the picture plane at left symbolically bounces off the slave. The slave rests his elbows on his knees and clasps his hands in the gesture so familiar from the seal of the society for the abolition of the slave trade, and which Debret, as a Parisian would have become so familiar with in the 1790s. Is he in supplication, or is he actually in the act of excreting, the mess emerging beneath his buttocks is certainly not a shadow, is he suffering from the flux and adopting this position to ease himself physically? The hopping bird, facing like the donkey left to right, moves away from the slave and seems to embody a message of absolute freedom. The uncaged bird is a metaphor for the freed Christian soul, and for the holy spirit, the donkey is the sacred beast upon which Christ rode into Jerusalem, the slave may be praying, there are many ways of putting those elements together as an ironic religious critique of slavery. And the ironies do not stop there, look more closely, look deeply in to this sheet and you see floating below the three water colours two ghostly white figures, males wearing elaborate capes and large sun hats, absent but present, the people who see the slave and the donkey in legal terms as property.

[17 slide, Senegalese] In many of the drawings Debret seems to be thinking deeply about how ethnic type and physical characteristics of different Africans inflect the manner in which they wait. **[18 slide detail]** The following sheet clearly depicts a certain shape of African body, probably Senegalese, or Sudanese, thin, enormously tall people, described by Gilberto Freyre as Hieratic, who must find different solutions to the interminable problem of how to arrange such angular bodies for prolonged periods of stasis. The processes of human engineering, which interested Debret in so many of the sketches, here comes to dominate. The figure on the left has become a study in how the human form can lock itself up. This figure whose arms and legs resemble a section from an iron bridge appears to have made itself into an industrial yet organic sculpture, as if Isumbard Kingdom Brunel had collaborated with Henry Moore.

One of the most characteristic and semiotically confrontational moves Debret makes is to advance the interrogation of enforced waiting in relation to torture, punishment and violence. The implications of the fizzing visual connections he sets up in some of his sketchbook pages are almost unbearable. **[19 slide, torture sheet]** In this page he has drawn an earthenware water container, a broom head made of dry grasses and an iron coffee pot with two cups in a square formation on the left. Then to the right of these a *tronco* or large slave stocks, and just below it in

light pencil and inscribed 'botte' is an iron boot put on runaways. [20 **Detail collars**] In the centre are heavily outlined watercolour and wash studies of five differently shaped slave-punishment and runaway collars. Then, at another point, maybe earlier, maybe later, Debret put in a series of human figures. In the foreground middle left he sketched the naked upper torso head and neck of a male slave, wearing a slave collar with two long metal appendages and fastened with a knot, as if to remind himself how these things worked.

The larger planned water colour compositions are most successful when they manage to return to the silence, and understatement, and even to echo the technical relaxation of the sketches. [22 **slide**] Take for example the elaborate full page water colour composition *Visit to a country villa in the outskirts of Rio*. In the reception room of the Casa Grande one slave matriarch meets another. [21 **slide detail**] Yet look at the heavy jewelled face of the hostess, and another type of social interaction dominates. A half naked young black slave woman, stands directly behind the lady of the house, the slave's visage remains forever hidden, padlocked into a grotesque 'dirt eating mask'. There is intense visual irony in this print: in a composition where all the performers look anywhere and everywhere except at the object of horror, once the viewer locks onto the form of that victim, it is impossible to tell where she is looking. Does she gaze out through the perforated mask at the woman who has just arrived or does she look right at us? The most noticeable thing about this victim is not that she is wearing this horrible machine, but that nobody notices her predicament. A young woman, going about her tasks in an iron masque, is clearly just part of everyday life. It is the downbeat normalcy of her social presence which remains so powerful, again she watches, and waits, her trauma only visible outside the scene. The print is at one level didactic, but it is didacticism on a very slow, low burn.

Debret had tried out various pictorial settings and drawing styles in order to explore the theatrical potential of this particular torture implement. [23 **slide, big slave mask**] He produced a full-page study, more carefully worked up than the sketches, inscribed *Tin Mask worn by negroes who have a desire to eat dirt*. This is a positively statuesque, or even monumental, full figure study of a male slave in strict profile. Again Debret insists on the point that no matter how outrageous the punishment appears the slave is required to continue to go about his or her daily duties of carrying water. His snout like mask, with its counterbalancing heart shaped padlock makes him appear spectacular, in his isolation, or like an object of anthropological interest, a strange exhibit fantastic in relation to normal life. Looking at this design, and considering Debret's profound commitment to the exploration of the metaphoric, metonymic, and ironic effects of this horrible object, he seems to be setting up a series of questions relating to the black African and white European uses of the mask. [24 **pig mask**] Sub Saharan Africa is filled with cultures which engage with masks at deep narrative, symbolic and aesthetic levels. African masks were of course responsible for transforming the way European high art was capable of seeing, and it has been argued, lie at the heart of the cubist perceptual revolution. Could Picasso have wrought those extreme facial transformations on his *Desmoiselles Davignon* without African masks. Yet African masks were being used, developed and reinvented by slave artists in the Diaspora two hundred years before Picasso and Matisse ever laid eyes on one. Debret saw and observed these processes. [25 **place from Caderno**] His sketchbooks record examples of African based fetish sculpture and mask production which prove he had an interest in, and a certain knowledge of, how these operated at the centre of certain modes of slave thought and ceremony. African masks are not just beautiful, they have social function, they are deeply metaphoric and multi referential and frequently involve complex semiotic marriages which magically harmonize humans and animals. From this perspective it is difficult not to see a tragic

irony underlying Debret's anatomisation of the social dynamics of the tin dirt eating mask invented by the European slave powers to annihilate black identity, to muzzle slaves, to make them appear like domestic animals.

The deeper one penetrates into the entire range of Debret's Brazilian oeuvre the more apparent it becomes that he is operating multiple systems for communicating the complexities of slave society, and that he manipulates different styles of drawing to achieve his ends. There are metaphoric associative chains of imagery which run through the work, these create nuanced communicative networks which shift and develop across different fields of representation. Debret was a fine naturalist, and developed a beautiful style for the scientific annotation of specimens of flora and fauna. His water colour drawings of reptiles, fish, insects, flowers, ferns fruits and grasses merit a detailed study in their own right. **[26 slide fruit]** Debret was capable of producing smooth and polished large oil compositions in the tradition of Dutch still-life painting in order to celebrate Brazil as an earthly paradise, a cornucopia of exotic things to eat. He made a magnificent oil which gathered together every exotic tropical fruit and vegetable he came across. Stuck into this, like a serpent penetrating or emerging from the Garden of Eden, was a broken piece of sugar cane snaking its way into the heart of persimmons, aubergines and berries with a certain ithyphallic brutality. Debret incorporated sugar into his aesthetic with a thoroughness no other artist of the slave Diaspora ever approached. The precisely observed structure of the piece of sugar cane he put in his oil painting reflected an obsessive attention to the structure and physical presence of this fatal form of grass. Debret produced remarkably detailed water colour studies for the majority of the important and unfamiliar fruits which he put in his large studio oil painting. They are intense and precise and stylistically independent of any of his other work. **[27 slide, sugar cane study]** His study of a broken fragment of fresh sugar cane is reminiscent of the almost painfully precise, and hallucinogenic-ally detailed nature studies of John Ruskin. As with Ruskin there is a desire to achieve truth through the sheer ferocity of looking closely. **[28 slide cane detail]** The range of the palette his extraordinary, at the point where each section grows into the next we move through what appears almost a geological shift, from soft unbroken curves of greenish yellow ochre, into small rivulets, cusps, ridges, notches, like dried lava, a frozen sea of pumice, coruscated. These meeting points are painted in a bruised palette of greys, indigos, earth violets, and browns, before emerging into a splash of carmine. The sugar cane was of course celebrated in abolition literatures, as the plant watered with the blood of millions of slaves. And in this study it is as if the blood and torn flesh break through the smooth skin, while the broken left end juts out white like a bone fragment. This broken fragment, painted in a palette of dead yellows, dusty purples, dull greens and dry reds, take us into the world of Gericault's mortuary studies of severed arms and legs.

Once you look into it there is no end to Debret's engagement with the metaphors of sugar, and I have no space to trace these networks here. So I will end with the most fully realised and artistically challenging work he produced which incorporates this theme. **[29 slide, tronco]** The water colour *Slaves in the Stocks* and the similarly entitled lithograph in the *Voyage Pottosque*. This whole sheet study showed four male adults lying about on mats made of cane trash, in an outhouse amid piles of agricultural equipment, including an ox yoke and a parcel of horse whips, these men appear forgotten, their suffering redundant. Each of the three secured by the feet adopts a different position in a forlorn and doomed attempt to secure some temporary physical ease.

The black nearest us has a healthy and beautiful body, and reclines, his elbow behind his head, like some parody of an entombed Christ rising from his linen shroud. **[30 Slide detail head**

and sugar] Debret has produced a face which stares, blankly out of the picture plane, a face driven beyond sensate consciousness by its misery. The state of suffering these men endure is articulated most forcefully through the fact that each one of them seems emotionally withdrawn, not really with it, locked into a world of his own, a world beyond pain, that may well be a world of lunacy, or what we would now term traumatic stress. [31 slide, Hogarth] The figure farthest back is powerfully reminiscent of one of the great studies of the pathos of insanity to have come out of eighteenth century print culture, the final engraving from Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*. This print shows Tom Rakewell insane, consigned to Bedlam. He reclines nearly naked, his feet are being put in restraints, and he laughs madly, pathetically, unable to perceive what has happened to him. [32 Slide Debret tronco] Debret has taken the essential power of this figure and transposed it to an outhouse on a Brazilian estate exactly ninety years after Hogarth made his iconic design. The moral punch of the design is consequently entirely different. Hogarth's print is straightforwardly didactic a double warning, firstly of the barbarism with which English society treats the mentally ill, but secondly a warning against the life the rake has lead. Tom of course, is to a large degree the instigator of his own misfortunes, and the victim of his own weakness and licentiousness. Debret's slaves are simply victims of an impersonal system which refuses to acknowledge their human status and which remains officially insensible to their capacity to suffer and to be hurt beyond the point of reason. [33 slide, head] And where does sugar fit into all this? Beneath the right ear of the slave fastened by the neck, are two broken fragments of sugar cane, and above the head of the slave reclining in the foreground are two more. These snapped off pieces, so similar to the fragment I have just discussed, which Debret painted with such obsessive attention to detail, is the only food the slaves appear to have. Even here this magic juice is the life force which will enable the men to live through the ordeal, although what sort of beings they will be when they emerge, is left as a terrible subject of speculation.