

LAURA FACEY: BETWEEN THE GRAIN

ARTIST PROFILE | BY: KERRY CHEN

At 70, Jamaican artist Laura Facey is releasing a sweeping monograph on her 50-year career, yet, her most powerful work might still lie ahead.

The renowned Jamaican artist best known for her monumental public sculptures is carving space for healing within the pages of her upcoming monograph, “Heartwood.” Written by Australian artist, curator, and art writer Anne Errey, the book unfolds chronologically, tracing three distinct periods in Facey’s life and career, offering a comprehensive review of an artist whose work has held prominence in Jamaica’s cultural landscape. The monograph pairs Errey’s incisive essays with images spanning Facey’s sculptures, lesser-known drawings, prints, and assemblages, alongside photographs from her personal life, charting both her artistic evolution and personal journey. Errey reveals the myriad influences that fueled what she refers to as Facey’s “wild self-determination” as an artist. She traces the formative family influences: how the 1970s political climate led to Maurice Facey’s appointment as founding chairman of the National Gallery of Jamaica, and how Valerie Facey, herself a visual artist and arts advocate, nurtured her children’s creative development from early pantomime experiences through lifelong artistic engagement.

Moving from these early influences to formal training, “Heartwood” tracks the evolution of Facey’s practice, beginning with her foundational art education where she pursued studies in sculpture in the United Kingdom, and briefly in the United States before completing her training at the Jamaica School of Art (now the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts). The narrative moves to Facey’s immediate post-graduate years, when experiences like fabricating large-scale styrofoam props for opera productions and wrestling with molten metal in industrial foundries grounded her material mastery. It also reveals how mentorship from local art luminaries like Edna Manley and David Boxer, along with time spent in the studios of prominent artists such

as Osmond Watson, helped direct her technical aptitude towards a singular artistic vision. The monograph comes full circle to Facey's most recent works, where entirely new reflections and subject matters have inspired a dramatic evolution in her approach, one that has shed representational forms in favour of abstraction and minimalism. Heartwood reveals how this artistic shift emerged through Facey's collaboration with Australian artist-curator Melinda Brown, whose creative direction guided this transformation.

This new direction departs dramatically from Facey's decades-long focus on slavery, a thematic preoccupation that, while central to her artistic identity, has not been without controversy. Her unflinching exploration of this subject through her distinctive visual language has long been a point of critical contention. To some critics, Facey's conceptual approach, particularly in works like "Redemption Song" (2004), reflects a privileged distance from Jamaica's historical trauma. By framing emancipation as primarily spiritual rather than bodily, her interpretation clashed with the lived realities of many Jamaicans, for whom slavery's legacy remains viscerally present. This tension exposes a central paradox of postcolonial cultural production: when artists like Facey — a mixed-race Jamaican of privileged heritage — engage with local concerns, their perspectives inevitably bear the imprint of that privilege, even as their work becomes part of the very national discourse it seeks to transform.

For Facey, this broader paradox crystallises into a specific challenge: how to bear witness to histories beyond one's immediate experience with both integrity and emotional truth, a challenge that isn't unique to her. Picasso, though disconnected from the 1937 bombing of Guernica, powerfully articulated its horrors in his iconic anti-war mural, just as artists across generations have transformed countless experiences of trauma into resonant visual language. This speaks to what the late art critic Robert Hughes described as art's true mission— "to make the world whole and comprehensible, to restore it to us in all its glory and occasional nastiness not through argument, but through feeling, and thus, to close the gap between you and everything that is not you, and, in this way, to pass from feeling to meaning." Facey's work similarly attempts to bridge that gap: bearing witness, provoking feeling, and seeking

meaning in shared histories that are both painful and unresolved. This is what Facey invokes when she characterises her work as being concerned with healing. Throughout "Heartwood," Errey traces with both scholarly care and deep empathy the evolution of an artist who, in Facey's own words, "had to travel through the dark night of the soul." That personal journey, marked by struggles against patriarchal forces and other reckonings, pulses through her early works from the mid-70s to late 90s. Even in abstraction, Errey notes works that vibrate with profound intimacy and may be interpreted as visual testimonies to familial and psychological wounding. She suspects this same impulse has driven Facey's engagement with the dissonant aesthetics of slavery, which mediates a dual confrontation where particular historical context becomes both metaphor for private trauma and lens for examining its unresolved afterlife.

The debate about Facey's positionality, and the undeniable privileges it confers, remains vital, yet this fixation on positionality, while valid in principle, too often dominates the discourse at the expense of fuller engagement. Rather than dismiss these questions, we might ask: What insights emerge when we weigh Facey's perspective *alongside* her technical innovations—like the way her bronze patinas echo Jamaica's volcanic geology, or how the monumental scale of her artworks force public reckonings? A truly balanced critique would examine how her "Redemption Song" synthesises European lost-wax techniques with Afro-Caribbean spiritual motifs, creating forms that are neither reducible to identity nor separable from it. When we allow identity politics to overshadow such nuance, we don't just flatten Facey's work, we risk replicating the very reductive frameworks we claim to challenge. These reductive debates risk undermining both the artist, whose legacy rests on technical mastery, conceptual sophistication, and the commanding physicality of her public monuments, and art's broader capacity to foster transformative dialogue.

By releasing "Heartwood" now, amid ongoing artistic evolution, Facey aims to widen engagement with her work, offering deeper context as she explores new subjects and formal approaches. She seeks to connect with contemporary audiences who, she believes, may not yet fully grasp the breadth of her practice. "The artists seeing my

work now are missing many chapters... [through Heartwood] they'll have an opportunity to catch up with my early work," she reflects. If pieces like "Redemption Song" (2003) have dominated public perception, this monograph provides a broader, more layered entry into Facey's world, not just her visual language, but the philosophies and private impulses that have shaped it. "Heartwood" is neither a defense nor a definition of her legacy, but an expansion of it, but rather a map of a career forged equally by spiritual inquiry, historical reckoning and healing. Published by Mill Press, "Heartwood" is expected to be released in the first quarter of 2026.