

**Absence/Presence of *You are my kindred spirit*
Eilidh Akilade**

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Sulter’s voice rings throughout the room - a deep velvet on repeat. In this, an audio presence fills a negative space: with each step, we walk into and with *The Alba Sonnets* (1995). One line finds me, often:

‘Moon and Sun and Stars we share
Yet in the depth of night I turn,
you are not there.’

Sonnet and space and sound we share, although Maud is not there. And yet, we let her words - of the court’s Black Scottish women, Black Scottish women like us - move us. Lubaina Himid’s horn sounds an ending. *The Alba Sonnets* begin again.

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How a presence may be an absence and an absence may be a presence.

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And then, there is Maud as a child - with a monkey in her arms, a parrot upon her pram, a penguin in her eyes! A family sits upon a roundabout and a woman holds Maud’s hand. The family photos are big. So big we must look up, step back - child-like, Maud-like. The photographs of *Memories of Childhood* (1993) are scanned and in that scanning a tear has been held, a fingerprint remembered. In this, a presence is reminded. Maud is generous with these small intimacies.

Against the back wall, Maud appears now grown in a series of projected self-portraits. Her black hair sinks into that of the background; a negative space welcomes oneself. Her necklaces - pearls, heavy metal, rope - are tugged at and held. The projector sits behind us, atop the red enclosure of *Plantation* (1995); one body of work touches another.

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How an absence may resist its own absence, whether with young smiling cheeks or pursed lipsticked lips.

¹ ‘I’m very interested in absence and presence in the way that particularly black women’s experience and black women’s contribution to culture is so often erased and marginalized.’ - Maud Sulter

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In *Plantation*, Maud is absent and present: her consciousness is elsewhere as her body is operated on. In her absence (which is also her presence), Bertha Mason arrives. Not as *Jane Eyre's* 'Mad Woman in the Attic', but as Bertha. In this, colonised bodies - Bertha, Maud - are offered a rare healing.

With *My Father's House* (1996), we lose an hour - which is not a loss - at her father's funeral rites in Ghana. The footage is bleached with age - light, too, perhaps. It is on a loop; I join as 'AMBULANS' appears upon an orange van with purple lights, flash flash. The time and date sit in the bottom right corner of the screen. Later, the grieving gather on white plastic chairs, clapping their hands to music. The sound comes before, or it is after, the pressing of palm to palm. Grief is an absence outwith time. For some footage, the time and date are absent in their corner; then, they return. A poem ends the video and I hold one line close: 'The call/ is not returned'.

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How some presences demand absences; how some absences demand presences.

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Sycas (1993) arrives in *Tramway* as projections. As *Blood Money* (1994) sounds through the benched headphones, four slides of five images pass. An image: a Black arm stretched across lilac; a thumb cut and pasted - up, up - holds a marble bust, with only two stacked books as a support; snowy mountains look down with ease. An image: across a European town - rolling green hills and fir trees nestling neat houses - an African metal sculpture is pasted and in my uncertainty, whether it is a mask or talisman or ornament, Maud's critique of colonialism erasure is present. An image: an elephant's head adorned upon a portrait of a white man, an illustrated countryside laid underneath.

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How a presence - a colonial presence - may eat itself from the inside out, and persist, nonetheless. Continues to chew spit swallow until another presence rearranges its remains, hopes for absence.

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Sphinx (1987) is a quiet film. Steady cam. I take a picture of the sphinx on the television screen; in the image, the screen appears a glitching blank. I delete the image - it is for the best.

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How a presence may return, later, as an absence.

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In the room's centre, linen falls from above, each stretch of textile holding printed images of *Alba* (1995), an installation commissioned by the Centre for Contemporary Arts Glasgow. A child runs between the images, the linen. It is such a joy, that the child may run in Tramway, in 2024, and at once also run in the Preston Art Gallery, in 1995. The exhibition and the child - they are both here and not here. And through the linen, *Syracas* glows; turn, and *Memories of Childhood* welcomes a soft blur also. One presence layers itself upon another.

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How absences may gather together, lay themselves upon one another, and find themselves a presence in a new present tense.

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In part of Maud's series *Significant Others*, Elsie looks proud in that neat tailored uniform, standing in front of a tram in the photograph hanging in Tramway, the former Coplaw City Tram Shed Depot. She has been here before - yes, the tram conductor is present, absent, and now present again, here, in Tramway. Time wraps itself around a space, pulls us in. And, Elsie, how to raise a Black child here, there? I am small and I am grown, and I like to press the soles of my feet against the tram lines on the concrete floor - see where they may take me. There is no tram and the tram lines continue on.

Elsie's photo - and that of other relatives - is cast with a spotlight. Thin slices of red into orange, yellow, green offer a framing. I look up to the rigging and many lights and yet, cannot find Elsie's portrait's spotlight.

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How a presence may be absent.

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I like Glasgow through Maud's lens. In *No Oxbridge Spires* (1998), the city's red stone is bright. Park fence, street, road - and she's a Southsider, like us, here. Her children hold the hands of their grandmother and great auntie, walking so nicely. They visit Maud's childhood home; it is boarded up now, awaiting demolition. Maud's voice rolls across the video: 'No Ancient Relics

carved in Stone. No permanence.' - and so Maud, and her collaborators, create their own permanence.

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How an absence may allow a presence.

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One presence is not a substitute for another; the presence of art does not ease the absence of life. But, in *You are my kindred spirit*, Maud is present. It has taken some time - too long - for Maud's presence here (and there are still many Black women artists like her who are absent). We are present in her absence - and, in this, it is perhaps not absence. Colonialism and its whitewashing agents are present - god, they are so violently present - and yet, so too is this. So too is Maud.

The horn.

again.