Re-Materialize (detail), 2016
series of C-prints
14 x 11 in (each)

Attempt, 2016
ink, graphite, nail polish and collaged image on paper
14 x 11 in
Rippled, gassy, viscous black substance, roadkill in various states of decomposi-
tion squashed into the asphalt of a road, a pattern for a bearskin rug, appro-
priations of the graphic illustrations of “local types”—these are just some of the
seemingly incongruous elements that overlap, blend, merge, and multiply in
Nicole Awai’s body of work. The two- and three-dimensional, the representa-
tional and non-representational violently collapse into and seep out of one
another. The boundaries between natural and man-made, human and nonhu-
man, familiar and alien blur. A naked body, disintegrating animal carcass, paved
sidewalk, bubbling surface of a tar pitch and heap of paint take on intimate
resemblances even as a cutout form seeks to separate and distill them into
distinct entities. The repeated shape of an animal hide brings into focus their
relentless materiality, at once always different and always, at the core, the same.

In her expansive painting practice, Awai examines what she identifies as
“the inextricable union of narrative and matter.” She investigates this union
through “varying material states of being in immediate time and perpetual his-
tory,” encapsulated in the transformative moments of earth, things, and bodies—
from and into one another. As the 2012 Art Matters grantee, the artist explored
the La Brea Pitch Lake in her native Trinidad as both a physical and psycho-
logical locus through which to grasp the complexities and uniqueness of her
identity as a contemporary artist from the Caribbean. At the Lake, the perceptual
site, imagination, memory, and received narratives intersect. From their nexus,
Awai considers the mutually intertwined histories of material exchanges and
human dislocations: a global circulation of the highest-grade asphaltum on the
planet, African and Asian peoples violently brought to the Caribbean to produce
export commodities, and their diasporic descendants. Their material traces and
graphic signifiers coalesce in her work with a dual aim. One is to recalibrate our
perceptions into “an acute awareness of here—our present/presence.” Another
is to suggest that our presentness is always embedded in the incessant, cyclical
flows of matter and time.

Dorota Biczel is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Art and Art History at The University of Texas at
Austin. In 2015-16 she served as the Visual Art Center’s Curatorial Fellow. Dorota specializes in modern
and contemporary Latin American art in the global context. Her dissertation examines artistic and
architectural interventions as the means of construction of new publics in Lima during the tumultuous
period of the urban demographic explosion, transition to democracy, and onset of the Internal Conflict
in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Awai creates image-object-facts willfully extracted and fabricated from the
uninterrupted movement of asphalt and magma; from the constant propagation,
composition, and decomposition of bodies. Here is the matter in re-pose—
captured in a momentary, dual, dialectical state. On the one hand, in Awai’s
work, materiality crystallizes itself as a pose when brought to our attention like
the liquid asphaltum rendered a perceptible, concrete form by the imposed
shape of a bearskin rug. On the other hand, it is simultaneously the matter in
repose—that is, the matter that appears at rest, still, concealed, or dormant
while it awaits the next material transformation. At their generative junction,
invisible stories ooze out and temporarily jell, speaking to our persistent desires
to control and transform the matter to our own ends and its enduring command
over our lives.
Nicole Awai
Material Re-Pose

February 16 – April 29, 2017

OPENING RECEPTION
Thursday, February 16 · 5–7 p.m.

In her medium-non-specific paintings, Nicole Awai moves fluidly between two and three dimensions and employs popular commercial materials such as nail polish to explore notions of identity and history. Born in Trinidad, Awai received her M.F.A. in Multimedia Art from the University of South Florida in 1996 and attended the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in 1997. Her work has been included in several seminal exhibitions, including the first Greater New York: New Art in New York Now at MoMA PS1 (2000); Open House: Working in Brooklyn (2004) and Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art (2007), both at the Brooklyn Museum; the 2008 Busan Biennale in Korea; and Global Caribbean: Focus on the Contemporary Caribbean Visual Art Landscape at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Puerto Rico (2011).

The Courtyard Gallery is located inside the AT&T Executive Education and Conference Center at The University of Texas at Austin and presents work by faculty and alumni of the Department of Art and Art History in the College of Fine Arts. The exhibitions are curated by Jade Walker, director of the department’s Visual Arts Center.

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