

**PRESS RELEASE: CARIBBEAN MASTERPIECE ACQUIRED FOR AUTUMN EXHIBITION
*LIVE THE SURREAL: ROBERTA STODDART'S SLEEPWALKERS***

Wereldmuseum acquires *Sleepwalkers* (2009-2017) by the Jamaican artist Roberta Stoddart. The painting is an important addition to the museum's collection and will be one of the key works in the exhibition *Live the Surreal*, on view at Wereldmuseum Rotterdam from 17 September 2026 to 29 August 2027.



Roberta Stoddart, Sleepwalkers, 2009-2017

Live the Surreal: Surrealism as a global mentality

The exhibition *Live the Surreal* explores surrealism not simply as a European art movement, but as a global mentality and activist stance. Across different periods, continents, and cultures, surrealism has served as a means of resisting oppression and expressing desire, sometimes for another world.

The exhibition features work by dozens of artists, including Julio Gálan, Tetsuya Ishida, Roberta Stoddart, Renée Stout, Yves Tanguy, Co Westerik, and Santiago Yahuarcani. Works from the museum's own collection are shown alongside national and international loans, including masterpieces from Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen and contemporary works by Rotterdam-based artists. *Live the Surreal* presents surrealist art from countries across different continents, including Mexico, Australia, Jamaica, and

Indonesia. In doing so, it broadens the conventional museum perspective on surrealism and demonstrates that the dream of a better world is a universal force.

The exhibition design playfully and rebelliously breaks down the museum's walls. Visitors become aware of, and are invited to break free from, the conventions of the museum itself. In the final gallery, the walls, ceiling, and floor disappear altogether, allowing for new ways of looking.

Sleepwalkers resonates closely with this approach. Like the shifting spaces in the exhibition, Stoddart disrupts the seemingly harmonious group portrait and lays bare the hidden power relations beneath it.



Detail uit Roberta Stoddarts, *Sleepwalkers*, 2009-2017

***Sleepwalkers*: a Caribbean conversation piece**

Roberta Stoddart is a prominent contemporary artist from Jamaica and the Caribbean, known for her layered portraits and unsettling landscapes that explore the enduring effects of colonialism, ethnicity, gender, and class in everyday life. Her work, exhibited internationally and recipient of numerous awards, raises questions about identity, marginalisation, and what it means to 'belong' or to be seen as 'other'.

In *Sleepwalkers*, Stoddart draws on the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century genre of the conversation piece: seemingly informal group portraits set in harmonious surroundings that, in reality, normalised colonial power relations. By applying this visual

language to a nocturnal wedding ceremony in which each figure carries symbolic meaning, Stoddart dismantles the power structures concealed behind the portrait.

Set in a nocturnal, sultry Caribbean landscape draped with Spanish moss, the painting depicts a wedding ceremony. Figures from past and present appear to come together in a frozen moment. Human and animal alike turn their gaze towards the viewer, as if caught in headlights, seemingly asking: what now? The work carries a dreamlike tension rooted in a distinctly Caribbean context.

At the centre of the painting stands Bertha Mason, the 'attic character' from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). In the novel, Bertha, who comes from Jamaica, is reduced to a classic colonial caricature: aggressive, exotic, wild, promiscuous, and irrational. In Stoddart's painting, she is given her own story, her own voice. In this way, Stoddart aligns herself with postcolonial rereadings such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), which retells the story of *Jane Eyre* from Bertha's perspective.

By bringing these literary and historical strands together, *Sleepwalkers* questions how colonial structures continue to shape identity, gender, and class – and how concepts such as 'perpetrator' and 'victim', 'black' and 'white', 'past' and 'present' are inextricably intertwined in a postcolonial world.



Detail uit Roberta Stoddarts, *Sleepwalkers*, 2009-2017

A major addition to the Netherlands' public collection

With 500,000 collection objects and 750,000 photographs, Wereldmuseum manages a collection in which history, global art, and material culture intersect. Contemporary art plays a crucial role in rereading these histories and reflecting on the present.

With this acquisition, made possible in part by a contribution from the Mondriaan Fund, Wereldmuseum adds an exceptional work to the Netherlands' public collection. Although Stoddart is widely recognised in the Caribbean and the Americas, her work has not previously been acquired by a European museum.

From 17 September, *Sleepwalkers* will be on view in the exhibition *Live the Surreal* at Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, where it will demonstrate that surrealism is not a closed chapter in European art history, but a living, global force: a way of seeing, dreaming, and acting that continues to resonate to this day.

After the exhibition finishes, the painting will move to Wereldmuseum Leiden, where in 2027 it will take a prominent place in the renewed permanent presentation exploring global perspectives on the history of art and design.