

Curtis Talwst Santiago

JOYvastated

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For his exhibition at Nir Altman, Curtis Talwst Santiago is presenting a new suite of paintings and a series of objects and beats which draw upon the history, traditions, and visual manifestations of Trinidadian Carnival, an art form which has evolved from a European tradition into a multifarious and complex medium of communication between the different ethnic groups of the island¹ and a snapshot of the global postcolonial condition.

Amid the throng of bodies that moves exuberantly across the canvases in clouds of confetti, the viewer can recognize some of the figures common to the specifically Trinidadian genre of carnival. Devils and Imps adorned with blue costume elements wreak havoc among the crowds and evoke the politically charged underbelly of the tradition, which harnessed horror and the infernal as disruptive forces capable of reprogramming, if only for a few days, unjust systems of value that had been installed between the different racial groups of the island prior to emancipation of the enslaved African population in 1834. Indeed, other figures resemble stereotypical European males and assert an ambiguous presence that can be read as the oppressor when viewed through the lens of the complex history of interracial power structures on the island. Yet, viewed through that very same lens, they could also quite simply be revered ancestors. Or are they instead costumed revelers of the present, poking fun at these ghosts of the past, living with them and through them as a euphoric transtemporal collective body momentarily liberated from the residual power of a history that sticks fast to today's social norms?

Within these raucous, shimmering configurations of the archetypal and the anonymous, one figure ruptures the scene with a presence that sits awkwardly beyond these two categories. Marked by an androgyny and agelessness that defies categorization, their black skin breaks through from beneath a white mask or make-up, their face framed by a shock of bright orange hair and a peach-blushed body studded with multicolored polka dots. A tragic club-kid clown dragged up in whiteface for the party, they further nod to the Trinidadian art of playing mas'. A shortened form of the word mask or masquerade, playing mas' refers to the process whereby revelers transform themselves into fantastic beings, or characters—such as the notorious, quick-talking Midnight Robber, dressed in black with his extravagant tasseled hat—and whereby, historically, Black revelers would paint themselves white to topple vertiginous power imbalances, or paint themselves black to mock the Whites who had done the same in multilayered acts of resistance and affirmation.

As carnival flattens the planes of history and the asymmetry of colonial earth into a pulsing vibrant matter of the immediate present, and as this matter shifts shape and seeks form in figures that restlessly break out of lines drawn by the patterns and paradigms of a script

¹ Ruth West, *The Robber in the Trinidad Carnival*, *Caribbean Quarterly*; Dec, 1990; 36, 3. P. 42.

written too long ago, one character remains out of place. Too much, anachronous, and yet still here. They move between the beats, punching out blue syncopes with displaced and misplaced steps as they flicker at the interface of multiple worlds. While it was the spectacle of masquerade which allowed entry into public life, it appears that hypervisibility now begets exclusion. In the thick of things, but completely out of it. Invited, but not involved. Perhaps the celebration of self-enactment can reflect back the weight of another gaze. Perhaps the jubilant affirmation of mark-making can chart new worlds of recurring momentary ecstasy against an ever-shifting yet irrevocably catastrophic ground. JOYvastated.

Daniel Milnes

Curtis Talwst Santiago (b. 1979, Edmonton, Alberta) studied as an apprentice of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. Santiago has exhibited internationally at venues such as The FLAG Art Foundation, New York, NY; The New Museum, New York, NY; The Eli and Edythe Broad Museum at Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI; the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA; the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan, Canada; The Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; and the SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; among others. The artist was included in the inaugural 2019 Toronto Biennial of Art in Toronto, Canada, the SITE Santa Fe SITELines.2018 Biennial, Casa Tomada, in Santa Fe, NM, and was featured in the 2018 and 2022 Biennale de Dakar in Dakar, Senegal. The artist has had a solo exhibition at Art Gallery of Alberta in 2022 and Can't I Alter in 2020 at The Drawing Center, New York, NY. His work is in the permanent collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY. Santiago considers himself decentralized and lives and works between Munich, Germany, New York, NY, Lisbon, Portugal, and Toronto, CA.

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