

ARTFORUM

“EN MAS’: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean”

CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER, NEW ORLEANS
900 Camp Street
March 7–June 7

This expansively ambitious show curated by Claire Tancons and Krista Thompson is based on a fresh postulate for history and an apt query for today. The exhibition proposes that carnival—that great tradition of pre-Lenten partying in public, endemic to former slave societies in the Caribbean basin—has played a crucial role in shaping modern culture everywhere. It’s not only people in Trinidad and Rio and New Orleans, these days, who build stylized lives around Fat Tuesday’s “farewell to flesh”; Caribbean-style carnivals are also New York and London’s biggest and best-attended yearly public events.

That’s the postulate. The question is trickier: How might carnival’s attendant forms of aesthetic practice and ritual modes of masquerade—the performative arts that Trinidadians call *mas’*—be synthesized with the larger contemporary discourse of performance art, with its genealogy presumed to originate in the bodily economies not of chattel slavery but of Europe’s *avant-gardes*?

To find out, the curators commissioned nine artists from the Caribbean and its diasporas to create performance pieces for their respective islands’ main carnival streets (or, in the case of London-based Hew Locke, for Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall). The exhibition here gathers both photographic documents of and materials used in the resulting pieces—decorative coffins from Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson; Locke’s faux riot-cop shields, riffing on carnival’s contradictions in now-gentrified Notting Hill—to at once refigure the artists’ work and ask “how carnival might be critically re-inserted,” Tancons writes, “within the history of the exhibitionary complex.”

The answer to that, on evidence here, remains fuzzy. It is telling that the two strongest pieces in the gallery context are films, by Cauleen Smith and Christophe Chassol, which were conceived as such. But one leaves the show convinced of both its guiding questions’ import and of the key role that its revitalized host institution—sited in a city that has both sprouted a real restive art scene, ten years from Katrina, and retains the country’s richest well of folk performance tradition—can play in the asking.



Ebony G. Patterson, *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories*, 2014, three-channel video installation, color, sound, 9 minutes 40 seconds.

--Joshua Jelly-Schapiro