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451 N Paulina Street, Chicago 60622

312 243 2129 moniquemeloche.com

Chicago Tribune

'En Mas' at DuSable takes a different look at Caribbean carnival



Ebony G. Patterson, Invisible Presence: Bling Memories, performance, April 27, 2014, Kingston, Jamaica. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago. Photograph: Monique Gilpin and Philip Rhoden User Upload Caption: Ebony G. Patterson, Invisible Presence: Bling Memories, performance, April 27, 2014, Kingston, Jamaica. Courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago. Photograph: Monique Gilpin and Philip Rhoden - Original Credit: handout (Monique Gilpin / Philip Rhoden / HANDOUT)

By [Lori Waxman](#)

Even if you've never danced, feasted and gawked your way through the spectacular celebrations of Caribbean carnival, you likely have some sense of the elaborately feathered headdresses and sequined bikinis, the exuberant soca bands, and the endless parades and merrymaking involved.

"En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean," which opened two weeks ago at the DuSable Museum of African American History, includes just about none of this.

Instead, brown cardboard cutouts, flower-patterned coffins and shields bearing photographs of London townhouses fill the small series of rooms along with a mysterious white geodesic sphere and a black-suited alien posed halfway up a metal ladder. A sousaphone plays mournfully in its lowest register, while a man whistles robin calls, and two people chat conspiratorially.

Co-curated by Krista Thompson, a professor at Northwestern University, and Claire Tancons, the exhibition, which debuted in New Orleans and has traveled to the Bahamas and the Cayman Islands, eschews an anthropological approach (though extensive wall labels inform about the finer points of masquerade, Junkanoo and other traditions). What's on view instead is the critical and creative take of nine contemporary artists commissioned to make projects during the official 2014 carnival season in cities including Port-of-Spain and Nassau, and diasporic ones like Brooklyn and New Orleans.

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Instead of flamboyant costumes, Bahamian artist John Beadle created towering wearable structures of cardboard shapes, patterned with the designs of concrete screen walls and iron fences. Though ironically no less decorative and sprawling than typical regalia, the drab materials and functional forms of "Inside-Out, Outside-In" are their opposite, referring slyly to the actual supports that form the undergirding of the most extravagant parade wear.

In contrast to the classist extravaganza of carnival in Kingston, with its pricey tickets and imported costumes, Ebony G. Patterson organized "Invisible Presence: Bling Memories," a defiantly handmade and working-class memorial to the victims of urban and police violence. Not surprisingly, parade organizers just barely permitted Patterson's group of 80 volunteers carrying 50 coffin-shaped sculptures covered in loud prints, tassels and plastic flowers to participate in the official road march.

Meanwhile, in London, a unit of foot soldiers marauded through the main hall of the Tate Modern, herding and harassing befuddled, iPhone-wielding visitors. Choreographed by Hew Locke, they wore masks printed with jerk chicken, peas and rice — popular carnival street food, but grotesque as facial decoration — and brandished town house-patterned riot shields and batons, drumming out a catchy beat while enacting a performance that spoke to the tensions on display across town at the Notting Hill Carnival, where the real police were at work protecting a now-posh neighborhood from revelers who decades ago, when the festival was founded, would have been right at home.

A bold alliance of popular and avant-garde culture, "En Mas" presents a number of curatorial challenges, some intentional and some not. The DuSable, venerable institution that it is, is also underfunded, cramped and unused to displaying multi-media contemporary art. And while it makes perfect sense for a museum of African-American history to host a show about Caribbean culture, it seems a missed opportunity on the part of mainstream art institutions to have embraced a non-Eurocentric history of performance art.

More thoughtful, though, are the ways in which some artists have approached the problem of re-presenting in a museum live art that was made for the streets. The tried-and-true solution of sharp video documentation and striking artifacts has been put to good use, but it has also been gotten beyond. Viewers of Charles Campbell's "Actor Boy: Fractal Engagement," don't just see photographs of what they missed — an uptowner's excursion to downtown Kingston involving a contortionist, a fire-eater and sci-fi masks — but something new besides: an animation by Oneika Russell that fancifully interprets the tour and a strange sparkly dome by Campbell that serves as a monument to a postcolonial utopia of the future.

Though carnival is all about public spectacle, living life to excess in the streets, two of the most magically immersive artworks in "En Mas" are decidedly intimate. Christophe Chassol composed a full-length film essay out of noises and images recorded during carnival in Martinique. "Big Sun" neither sounds nor looks as expected: Men play dominoes and blow conch shells in a provisions shop, the surf crashes on a beach, birds twitter, rain falls, a flautist plays in a concrete cemetery, creole is spoken. Overtop it all is Chassol's own startling instrumentation, jazzily harmonizing the fragments that make up the whole.

For "C Room," Nicolas Dumit Estevez filled the back room of a folkloric museum in Santiago de los Treinta Caballeros, Dominican Republic, with props ranging from potatoes and shopping bags to sparkly wigs and colorful umbrellas, and then invited friends and friends of friends to transform themselves into the weird and wonderful. I want to have been there, too, with a string of plastic pitchers for a necklace and a pink bra for a hat. That's my kind of festival.

"En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean" runs through August 13 at the DuSable Museum of African American History, 740 E. 56th Pl., 773-947-0600, www.dusablemuseum.org.