

Art in America

REVIEWS SEPT. 23, 2015

“En Mas: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean”

NEW ORLEANS,
at Contemporary Arts Center

by Cathy Lebowitz



Cauleen Smith: *H-E-L-L-O (Infra-Sound/Structure)*, 2014, video, approx. 11 minutes; in "En Mas."

Carnival celebrations today have lost much of their original social and religious purpose, becoming, like most everything, highly commercialized events. Carnival in the Caribbean can be traced in part to the masquerade balls thrown by 18th-century French plantation owners in Trinidad, alongside which slaves and newly freed Africans developed separate revelries that evolved into what Trinidadians call “playing mas.” To play mas encompasses conceiving, creating and performing a character. Music and dance are as crucial to these productions as objects and outfits.

One of the first things viewers saw upon entering “En Mas”: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean,” which not only explores but fosters the cross-pollination between popular and high art, was a black-cloaked makeshift mannequin on a ladder, wearing a large helmet with headlights shining out of the eye sockets. In addition to several other black-outfitted wire-form figures, Marlon Griffith’s installation *Positions + Power* (2014) included a wall-size video of a performer in a version of the helmet being pushed through the nighttime streets of Port of Spain, Trinidad, this past April during mas. Even in the safety of the gallery, the “Overseer” character, as it was referred to here, felt threatening, thus succeeding in temporarily and somewhat grotesquely inverting the social hierarchy. Griffith, who was born in the city, trained as a “mas man” and now lives in Nagoya, Japan. The “Overseer” not only resembles police towers set up around the capital of Trinidad during carnival but also conjures the facelessness of 21st-century methods of control

and warfare.

“En Mas” comprises nine commissioned works that were created by Griffith, John Beadle, Christophe Chassol, Charles Campbell, Nicolás Dumit Estévez, Hew Locke, Lorraine O’Grady, Ebony G. Patterson and Cauleen Smith—artists from the Caribbean or its diaspora—during the 2014 carnival season. Each artist focused on a place with which they are affiliated. The show was co-organized by Claire Tancons (an independent curator born in Guadeloupe and based in New Orleans, who has devoted much of the last decade to researching the intersection of public processional culture and performance art) and Krista Thompson (an art historian who focuses on Caribbean studies at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill.).

The works on view were presented in a room painted black and divided into open theater-like spaces. The viewer could circle the perimeter to read wall labels detailing information about each artist and carnival traditions in Trinidad and Tobago, New Orleans, the Bahamas, Jamaica, Martinique, the Dominican Republic, New York and London.

In some pieces, the focus is music. *Big Sun* is an hour-long poetic film essay on Martinican culture by Christopher Chassol, a Paris-based composer born in Martinique. Filmmaker Cauleen Smith’s New Orleans commission *H-E-L-L-O (Infra-Sound/Structure)*, an 11-minute projection, leaves out much of what we expect from the city’s processional culture—the crowds, costumes and revelry of Mardi Gras and second line parades—to concentrate on nine individual musicians, each playing a five-note sequence that echoes the tonal salutation from the film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. The California-based Smith shot the local musicians at places in the city with significant histories for the black community.

Lorraine O’Grady’s video *Looking for a Headdress* teases a great deal out of a simple act: watching footage of Brooklyn’s West Indian American Day Parade (as well as YouTube videos of Brazilian carnivals) in her Westbeth studio with Andil Gosine, an Indo-Canadian Trinidadian professor of sociology and gender studies. Known for her early-career public appearances in costumed personas, O’Grady is preparing a new character, whose outfit combines a Western garment and a carnival headdress. She tells Gosine about this process as the two of them comment on the parades, while we see what they are seeing. A computer monitor on a desk with a chair was an understated invitation to pause, rewind or fast-forward, giving visitors a degree of control over the ordering of the 30-minute video, which is remarkable not in its appearance but for what it accomplishes so efficiently. As MoMA curator Thomas Lax observes in the catalogue, *Looking for a Headdress* not only “mimics the way diasporic communities are built—through an intimacy at a distance”

but also serves as a “historic condensation of O’Grady’s career.”

Bringing together autonomous artworks and evocations of previously held processions, “En Mas” benefited from a range of approaches to performance, functioning as an experiment in how to present this art form in an exhibition. In tracing the lineage of performance to traditions other than those of the European avant-garde, the show could be considered something to be continued, even beyond the Independent Curators International-supported tour that is currently being organized.