

BURNAWAY

The Voice of Art in the South

Art Review :

“EN MAS'” Explores Carnival as Performance Art, at the New Orleans CAC

by [Rebecca Lee Reynolds](#) / April 29, 2015



Ebony Patterson in Ebony Patterson in collaboration with Michelle Serieux, *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories*, 2014; HD video installation, 9:40 minutes.

If you thought that an exhibition about Carnival and contemporary art would be fun, well, you might be wrong. “En Mas” is definitely about Carnival, yet it fails to razzle and dazzle. That’s not necessarily a bad thing.

The recent Prospect.3 exhibition in New Orleans gave us Carnival as spectacle in such works as Monir Farmanfarmaian’s mirrored panels that reflected the bright colors of Andrea Fraser’s pyramid of costumes collected on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. One critic described the Newcomb Gallery venue of P.3 as “overwhelming bling.” Two P.3 artists are featured in [“En Mas”](#) : Hew Locke, whose P.3 installation *The Nameless* (2010-14) was filled with black plastic beads that suggested Mardi Gras beads (unintended by the artist), and Ebony Patterson, whose glitter-encrusted collages shimmered in the low light of an adjacent room. Their contributions to “En Mas” are darker in tone, using the attraction of Carnival to draw viewers into deeper inquiry. After all, the reality of Mardi Gras is not the bling. It’s the boredom while waiting for the parade to arrive, precarious ladders full of children, the injuries from beads thrown with too much force, the hangovers, the blackouts, the costume failures, the missed encounters.

described the Newcomb Gallery venue of P.3 as “[overwhelming bling](#).” Two P.3 artists are featured in “En Mas”: Hew Locke, whose P.3 installation *The Nameless* (2010-14) was filled with black plastic beads that suggested Mardi Gras beads (unintended by the artist), and Ebony Patterson, whose glitter-encrusted collages shimmered in the low light of an adjacent room. Their contributions to “En Mas” are darker in tone, using the attraction of Carnival to draw viewers into deeper inquiry. After all, the reality of Mardi Gras is not the bling. It’s the boredom while waiting for the parade to arrive, precarious ladders full of children, the injuries from beads thrown with too much force, the hangovers, the blackouts, the costume failures, the missed encounters.

For this high profile project, curators [Claire Tancons](#) and Krista Thompson, both of whom have extensively engaged with the subject of Carnival and performance, commissioned nine artists with ties to the Caribbean to make new work about Carnival. Upon viewing the exhibition, which won the Emily Hall Tremain Exhibition Award (a biennial award for thematic exhibitions of contemporary art), it becomes clear that the curators were interested in elucidating how Carnival is celebrated in different Caribbean countries and in a diasporic context (in London, New York, New Orleans).



Hew Locke, *Give and Take*, 2014; printed cardboard shields and printed paper masks on wallpaper.

In focusing on Carnival, the curators hope to reorient the narratives of performance art away from the Eurocentric ones more familiar to art audiences (see RoseLee Goldberg’s survey text, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*). It’s hip right now to connect the Carnival tradition to the new trend of participatory or socially engaged art. Nato Thompson included the Mardi Gras Indians in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* —even though their tradition is not part of a high art canon. Instead, it’s part of the New Orleans vernacular; the Mardi Gras Indians are African-American groups that call themselves tribes and mask as Indians on Mardi Gras Day. In the exhibition’s reading area, visitors can see archival footage of the Mardi Gras Indians in 1966 and 1971 from the Historic New Orleans Collection.

The rhetoric of the wall text at the entrance to the exhibition suggests that Carnival offers a more politically inflected form of performance as well as a more populist one. The title of the show is a pun on the Caribbean term for Carnival—*mas*, an abbreviation for masquerade—and the phrase *en masse*, meaning “all together” in French. The masses could be us, the visitors, the crowds at a Mardi Gras parade, the works in the exhibition, or Marxist masses. Politics come to the fore for Hew Locke’s performance *Give and Take*

(2014), a critique of how the gentrification of London’s Notting Hill in London has put pressure on the Carnival celebrations that traditionally take place there. Masked performers bear riot gear shields that depict facades of Notting Hill townhouses. Marlon Griffith, whose career started as a Carnival designer, returned to his native Trinidad for his performance *Positions + Power* (March 2014). In the gallery, we see a large mobile staircase, used in the performance by an “Overseer” character dressed in black who surveys the crowd from the top of the staircase tower. In the video, we see the Overseer wearing a Martian-like mask, her almond-shaped eyes projecting bright beams of lights that are reminiscent of the mobile surveillance towers used by police during Carnival.



Marlon Griffith, *Watchtower*, 2014; aluminum brackets, acrylic sheet, rubber castors, 16½ by 2 by 10 feet.

Ebony Patterson’s performance *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories* (2014) refers to a 2010 police raid that killed 72 people in Tivoli Gardens in Kingston, Jamaica. Their deaths are commemorated by decorated coffins, itself a reference to the tradition of “bling funerals” in the area. Made of thin cotton fabrics in brightly colored patterns stretched across an armature, these coffin substitutes refuse the somber associations of black with death. Upended vertically on poles, they become placards for a protest march. A few are installed in the gallery, behind which three large screens play video documentation of the performance when a group of 80 people carried 50 coffins behind one of the official Carnival parades in Kingston. On the one hand, the bright colors and materials and the music feel celebratory. However, it’s clearly designed to interrupt the party atmosphere with a reminder of the reality, even the injustice, of the deaths.



Nicolás Dumit Estévez, *C Room*, (*Photo series 1*), 2014; C-prints mounted between Plexiglas, 16 by 24 inches.

This ambivalent structure of celebration and melancholia seems typical of the exhibition, or perhaps is its message. While we are offered many videos (so many that it took over four hours to view the entire exhibition), their formats tend to keep us out of the loop. Patterson's video, for instance, a collaboration with filmmaker Michelle Serieux, is washed out, plays in slow-mo, and often utilizes high points of view that would not be possible for an average spectator. This is not take-you-there documentary but a more avant-garde second-order reflection on the event. The style reminds you that you were *not* there.

Other projects foreground the artists' personal relationship to the event. Christophe Chassol's film *Big Sun* (2014) is a concept album about his experience during one day of Carnival in Martinique, concluding with a Carnival parade. For the lyrical film, Chassol composed music that would be in sync with the natural sounds of the environment and the beats of movement in the frame. When birds are chirping in the morning, we hear their instrumental equivalent; when boys on the sidelines of a parade are dancing, the beat of the music matches their movements.



Cauleen Smith, *H-E-L-L-O*, 2014; digital film, 11:06 minutes. Cinematography by William Sabourin. Produced by Kira Akerman.

Cauleen Smith's film *H-E-L-L-O (Infra-Sound/ Structure)* is a tour of historical sites associated with brass band music, a genre that is associated with Mardi Gras parades in New Orleans. The film, shot in New Orleans in June 2014, is based on the "bass map" in Rebecca Solnit and Rebecca Snedeker's *Unfathomable Cities*, a book about New Orleans. The map highlights sounds from the low end of the musical spectrum, ranging from jazz music to natural sounds such as fireworks booms and foghorns. In Smith's filmic response, nine musicians repeatedly perform one musical phrase appropriated from the 1977 Steven Spielberg film *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. A sousaphone plays at Congo Square, where jazz first began in drum circles played by slaves on their day off. A bass saxophone is paired with an empty lot that happens to be the site of the Glass House, a club where the Dirty Dozen Brass Band played in the 1980s. A chain link fence obstructs our view of a cello player on the steps of a red brick building. It is the Booker T. Washington Auditorium, the school where Paul Robeson sang "Old Man River" to an integrated audience in 1942. The repetition of the notes and the slow, constantly moving camera create an elegy for the lost history of these sites as well as a hopeful attempt to reconnect, just as Spielberg's main character was attempting to connect with aliens.

What's so appealing about Lorraine O'Grady's approach is that she gives us the very medium by which most people encounter Carnival: online video. The installation of *Looking for a Headdress* offers an institutional white desk, three black swivel office chairs, and a Mac Book Pro with speakers. The visitor is permitted to sit down at the desk and control the playback of the 30-minute video (it is also projected onto the gallery wall, in case the chairs fill up). In the video, O'Grady is hanging out with Anctil Gosine, a professor of sociology and gender studies at York University, Toronto, and it looks like they are sitting at the same desk used in the installation. O'Grady's family is from Jamaica and Gosine's moved to Canada from Trinidad, so both experienced Carnival through the diaspora.



Installation view (l to r) Lorraine O'Grady's *Looking for a Headdress*, 2014, and Nicolas Dumit Estevez's *C Room*, 2014.

As they move from clip to clip on YouTube, we get to listen to their commentary, sometimes factual and educational, at other times emotional or funny. In response to blackface and whiteface characters at a Brazilian parade: “I didn’t understand what was going on; it was very odd...” It becomes clear that they are practicing something like art criticism. They admire a more politically inflected 1989 parade in Brazil (on the theme, “Rats and Vultures, release my family”) by remarking that “you can’t tell from the joyfulness how serious it is.” But a Brazilian parade that pays homage to a deceased Formula One racer receives the damning remark that it looks like a Disney parade. There’s feminist deconstruction of standards of beauty in response to the skimpy outfits at the 2014 West Indian American Day parade in New York, as well as admission (or perhaps blame?) that academics tend to romanticize Carnival. When O’Grady exclaims, “Isn’t this fabulous?,” she’s finally found a good model for the hunt that started this Internet wormhole: a headdress in [Isaac Belisario’s 1836 prints of Carnival characters](#).

Though the narration tells us that O’Grady is searching for a headdress, we never get to actually see the one that she makes (it’s for a performance that hasn’t happened yet). In *En Mas’*, the artist’s performance itself, or, in some cases, Carnival as the collective performance, is the ghost of the show. It is present by proxy only, the show offering a dark rumination on the failure of documentation to capture performances and the spirit of Carnival. John Beadle’s cardboard costumes are silent sentinels, never disclosing their secrets (they will be used in a future performance). Hew Locke’s masqueraders transform into riot police, pushing the audience out the doors of Tate Modern. Cauleen Smith’s New Orleans piece never shows us Mardi Gras, or even a second line, which is supposedly its referent. But in her 12-minute film *Depth Procession*, we do get to watch party-goers take a “party bus” to the Mississippi River ferry and watch it cross the river and back. It looks like these passengers are having a good time on a hot summer day. It made me wish I was too.

“*En Mas’*” isn’t one of those exhibitions trying to blur the lines between Carnival and capital-A art. Its ambition is much greater, and for that, it should be applauded. But it’s hard to love a show that doesn’t let you enjoy the party. Maybe it has a lot to do with timing: we just went through Carnival season. The Mardi Gras Indians recently celebrated their parade day, “Super Sunday,” and their stunning feathered and beaded suits will now be put away. There’s a feeling of letdown in the city after Mardi Gras, and yet also relief from the exhausting windup of the season. Come to think of it, maybe this is exactly the right time to appreciate the complicated ambivalence of “*En Mas’*.”

“EN MAS’: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean” is on view through June 7 at the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans.

Rebecca Lee Reynolds is an assistant professor in the department of fine arts at the University of New Orleans, where she teaches art history.
