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Mas in the museum? 'Up Hill Down Hall – An Indoor Carnival' at Tate Modern

By Varala Maraj

Varala Maraj reviews 'Up Hill Down Hall – An Indoor Carnival', guest curated by Claire Tancons for London's institute of contemporary art, Tate Modern. Trinidadian-born Marlon Griffith leads his procession of masqueraders in his performance 'No Black in the Union Jack' across the River Thames. Hew Locke, who was raised in Guyana but lives in London reflects on the changes of Notting Hill Carnival over the years with his piece 'Give and Take'. This 'BMW Tate Live' one-off event celebrates 50 years of Notting Hill Carnival and simultaneously pushes the boundaries of Carnival as an art form. But does mas belong in the museum?

Promotional graphic used for 'Up Hill Down Hall – An Indoor Carnival'

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What does Carnival look like? Wired bras, sequined bikinis, feathered headpieces, metal tiaras, glittered sneakers, coloured boots, strappy stilettos, skin-coloured stockings, ripped stockings, no stockings. Port of Spain, Notting Hill, Rio. There is no one true picture of Carnival.

From its inception to the present day, Carnival has proposed its uncertainties. Is it a festival or a parade? Is it a form of celebration or a work of art? Does it belong in the streets or in a museum? The latter debate in particular, is one that still confuses some of those involved in 'Up Hill Down Hall: An Indoor Carnival' (UHDH). The event, which took place at London's Tate Modern, was orchestrated by the pioneering work of guest curator Claire Tancons who was invited by BMW Tate Live Seriescurator Catherine Wood.

Tancons tells us: 'It's really an unprecedented opportunity to be able to feature the work of artists of Caribbean descent and otherwise who have been looking to Carnival as an artistic medium and form of public address.' In a nutshell, this describes what UHDH is: a platform that showcases Carnival as an art form while simultaneously being used as a vehicle for social commentary. But UHDH also has the one thing that all Carnivals have in common: spectacle.

Guest Curator Claire Tancons with 'The Canopy' in the background at 'Up Hill Down Hall – An Indoor Carnival'

Guadeloupe-born Tancons explains: 'It was very important to frame this take on the Notting Hill Carnival from a historical and political standpoint. As much as *Up Hill Down Hall* may seem cheeky

because of the punning -from Notting Hill to the Turbine Hall- also note the subtext 'An Indoor Carnival'. It's actually a subtle reference to Claudia Jones' first Carnival of 1959, which took place in St. Pancras Town Hall in London. This is the context which I brought forth to the artists, and from which their various works were conceptualised'.

Also as a writer and researcher who has studied Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago for roughly a decade, Tancons says: 'I saw two things happening: one was Marlon Griffith designing installations for a gallery context and the other was Marlon continuing to produce his Kiddie's Carnival band. There came a moment when, through our discussion, he understood that he could bring both together and transform his contemporary artistic practice into Carnival performance art… Whether or not this type of fusion is a good thing, is for us to decide. Should we take Carnival, or the artistic component of Carnival -mas- away from the street and into the museum? I myself am not too sure. Maybe it is that, to have Carnival at the museum, to single out its artistic component, away from its ritual and festival elements, is a sign of something going amiss with it in its 'natural home', which is the street'.

Ironically, UHDH commences neither in the streets nor in the museum, but on London's Millenium Bridge. With St. Paul's Cathedral in the background, Trinidadian-born Marlon Griffith leads the show with his performance 'No Black in the Union Jack', a title which unwittingly happens to coincide with author Paul Gilroy's 1987 classic, 'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation'.

Marlon Griffith's 'No Black in the Union Jack' performers crossing the Millennium Bridge

Acquiring the Trinidadian nickname ‘mas man’, Griffith is no stranger to designing masquerader costumes, but this particular design, he tells us, is inspired by both nature and politics, with an element that proves sentimental for the Caribbean audience.

Looking at the River Thames through the floor to ceiling windows of the Tate Modern’s 6th floor, Griffith tells us: ‘For a lot of people I’ve spoken to about the project, the idea of coming across the bridge is very symbolic. Particularly a lot of people of Caribbean descent, or people who have moved to London and especially the first generation of West Indians who came to the UK will relate to this idea of crossing water, coming to this new place. A new life, almost like a rebirth’.

Unlike this year’s Notting Hill Carnival Monday, which was drenched by London’s gloomy skies, UHDH was welcomed with a sky sunny enough for Griffith’s glossy black and silver costumes to dazzle. The masqueraders dressed in all black and carrying hand-held geometrically-shaped cardboard cutouts, proceed towards the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, with pedestrians flocking around to witness something they have never seen before.

Griffith’s ‘No Black in the Union Jack’ performance under Wolff’s ‘The Canopy’

The 38-year-old artist reveals: ‘The costume is designed based on hummingbirds. It’s a motif I use in my work from time to time. For a lot of people, the hummingbird is usually associated with the

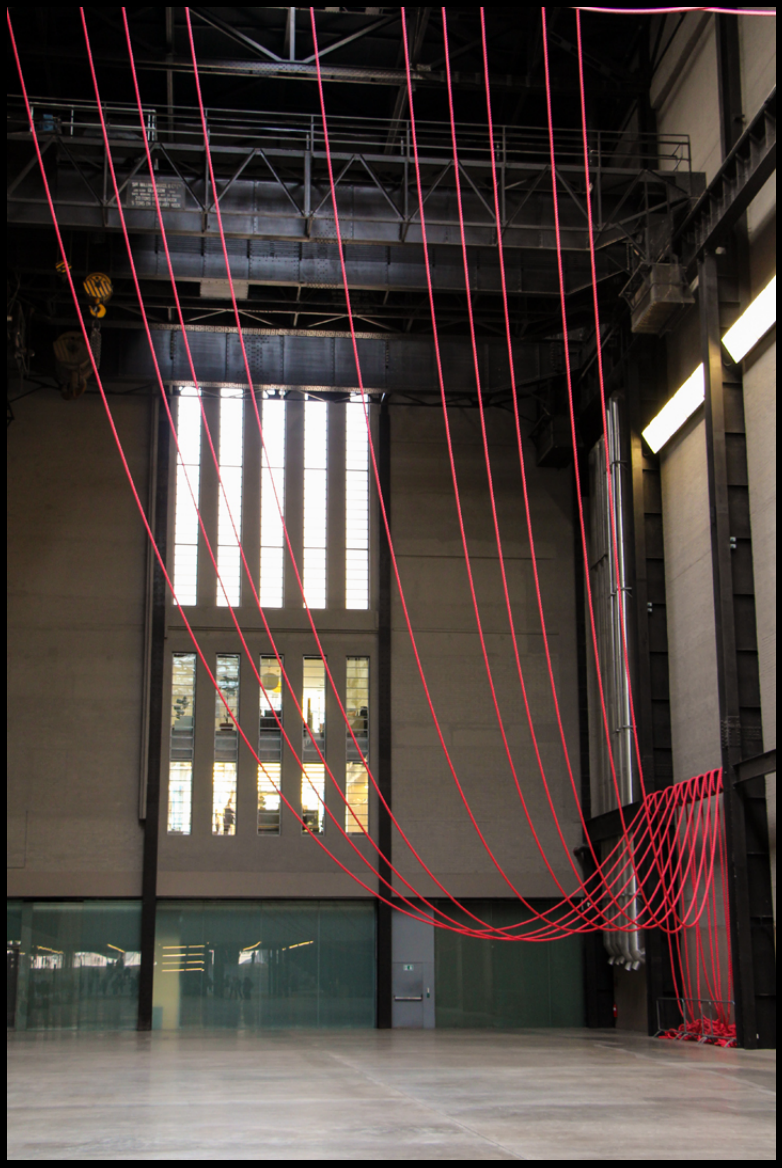
Americas and the Caribbean, but what a lot of people don't know is this beautiful little bird is also very territorial and very aggressive. So the costume plays on those elements and also comments on how people of different communities are perceived out of their homeland. The costumes can be interpreted as saying, 'We're bad and we're tough. So, we'll show you how tough we can be''.

The masqueraders move at a steady pace in single-file and are accompanied by portable PAs blasting a variety of sounds, including: excerpts of traditional Calypso music -a genre with West African roots, born out of times of slavery in the Caribbean, hit soca songs– of a genre which emanated from Calypso and a random arrangement of advertisements and DJ dialogue, typical of everyday Caribbean radio. This soundscape collaboration between Griffith and London group Dubmorphology, makes the tone of the parade complex, jumbled and chaotic. Or in one word: Caribbean. But Griffith says this haphazard audio assortment is intentional. He tells us: 'My initial ideas around sound drew more from my Notting Hill Carnival experiences, so I wanted it to come across like a sound clash. The sound that is heard on the bridge and inside the Turbine Hall doesn't necessarily go along with the actual work. They are more navigating, than actually being part of a choreographed piece'.

Griffith's 'No Black in the Union Jack' at Tate Modern's Turbine Hall entrance

Moving with the 'sound clashes', the masqueraders stomp their feet, releasing jingles from the sleigh bells attached to their ankles, akin to classical Indian dancers' ankle wear 'Ghungroo'. The costumes are almost as tall as the masqueraders, leaving only a space for their faces to be seen. As

they lift their hands in time with the soundscape, the costumes become shields, covering most of their bodies and hiding their faces. Japan-based Griffith also cites his encounters at London's Notting Hill Carnival as the inspiration for this warrior-like design. The artist says he gained inspiration from 'clashes between the police and masqueraders, clashes between the police and public' and 'most importantly, the 2011 London riots'. He elaborates, saying: 'It was about creating a work that responded to this presence – this Caribbean voice and to Caribbean communities that exist within the UK, which are always very present when these kinds of things happen… it stands out as a voice of reason- not an offensive voice, but one that protects. By creating these shields- these are like anti-riot shields, if you will'.



Gia Wolff's installation 'The Canopy' (detail)

A thick crowd fills the Turbine Hall and spills along the balconies above, all eagerly anticipating the entrance of these shielded hummingbirds. As the enter, they convert their stance into dance and their 'wings' become iridescent, catching light from the sun peering into the Tate. The hall, once an empty warehouse-like space, now embraces the bright red ropes of 'The Canopy', designed by American architect, Gia Wolff.

Wolff's contribution to UHDH is one that Tancons considers a milestone in Carnival moving forward as an art form. The event curator says: 'An architect with a specific interest in Carnival, to me, is an indication as to how important Carnival has become as a field, that it has been taken up cross-disciplinarily and has been experimented with for works of monumental impact such as 'The Canopy''.

With one tonne of thick bright red ropes draping across the hall's multi-story high ceiling, Wolff tells us: 'What you see is a spatial intervention in the Turbine Hall. It is meant to be a processional piece that brings the viewers into the space, both visually and physically, drawing them from the entrance, into the belly, under the balcony and into the big open gallery at the back. The closer you get to the centre of the room, is the closer you get to the bottom of the catenary curve, where the ropes are closest to you and you begin to see the physicality of it'.

As for the use of the medium, Wolff says: 'We were really thinking, 'What's the greatest intervention we can do within our means?' and ropes, although not totally inexpensive, are something that met that demand. Also, more importantly is that there's a history of ropes being used within Carnival for various reasons, including hand-held ropes for crowd control'.

Fittingly, during Griffith's piece, as the masqueraders made their way further into the hall, ropes of 'The Canopy''s colour are used to restrain the crowd. It is at this point where the various artworks of UHDH seem to collaborate and react to each other. The crowd comes alive and starts moving against the rope. Some attendees are excited to see the masqueraders approaching. Some are confused about the movements of the rope. Others are dancing amidst it all. This is Carnival, indeed.

Coming from a family of eight of architects, Wolff has spent a great extent of her career working on projects that 'engage in performance and moving buildings'. Now building research on largescale floats in Rio, Wolff says: 'when Claire Tancons contacted me for this project, she said, 'The Turbine Hall really is like Rio's Sambadrome. It's like the same scale, so if you had a Sambadrome, what would you do to it… spatially?' And that was my challenge.'

And although the idea of bringing 'mas' into the museum might also seem 'challenging' for those on extreme ends of the spectrum, Wolff believes that some good can come from UHDH. The architect admits: 'The museum context, I think might be a little controversial, but it's allowing an opportunity for external artistic Carnival-related projects to come together. Ideally, this would feed back into the streets in a new kind of way. If it can have a reciprocal relationship then, I think it's a great opportunity'.

Somewhere in the middle of this indoor Carnival, tiny pieces of flying paper spiral from the ceiling to the floor. It is an intervention from the art students of Central Saint Martins, called 'The Sky is Dancing', which is the result of extensive research on Notting Hill Carnival. The piece acts as

commentary on the state of police surveillance of the black population of London and participants at Notting Hill Carnival. Tancons says: 'The students' piece is a commentary on the state of police surveillance, under which the black population of London and participants at Carnival can be under certain circumstances. So theirs is a take on the ticker tape motif, which of course, is very Carnival-esque, but turned into helicopters'. The strips are folded precisely, allowing them to move to fluidly and appear majestic in their descent. Hands grab to catch these miniature 'helicopters' and reveal names of the art students and links to their online presence. As the floor becomes littered, children claim their piles of the strips and we begin to welcome the second act of UHDH, Hew Locke.

'The Sky is Dancing' by the students of Central Saint Martins – University of the Arts London

Born in Scotland, raised in Guyana and now based in London, Hew Locke's 'Give and Take'* also adopts a shield-like design, but instead features photography of the iconic houses of Notting Hill. How he got the idea, however, was not as simple. His performance, he tells us, is 'a result of cold hard panic'. The 55-year-old artist says: 'I was working my brain and I wasn't sleeping and then at about 2 o'clock in the morning, I woke up and thought, 'Ah! That's what we want- a bunch of shields with the Notting Hill houses, pushing people out of the hall'.

As a former resident of Notting Hill in the eighties, Locke admits his piece is a personal reflection on how Notting Hill Carnival has changed over the years. He recalls: 'There was a time when it was just steelpan and costumes. Then sound systems started to kick in, and I'm sure there were some people who were purists and were against that, but now sound systems are a natural and accepted

part of the tradition. And for me, the Brazilian Bateria drums are a part of the tradition as well… And I got lucky because Batala London agreed to work with me for this performance. Without them, forget it! Because I got to work, not with a bunch of volunteers, but with a bunch of people who knew what they were doing'.

Hew Locke's 'Give and Take' performance

The rhythmic drumming from Batala London's Samba drums introduces a new frenzy in the Turbine Hall. Wearing matching masks, rich in vibrant pinks and oranges, the drummers play a midtempo beat. They maintain a straight line with crowds growing around them. The masks, Locke explains, is a photograph based on a physical prototype he put together using Jamaican food ingredients and beads. He says: 'I literally chopped up some jerk chicken, mixed it up with my hands, moulded it into a mask, photographed it, and that's the mask'.

The same mask multiplies throughout the hall as a group of new performers appear. They carry cardboard shields, which they tap harmoniously with sticks from behind. The masqueraders remain

true to Locke's concept: kettling sections of the crowd, targeting groups and individuals at random, pushing their shields towards them, displaying the white and pastel townhouse-styled flats of Notting Hill, one of which is Locke's former home.

Batala London drummers during Hew Locke's 'Give and Take' performance

Although Locke envisioned the crowd moving away from the shields, this did not always turn out as planned. He smiles, recalling: 'They weren't moving. They were happy. Some of them were dancing. And all of a sudden it became something different. That's the thing about performance, you never know what's going to happen'.

Much like Griffith's piece, Locke's 'Give and Take' comments on the socio-cultural issues which, in the eyes of many Caribbean people, have disturbed the freedom of Notting Hill Carnival for years. But as someone who has been inspired by Carnival for much of his career, Locke can simultaneously account for the progress Carnival has made in London's contemporary art world. He recalls: 'I couldn't talk about Carnival for many years. In the late nineties, I would say that my work is influenced by Carnival and people would just sideline me and think, 'He's just about Carnival. He's not serious'. But, now, that's not a problem… So for me, UHDH is not about validation. This is Carnival. It's always been an art form'.

But does this art form belong in the museum, or only in its place of origin- the streets? As someone who has lived both in the Caribbean and UK, Locke offers some insight: 'The environment outside

here is not like in the streets of Jamaica, Trinidad or anywhere in the West Indies, where you've got something to work against. Here, people don't really care. Whereas, within Tate Modern, you can say something. So this piece is designed specifically for here. It won't work outside in the street'. This is evidence to support that Carnival is designed by cities for cities, by the people for the people. What is acceptable for the culture of Notting Hill is not necessarily for that of Port of Spain. And what works in Rio may not be as easily understood or well-received as what may work in London.

Hew Locke's 'Give and Take' performers assembled together in the Turbine Hall

Coming from West Indian eyes that have seen the cultural, political and artistic evolution of Notting Hill Carnival over the years, Locke tells us that his portrayal is one of Notting Hill today. There are sounds of Rio, costumes with a taste of Jamaica and scenes of Notting Hill. And as the procession continues, the music builds, the crowd is engaged and still growing on this sunny London evening. Attendees begin to challenge the masqueraders, some now moving in accordance to Locke's vision. As the drummers join the masqueraders along the 'frontline' they add drama and dance to their routine, encouraging the audience to mimic them.

As Locke's performance climaxes, his masqueraders make way for the live soundscape of Dubmorphology to fill the room, echoing against Wolff's 'Canopy' and luring more visitors into the Turbine Hall. Some attendees suggest to Tate staff that UHDH should be an annual event. And when asked if we may meet again for another UHDH, Tancons smiles and wryly says: 'maybe'.

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As UHDH comes to an end, the crowd exhibits mixed reactions. Some are disappointed that the Carnival is over. Some are inspired to head to Notting Hill Carnival. Some are still wondering what this event is about. It is art. It is dance. It is controversial. It is loud. It is release. It is revelry. It is Carnival.

'Give and Take' by Hew Locke received additional support from Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, as part of En Mas': Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean. The exhibition, which will open in 2015, is curated by Claire Tancons and Krista Thompson at the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC), New Orleans and co-organised as a travelling exhibition by Independent Curators International (ICI),New York. The exhibition is made possible by an Emily Hall Tremaine Exhibition Award with additional support from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

- See more at: http://arcthemagazine.com/arc/2014/09/mas-in-the-museum-up-hill-down-hall-an-indoor-carnival-at-tate-modern/#sthash.9Hwyc644.dpuf