

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACT OF RICHARD MARK RAWLINS' FINDING BLACK

by Dean Arlen

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"Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions." <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/#1>



Richard Mark Rawlins: Finding Black (artist studio wall), 2014

Richard Mark Rawlins' 'Finding Black' consists of 50 small black and white graphic squares 8"x 8"; there are 10 pieces per row and five per column. Each individual piece depicts a different scenario, each was printed on, screened, drawn, treated by the weather, left out in the rain, giving the work an aged, greying look as the paint and ink of canvases were allowed to drip onto other canvases. In essence, the environment was allowed to become part of the making, giving the work a look of an old manuscript. Each square is a panel in a large comic manuscript; the lines are bold, and the texts tell a story. There is a beginning, there is an end. Where you begin is up to you. In the 2014 Jamaica Biennal 'Finding Black' will be presented in a configuration that spans 24'.



Conceptual presentation of *Finding Black* – design by the artist.

Modernity is revolution. The liberation of the individual experience became an important aspect in the politics of aesthetics, in turn becoming the main facility in the development of neo-liberalization. As a small island state, living in the shadows of colonial and imperial forces, Trinidad and Tobago has found innovative ways to defy these forces of Western Civilization, to 'ring we bell' as it were through the development of the tambu bamboo, doubles, roti and the most enviable of all objectification, that sculpting of modernity in itself, that signifier of Creolization: the steel-pan. An urban instrument, the steel-pan is a collage of evolution, rural, urban, industry, found material, clandestine, performative, spiritual, ghetto, community-power, engineering, art, industrial design, cultural politics, sex and taboo, manners and criminality, proletarian intellectualism and proletarian power; all coming together to create this amazing tapestry of art, culture, and design. It can be described as 'evolution' seen in real time.

Post Modernity allows for the acceptance or creation of the steel-pan, roots, rock, reggae... Afro-Caribbean-High Science. This is where Rawlins sits, in a post-modern, neo-liberalised, post colonial, neo-colonial, post black space. He is African, black-man, middle-class, father, husband, designer/artist. In the hill of his making; in his space; his conversations are intense, a burst of energy; like the cork that shoots out of a bottle of champagne. Rawlins' act is a burst of energy coming at you. Your attention becomes sudden, collapsing the moment into awareness; you're in his world of words. You're aware of being in his words, but because of the familiarity of the imagery, they can easily become yours. Where do the artist's words sit? Is it in Black Nationalism? Afro-American Pop cultural imperialism? Or maybe Pop provocateur? Caribbeing criticism or a reflector of our being?

H. Marshall McLuhan's mid century prediction of an increasingly influential and often intrusive mass media was proved right. This influence on people's lives in fact extended far beyond expectations. For the first time, wars, disasters, political campaigns, major cultural figures and social trends were surveyed by the cyclopean eye of the press, and either affirmed or negated by radio, television, and the media's newest arbitrator: the public opinion pollster.

This is what I'm witness to: documentation of the phenomenological act of an artist's affirmation of mass media, his love of the machine, from Uhura in Star Trek's 1960s to Hip Hop's revolutionary vanguard black nationalist group: Public Enemy, "Fear of a Black Planet", 'Finding Black' has gone into all of them to comment in an intimate way about them. So intimate, in fact, that I myself have found common ground in commenting alongside the texts. Who, for example, has not had a similar flirtation with Uhura's legs or was captivated by the power she posed on deck with her other colleagues? 'Finding Black' is a signifier in deconstruction-colonialism or better yet, a reaffirmation of black revolution in development of a post-post-black identity.

Rawlins and I have had conversations about designers foraying into the gallery, operating as artists and painters on canvas. There is nothing new about this. What is interesting is the emergence of personalities – the designer as product descriptive and the painter as internally introspective, personal political. These two personal types have interesting overlaps in discussions of anthropology, sociology and economy.

African American film director Melvin Van Peebles knew that after the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, a rash of urban riots, and the all-to-common instances of bloody, often fatal confrontations between black activists and governmental authorities, many African-Americans yearned for an escapist art that, as portrayed in his film, 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song', placed members of the black underclass in the role of unbridled, avenging anti-heroes.

Black Art – Cultural History-Richard J Powell – "Correction: The Revolution will be Televised"-99.

The above statement pits the artist in an intuitive, observational position of power. Giving artists understanding, imagination and imagery; a shaman, shape-shifter, guru, renegade, revolutionary, a dilettante. Rawlins is a designer who works in developing strategic positioning of imagery, symbols and text within the social and capitalist space. He is fully aware of the politics of the image, the politics of the image in space, the politics of the machine in the developing of desire. I apply this understanding when I peer into the works of 'Finding Black'. It is a conversation of man; conversation is, after all, political. 'Finding Black' is the politics of the machine. It is the personality of the designer developed in a product, market-driven space, who then ventures into personal, introspective dialog with self. Here, he can find darkness, light and perhaps resolution.

LINGUISTIC ACTIVITY

"Basically, phenomenology studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity."

We **bump we gum, we ole talk, we vent we feeling** – linguistic activity which moves us towards freedom. We **Picong**: the act of language in freeing self of demons, to invoke demons, send forth demons. It's a blessing on this blessed, cursed soil of ours. Languages have also been known to bring angels unto us.

Artists – more than most – have cornered this market in dealing with madness: the double-edged sword of schizophrenia. See us travel down lonely pathways where people question the language, burning the artist at the stake. There is this solitude in the moment when we edit our speech; we say to ourselves shall I? The composition of lingual symphony in the way we construct dialog, is often filled with interventions in real time: we skat, we improvise life, where in a moment we can be in rapid, intense conversation in one thought, then suddenly we find ourselves in other related intense observations or other unrelated activities in and out of our social realms.

THIS SCRIPT – Spells out a internal conversation in the flow of imagery, or the imaginings had while looking at the works and developing the criss-crossing red lines.



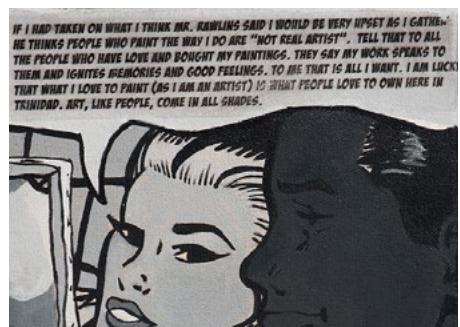
FINDING BLACK STRING THEORY: The above photo – attempts to present the criss-cross lines that come in conversations and observations.



MAC FARLAN, JAH, REALL AMAZE ME,
HOW DISS MAN MAKE NAME FOR SELF
OF DE SWEAT OF ANODDER MAN, DEN
BECOME BIG MAS MAN FROM THIEFFIN,
DIS IS THIEF COUNTRY.



JUMBAFUCKMEH, WHA! HE SEEM REAL
PISSED OFF



DEM ART SOCIETY PEOPLE, REEL SORF!



DE IMAGE SAD, IT REALLY TELL YUH
ABOUT IMAGE HOW YUH SHAPE IT IN DE
IN DE PERSONAL

ouch yuh ankle,
imme little sample,
ouch yuh ankle,
imme little sample,
ouch yuh ankle,
imme little sample,
he time on the clock
is thirty gyal, gyal,
yal, Touch yuh
ankle,

WHO SING DIS, BOY HAVE TO GET THE
CD, LISTEN TO WHA THESE CHILDREN
LISTENING TO



DAT WIG BIG, DEM USE TO SELL DEM?
DAT IS PLENTY HAIR

ETC. ETC. ETC.

This symphony criss-crosses the terrain of proletarian social, political and economic observations which are loaded with class and social position in the space they are made in an extempore performance; these criss-crossing lines reverberate in their own tonal aesthetics, pounding bass lines, screaming mid sections and side busting vocals, 'de iron man', high 'def' tassa, 18" of speakers, the 'mad man' chant, rolling we waist or pull up she dress. The tone here is one of pitch, suddenness, tenseness and emotions.



PERCEPTIONS OF BLACKNESS: SPF THIRTY is all yuh need, 2014

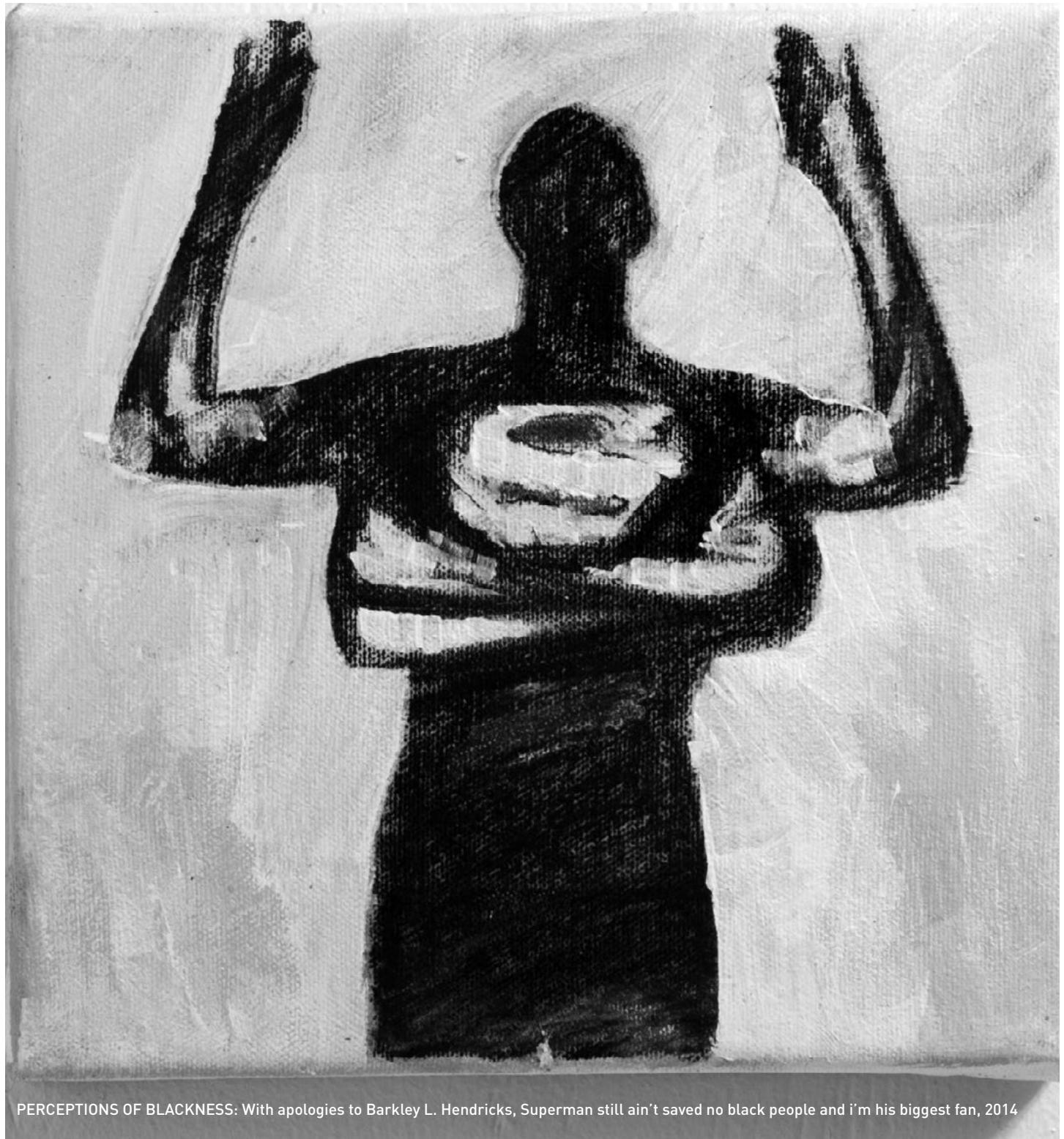
There is a different light under which everything is viewed in the tropics: a white-hot light which makes everything more alive, more heated and thus often symbolised as more vibrant. Still, only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun. The heat is not sobering, it is more to be feared, the intensity forcing a different understanding and experience of the body: human sexuality pushes to the foreground. Yet it is the same warmth, if not heat, which appears most picturesque from afar to the temperate mind.

Imaging the Caribbean – Culture and Visual Translation – Patricia Mohamed Pg 293-Invention of the Caribbean Picturesque, "Royal Palm Estate"

I'm caught in the vortex of linguistic ferocity, each frame a moment of phenomenological experience, criss-crossing aesthetics, born in the real time movement from one place to another, in the deep introspective allegiances of art and position as designer. A man is seeing a new side of himself; this is brave, opening the other. Bringing to the table the process of both voices and finding the symphony that comes with this collision. Not all of it will work. But in the alleviation of the soul, we find peace, rhythm and finally aesthetics. The grid symbolizes this freeing; it is urban planning for the soul.

IDENTITY, BLACK IDENTITY, BACK TO IDENTITY

This isn't ole talk, this is real time, mother fucker, harder they come, black consumption of the I, Mid-night Robber, in de Gayelle, stick fighter, Caribbean Architectonics, CariBeing, shape-shifting, shamanic language that may be rhetorically dangerous for the artist. Black radical lyrics, black identity politics and black nationalism are being challenged in the social norms of the international art world space. Some practitioners want the freedom not to be caught in the web of identity politics. Identity aesthetics are brought from the phenomenological context of neoliberalism, capitalism, slavery,



PERCEPTIONS OF BLACKNESS: With apologies to Barkley L. Hendricks, Superman still ain't saved no black people and i'm his biggest fan, 2014

post-colonial identity, black-anglo-saxon-christianity, colonial apologism, with the risk of evolving into a consumptive, slick narrative of the ‘Western art for art sake’ position; black identity politics in the convergence of Western aesthetics has collided, in a big bang-ing collision that has not yet stopped. As mentioned earlier, the Caribbean was always modern, what has happened is the criss-crossing lines of conversation, Rawlins has presented Afro-Caribbean identity issues in the string theory of pop-culture assimilation discourse; which is the cathartic black male position.

CONCLUSION - THE MAKING OF IDENTITY

As a black consciousness grew more popular, two questions arose: (1) Was there such a thing as a black gesture, or forms of expressive movement that could be classified under what Bearden had described as the “innerness Of the Negro experience,” and (2) if black gestures existed, how can one Reconcile them with abstraction?

Black Art – Cultural History-Richard J Powell – The Name Game- pg 129

There is conscious and unconscious deliberation in the act of making which is adhered to in the principle of time and knowledge gathered in time – language is measured, tempered and flawed. Language is constructed in the phenomenological act, regurgitated in the symbolism of cultural experience, what is visually constructed speaks of a socio-political, economic, experience at first hand. Here lies the tricky part of the conspiracy of art: in the presence of conversation man deliberately reconstructs form, experiences and language within the postmodern capacity, to do, to be, I'm my Facebook. It is here that art becomes deviant, charged with political angst, philosophical mischievousness, personal investment. Here is 'Finding Black', a stiff upper lip of the middleclass experience. The cathartic act has been placed in the middleclass bastion of the gallery, shipped to be consumed. 'Finding Black' will be hung on the walls of the National Gallery of Jamaica to be visually interrogated over red wine and maybe crumpets. This experience of familiarity brings something else that needs to be worked on: how do these Afro-American Black-Pop icons interact with the social dynamics of the Afro-Indo-Pop gestures of the Trinbagonian experience, such as Sweet Bread, DEW, Santana, Welcome to Warlock, Sister God, On a Hot Tin Roof, Freddy Kissom's Strolling Players, Buelah, or even Anansi.



Sweet Bread by Mahase Calpu – Trinidad and Tobago Saturday Express/Section 2 /22 November 2014



ASSERTIONS OF BLACKNESS: NUFF SAID., 2015

The making of identity or the marking of identity brings with it a conscious political intellectualism, which trumps the phenomenological act, underpinning the need to explore the folk position towards a rational, logical conclusion score which allows for words both personal and subjective. We must also mention the National Joint Action Committee, Emancipation Committee and very recently the Black Caucus; I also have to add the woman's movement: CAFRA, Working Women. All identity scoring organizations looking, activating, developing text on identity, shaping identity politics, searching for the moment man/woman will sit on the stoop to eat boil corn and cassava.

As Rawlins, nation and self have been going through the pains of looking inwardly. His works allow us the ability to tap into the phenomenology of man and apply it to our Creole conversation. The next step in identity politics is the act of the political, where the work becomes contemplative within the political discourse of Pop Art in Trinidad and Tobago, where there has been a flurry of cartoons in print from DEW, to Sweet Bread, to Santana and the development of the Animae Caribe festival. The formation of new black iconography has had certain external economic and political implications for identity; this isn't evident in FINDING BLACK. This has been challenged by post colonialism and weakened due to neo-colonialism, which has challenged the very existence of identity on the whole. 'Finding Black' opens, for me, the contemplative, where the work of man allows me to see myself a little deeper, in these moments of pop culture imperialism. I would like to see the post-post-black identity position; it has now been found, let's reposition it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

The idea of exploring the 'living space' has consumed Dean Arlen since he returned from the Ontario College of Art and Design, which he attended on a Commonwealth Fellowship. He pursued a multi-disciplinarian approach to sculpture, through installation art. This compounded his jewellery studies, done at John D Technical Institute and Visual arts diploma completed at the University of the West Indies. On returning, Arlen embarked on an objective of art and design in Trinidad and Tobago's living space. The most memorable being the UWI Sculptural Project/The One Day Symposium 2006-2010 the Sculptural Playground (in development). The projects he engages are extensions of his studio practice where Arlen's collages, assemblages and paintings have allowed him to create urban philosophical art and design language. These undertakings have strengthened his resolve to reinterpret these elements into his very own urban and rural spaces.

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ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Richard Mark Rawlins is a graphic designer and contemporary artist living and working in Trinidad and Tobago. He is the publisher of the online art magazine Draconian Switch (www.artzpub.com), a co-founder of Trinidad and Tobago's Erotic Art Week exhibition, and collaborator in the Alice Yard contemporary art-space initiative.

Noted exhibitions include the "Bienal Internacional de Asuncion 2015", Centro Cultural de España Juan de Salazar, Paraguay; the "Jamaica Biennial 2014", National Gallery of Jamaica; "Season of Renewal", University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica; "The Global Africa Project", Museum of Arts and Design (MAD), New York, USA; "Who Was That Masked Man Anyway", Alice Yard, Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago; and "Steupps" and "FINDING BLACK", Medulla Art Gallery, Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago. Rawlins has also participated in the Vermont Studio Center residency, and his work forms part of the Toronto-based Wedge Collection.

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