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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", 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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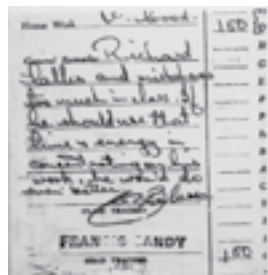
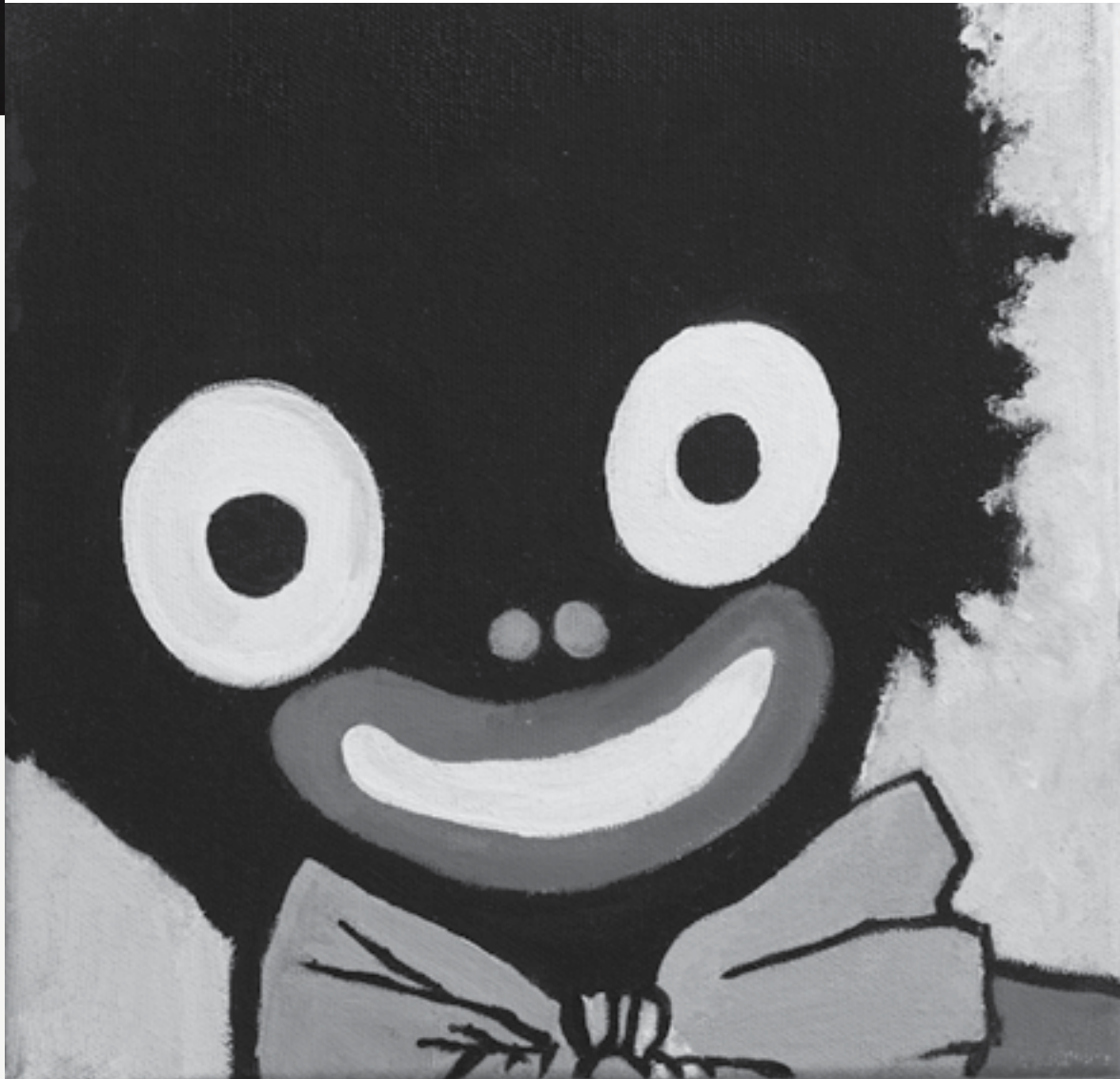
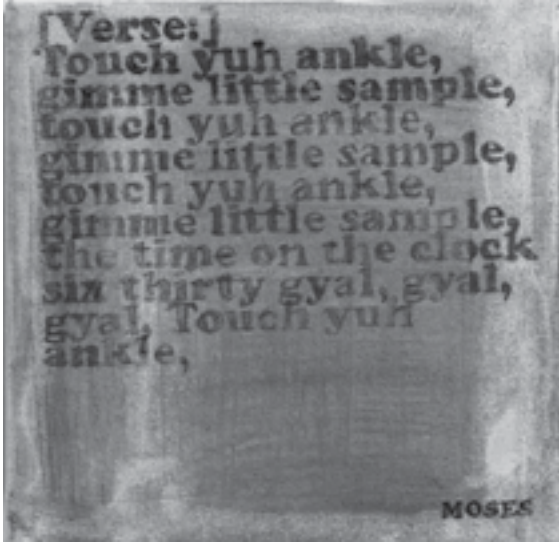
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 MEDULLA

 DRACONIAN SWITCH



Images above courtesy The Wedge Collection



# GETTING TRICKED WHILE FINDING BLACK

By Nicole Smythe-Johnson

OCTOBER 2015

**Nicole Smythe-Johnson** is a curator and writer living in Jamaica and working across the Caribbean region. In 2013, she completed her tenure as Senior Curator with the National Gallery of Jamaica where she worked on the "National Biennial" (2012), "Natural Histories" (2013) and "New Roots" (2013) exhibitions.

Since then, she has worked with contemporary Caribbean art and culture magazine, ARC, as an editor and writer, and works with Jamaica-based contemporary art organization, New Local Space, (NLS) as outreach coordinator and host of NLS' online art conversation series, IN.



is "(The sun said HELLO.)" I think its "sun", it could be anything ending with "n"- but they flourish nonetheless.

Maurice Bishop makes an appearance, but not merely as revolutionary, as sex symbol. A dark-skinned, older woman, wearing her smartest hat, looks up at Bishop with an adoration that no screaming "Belieber" will ever approach. The photo is captioned "god tek 'e time when him mek maurice." And as I read it, I thought *mmmmhmm*, and a chorus, or an echo travelled down to the Southern-most point of the archipelago and back up to me. No truer words my friend, no truer words... but enough about Bishop, what was I saying?

In the next panel you may find yourself contemplating American producer and pop-singer Pharrell's "the new black" or puzzling an obscure romance comic from 1960s America about inter-racial love (who knew there were such things?). There's Tintin and Golly too.

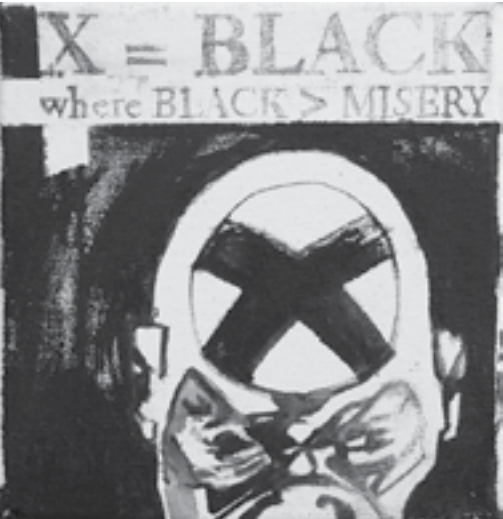
**So, what are we to make of it? Yes blackness is many and varied, but why does it feel so foreign, so fractured?**

Is it all the American and European references? Is this Caribbean blackness? Does that matter? Or is "Finding Black" only alien-feeling because it is made by a man who identifies himself with a black Pantone square, contrarily bearing the code for fluorescent pink. As if he thinks he's smarter than us! As if we wouldn't look it up! Is he pink or is he black then? Can pink look black?

**I guess... you don't get to know.**

You'll have to take all I've given you here and make what you will of it in your own mind. Go look at it, tell me, did you find black? Did you like finding it?

I'm sorry to disappoint you. Really, I am. But Rawlins inspired me, if you're going to speak faithfully about a trickster text, you can only turn around and write another. **NSJ //**



(IN OTHER WORDS)

"I think the control and presentation of one's own image is an important concern. How you are perceived shouldn't be defined by passing "poplitical" references which often make simplistic, stereotypical or racist depictions of blackness. Author W.E.B. Dubois coined the term 'double consciousness' to describe the African American struggle to balance being African and American. I would like to think that – as a black man from the Caribbean – I juggle a triple consciousness of sorts: one construct is framed by being Trinidadian, another by being black with entitlements and class privileges, and another purely based on a populist political conditioning by the global media. It is in this triple consciousness balancing act that I believe the work is beginning to find its way." **RMR //**

**RICHARD MARK RAWLINS**  
Finding Black Artist's Statment

An original text published on the occasion of Richard Mark Rawlins' solo exhibition, <b>Finding Black</b>	EXHIBITION SUPPLEMENT   \$ FREE (but never cheap)	22.Oct.15	Medulla Art Gallery, Woodbrook
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I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness, my ethnic features; defamed by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, slave traders, and above all, yes, above all, the grinning Y'a bon Banania.

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)



We elected a black president. Yet we still incarcerate blacks at nearly six times the rate of whites. We've had not one but two black secretaries of state. Yet, a study shows that women with "black-sounding" names – like Lakisha and Aisha – still have a hard time getting hired as secretaries.

Farah Stockman, "Naming this Era of Racial Contradiction", *The Boston Globe*.

**Can Black People culturally appropriate one another?**

Zipporah Gene, "Black America, please stop appropriating African clothing and tribal marks", *OkayAfrica.com*.

**Lifetime, Television for Bad Men.**

Pink text on a mint green men's t-shirt from Richard Mark Rawlins' RMR line.



Image courtesy The Wedge Collection

**Like its creator, Richard Mark Rawlins' "Finding Black" is a cheeky little... oh, polite company. It's a real piece of work.**

It's not that the work is offensive, it's not at all. Rawlins himself? Maybe, but not the work. Rather, the piece is playful, teasing, hard-to-pin-down. It beckons you to it, then giggles and runs away. If I wanted to be fancy, I might call it a trickster text.

The piece consists of 90 (8"x 8" size) square panels, all in grey scale. The narrow palette doesn't obscure Rawlins' mixed media approach. His combination of screen-printing, painting and collaged digital prints creates lay-

ered, textured surfaces. Some of the panels work like contemporary palimpsests, shrouding their under-layers; enough to make you squint, but not so much that you can't make out a Ralph Ellison quote or "BLACK > MISERY" under a wash of black paint.

The piece has been exhibited in different configurations – a long eye-level row at the National Gallery of Jamaica, a grid of 50 panels – but in all the versions I've seen, it begins with a black Pantone square. Well, it's not quite a Pantone square, it's a canvas square made to look like a painterly Pantone square. (Yes, painterly Pantone is a little onomatopoeic.) Black paint almost fills out the pencilled-on square and below that, where the Pantone code usually is, we have "RAWLINS 046, Finding Black" printed in the Pantone font (Trade Gothic No. 2, I understand from Yahoo! Answers).

Ordinary folk out there might ask, "What exactly is a Pantone?" You've seen it before, the squares with the colours and the numbered codes. It's essentially a system for matching colours. Each colour has a standardized code that any designer or printer can use to perfectly match the intended colour without worrying about slight variations in perception caused by screen resolution, lighting etc. I don't often get into this kind of technical detail (in life), but this particular artist's practice and work insists on a deliberate engagement with making and media. The square canvases, digital in their square perfection – pixels of a sort – all washed and slathered with a heavy, human hand are the first contradiction. Then on the panels, the prints, the Lichtenstein-esque comic frames, the fonts, the washes, emoticons, archetypes.

**The work is heavy with form, the form steals from the content, stifles it.**

Not unlike racialized skin (see Fanon). For example, no matter the configuration, it's impossible to see the whole work at once. If you step far back enough to see all of the canvases, there is too much, the eye can't settle anywhere, it becomes a grey patchwork. If you are close enough to look at individual panels, you can only really look at one, and the two or four directly beside/around it. This gives you enough information to discern a relationship between the canvases and a method to their sequencing, but that is only followed by frustration and resignation. Since you have no choice but to look at the thing bit by bit, trying to reconfigure a whole that you only suspect is there in your mind's eye; much in the way that the human eye (apparently) perceives a focused foreground and background simultaneously, but once vision is mediated by a camera, focus is limited to one or the other. The lens does something, representation does something. What excess escapes the code number?

So we have a Pantone code that tells us what this is. All these variations fall out from that code. Which code is that? The black one, or the "Rawlins 046"? Is this a portrait of Rawlins as a black man à la our painted black square? What's 046? Google says Pantone code 046 is fluorescent pink. Now, this is some Anansi business, because black men and fluorescent pink... it's a stretch. But then... Ebony G. Patterson.

Continued ➔



WITKIN  
THE BLACK  
AND FORTS

