

journey with the jab:

review of curtis talwst santiago's *moving through burning haze*

at cooper cole

A tremor of discomfort made its way through me when I met the gaze of the Jab. The slate form with its hooked horns and frenzied smile left me unsettled. I could not discern exactly where their eyes were focused, but I understood that I was being watched. It's difficult to not feel fear when encountering a Jab, with our understanding to fear what is in the shadows and figures that are diabolic in form. However, the Jab is not imbued with evil. They are multifaceted— not necessarily good, nor are they bad. These intimidating individuals are for facilitating reflections, with ourselves and power. Curtis Talwst Santiago's exhibition *Moving through burning haze* at Cooper Cole is a venue to meet the Trinidadian Jab and share a moment of reflection with the multifarious being.

Curtis Talwst Santiago (b. 1979, Edmonton, Alberta) is a multidisciplinary artist assessing culture, memory, and the imagination. Early in his practice, Santiago studied as an apprentice of Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. He has exhibited internationally at The New



Figure 1: Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Jab Molassie Posse", 2022, mixed media on paper, 18 inches x 14 inches (45.7 cm x 35.6 cm).

Museum, New York, NY; the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA; the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan, Canada; The Pérez Art Museum Miami, Miami, FL; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; among others. Santiago considers himself decentralized and lives and works between Munich, New York, Lisbon, and Toronto. His works reflect on multiplicity and his exhibition at Cooper Cole is another example of how the artist engages with plurality.

Moving through burning haze engages with memory, ancestry, and cultural imagination, using Carnival as the setting for exploration. The figure of the Jab is featured in nearly all the works, often as the primary subject. To note, the Jab—also known as Jab Molassie—is a character that is part of Carnival in the Trinidadian tradition and one type of devil mas. You may see them before the official start of Carnival, during the J'Ouvert festival which occurs the morning before the event (from French “jour ouvert”, meaning daybreak). “Jab Molassie” is a French Patois term, ‘Jab’ being patois for the French ‘diable’, devil; and ‘Molassie’ from ‘mélasse’, molasses. The figure is an iteration of ‘Devil Mas’ and reflects upon an important part of the history of Trinidad and Tobago (the Jab also exists in the Grenadian tradition).

For context, African people were brought to Trinidad and Tobago as part of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Over 6.5 million enslaved Africans were brought to the West Indies and approximately 44,002 landed in Trinidad and Tobago. French settlers wanted to develop sugar and cotton plantations in Trinidad and Tobago, and the enslaved African population were subject to that labour. So, there is a link between the European settler population, the African population, and the commodification of the body and sugar. Molasses is a byproduct of processed sugarcane, and the character of the Jab would smear it across their body. There are different theories as to why the figure is smeared with molasses: to pay an homage to the African ancestors that persisted, the depiction of the Orisha, Esu (out of the Yoruba tradition), or playing out the role of an individual that fell to their death in a vat of molasses. There were different substances used for smearing as well,

including lard, grease, oil, and tar. The combination of the molasses, the adornment of horns, and brandishing of pitchforks culminates in the Jab Molassie. The costume and general visual of the figure (and related) had shifted in the subsequent decades. Rather than solely red, they became khaki, slate, and cobalt blue. Other features changed as well, like the plaited hemp leaves, adornment of thick horns (padded headpiece), long tails, and pitchforks. Within Carnival, certain Jab Molassie are held back with shackles and covered with soot, reflecting on the realities of slavery and life on the sugar plantations. Traditionally, the Jab wears a heart-shaped cloth adorned with glass, mirrors, sequins, and other ornaments.



Figure 2: Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Untitled," 2022, spray paint, oil, charcoal, pastel, and acrylic on canvas. 59 inches x 102.37 inches (149.9 cm x 260 cm).

Santiago recognizes the sartorial traditions in his representations of the Jab, particularly in “Untitled” (2022) (figure 2). The high contrast between the flecks of white, blush, and sky blue upon the darkness of the Jab Molassie creates the illusion of sequins glinting in the light. A second, third, and fourth Jab can be identified: a blue Jab with wings spread across the centre, another black Jab with its back curved hanging forward to the right of the centre, and at the very right is another Jab that is predominantly yellow. While it may seem tempting to claim the works are reminiscent of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s oeuvre, the scene here is the West Indies, not New York. In the background are an array of people dressed in white. The white stands in contrast to the brown complexion, conjuring imagery of summer linen or guayabera to keep cool in the heat. The fabric communicates a level of status, in addition to serving as a reference to the labour of cotton. Wearing cotton or linen fabrics was not always possible given the differences in class, often only worn by Europeans at home or abroad in the colonies (such as within the Caribbean). However, within the twentieth century the garments became popular in the middle-class Black community. While linen is optimal for keeping cool, it requires care and is more expensive than other fabrics. So, wearing linen signifies that one has enough money to afford to purchase the material, and that one has the means to iron and dry-clean it as well. Santiago’s depiction of people wearing white linen and cotton is a reference to the shift in style and labour.

This also runs parallel to the fact that Black people did not always freely participate in Carnival. The festival originates in 1753, with the French that brought their pre-Lenten traditions to Trinidad, celebrating within their homes. A major shift took place in 1834, after the emancipation of enslaved African people. This change in participation sparked the intricate costumes and celebrations that we associate with Carnival. Canboulay is the event in which people rejoice in liberation and reflect upon the experiences of enslavement and is the tradition from which Carnival developed. The celebration of perseverance and culture continued to develop and spread across the West Indies and abroad in other diasporic communities. Santiago’s works uses the visuals of the pennants and the



Figure 3: Curtis Talwst Santiago, "The Places We Will Come and Will be From," 2017 - ongoing; spray paint, oil, charcoal, pastel, acrylic, laces, and grommets on canvas, 100 inches x 144 inches (254 cm x 265.8 cm).

Jab as they are recognizable to those familiar with Carnival. The Jab is an integral figure since it embodies the shift in freedom which is at the essence of Carnival.

Within "The Places We Will Come and Will Be From" (figure 3) Santiago reminds viewers of the West Indies as the site through a variety of visual signifiers familiar to the islands, such as the flora and architectural elements. The splay of dominoes activates memories of humid evenings matching ends and building lines across the tabletop. The sensation of rising from a plastic chair, sticky with sweat, is readily imagined. The dominoes form an arch from the lower left corner towards the upper centre. A map script is written across the upper centre portion of the left panel, centring viewers on a sentimental and geographical level.

Resting on a plinth in the gallery is a repurposed jewelry box that Santiago uses to house a scene with the Jab (figure 4). One can witness the blue Jab half-crouching among the flora, gazing outwards to the larger world. The 'Blue Devils' stems from the story of Archangel St. Michael disguising himself as a devil to cast out Satan from Heaven. St Michael appeared to drive the devil away, mocking Satan with a celestial blue hue. On the upper panel is a second Jab, this one black and framed by stone arches, fronds, and pennants. The choreography and theatrics of the object



Figure 4: Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Jab Women, Jab Jab Posse," 2023, mixed media in reclaimed jewelry box, 3.5 inches x 2.5 inches x 2.5 inches (8.9 cm x 6.4 cm x 6.4 cm).

cannot be denied, reinforcing the performance element that comes with Carnival and the Jab. Santiago shifts how the objects and figures respond to one another by putting the Jab within a compact mirror, rather than a mirror upon the Jab. This



Figure 5: The four individual works share the following details: Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Jab Molassie Posse," 2022, mixed media on paper, 18 inches x 14 inches (45.7 cm x 35.6 cm).

placement reinforces the act of reflecting upon the Jab, echoing the meditation of a prayer bead.

Within the lower gallery is a crowd of Jab (figure 5). The difference of expression and angles give the illusion of movement, as if the figures are swarming around you. The gradient of neon provides a light within the centre of the Jab, like the spiritual nucleus of the figure is emitting energy. The various Jab hold different expressions: subtle bliss, contempt, or one of sated rest. This is a reminder that the Jab is not malicious and comes in a variety of forms.

Santiago's works are culturally rich and engages with the historical traditions of Trinidad and Tobago. Toronto has a strong community of West Indian diaspora that have contributed to the city's culture. While other island nations are recognized more often for their cultural contributions, Trinidad and Tobago are often overlooked, or their contributions are misattributed. Trinidad and Tobago have given us plenty, including Calypso and its sister Soca. The celebrations of Caribana would not be the same without their culture, and neither would Toronto. The Jab pushes us to reflect about what the figure represents, racially, culturally, and spiritually. Santiago's exhibition takes that reflection further by prompting us to think about Trinbagonian culture and history, and how that history is remembered.

Moving through burning haze

Curtis Talwst Santiago

Cooper Cole

Toronto, ON.

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