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INTERVIEW
MARLON GRIFFITH:
CONNECTING ART,
COMMUNITY
AND CARNIVAL

By Dr R. L. de Matas

Griffith, Marlon, 'Marlon Griffith: Connecting Art, Community, and Carnival.' (interviewed by R. L. de Matas for *Journal of Festival Culture Inquiry and Analysis*, 2.1, 4 March 2023, 68-107)

**MARLON
GRIFFITH**

Marlon Griffith

(b. 1976, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago) started his artistic practice as a Carnival designer—a “mas’ man,” as Trinidadians would call him. This background deeply shapes his work as a contemporary visual artist, which has performative, participatory, and ephemeral characteristics that derive from Carnival. Griffith’s work is based upon a reciprocal dialogue between ‘Mas’ (the artistic component of the Trinidad Carnival) and art as a means of investigating the phenomenological aspect of the embodied experience; it is situated at the intersection of the visual and public performance. Experimenting with fundamental questions in perception, Griffith’s work interrogates contemporary culture outside the traditional pitfalls of representation. Operating outside the context of Mas’ Griffith performative actions are stripped down to their basic form and abstracted to create new images and narratives that respond critically and poetically to our socio-cultural environment.

Griffith has been an artist in residence at Bag Factory / Fordsburg Artists Studios in Johannesburg (2004); Mino Paper Art Village in Japan (2005); Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts, Kingston, Jamaica (2007); and Popop Studios, Nassau, The Bahamas (2010–11); and Art Omi, Ghent, New York (2011). He has shown extensively in North America and Europe (South-South: Interruptions & Encounters, 2009); Miami (Global Caribbean, 2010); Washington (Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions, Art Museum of the Americas, 2011); Champaign (Krannert Art Museum, 2011) and other locations and internationally in Gwangju (7th Gwanju Biennale, 2008) and Cape Town (CAPE09, 2009) MANIFESTA 9 Parallel Projects 2012, Hasselt, Belgium, AICHI TRIENNALE 2013, TATE MODERN BMW Tate Live Series 2014, AGYU (Art Gallery of York University) 2015 and ART DUBAI (U.A.E.) 2019, 14th HAVANA BIENAL (Havana, Cuba) DOCUMENTA 15 (Kassel, Germany).

In 2010, Marlon was the recipient of a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and of a Commonwealth Award. He has been residing and working in Nagoya, Japan since 2009.





JFCIA is dedicated to culture and practitioners within the cultural space inspired by festivals, rituals, celebrations, carnivals, gatherings, etc., and its work helps shine a light on ideas, embodied experiences, and alternative perspectives. It is our opinion that festivals are ideal venues for celebrating art, culture, heritage, and tradition.

In this volume, we look at the work of Marlon Griffith, a Trinidad and Tobago visual contemporary artist. Griffith's work plays an essential role in carnival art practice, culture, and the arts. Griffith began his artistic career working in carnival arts and later evolved into a visual contemporary artist. In his art, he combines traditional and modern elements. A number of the artist's pieces have been exhibited internationally in galleries and museums. In his installations and performance-based pieces, he explores themes of identity, culture, place, and space, challenging viewers to imagine new possibilities. Through his art, he makes a powerful and bold statement about commercialism. This encourages viewers to think critically and question carnival processes and practices. He has been praised for his innovative use of materials.

I first encountered Griffith's work while studying for my postgraduate degree. My search was to find a contemporary artist whose work exhibits a crossover between art, carnival, and performance. Upon discovering Griffith's carnivalesque pieces, I was intrigued. His work challenges traditional boundaries between art and carnival, not just visually, but also conceptually. He seems to have created a space that allows him to explore his creativity beyond carnival. The skills he acquired from his days as a mas' man, the residency he held as an artist in residence, and his current standing as a contemporary artist have allowed him to explore and refine his artistic style further. His art is a form of expression that is both meaningful and joyful. His work celebrates the beauty of making and explores deeper aspects of performance, embodied experiences, and community work.

His appetite for community involvement was demonstrated early in his career when he ventured beyond the local community to work collaboratively to create meaningful projects outside Trinidad and Tobago. While living in Trinidad, he designed costumes and participated in the Notting Hill Carnival in 2006, 2007, and 2008. Griffith collaborated with *Elimu Mas' Academy* in collaboration with Paddington Arts, which has a community youth centre. He embraced working with *Elimu's* children's band. This came about through designing a children's band in Trinidad. He explains: "I was doing a children's band in Trinidad, and one of the parents of the masqueraders told me she had an uncle who brought a band to the UK. She asked me if I would be interested in working with him."

Griffith is a master of his craft and an inspiration to many. In our discussion earlier this year, he discussed his process, practice, and community work and projects. The following is a record of our discussion, and he provides insights into his work and the stories behind it.







In this interview, I would like to delve into your journey of becoming, exploring some of your experiences from being a mas' man to becoming a contemporary visual artist, along with your artistic approach to contemporary art. Think of a young Marlon picking up our journal and using it as a basis of inspiration and education, not necessarily handholding per se, but more like a compass. So, briefly, how did your journey as a mas' man begin?

Hmm, I knew I always wanted to be an artist. What direction to take? I was never really sure. 'Cause you know, the dream, the ideal scenario would be to go to art school, that type of thing. You know, live the artist's dream. But that never manifest. So, like many of my contemporaries and artists before me, I attended the John Donaldson Technical Institute (John D), which is like a trade school based in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad. At the time, 'John D' had a graphic arts programme that was considered very strong.

I went to 'John D'. I did the graphic design programme, and what you get is like a technical diploma. But I never really practised as a graphic designer. It wasn't really what I wanted to do. It was the closest thing to fill the void, just to put it another way.

So, I did a graphic design programme, but even before that, I discovered making mas'. Now I played mas' as a child, and enjoyed doing it, but I never saw myself getting involved in it so intensely, you know. When I started going to secondary school, I wanted to be an artist, but I didn't know what direction that would take.

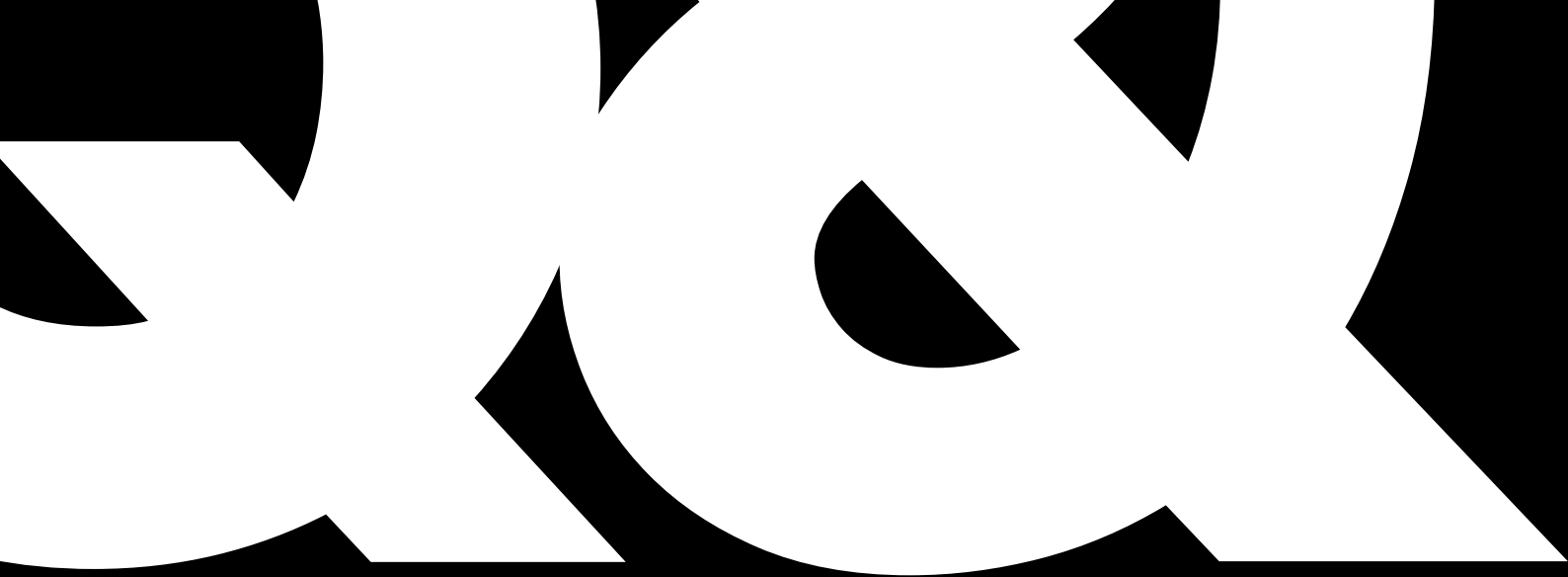
And it [was] quite by accident I started making mas'. I was working with someone, and they took me, I can't even remember how I ended up there, I think it was helping them with something. I was helping them collect material and buying stuff one day, [and] they were taking it back to their workshop.

And then I got there, and I realised it was a mas' camp, but a very small one. And I discovered the person had a children's band. And I just kind of started helping them, you know, and it wasn't a planned thing. [As you know], with mas' camps, you go once, it might be curiosity, and then you go back and then you get hooked on doing this thing, you know?

And for me it's like, I started this process and I wanted to see it finished. So, I just got hooked. I just got so deeply involved in the process of doing this thing. And after some years, eventually I had left the group.

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What happened after leaving the group?

I had kind of fallen outta love with carnival in a sense. I was there and I was doing it, but I wasn't doing what I wanted to do, or at least that's what I thought. I wanted to be an artist, you know? When people talk about art, you know, it's this very specific thing, whether you're drawing or painting or doing sculpture. But I wasn't really focused on any of those things. And, making mas' for me, after a while, it was no longer fun – you know, I wasn't enjoying it anymore. It became a chore. And when it became a chore, I didn't want to do it.

So eventually I had stopped for like a year and I decided, you know, I've had enough of this. And during that year I was doing the art things, so I was doing the drawing and that type of stuff. And while I was doing that, someone contacted me out to the blue, it was a principal of a school, and she said that they [were] working on this children's band for the following year. And she said, 'You're the best person for the job.' And I was like, 'I don't do this stuff anymore. I could direct you to other people who could help you.'

But she kept insisting that I had to be the person. And every day she called me. I said, 'I'll think about it, and I will call you back.' And she kept calling me like every day. [She was calling me like every day.] Now, I was doing another

project, it was like a small residency up in the mountains in Trinidad until eventually I told her, 'I'm coming into Port-of-Spain. I'm going to drop by,' because at this stage, it's like, I wanna see this person face-to-face because over the phone they're not getting message.

Every day she would call. She's like, 'You change your mind?' The person who told her about me, his child was going to the school, but he was also a very good friend and a mentor, and continues to be to this day.

And his wife was actually my art teacher in secondary school. So all these connections. So, eventually, I do go to see her [the principal at the school]. I walk into this school, and I walk into her office and she starts announcing to whoever is in the office [that] I am the person who is going to design the band.

I was like, I never agreed to anything.

So, she pulls out all the drawings and I look at them and I'm going through these drawings and in my mind it's like, these things are awful.

I look at her and I'm like, 'The children are going to be wearing this?' And she's like, 'Yeah.' And she's like, 'We want your input into this.'

But they wanted a king or a queen costume to go with it. She was so passionate about this band. And when I saw what they were doing, I told her, 'I'm gonna redesign the costume, because they already picked a theme and all of that.' And the children already had in their minds what the theme [was]. 'But, I can't promise to be here like a hundred percent, because I'm doing another project.'

I did the design. I designed it and I gave it to them. And then I asked, 'Who's going to be making it?' And they said that they'll be making the costumes. I asked, 'Have you ever done anything like this before?'

They said, 'Yeah, we did a little.' Then they showed me some pictures from something, and I was like, 'Oh my God.' And then the next thing you know I was pulled into making the costumes. And that was the first of, I think, about five or six bands I did for them (the school).

The first time I did it for them, it was a very small – it was a very small band. The queen costume did really, really well. And that gave them motivation. So, the following year, before Christmas even came around, the phone was ringing: 'We need you.' And the following year they won, they won everything, and year after year they just kept doing better and better.

But while that was happening, something else was happening with me. Like, I was still trying to figure out the art thing. And what started happening was I started doing a lot of experimentation with materials. At the time I was so involved in carnival, doing the children's bands and other things.

I was working with this material and kind of questioning what happens to it, you know, because carnival is such an ephemeral thing. You know, there's this intensity that happens for a very short period, and then it's gone and there's all this stuff that's left behind. So, it became a question of: what happens after?

So I started doing a lot of experiments with materials I would use during carnival and started making installations and stuff that started to get noticed – but also working outside of the carnival period. I was kind of curious to see how the process functions outside the context of the carnival space. The festival has to happen for this burst of energy to occur. But what happens if you take it and drop it outside of its context?





What was the outcome of your experiments?

I started doing all these projects. It started off very small, like small interventions. The first kind of small intervention happened in South Africa. I was doing a residency. I was there for three months, and at the end of the three months I decided to do, like, a small type of procession, [a] carnival type of intervention. During the period, I got people kind of hyped about it, and I was doing workshops with people, talking about the process, talking about the history of carnival – you know, the things it generates, and characters and all these things.

And for the opening, we had this small event that really kind of blew my mind, where people just kind of showed up doing their own thing. It was planned, but it wasn't planned. I was really, really shocked to see the amount of people that turned up and decided to do their own thing, or put their own interpretation of what I told them about, carnival and the process and the history. They kind of framed it into their own kind of context of the current state of South Africa, and those types of things. So that was the first action or intervention, if you want to call it that. And then over time, it just kind of built up.

Things really started taking off when this curator [I told you about], Claire Tancons, came to Trinidad. Like me, I think she got kind of caught off-guard as well with carnival and all of its processes, and she saw art happening in the middle of all of it. And sometimes it takes someone from outside your space to see the potential in something.

She started writing about carnival, but from a more critical perspective, and really shaping it. She started talking about carnival the way people would talk about a painting, you know? Like, this is art too. She really started to shape and frame and put a context around this thing (carnival).

And we worked on a number of projects together, doing biennials and projects at biennials. And people started taking notice of it. The other thing is, not everybody's going to get it. There'll always be people who are kind of like, 'Well, I don't know about this.' Because in the arts, world performance for them is closer to, I guess, choreographed dance. And also, when people talk about art, it's a very Eurocentric perspective. So, art [for them] does not happen outside of a Western and European sphere. You know, drawing, painting, sculpture, it's abstract art, it's performance, and anything anybody else has to offer is irrelevant. It continues to be a challenge at times. Every so often there's a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel, when people like yourself and others contact me out to the blue and say they came across this thing [my work]. Usually when the person contacts you, they're really passionate about – not necessarily carnival, but they're really interested in how this process shapes, or is perceived within, the context of a bigger world.

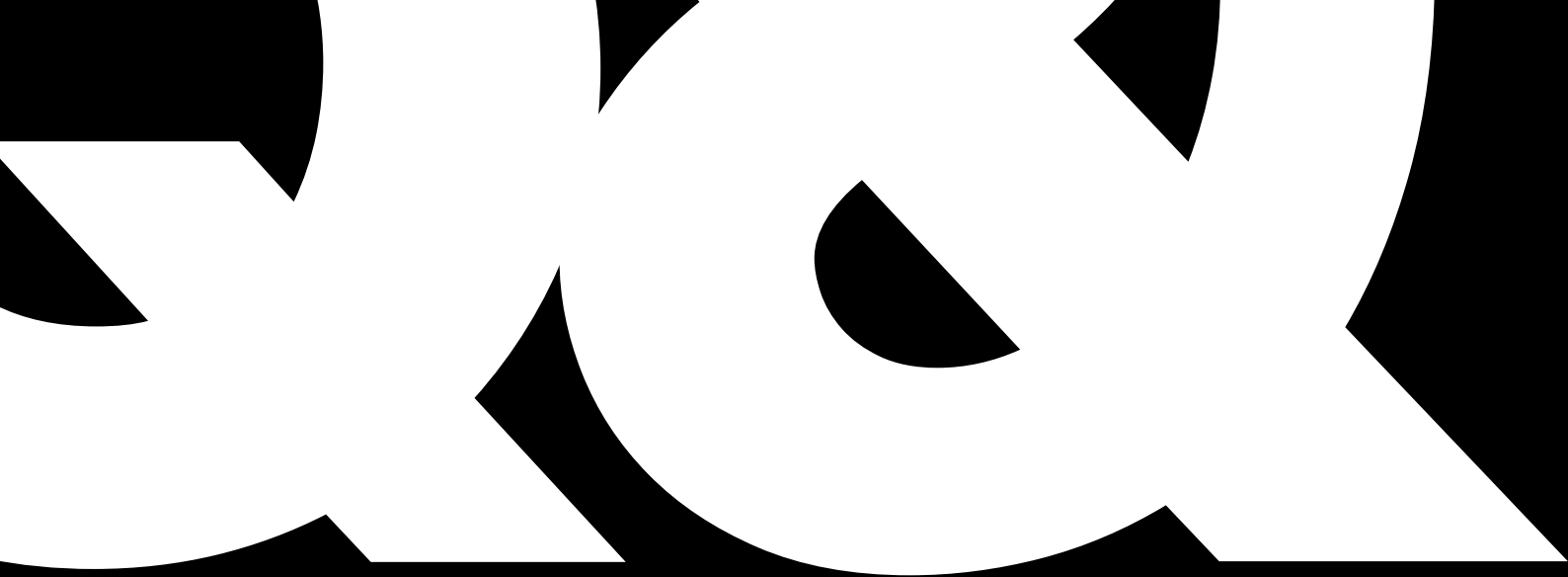
Your experience so far demonstrates the idea of embodiment, from the way you have embodied carnival as well as your experience living in South Africa during your brief residency. What is your take on how people in Trinidad and Tobago embody and remake carnival traditions?

People just don't, at least to me, see it beyond the tradition. They have narrowed the tradition. I think it's one of the reasons why I feel carnival now suffers so much. I mean, carnival, not long ago, ended in Trinidad, and what little I saw of it was really disappointing. To me, there was just no energy to it whatsoever. And it has been like that for a very long time. I always feel like there's a failure to engage [carnival] on another level, which is something I always try to do with my work. And I've really tried to change [my] way of working. So, it's no longer just about carnival. Like, I tell people I feel there have been phases in the development of my work and my process. In the beginning, I started using the mas' camp type process of working. So, when I did my residencies, my studio space was essentially

like an open studio where people were free to come in, engage, talk, participate. And whatever comes out of those conversations during that process would be not necessarily the final thing, because I always feel like it's an ongoing discussion.

The project might be over, but there's still questions lingering after the project, and I continue trying to find answers to those questions. The way I work now, I always feel like carnival shouldn't just be the music – there's the fêting, there's the rivalry, there's all that stuff. But one of the things that [it] lacks is a form of what I explore: a level of civil engagement, and really trying to understand not just people, but the city you navigate.





Time-wise and in terms of your creative process, can you tell me a bit more about your experience of working between carnival and your residencies?

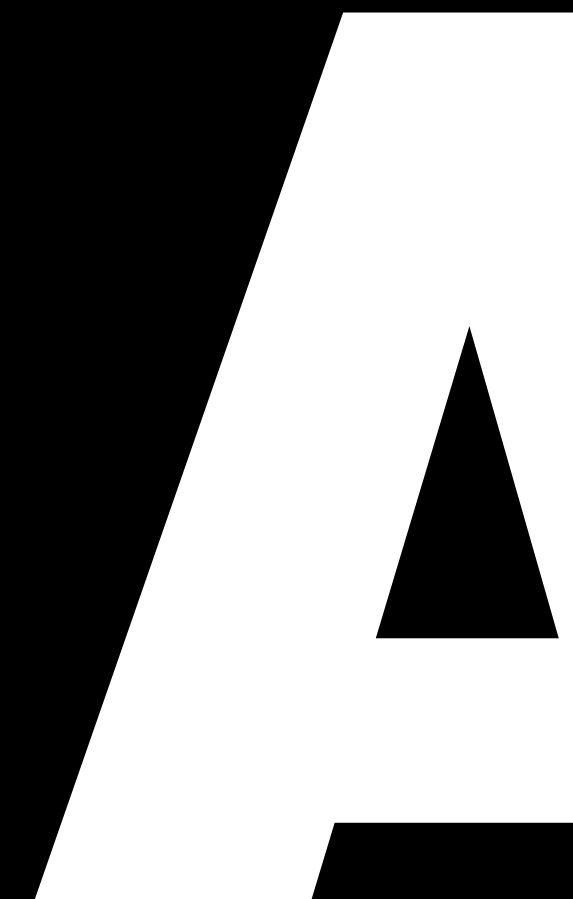
One of the last possessions that I did [was] relating to the book that you saw, (Symbols of Endurance). It was a project I did in Toronto, which happened around, very close to Caribana. Before, like I said, I used the mas' camp process, so it would be a very short, very intense process of working. Regarding residencies, these periods would last like two to three months. Within that period of time, I [would] try to create. Sometimes there might be a pre-planned idea, and when you get there, things change – sometimes the people you meet and the project kind of evolves into something else during my time there.

But, with more recent projects, I look at it in the long term. So, developing a project will take, like, a year to two years. And what happens over that period of time is really what matters, because what I try to do is build a community around the project. So, instead of the short, intense period, I build a community of people that are solely invested in the project and bringing [in] people from different parts of the community.

Who are you engaging with in the communities you are working towards creating? And what boosts your community engagement?

In the project in Toronto, I worked with a whole spectrum of people from all over Toronto and its environments. I had spoken with poets, and this was a group of young people. I worked with a group of young fashion designers from another community, dancers with disabilities, capoeira athletes, and the Mississaugas of New Credit the indigenous people of Toronto.

These are groups of people who have never worked or encountered each other before, and putting them in a room together is a whole other people management thing. But it's not just people management. What we did for the project was realise we had to create a common unity. We had to create, like, a language for the project.







The Mississauga of New Credit, they have teachings, like wisdom, strength and unity – that helps. And we had these teachings that people focus on that we aimed to strive for during the project. And it didn't matter who you [were], or where you [were] from. And what was happening [was], and without us realising it, a community was being built over that period of time.

So, all these people who would not necessarily work together were now communicating, collaborating, and making work together. But also, there was a question, which has always been a question in my work: the question of sustainability, or [what] happens after the project is over – what usually happens with other projects.

The procession usually has another life to it. So, when the procession is over, there tends to be a physical exhibition of elements from the procession, combined with drawings and sculptures and those type of elements. But here we took it to another level. We had the exhibition after the procession, but what was happening was these people, during this two-year period, continued together, building this community, and started doing their own projects. They continued building on their own and building other networks from what we started. So, even after I'm gone, they may not be making mas' or building costumes or anything like that, but whatever they're interested in, they are now using that same process to build other communities and connect in the same way.

I think you answered my question about what boosts your community engagement. You explained about creating a language for the project and common unity. In my opinion, there seems to be a positive reward coming out of this endeavour. It shows you are not just supporting people who have never encountered each other before to become invested in just the project, but rather to help them become more invested in their environment long-term, because the language and the type of engagement enhances their quality of cohesion and communication. Tell me more about how you went about working with these groups and how you facilitated people management to support everyone in focusing on the main goal.





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Tell us about your other experiences of working abroad. How did you begin working outside of Trinidad and Tobago?

I did it for three years. From 2006 to 2008, I worked with *Elimu* and Paddington Arts in Westbourne Park. Every year, *Elimu* put out a band in collaboration with Paddington Arts, which was, like, a community youth type centre close to Westbourne Park Station. It's like, two, three minutes' walk from Westbourne Park Station.

I was living in Trinidad and flying to the UK. So what happened was I was doing my own project in Trinidad. I was designing for a children's band and one of the, uh, parents of the masqueraders told me she had this uncle who brings a band [to] the UK if I would be interested in working with them.

And I said, uh, said we could talk. And he [the uncle] came to Trinidad that year. He came and he saw the children's band, and was with the band on the road for the day. Yeah. And, he liked what he saw and then, he made an offer.

So, I decided, and I said I [would] try it only for one year, and because I [knew] other people that did it, and I had, like, mixed reviews of the experience doing the Notting Hill carnival. I did the first year and they did really, really well. And I mean, the experience was, it was definitely a culture shock. London is definitely not Port-of-Spain. I went on to do two more years with *Elimu* and Paddington Arts.

Did you get another opportunity to collaborate with *Elimu*?

I actually came back to London in 2015. I was doing a project for Tate Modern. I collaborated with *Elimu* again. So, I use[d] some of their masqueraders for my project at the Tate Modern. I used some of their space to create all the work and everything. So, my project was happening during the Notting Hill Carnival, so both our projects were happening [at the same time]. It was an interesting dynamic.

What aspects of your work do you most enjoy, or what's the most fulfilment you get from the work that you do?

I'd say building/connecting communities is the most fulfilling. I mean it is something I never really, actually thought about. It's the first time anybody has ever asked me that question. The most fulfilling thing I really enjoy is seeing people connect. Yeah, I really like looking at people. I mean people [can] be really terrible sometimes, but at the same time human beings are so fascinating. Like, I could sit down and just observe at people all day. And there's so many things, so many different characteristics, and things people do and say, that could really make you wonder that we have the potential for so much. I really like seeing people happy, it's really an amazing thing to see – but not just happy; it's good to see people engaged. And when you see people happy and connecting, it is also a really amazing thing. In my workshops, when I see a group of young people in a room, doing something they've never done before and working with people that they only just met probably a few minutes or a few hours ago, and they look like the happiest people, even though they might be complaining about how hard the work might be, who's gotten cut or burnt from a glue gun – they're still enjoying themselves because they feel good to be part of something. I think that one of the challenges in society in general is a lot of people don't feel connected to, or feel part of, anything.





Some artists may connect their work with, I suppose, link their personality with art. For others, it might be separate, and their art, personality, or emotions are not interconnected. How would you define your work and what it means to be you?

Generally, I'm actually a shy person. I like spending time with people, but I generally spend a lot of time by myself. I like my time. I'm not the guy who's gonna get up and introduce himself to the crowd, but yet I do that with the work. There's Marlon, and then there's the work – that other side.

What did you do while transitioning from mas' man to artist?

I was doing other things. I was doing illustrations for magazines, just freelance work. Being freelance was intentional because I didn't want to be stuck in an office working for somebody else. I wanted that freedom to create and do whatever I wanted. It was really important to me. It was hard as well. When you're freelancing, it sounds like you're free, but you're never really sure when the next pay cheque is going to come, and you have to be kind of on your toes. There were hard times, but I think once my practice started to come together, other things started opening up for me. And I'm living in Japan now, and even being here wasn't planned.

Your experience so far demonstrates the idea of embodiment, from the way you have embodied carnival as well as your experience living in South Africa during your brief residency. What is your take on how people in Trinidad and Tobago embody and remake carnival traditions?

People just don't, at least to me, see it beyond the tradition. They have narrowed the tradition. I think it's one of the reasons why I feel carnival [2023]now suffers so much. I mean, carnival, not long ago, ended in Trinidad, and what little I saw of it was really disappointing. To me, there was just no energy to it whatsoever. And it has been like that for a very long time. I always feel like there's a failure to engage [carnival] on another level, which is something I always try to do with my work. And I've really tried to change [my] way of working. So, it's no longer just about carnival. Like, I tell people I feel there have been phases in the development of my work and my process. In the beginning, I started using the mas' camp type process of working. So, when I did my residencies, my studio space was essentially like an open studio where people were

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What made you decide to move to Japan?

Coming here wasn't even actually a plan. Another artist in Trinidad, at the time we weren't friends, but he did the residency. And when he came back to Trinidad, in a similar way to the principal [at] the school who kept calling me, he did the same, telling me I should apply for this residency. Anytime I saw him, he kept asking: 'Marlon, have you applied?' And eventually one day I saw him, and he brought the application [form]. He said 'Apply for this', and I said, 'Okay.' The thing is, when I applied for the residency, they had this website. I thought, 'Is this real?' And he kept hustling me about this. I did apply and got accepted. It turned out to be one of the best experiences I've had in my life.

I didn't stay immediately. The first time I came [to Japan], I was working a lot with paper and cardboard and those types of materials. And they haven't specifically catered towards people who work with paper. So, the city where I did my residency, they make this special paper called washi – washi paper.

I used the paper in printmaking. I was there for three months and they taught us how to make washi paper, the whole process. We had to use washi to make our final works for an exhibition at the end of the residency, and that went really well. I finished the residency, went back to Trinidad, and I thought, 'What's next?' And they contacted me again from Japan. They said they [were] having this other project and they wanted me to participate. And I came back again.

What's the medium you most enjoy working with?

Paper.

Why paper?

I first started making marks with paper one year. Then there was a band leader at the time, and he had this idea, and he was talking about this guy making mas' using cardboard. And eventually we met him. And yes, he was fantastic. His name was Michael Sheriff; he passed away many moons ago. I really admired his work. I was doing stuff with paper before, but nothing really, nothing serious. Nothing as in-depth as what he was doing.

Cardboard was cheap, it was accessible, I just didn't have the money. I had to make do with whatever resources available. Whenever I had the opportunity, I would go to Michael's workspace. There was one other guy that worked with him. And I would just go there and watch.

I would never do anything. We would just be talking. I would just look at him walking and it blew my mind. He made it look so easy. Eventually, I started quietly experimenting. I started kind of pushing myself and experimenting and doing projects with people, and discovered that I was really comfortable using cardboard.

I have experimented with plastics. I was never much into wire per se. I like metals. I've done some work with copper and aluminium. I'm always looking for new materials and new things to use with my work.

But I always go back to paper, you know, when all else fails, you know, I go back to basics, and while I'm doing that, something else might pop up.

Have you used recycled materials?

Yes, I tend to use a lot of recycled materials, so a lot of recycled paper, cardboard, sometimes recycled plastics. I try to avoid as best as I can using plastics, 'cause beyond storage, you know, it's, like, once I'm finished using it, like I don't really have – there's [not] much I can do with it.

A few years ago, I did a project in Dubai, and I used a lot of cardboard. I used so much cardboard [that] when it was done, they – I couldn't take it with me. They were just going to dump it after I left. So, I thought there was an architecture school, and they always need cardboard for building models. I decided to give them the cardboard. So, the cardboard had a second life.



How would you describe your creative process or your preparatory work?

I tend to do a lot of drawing. I might do a lot of reading as well. It depends on your project, but I tend to do a lot of reading, research, and drawing. I try to talk to as [many] people within the community [as I can]. And whomever I'm working [with], I try to have as many conversations with them as possible to try and really understand the space that I'm in and get different points of views of about that community. But my process – I would say I go through a very rigorous process. I do hundreds of sketches before I get to a final drawing. Even when I finish the final drawing, I'm still doing sketches, because I always feel like there's something that could be improved upon. It's one of the things I hate: that I never feel satisfied. I always feel like there's something that could be better or could be changed.

Have you modified or made tools to suit your work, or particular jobs that you do in your work?

I think a lot of mask men make their own tools depending on what they're doing. Sometimes you have to fashion your own tools for doing something very specific. I always have to create these strange templates for cutting cardboard and adapting the knife to cut the board the way I want, so it doesn't cut a certain way on the board, and I tend to do that a lot.

I may not make a lot of new tools, but when it comes to surfaces, I might start with one surface. But I like changing the surface of things, so the texture of it changes, or the look and feel of it changes.