ZAK OVÉ IS A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ARTIST IN SCULPTURE, FILM AND PHOTOGRAPHY.

We meet at Penn Station, New York City on a brisk morning in January to go see a piece that he has installed in the Newark Museum. It is an eight-minute kaleidoscopic film of images from the Trinidadian Carnival, “A Land So Far”. The images are simultaneously colorful, repetitive, kinetic, haunting, modern and ancient. He scored the soundtrack, adding a hypnotic quality to the film. It is the perfect encapsulation of the man himself.

Born in London to a Trinidadian father and Irish mother, Ové grew up in a household filled with magic, creativity, art, and politics. His father, Horace Ové, was the first Black British filmmaker. He made the feature film *Pressure* and, prior to that, a string of documentaries. His mother, Mary Irvine, worked in fashion for many years and ran a clothing boutique Doudou’s in Camden, London. Additionally, she was a speaker for both the communist and social workers parties, and she was “quite a formidable politicized character in her own right and a strong feminist to boot.” It was not strange for him to come back home from school and find Stokely Carmichael with members of the Black Panther Party hanging out in his back yard.

Literally, Ové followed in his father’s footsteps, carrying cameras and running behind the film crew at the young age of ten. At that time his father was making documentaries between Africa, the Caribbean, and Britain - exploring the Black experience. After that, he enrolled in film school at St. Martin’s School of Art and was there from 1984 until 1987. In 1986, Zak had his first photography exhibition sponsored by the Greater London Council, documenting the same subject matter - this time exploring what the Black experience had become. Spending much of his youth going back and forth to Trinidad visiting his grandparents and extended family, Ové learned to play percussion that had originated from the carnival steel band tradition. As his photography career took off, so did his musical career, and he ended up playing percussion on Jazzy B’s first Soul II Soul album. This collaboration opened the door to a pool of musical talent for whom he later directed videos and shot album covers. Some of the artists he worked with include Moni Luv, Kym Mazelle, PM Dawm, Salif Keita, Chaka Demus and Pliers, and Patra (featuring Tupac).

**BY BELINDA BECKER • PORTRAIT BY JERMAINE FRANCIS**
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of transfiguration, anything on the stage of life.”
In the 90s, Ové continued making music videos with Jon and Ziggy Baker of Gee Street Records and Chris Blackwell of Island Records. A defining moment in Ové’s career was when he was asked to direct an advertising campaign for Guinness Island with the legendary reggae and dub master Lee Scratch Perry. Zak explains, “The first day we went to meet him; we go to the hotel room - Scratch is skipping backwards, and he has CNN playing on the television. And he has a tee shirt with Haile Selassie Ové over the television so that the news has to come through Selassie into the room. And he was counting backwards from 100 to 1. And he refused to look at the people from the agency directly; he would only look at them in the mirror. Remember those plastic white peanuts you used for packaging? He would have to have those in anything he was drinking to ward off evil spells. So, essentially, you were dealing with a very old world Caribbean character in that sense – more typical of an Obeah man than a reggae star.’ This experience was an epiphany for Ové. Because both the Dogon people of Mali and the Yoruba were present. “Exploring the plains of Africa and the Caribbean before colonialism and trying to imagine how that landscape might have been, how that singular moment in the annual calendar, allowed these people to become exactly who and what they wanted to be and then become something very different from what they were once destined to be. “It must be a very strange experience to be a downtrodden people to resurrect themselves from their colonial disposition.” He started documenting the phenomenon of how, during carnival, one could escape the oppressive nature of post-colonial life replete with Christian ethics and give birth to a higher self, an exalted self existing in all its glory and power before the advent of slavery and colonization. “It must be a very strange experience to be taught that God is white, you are black, that this is a colonial world, that you are marginalized to this degree and that you can only ever be this. But yet through this process of transfiguration, one can be anything on the bigger stage of life?” What interested Ové was how that singular moment in the annual calendar, allowed these people to become exactly who and what they wanted to be and then disappear into their ordinary lives, almost disguising themselves for the rest of the year until it came round again. He adds, “To me that was astounding.”

Ové documented the carnival for about eight years on the “truck” as a photographer and filmmaker. “… and then you reach that moment where you are like, ‘hold on a minute, you’re having all the fun. The excitement is in the making and creation of this, not in the recording of it.’ It struck me - I live between Britain and the Caribbean. And here you are in this moment, and here I am in this moment. I see all the gold in this and realize all the bullshit I am surrounded by in New York and London. How do you bridge the gap? Playing mas – how do we reinvigorate this? How do we keep this alive? Resistance art - how do we extend this platform so that we might see ourselves as a unique Caribbean entity without just being or becoming secondary car park attendants in the back lot of the United States.”

While pondering these questions including the idea of how identity can be taken from one in an instant and never returned, Ové’s artwork started to take shape. “What happens when instead of working in ebony wood, those designs are legitimized in plastics and metals, a new fabrication? … and what about the extended dialogue of those moments? How does this street festival march its way into the gallery space? How do we take ownership of that, and what it speaks of and for? No one at this point in time was really thinking along those lines. There were a few people who were looking at it from a distance such as Peter Doig.”

Ové then set out to fill that void. “Returning to the power of these invested carnival characters, they became my super heroes. Suddenly, the men and women who participated in this showed me strength and a sense of imagination that went beyond anything I could imagine. The investiture in their stories and the characterizations year by year – and how they would further that, became more and more exciting to me, and what I began to do was interpret their stories on location within the Caribbean that then spoke about the history of that character and its relationship to the island.”

*Paradise Lost* is one of Ové’s most evocative photographs from his carnival series. It depicts sailors decked out in elaborate effeminate costumes, standing on the edge of a rusted ship. The photograph is hauntingly beautiful. Ové explains, “The fancy sailors were some of the hardest men from the ghetto. The badder, the tougher, or rougher you were, suddenly during carnival, the more ribbons, more bows, more colors, and plaits you would wear. You’ve feminized as you’ve become a harder, more masculine individual because your prowess is such that you are fulfilling your arc between masculine and feminine. In a sense, it makes you a much more dangerous individual. To me that is really a black super hero in his fullest. That was a turning point for me. If you can be this then I should know no boundaries whatsoever. Who the fuck is going to teach me to dumb down after I have seen and experienced this? Fuck off with your fucking grey, and your dull blues, and your beige, and worried about if your socks are too fucking bright. Who cares? In the beginning, this was the power that we were given. It was nothing other than that. … which makes sense, even in Harlem it makes sense - being dapper, swagger, the whole notion of being a peacock, of fulfilling that huge arc that maybe had escaped us through slavery, that maybe escaped us through colonization of the mind in the west, but is actually who we were, and who we should still be. These are my heroes behind my sculpture, this is what I am really inspired by.”

Two of his pieces, *Time Tunnel* and *Nubian Returned*, explore this idea of bringing past and future together in the present. “Exploring the plains of Africa and the Caribbean before colonialism and trying to imagine how that landscape might look, hundreds of years in the future is something that I am very interested in.” Both the Dogon people of Mali and the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria believe in the concept of time travel. Many Trinidadians are descendents of the Yoruba. He counts as influences for these pieces, artists like George Clinton, Funkadelic, Sun Ra, Coltrane, and the entire Black American experience that dealt in that
kind of Black psychedelia. “Those have been all the elements or ingredients I like to put in the cooking pot, so to speak.” Along with working with recycled materials and junk objects, Ové also uses shells, black dolls, African masks, and fabric to bring past, present, and future together in a very modern way. “I am also concerned with the rhythm and musicality of the work in sculptural terms, how it feels.” He credits Trinidadian artist, Embah, for introducing him to this concept. His piece, The Time Thief plays with these idioms – having straight razors in his watch, wearing whips around his neck and carrying a bowler hat, again referencing the griots and storytellers from the future. “It’s important to have the sense of a victorious narrative, one where we don’t bleed in front of a camera and apologize. As much as we have suffered, we can see a way through all the bullshit to success. When the world outside the family home starts to dictate your goal posts, this work is here to remind you that your emancipation goes much further than anything they’ll dictate to you. And that is the important thing that contemporary Black art is doing right now – breaking down the framework and the wall of this fucking oppressive society that tried to retain us within its narrow margins. I look at those characters in the carnival as the last of the Jedi. And who do you want to be? I want to be fucking Luke Skywalker.”

When asked about his process, he says, “It’s not mapped out in that sense. I guess my barometer is what excites me the most in terms of ideas . . . trying to understand where we’ve come from, what was important, and what is missing, and filling in the gaps in a way.” Another piece The Upsetters is built around the Jamaican sound system where two sets of speakers embedded with African masks are stacked on top of each other, becoming a sort of totem. “They symbolize probably the only religious experience for me through my childhood. I am using ‘religious’ in a quasi way, in a sense of divinity that always inspires and pushes me forward into things. The sound system had galvanized a community it was able to speak to. And whatever came through this interface was a language that spoke about culture, spoke about the past, it spoke about pride.” Ové strongly believes in the idea that an artist has a responsibility to reflect the times in which he lives and try to effect change. “I come from a strong lineage of social documentation. My father’s generation broke ground and opened doors quite aggressively to get young black kids into office and open situations up in a 60s radicalized approach. That was the first wave. As the first generation born in Britain, I have to ask myself how do I carry this on?”

Ové is encouraged by what he sees happening in the art world today. He hesitates to name artists who inspire him for fear of leaving someone out. “I might choose five today and, tomorrow, it might be a completely different five depending on how I feel. Coming to America, it is very exciting to see the whole contemporary Black art scene. Black art is having a moment. There is a dialogue happening that perhaps when we were younger was only happening in music, where now there is something very heartfelt about how people are approaching the works made and what the work speaks about.” Ové’s work has taken him all over the world: Mali, South
Dogon Door Cutout
Africa, United States, Czech Republic, and China. He adds, "I couldn’t ask for a better life in the making in terms of the people and the situations that come to me through my work. That is the most exciting part of this."

Ové, represented by Vigo Gallery, is eager to show commercially in the States and is looking for a suitable partner gallery. He has his film *A Land so Far* at the Newark Museum and two large sculptures entitled *Moko Jumbies* going back up in the British Museum. He has been commissioned to do work for the full court of Somerset House, and he will have a solo show exhibiting at Vigo gallery in London later this year. He is going back to Trinidad where he is set to make another film featuring a script of its annual carnival. "I am trying to put as much up anywhere and everywhere I can."

Is there joy? Is there longevity to his work? Is there sustainability? Ové says, "One would hope in the arts that I can work right up until my death, and one would also hope that if I pay attention, and I am sensitive to everything going on around me that I shouldn’t become dull - that I become more attuned, more aware, and unconsciously reflective as to how I incorporate things. You get better with time. The difficult thing within that is how you finance it. Up to this point in time, I am lucky enough to be able to make a meager living from what I am doing. And I hope if I can engage with more museum programs, it will allow me to pave that way. It is very exciting to see my peers able to engage in such a way where now they can also make money and have the reverence of that moment. One of the things I love is like when I go to see the *Moko Jumbie* pieces I did in the British Museum, and I become completely invisible in that moment because it is not about me - it’s about the work. It’s kind of a busted Frankenstein moment: you’ve given life to something that speaks on its own terms to its audience that has nothing to do with you anymore. Your work is done. And that is very satisfying, especially when school kids show up, and see themselves in your work, and that you somehow have made them bigger in that moment. That’s very important to me. That’s probably the biggest part of it."

The interview ends with him expressing regret for having said so much and with me exhaling from the intense brilliance that is Zak Ové.

www.zakove.co.uk
Black Astronaut, 2012 - Photograph by Jermaine Francis