



# ZAK OVÉ: STAR LINER

07 MARCH 2018 | ANNA WALLACE-THOMPSON



*Skylark*, 2017 | Image courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi

It begins with the carnival. And what a carnival. A celebration of a new identity, just for them, by a people whose own roots stretch far and wide across the globe. In Trinidad, centuries of immigration has seen multicultural communities flourish, and it is here, in this celebration of life – of past and future – in an array of flashing colour that this story begins.

“The carnival in Trinidad was very much a process of celebrating culture, if you like, *away from* another culture, of working with an absence,” explains British-Trinidadian artist Zak Ové. “How did people see themselves once they had been stamped by colonialism? What sort of hybrid mythologies did African and post-African people hold on to, to find a sense of self and purpose? How do you hold onto tradition yet maintain individuality?” In *Star Liner*, showing at Lawrie Shabibi

gallery (19 March–1 June 2018), it is this notion of culture and belonging, as embodied by the carnival, that binds everything together.

The exhibition's evocative title is key, and its marrying of two abstruse yet ultimately complementary references reflects Ové's historically and anthropologically rich approach to his oeuvre. As such, *Star Liner* is both a nod to the psychedelic beats of American science-fiction-inspired funk musician George Clinton as well as the short-lived yet ambitious Black Star Line shipping line founded by Jamaican-born Marcus Garvey in 1919 (part of the 'Back-to-Africa' movement to repatriate African Americans).



As such, the idea of the journey is one of the threads that binds *Star Liner* together, such as in two large-scale signature 'doily paintings', with their spiritually-evocative titles of *Heaven* and *Earth*. Here, countless colourful crocheted doilies are layered over each other to give the impression of blooming sea anemones and corals, psychedelic acid drop rings of colour, a vivid, blossoming field of flowers. Found across Trinidad (fittingly, also known as the 'rainbow nation') doilies hold a special place in the home. Ové includes custom-made pieces crocheted by Syrian refugees, a poignant juxtaposition of an object so associated with home pride and comfort, yet made by a people who currently have no such luxury. "Doilies symbolise a sense of Caribbean working and lower-middle class culture," explains Ové. "They are usually reserved for the front room, as objects of pride, saved for guests and special occasions. I was interested in the many forms of expression and colour that exist in them. Often made by women living in fairly repressive households – these doilies become a mode of self expression." A lot of the doilies, he discovered however, also came to Trinidad and Tobago from as far and wide as Europe, South America and the Middle East. "When I found out about the Syrian crocheting community [there is a large Syrian community in Trinidad], I was utterly fascinated. They had seen my work and reached out to me, and I sympathise greatly with the plight of the Syrian people and felt by incorporating these particular doilies in my work, I could engage people in that conversation."

The exhibition also includes sculptures, building on Ové's iconic *Invisible Men* series, which saw 40 black graphite sculptures installed in the courtyard of London's Somerset House during the 2016 edition of 1:54 African Art Fair. In *Star Liner*, new iterations feature, bedecked in stars and stripes and even the bow tie of yesteryear's once-beloved yet now inconceivably racist 'Golly'.

These sculptures are also important in their realisation in graphite, rather than the traditional ebony, a hallmark of Ové's sculpture work. "I find the *Invisible Men* proud and noble, especially in the gesticulation of the figure," explains Ové. "When conceiving the idea for the 1:54, I had researched that the last time a really big African event had taken place on that site was in 1605, when Ben Jonson's play 'Masque of Blackness', was celebrated by Queen Anne, the wife of King James. They spent something like six million pounds on a ball, where all the noble ladies of England dressed in blackface as 'African princesses' who had then come to England to bathe in a 'sea of whiteness'. I was really interested in this, as my practice is also rooted in investigations of what happens to the diaspora – to Africans born abroad, and the children of these Africans born abroad, in a sense of identity, displacement, and sense of direction." In fact, the *Invisible Men* will also be travelling to San Francisco, where they will replace pioneer monuments showing African Americans in a poor light at the City Hall Plaza.

The choice of graphite, too, is important. "There is often a story that is stuck upon African sculpture, always in ebony wood, as it were, and how we presume a work is made and where it comes from," muses Ové. "I felt switching to graphite was interesting, in how it recontextualises and recontemporises an otherwise familiar figure. Using different visual materials allows me to look at how old world mythologies can be sustained and revitalised with new powers and a modern vernacular." This also carries over into a large mask piece, *Rumplesteelskin*, made of vintage car parts, in particular, a Morris minor bonnet.





Then there are *Sky Lark* and *Star Child*, a spaceship and two rockets respectively made out of repurposed fairground rides. They speak of movement and migration, and perhaps also of the perpetually revolving ideas of belonging and race that swirl around us, just like a fairground ride – ever in motion, yet never truly moving forward. Crucially, they are also a nod to Afro-futurism, a sense of looking for a future where where the past has been designed by somebody else. “There is also the suggestion through the whole show of time travel and space,” says Ové. “The notion of African culture, religion, future worlds. I wanted to put works together that can be of the past, present and of the future, all in a dialogue in that moment, a new kind of conversation. And then in these two particular works, I wanted to hark to that feeling of being taken somewhere special, of being elevated.”

At a time when discussions around race and belonging seem more fraught than ever, as we struggle with an increasingly globalised world in which boundaries and histories become increasingly blurred, *Star Liner* brings to the fore important issues that remain at the core of our need to better understand ourselves. “One of the things I guess people in my generation are aware of, is, as we drift further into a new millennium and the world speeds up, what do we think is important?” says Ové. “What do we want to retain humanistic ally? Who do we want to be? What kind of society do we want to exist in? I think a lot of this work, at least for me, has been a journey of emancipation, of mapping new situations and stories out, and pushing what is possible for the future.”

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***Star Liner* opens on Galleries Night, 19 March, 6-10PM.**

**Zak Ové will be in conversation with William Lawrie, co-founder of Lawrie Shabibi, on 22 March, 11:30AM in the Majlis (The Yard).**

All images courtesy of the artist and Lawrie Shabibi.