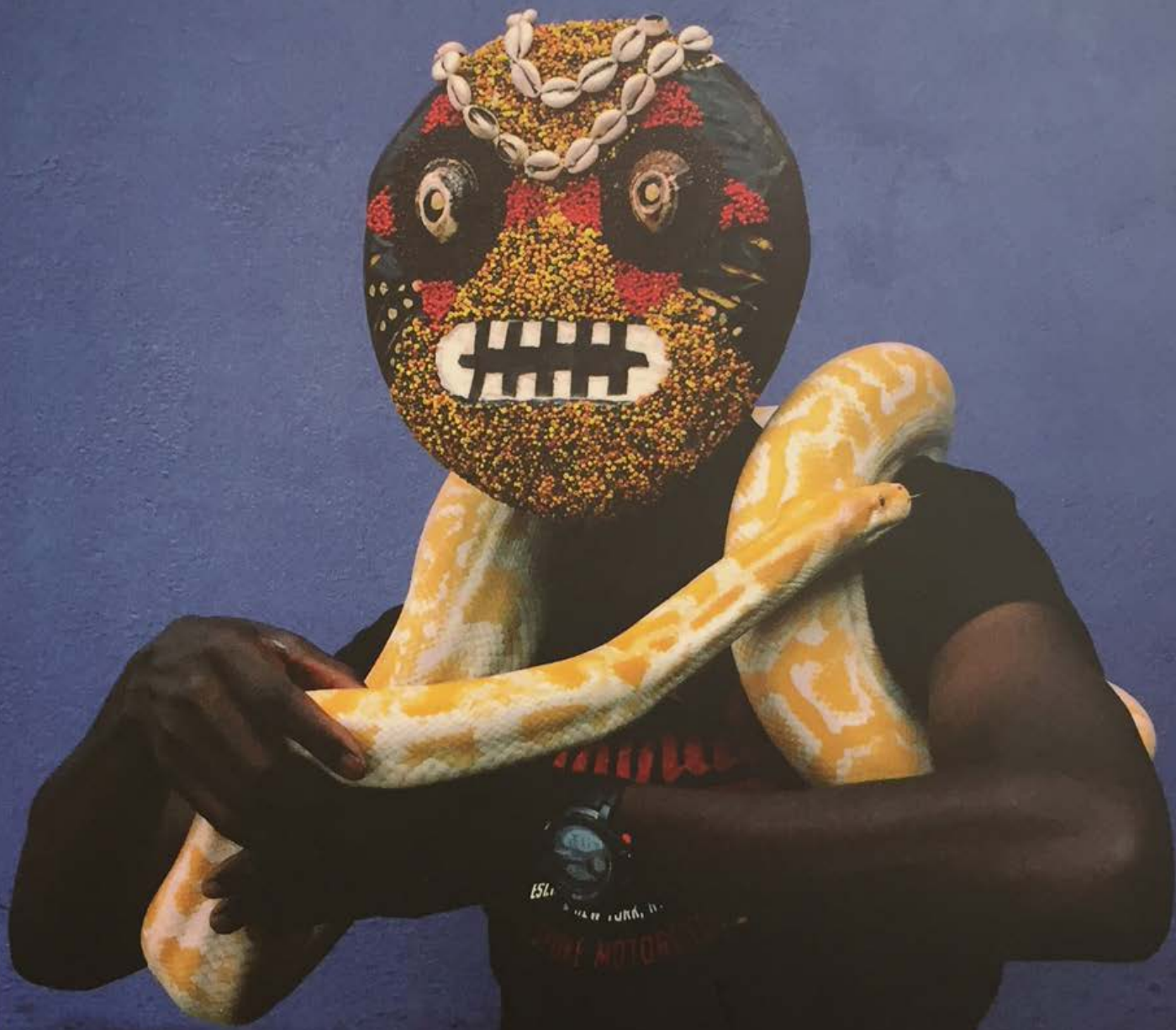


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JOURNEY INTO A NEW DIMENSION

ZAK OVÉ'S STAR LINER REIGNITES AND REINTERPRETS LOST CULTURE USING NEW-WORLD MATERIALS

BY AMY GIBBINGS

"If all I knew about Africa were from popular images, I too would think that Africa was a place of beautiful landscapes, animals and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and Aids, unable to speak for themselves."

- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Irish-Trinidadian artist, Zak Ové, challenges the clichéd notions projected onto Africa in his latest exhibition 'Star Liner' – redefining Western idealism's of Africa and her diaspora and suggesting a journey into a new dimension for African identity.

Since the first settler stepped ashore, the African continent has been subject to violent exploitation, gross misrepresentation and contemptuously drained of her independence. Her people were traded, enslaved and sent to distant lands, and still today she is envisioned and appropriated through the lens of an 'outside' world, foreign to her own.



“It’s from the outside that Irish-Trinidadian visual artist, Zak Ové, challenges clichéd notions of the continent and suggests an infinite scope for bold redefinition of the African identity.”

This is the inspiration behind his latest exhibition and first solo show in the Middle East, ‘Star Liner’ – a fantastical blast of colour and a careful assemblage of found objects, reimagining the African narrative on his own terms through a futuristic lens. The show ran parallel to Art Dubai and the Dubai Art Week and was hosted by contemporary art gallery, Lawrie Shabibi on Alserkal Avenue – an industrial compound turned arts and culture district. Central to Ové’s work is the idea of belonging and identity – and drawing inspiration from his Trinidadian heritage – he seeks to “reignite and reinterpret lost culture using new-world materials. Whilst paying tribute to both spiritual and artistic African identity.”

Much of Ové’s inspiration is drawn from the famous Trinidad and Tobago Carnival, a bold and exultant array of people and colour – a theatrical celebration and masquerade of women in sparkling bikini’s, elaborate feather tails, body paint, music and dancing in the streets – a resistance art that became the symbol of slavery, rebellion and

eventually liberation. The carnival evolved from the pre-Lent festival bought over by the 18th century French settlers who thought it amusing to dress up and dance like their African slaves. As a form of retribution the slaves used the festival commotion as an opportunity for uprisings and rebellions, eventually, after their emancipation in 1838, hijacking the festival and making it their own. Much like the carnival, Ové’s work visualises a sense of African identity that was once subdued and suppressed by its French and British colonisers, but has since burst into a renewed awakening and sense of empowerment.

“For instance, when we look at African art and we look at objects carved in ebony wood, we already project a story onto them, about how they were made, by whom they were made and for what purposes. And we fail to see them, if you like, in a contemporary moment or in a contemporary dialogue,” says Ové. He uses new-world materials and colour to move the dialogue of Africanism into a new millennium. By reinterpreting

familiar and obsolete items together, Ové speaks to the multifaceted nature of identity, void of expectation and assumption.

The centre attraction of the exhibition is an installation, *Sky Lark*, an African mannequin, arms outstretched, soaring through the imagined atmosphere in a small spaceship, embellished with an array of found objects. Trumpets, bull-horns, wooden carvings and metal leaves, contrast with bright orange acrylic wings and a futuristic neon nose, speaks of a new vision of Africa. An image of a rocket shooting into space, breaching the threshold of human imagination and embracing the realm of the unknown is like the iconic moment Apollo 11 delivered the first humans to ever touch the surface of the moon. With his exhibition, Ové surpasses the boundaries of how Africans are depicted and the understanding of what the image of Africa could actually be.

In *Heaven* and *Earth*, Ové displays a kaleidoscope of crochet doilies created

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Zak Ové, *Sky Lark*, 2017. Vintage fairground ride, resin cast masks and mannequin, acrylic wings, trumpets, 204 x 162 x 240cm. FACING PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: *Heaven*, 2017. Crochet Doilies, 190cm. Installation shot of ‘Starliner’. All images courtesy of the artist & Lawrie Shabibi.





with vintage European doilies and custom made doilies by Knitstanbul – a social enterprise based in Istanbul that employs Syrian refugees. This 70s psychedelic inspired display links the old world to the new, repurposing old material in a vibrant and dynamic way. We see a link created – a collaboration between east and west, that unifies distant worlds. Strategically situated between these artworks is *Sky Lark*, suggesting a journey across dimensions – reminiscent of the Atlantic slave trade – but this time charting a new course.

Also included in the show are replicas of Ové's, *Invisible Men and the Masque of Blackness*. This time the two figures are clothed in bright colours, one wearing a red bow tie that represents Robertson's racist golly, the other adorned with the American stars and stripes. Both figures make reference to the

'hands up' gesture famously channelled by the Black Lives Matter Movement in their campaign against police brutality in the United States. In solidarity with the recent spate of shootings of unarmed black civilians by white policemen – the statues embrace the position, "don't shoot" – A reminder of the prejudice and oppressive projections Ové implores us to move away from.

In George Méliè's, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), one of the most influential films of the last century for its first time use of special effects and its exaggerated theatrical style – he communicates a satirical anti-imperialist sentiment. Showing at the Louvre Abu Dhabi as part of the exhibition, 'Globes: Visions of the World', the film is about the way we see our planet and our place on it. But like Ové, Méliè, extends this vision away

from earth and toward something unknown, as though it were a natural progression on a linear time-scale. And after centuries of imperialism and racial oppression, Ové looks toward a new destination for Africa, one of infinite possibility.

Ové's, 'Star Liner', represents what appears to be the next step along the trajectory of African development and absolute liberation. And like Méliè who depicts an odyssey to somewhere seemingly unreachable, Ové breaches a new frontier that offers an alternate reality. His work seeks to transport the projections on Africa into a future dimension, detached and independent from any strings that might still keep her bound.

Amy Gibbings is a writer on ART AFRICA's editorial team.



FACING PAGE: *Resistor Transistors 2*, 2017. Fibreglass, flocked, resin. 35 x 65 x 20cm. THIS PAGE: *Rumplesteelskin*, 2017. Scrap metal, 321 x 158 x 41cm. All images courtesy of the artist & Lawrie Shabibi.