



Mas

Bamboo Design Competition

Artistic Installation Category

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'The works of the past always influence us, whether or not we care to admit it, or to structure an understanding of how that influence occurs. The past is not just that which we know. It is that which we use, in a variety of ways, in the making of new work... The typology argument today asserts that despite the diversity of our culture there are still roots of this kind which allow us to speak of the idea of a library, a museum, a city hall or a house. The continuity of these ideas of type, such as they are, and the esteemed examples which have established their identity and assured their continued cultural resonance, constitute an established line of inquiry in which new work may be grounded.'

The Harvard architectural Review. Volume 5. Precedent and Invention. Between History and Tradition: Notes Toward a Theory of Precedent. John E. Hancock.

Trinidad & Tobago are south easterly islands of the West Indies, situated between 10° 2' and 11° 12' N latitude and 60° 30' and 61° 56' W longitude. At the closest point, Trinidad is just 11 kilometres (7 miles) off the coast of Venezuela. As such, like its South American neighbours, indigenous to its forests are varieties of Bamboo.

The artistic installation I designed called 'MAS', was an off-shoot of the traditional King and Queen Masquerade costume or float indigenous to Trinidad & Tobago Carnival. In this essay I will discuss the evolution of large scale *Mas* (Masquerade) costumes that have led to my own design. I will also discuss the relationship between my concept and the ritualistic usage of Bamboo in Carnival and East Indian celebrations.

Trinidad's Carnival began in the late 18th century with the arrival of French plantation owners. Under a royal *cedula on population* from the Spanish empire (the ruling party of the time), French colonists and their slaves from neighbouring territories migrated in large numbers to Trinidad. This was due to its agricultural potential as well as growing animosity in the more northerly islands between the French and the British colonists. The French planters established a strong aristocracy in Trinidad & Tobago that secured many French traditions, one of which was Carnival. The statistics



of population under British rule by 1882 registered that there were '3341 Whites, 13 392 Free Coloureds, 20 Chinese, 893 Indians and 22 328 Slaves'.¹ This is important to note because although there was boastfulness of the medley of inhabitants, racial tensions were in fact very prolific. Trinidad & Tobago has in fact always been highly cosmopolitan and has in this way had a unique history to the other Caribbean islands. One can argue that this is one of the key contributors of the evolution of Trinidad's carnival throughout Colonialisation, past Emancipation and into Independence. The original French festival was a series of elaborate high society balls, street promenades in carriages and house to house visits. It was a time of inversion of roles. An English Office present at Carnival in Trinidad in 1827 wrote:

*'I wish, Bayley, you had been here in the time of the Carnival; you have no idea of the gaiety of the place in that season. Ovid's Metamorphoses were nothing compared to the changes that took place in the persons of the Catholics of Trinidad. High and low, rich and poor, learned and unlearned, all found masking suits for carnival...'*²

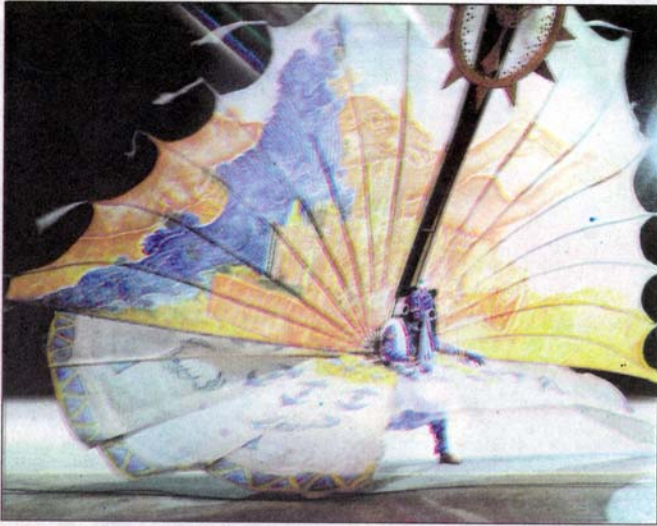
From this time and onward, elaborate costumes and dramatic performances ensured a time of spectacle and amusement. In 1881, the Port-of-Spain gazette reported one of the first indigenous Trinidadian carnival displays known as the *Canboulay*, or Creole Carnival. This carnival belonged to the African slaves and began to assimilate French traditions with their own characters and music. These characters included *Moko Jumbies* which were West African manifestations of spirits that walked on high sticks, devil bands, stick fighting and *jab jabs* which were figures dressed as jesters that carried long whips that they would crack menacingly. Other typical French characters were also retained that still exist today. The *Canboulay* was fought for by the people in the streets of Port-of-Spain as the British colonists attempted to cease its observance by the slaves. This was recanted after rioting ensued. Carnival had for all factions of the society become a, '*Symbol of freedom for the broad mass of the population and not merely a season for*

¹ Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival*, pg. 8.

² F.W.N. Bayley, *Four Years' Residence in the West Indies*, pg. 214.



Carnival on Frederick Street, Port-of-Spain, 1888 (FROM A DRAWING BY MELTON PRIOR;
COURTESY OF THE *Illustrated London News*)



EARL THOMPSON, another Island People king, portrayed a theatrical Scorpion King and could execute the choreography as the light structure let him move as freely as he wanted.



Queen of Carnival PEOLA MARCHAN, moves across the stage with her costume The Incandescence of Beatrice Love. PHOTOS: SHIRLEY BAHADUR

*frivolous enjoyment. It had a ritualistic significance, rooted in the experience of slavery and in celebration of freedom from slavery... Adopted by the Trinidadian people it became a deeply meaningful anniversary of deliverance from the most hateful form of human bondage...'*³

Although this is a very brief introduction to an incredibly complex and multi-layered event, some of the important characteristics and axioms of the festival as it is expressed today are inversion, true cultural expression, drama, spectacle and celebration. Today carnival is still celebrated on the Monday and Tuesday preceding Ash Wednesday. From Sunday midnight celebrations begin that are similar to the traditional *Canbouay* celebrations along with other types of *Mas* that have been adapted over the years; called *J'ouvert* (or colloquial *Jouvay*). On the Monday and Tuesday thousands of masqueraders gather and parade through the street with their respective bands. These bands are still garbed in very colourful and elaborate costumes. Each band has a King or Queen of the band that is typologically large, very ornate and embodying the overall characteristics of the band as seen in the images to the left. The King and Queen of a band are judged in a competition

³ Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival*, pg. 21

called the *Dimanche Gras* that gives a prize for the most dramatic and creative costume. Each costume is made by hand. The materials used to make them today are primarily wire and fabric with various types of adornments. Some of them even include pyrotechnics.



Imps from the Devil Band

SIDNEY HILL PHOTO



Pierrot Grenade (SIDNEY HILL PHOTO)



Beauty Enthroned

SIDNEY HILL PHOTO



Fancy Clown (SIDNEY HILL PHOTO)

The evolution of this particular type of *Mas* has come from the French beginnings when characters would parade on carriages and incorporates ideas of an ornate float as seen in Brazil's carnival. It has also grown out of building an idea through costumes of spectacular proportions that are carried by an individuals who either wear them if they are light enough or pulls them on wheels for larger and heavier representations. As you can see in the images below, older *Mas* costumes were smaller and although ornate were built onto the character. On the lower left you can see an old example of a float that is pushed by other masqueraders.

Other Masmen (bandleaders and designers) have in recent times created stunning costumes that have stayed true to the axioms of the festival in their expression of cultural and social problems in the society as well as of historical traditions. Some have also been used to retell stories. Peter Minshall for example has had bands whose sections costumes dramatise stories, experiences and political expressions.

One highly topical and explicit design of his was called '*Madame Hiroshima*' done in 1984. This costume depicted a large bulbous female figure in tawdry dress and a mushroom cloud above personifying the nuclear bomb on Hisoshima as a '*whore of destruction*' as he called her. Other masterpieces of his include the '*Danse Macabre*' in 1980, also seen below.



This is the tradition in which my design has evolved. My own design is bare Bamboo with steel joints that allow movement. The wings and fins of the costume are arranged to give the impression of movement and fluidity and they would themselves move and sway with the movement of the costume across a stage. It resists the traditional approach of adornment to engage the natural aesthetic of the bamboo itself. It is a testament to the versatility and natural elegance of the material and of the bamboo groves. Bamboo was originally used structurally in most costume making before wire was widely available. The use of wire and steel has made the scale of the costumes grow exponentially. My design however reverts back to bamboo as a structural and aesthetic material. The bare bamboo is reminiscent also of the East Indian festival of Diwali.



'The source of this celebration is the Ramayana, an epic written in Bengal four centuries before Christ. Ram, heir to the throne of Oudh, is deprived of his birthright by a jealous step mother who secures his banishment into a forest. Ram and his wife Sita settle in their new environment, but Sita is soon abducted by Ravanna, the king of Lanka. Ram wages a long and bitter battle against Ravanna, finally defeats him and rescues Sita. The couple then return to Oudh after an absence of fourteen years and Ram is restored to the throne. The festival of Deya Diwali, which inaugurates Ramleela celebrations, celebrate Ram's return from the forest. Small earthen crucibles (deyas) are lighted and

*placed along pathways and around houses to give light to the returning hero...it is a symbolic victory of good over evil...*⁴

Bamboo stalks are split down the middle and placed in curved patterns to hold the *deyas* as seen in the images following. *Divali* is very widely celebrated and iconographically bamboo is very closely identified with as part of the exhibition of *deyas* in public and private places.

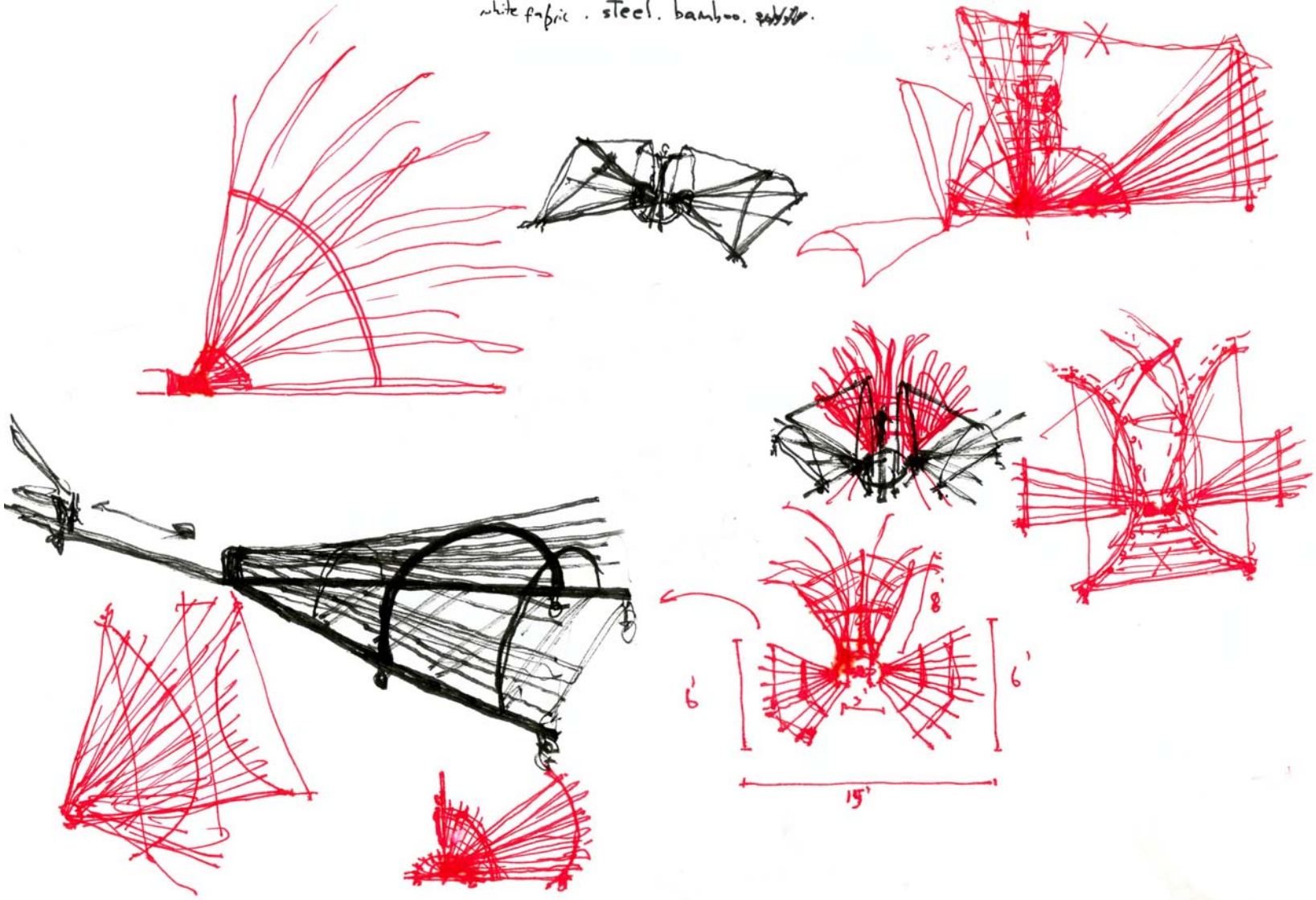
The use of Bamboo in ritualistic ways is prevalent throughout the society as it is an indigenous material of great versatility. There are also musical groups that play instruments called Tamboo Bamboo. This type of percussion group plays mostly at carnival time. Also, apart from ritualistic uses bamboo and bamboo groves have come to be remarkable setting places in paintings and in folklore. It appears more therefore as a living material than as a static one. And consequently its usage typologically belongs to Trinidad & Tobago in a deeply naturalistic way.



⁴ Brinsely Samaroo, *David Frost Introduces Trinidad & Toago, East Indian Life and Culture*, pg 123.

From the evolution of Mas as well as the ritualistic usage of Bamboo in Trinidad & Tobago I have created a costume that is evocative of the naked origins of my culture. Without adornment, it is reminiscent of the curve of the scenic bamboo grove that is indigenous to our forests and that frame our rivers and our folklore. It also harkens back to Divali celebrations and the memory of the stark bamboo with the small glowing light that illuminates it. In the tradition of Carnival as a time of expression and of extremes – whether it be extreme truth or extreme representation; my costume depicts a person in a bamboo grove. To take the interpretation further, it depicts our memory of our indigenous nature and of a naturalistic lifestyle that belongs to our forests and our heritage. It sways and shakes with the movement of the person with great symbolism for it represents the movement and the co dependence of humanity and our forests. One cannot exist without the other and one cannot move without the other. The bamboo enhances the movement of the person in the costume and the bamboo. The person is reduced to a smaller scale without the splendour of the naked bamboo that frames his movement.

white fabric . steel . bamboo . rubber .



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