

## **In the Studio with Yrneh Gabon**

When I arrived at Yrneh Gabon's Los Angeles based studio and knocked on the door, a mellifluous voice shouted "It's open!" Immediately, I knew my visit with Gabon was going to be infused with traditional Caribbean hospitality. I entered a creative space bursting at the seams with allegories conveyed through various art mediums--charcoal, paint, sculpture, multimedia, etc., made by a mature prolific artist with well-defined ideas, not the student I recall meeting at USC Roski School of Art & Design two years ago. There was no mistaking his studio for anything beyond a creative think tank that embraced both formal and conceptual art forms. During our interview, Gabon generously guided me through his creative process, vision and emerging corpus on Albinism.

Gabon's large portfolio of art lives among tidy piles of books with chapters marked for later reading or inspiration. He is an artist who enjoys the research facet of cultural production; and keeps relevant texts nearby to support the development of his ideas. To familiarize myself with Gabon's visual palette, I moseyed into his petite sanctuary. A small white dais caught my eye that neatly displayed Buddhist meditation instruments--a singing bowl, candles, and prayer beads used for prayer and mantra chanting—essential tools to keep him spiritually grounded. Among the panoply of art objects in the multipurpose studio, is a partitioned private area for resting, and a vibrant kitchen, where Gabon effortlessly goes into chef mode creating delicious Jamaican cuisine. I was treated to a succulent vegan lunch of black-eyed peas, spinach, finger bread, and plantains. Throughout our lively meal my eyes wandered around the studio looking for recurring objects, themes or metaphors. Following my urge to look upward I discovered a charcoal drawing of an androgynous figure on black paper mounted on the ceiling. I had a twinkling awareness that the majority of Gabon's studio work meticulously addressed the relationship between the agency and subjectivity of women.

Gabon was born in Kingston, Jamaica into a family of six (four girls and two boys). His exposure to art began in grade school with field assignments that sent Gabon to the village to observe objects and people, which later had to be rendered from memory. As a young man Gabon traversed the world working as an entertainer in Europe; the Caribbean, Netherlands, United Kingdom, and United States. He experienced a moment of success as a stage and television actor, filmmaker,

model, poet, and singer before establishing roots in Los Angeles. Gabon's latest foray into the arts included the academic studies of albinism in Tanzania, and Studio Art at University of Southern California (USC). "What is unusual, is Yrneh's aptitude in each of the mediums that he applies...he is able to translate his critical eye into many art forms and produce staggeringly powerful work."<sup>1</sup> In spite of having an effervescent personality and positive feedback on his studio practice, Gabon frets over his sustainability in this dynamic art market. The avowed "Renaissance man" maintains a growing portfolio chockfull of assemblage, collage, ceramic, bronze and metal sculpture, painting, photography, and video. Gabon says his "work is inspired by music, poetry or something visually stirring, and that depth and meaning frames the things that haunt [him], like the death of [his] first child."<sup>2</sup>

I was struck by Gabon's openness about a loss so profoundly personal. He showed me a painting, *Conception Still* that looked like a figurative interpretation a female ovum, which triggered Gabon's cathartic explanation of how years after leaving Jamaica, unbeknownst to him that at the age of sixteen he fathered a little girl who was stillborn:

"There are six siblings in my family. There are six eggs that represent each sibling, and inside are the stages of my deceased child's fetal development before her stillbirth. The colors were all colors that spoke to my emotion at the time. Inside the womb the painting reflects the stages when she was facing us when she was alive until her departure."

*Conception Still* shifted the trajectory of Gabon's career in the direction of fine art. It was indisputable that "the child gave me a second chance, and permission to pursue a creative life...It's really haunting that the child gave *me* the freedom to become an artist."<sup>3</sup>

Gabon's formal education began in the late 80s at the Ena Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts, in the School of Drama and Music, in Jamaica. In 2006, he returned to school at Los Angeles City College as liberal arts major. While there Gabon produced a mixed media collage, *Dear Mama, 2008*, which contained cobblestones made of fiber glass, and Swarovski crystals. It is a piece that relates to "women emerging from civilization that he calls "African continent pieces."<sup>4</sup> In the composition four women—an African, Asian and Caucasian are centrally placed, while an albino

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<sup>1</sup> Engel, Allison. *Roski Artist documents the Terror of a Hunted People*, February 21, 2013

<http://news.usc.edu/47033/usc-roski-artist-documents-the-terror-of-a-hunted-people/>

<sup>2</sup> Brown, Yrneh. Studio Interview

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Yrneh. Studio Interview

woman is positioned on the margin. The production of this particular piece was the inspiration for Gabon's academic investigation of Albinism in East Africa.

While living in the Caribbean during his youth Gabon vividly recalls seeing people with albinism, quoting, "In the last thirty years they (albinos) have been accepted in the Jamaican culture, but have remained social outcasts."<sup>5</sup> Although black individuals with albinism racially identify as black in Jamaica, their history of subjugation has been influenced by their visible physical features. In regards to the racial appearance of the albinic female body in Gabon's work, it can be viewed through Judith Butler's lens of subjectivity and subordination. The cultural theorist argues that in the same vein as sex, the construction of race and racial identity are historically informed.<sup>6</sup> The overarching reality in the African Diaspora suggests that albinos have been traditionally regarded as *the Other*, and as a consequence of "Albinism's non-conformity to the racial paradigm and challenge to the efficacy of race, the black albinic body is portrayed, both within and without the black community, as abnormal, ugly, contaminated and inhuman."<sup>7</sup> In opposition to society's discriminatory attitudes, Gabon's representation of the albinic female figure reveals: 1. A redemptive quality in its objective to recover the female's agency, by relocating her from a position of gender oppression to a symbol of empowerment, and 2. A central focus on the albinic female's agency in what philosopher, Gilles Deleuze refers to as a "state of becoming"—(i.e. becoming accepted by society, becoming fearless, or becoming the full proprietor of her body without the culture claiming, repurposing, or more importantly, erasing it.

Gabon's acceptance at USC, in 2010 facilitated the experimentation with different materials and techniques, as manifested in *Dark Shame, 2014*; in which he incorporated provocative symbols that pushed the envelope on the notion of blackness and race. Speaking with a heavy accent, "In Jamaica, you black like tar...there so much beauty about dark skin, yet it is something that people are ashamed of."<sup>8</sup> In *Dark Shame*, the central female figure is adorned with hair made of actual tar, and the ornamentation of elegant Arusha tanzanite and diamond earrings. Gabon waxes melodically,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Meijer, Irene Costera and Baukeje Prins. *How Bodies Come to Matter: An Interview with Judith Butler*. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 1998 vol.23, no21, University of Chicago Press, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Robertson, V. *The Racial Pharmakon: Investigating Albinism in African American Literature*. (Electronic Dissertation) 2006, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

“Her eyes are closed almost virginal, as if she’s moving through ominous clouds; and on the inside of her cape are the albino people who are humiliated by the conditions they are suffering.”<sup>9</sup> The compelling composition of *Dark Shame* includes a crucified bird and a dismembered leg, which are bound together and buried inside the woman’s coat, which allegorically illustrates the marginalized existence of individual’s living under the societal stain of albinism, and the societal inference of the black woman, as carrier of the afflictions of the oppressed.

It was refreshing to study the regal carriage of women in Gabon’s work. Displayed along the northeastern wall of the studio, is a large white ceramic sculpture of an expressive black woman, *Adela 2013*, with a smooth reflective surface that magnifies her dramatic Negroid features. It is the companion piece to the ceramic bust, *First Man, 2009*, which was produced in Gabon’s first art workshop at the California Afro American Museum (CAAM) led by LA artist, Chukes. Gabon warms to *Adela*, which reveals his flair for fashion. *Adela* is carved wearing a pink frilly and feminine blouse in the likeness of stylish women in Dar es Salaam, the largest and wealthiest city in Tanzania, where women follow fashion trends of the liberated West, over traditional afro-centric Muslim attire. Gabon sculpted *Adela’s* hair into Senegalese twists and bejeweled her with real herring bone earrings, designed by Hollywood actress, art collector, CCH Pounder, who is also Gabon’s benefactor, mentor, and inspirational best friend.

The East African nation of Tanzania “has one of the highest rates of albinism in the world — nearly 1 in every 1,400 people. That compares to about 1 in 20,000 worldwide.”<sup>10</sup> In order to achieve a critical understanding of the cultural implications of albinism, Gabon needed to travel to Tanzania, made possible by the sponsorship of Pounder and the African Millennium Foundation (AMF), a nonprofit operated by Malena Ruth in Los Angeles. Gabon’s field research was arduous and emotional. During a reflective moment he stated, “My days were spent in the villages interviewing people with albinism and in the evenings I returned to document my work and release my tears.”<sup>11</sup> Gabon’s research underscored how men and women with albinism undergo abject

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Burnett, John. *Tanzania's Albinos Face Constant Threat Of Attack*, NPR, November 30, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/30/165643518/tanzanias-albinos-face-constant-threat-of-attack>

<sup>11</sup> Brown, Yrneh. Studio Interview

discrimination and marginalization, as well as endless threats of violence, homicide, and rape on a daily basis. There is a ubiquitous and unfathomable attitude in Tanzania that characterizes people with albinism as possessing magical powers, thus allowing the nation to take proprietorship of the albinic body--under the guise that their tongue, heart, and genital organs can be consumed as a special elixir. "When you bring [a witch doctor] a body part, such as an arm, a leg or a finger, the witch doctor will make a potion with it...A miner will pour it in the ground where he wants to find minerals or a fisherman will pour it in his canoe."<sup>12</sup>

Today, nearly all of Gabon's work allegorically communicates adversity and peril is ingrained in the national fabric for individuals with albinism. One such art piece, *Crossing the Line, 2014*, reveals the precariousness of albinos "being chased into nowhere."<sup>13</sup> The mixed media collage shows a female figure kneeling on a prayer mat fully embracing her child, while another assembly of children stands in the horizontal plane of the canvas "with nowhere to go--literally just standing in a suitcase."<sup>14</sup> Gabon adds...

"The boys are symbolic of a broken system, they are chased like animals, hunted like dogs, the invisible wire, barbed wire on fence and skinny trees represents how little the tree presents life, and what little society-culture has to offer the person. The metaphors including the barbed-wire, butterflies and the cocoon, the desolate landscape, the sky...it is a hopeful Tanzanian blue sky, but yet there is darkness, and displacement and everybody is in this whole tradition of the suitcase."

The prominent suitcase in *Crossing the Line* is a recurring article in Gabon's creative corpus, serving as the principal metaphor reflecting the states of perpetual abandonment, alienation, dislocation, and torment endured by people with albinism.

In review of my impressive studio visit with Yrneh Gabon, I will reiterate that the interview truly was an experience...an enveloping introduction to albinism followed by a parade of emotions. When I left my head was still spinning. I felt weary and emotional, yet extremely moved by Gabon's unadulterated passion for his cerebral and artistic engagement of albinism.

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<sup>12</sup> Burnett, John. *Tanzania's Albinos Face Constant Threat Of Attack*, NPR, November 30, 2012. <http://www.npr.org/2012/11/30/165643518/tanzanias-albinos-face-constant-threat-of-attack>

<sup>13</sup> Brown, Yrneh. Studio Interview

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

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