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Saints + Jumbies: Stitching the Wild and Familiar

By Shivanee Ramlochan Wednesday, July 10th, 2013 Categories: [Features](#), [Updates](#)

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8

“Each of these women has a story,” Brianna McCarthy says, casting her hands to the four walls of Medulla Art Gallery, on the penultimate day of her *Saints + Jumbies* installation. The exhibit marks the artist’s second presentation in this space: she launched her debut show, *After Colour*, at Medulla in March 2012. Medulla, she says, provides valuable, necessary services to contemporary creative practitioners, within Trinidad and the wider Caribbean. This time around, she readily owns, the nervous energy surrounding her second formal showing has dissipated, but the intensity governing a public presentation of her art has not waned.

After Colour, McCarthy reflects, came primed with a specific locus of intent: it sought to represent various possibilities surrounding black feminine identity and beauty. “When I first began showing my work, it was centred around black women,” says the artist, adding that much of it was an instinctual response to so many African-American women telling her that “they needed to see something to make themselves feel beautiful.”



Rhudiannjah The Daughter – Brianna McCarthy

McCarthy has not dropped the mantle of black ancestral and modern pulchritude, in *Saints + Jumbies*, but her presentation has undergone a series of personal processes. The faces in this new collection, along with their corresponding facets, are less easily mapped onto an artist's statement that is either concrete or militantly defended. This, she says, is intentional. The journeys conducted by the artist in her newest offering of work are intimate, but not, she firmly avows, exempt from a variety of response in public perception. McCarthy remains unflinching about her willingness to have the pieces in *Saints + Jumbies* undergo numerous interpretations, without corporate artifice or the singular autonomy of her maker's stamp.

Notions of making and mending thread through the collection in indelible ways, reflecting the artist's process of self-identification through domestic and sacral arts. Stitchery and sewing are principal amongst these, which is perhaps one reason why "Keeping Company with Jaguars" is vitally important to McCarthy. Arguably the most labour-intensive piece in *Saints + Jumbies*, the artist describes the procedure of its creation as both unforgiving and immersive. The piece's title references Olive Senior's work, *Gardening in the Tropics*, and is a response to [Jasmine Thomas-Girvan's](#) exhibition of the same name. "Keeping Company with Jaguars" was solicited as a creative counterpart to Thomas-Girvan's work, by Mariel Brown and Richard Mark Rawlins, for their art and design publication, [Draconian Switch](#).



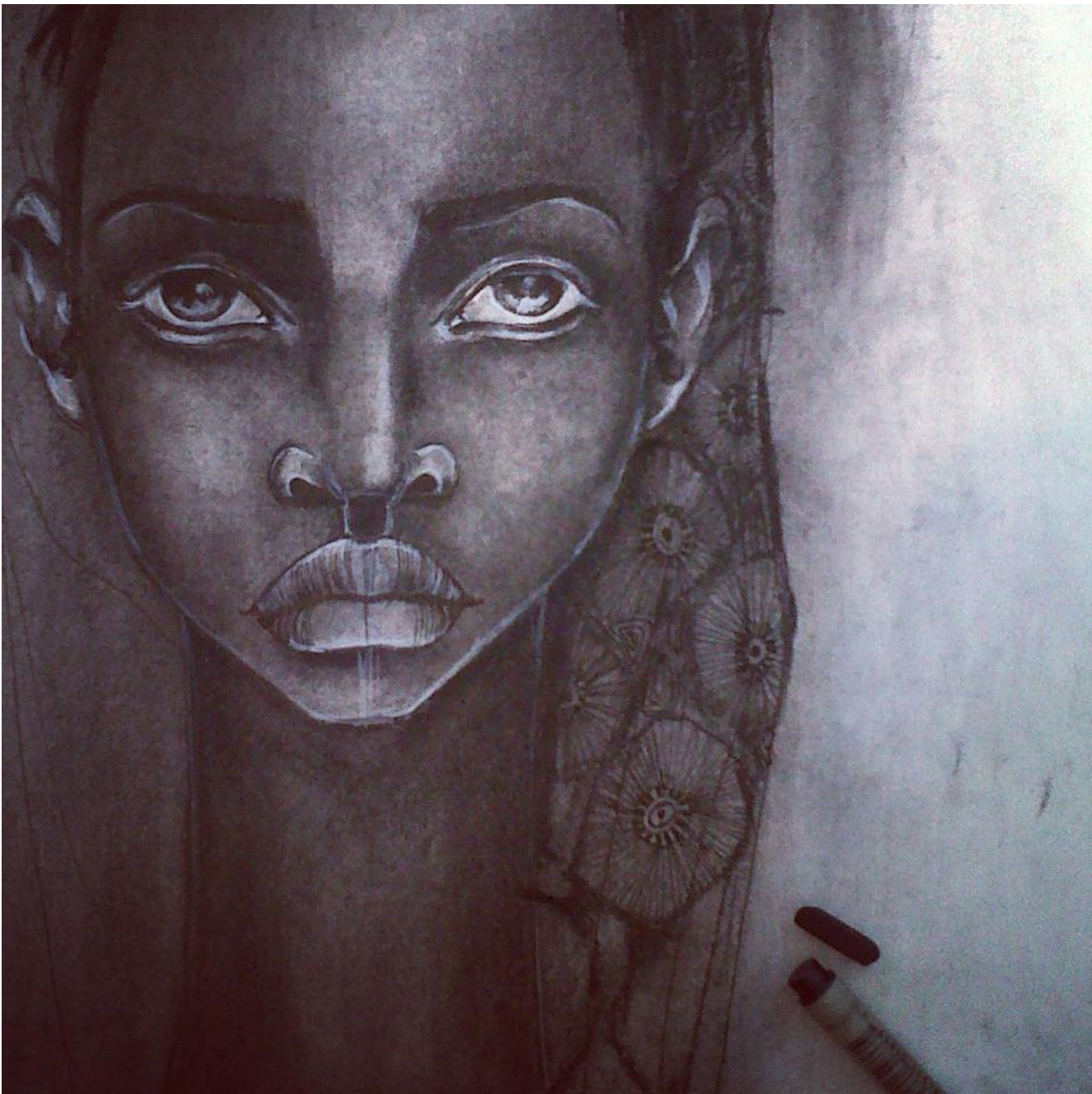


Keeping Company With Jaguars – Brianna McCarthy

McCarthy's comfort with an ease of interpretation lends itself to a multiplicity of patterning and titling, even in the selection of which women represent jumbies, and which signify saints. Neither saint nor jumbie, she stresses, "is more important than the other, and neither is on either side of the good/evil spectrum." In shifting her focus away from a simplistic rhetoric of diametrically opposed forces, McCarthy creates a sphere of inclusion with these personages, a cyclical font of archetypes from which specific desires, talismans and favours can be drawn, depending on personal need.

"There is no woman in this collection who isn't at least a little bit dangerous," the artist says, proffering the position that innocence is not the mirror attribute to danger in the context of her creations' multifaceted power. Expressing the desire to create away from a systematically inculcated sense of innocence as parochial and virginal, McCarthy posits hopefulness as the reverse template of danger that emerges in several of these pieces. "Hopefulness can be a beautiful, naïve thing," she says, adding that the persistence of hope in ragged and uncertain circumstances guides some of her inspirational systems in Saints + Jumbies.

Exciting emergences are making themselves felt in the creative contemporary Caribbean landscape, McCarthy observes. She enthuses over the particular energy fuelling the installations of Richard Mark Rawlins, attributing to it an inherent "coolness". Rawlins' current and fifth solo exhibition, [Steupps](#), which runs at the Medulla Art Gallery until July 24th, 2013, is a "powerful homage to the whole notion of artists' statements," McCarthy says. Also ranking high on the list of creative peers whose work excites her is [Ebony G. Patterson](#), whose use of colour and pattern strikes chords of synchronicity. What McCarthy calls "the overabundance, the embellishment and elaborateness" in Patterson's work summon comparisons between the two, for all that the latter's art frequently engages with discussions on masculinity, while the former's work roots itself in harvesting the feminine and anchoring its primacy.



Our Lady of Exile- Brianna McCarthy

Of her inspirations, the artist names four without reservation, ranging from long-held adorations to freshly curated zeal. She was eight or nine when the work of Erté, principally his [Harper's Bazaar](#) covers designed between 1915 and 1937, captured her attention, marking a fascination with the oeuvre of the Art Deco master that has not diminished with time. "Erté blew my mind," McCarthy gushes, placing the vast body of [Peter Minshall](#)'s creative work in an equal position of importance. If her resonances with Minshall and Erté have been lifelong, her two newer creative lodestones are Boscoe Holder, whom she lauds for his use of light and colour, as well as Jasmine Thomas-Girvan. Enthusing on the precision in Thomas-Girvan's style, McCarthy says, "I like intricate things; I like small, very detailed, beautifully-made things and I think she focuses on that."

Though it might be considered a perilous exercise to assign personal favourites, certain pieces within the Saints + Jumbies collection run close to the marrow of McCarthy's attachment. "I met "Our Lady of Exile" at Christmas, on Mt. St. Benedict," the artist divulges, explaining that the genesis of the Lady's creation came from a collection box, marked with nothing but the exact title that McCarthy assigned to her piece.

“The Rebirth of Kimpa Vita” emerged from the artist’s bond with a new friend: “I had this incredibly strong bond with somebody, and I drew most of Kimpa Vita during our first conversation.” Of the painting, named by her friend (in honour of his patron saint, a Congolese Catholic prophet, executed for heresy) McCarthy shares that “she is me when I’m at my best, which is not very often, which is why I’m attached to her.”



Rebirth of Kimpa Vita – Brianna McCarthy

Given how enthusiastically McCarthy responds to collaborative projects, it's no surprise that her upcoming artistic plans involve a handful of talented photographers. "Most of the masks in this collection have places to go," enthuses the artist, naming the recipients with delight: [Radcliffe Roye](#); [Kwesi Abbensetts](#) and [Rodell Warner](#). McCarthy has invited each of them to engage, play and shoot the masks from Saints + Jumbies in the fullness of their own interpretation, without censorship or guidance from the artist herself. She eagerly looks forward to the products of this multimedia-based interaction, the results of which will likely form a joint exhibition. To this cadre, the photographs of [Sancho Francisco](#), who completed a shoot with McCarthy earlier this year, will be added. This photographic assemblage may be combined with a small installation of masks and body parts created by McCarthy, and is tentatively slated for a late 2013 launch. McCarthy herself remains open and playfully enthusiastic to this, and several other creative permutations that involve frolicking, experimenting and threading through layers of the primordial Self.

Brianna McCarthy's second solo exhibition, Saints + Jumbies, ran at the Medulla Art Gallery, Port of Spain, Trinidad, from May 22nd to June 15th, 2013.



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