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What Haunts You: An Interview With Anique Jordan – Desmond Miller

I can't remember the first time I met Anique Jordan. Instead, I remember reading Anique through her blog post "Why I write." I was stirred by her honesty, bareness and insistence on confronting oneself. After a busy couple of years – busy the way TTC wait times are long – we sat down on a Sunday afternoon to reflect on her art and the need for artists who are willing to do difficult work, willing to ask questions that lead down different paths than the well trodden ones of empire.

Desmond Miller: When I was thinking through how to approach our conversation, I thought about how your work is very studied, very deliberate – the reasons you choose poses, who you chose as the subjects. It's just something that struck me.

Anique Jordan: It has been like that, but it doesn't mean that that's what it's going to be. I started creating work by learning about my family history. My process involved doing a lot of research, asking questions, talking to the women in my family and trying to learn stories through them. The research became part of how my work was created, then, the work I created started to influence what I researched – it sort of folded in on itself. I worked with this process because I had been thinking a lot about what's missing and invisible. So, I spent a lot of time learning about the places where history gets stored, which brought me to the archive. There, what became more and more apparent is the invisibility of Black histories in Canada.

It made me think about what type of history gets held in the archive and how subjective that history is. But it wasn't until I was working on my first major commission that I started realizing that I'm privileging this space of absence. By working with the archive I was giving power to the idea that we are, that I am, invisible.

So it's not to say that we are not completely erased, removed, invisiblized, dismissed from being written about. It is to say that I am interested in thinking about the places where we are present. And giving power to people I believe have power.

I'm no longer interested in privileging the spaces that do that.

Not only looking at history differently, but also time itself.

This thought process meant, when I did the Lawren Harris show for the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the performers in all my images were in a site that was thinking about Black bodies and memory. I'm moving the archive away from the capital "A" archive, that's stored, removed, structured, in boxes in a building, and putting it back into the original source of the archive, which is the human body, the memory bank, the places of story and communication. That's what *Mas' at 94 Chestnut* (2016) began to teach me.



I think also about *94 Chestnut at the Crossroads* (2016). About what it looks like for a Black woman to create an image of a Black woman who is neither focused on a white gaze, nor solely on Blackness but instead focused on what she is doing. That idea almost seems radical in this world.

Toni Morrison writes about getting wrapped up doing this work, this intellectual labour of talking about and thinking about whiteness. And in doing that labour, nothing else gets done. Thinking about whiteness is making me dumb. So much of my intellect is consumed with it that there is hardly space for anything else. I think about the connections between what's happening with multiple communities in Canada – Black people, Indigenous people, Chinese people, Tamil people, migrant workers, refugees – and ideas that need to be thought about. Through my work, I'd like to be sharing conversations with our connections.





DM: If we think about bridging communities – especially in the Lawren Harris exhibit *The Idea of North* (2016) – the experiences of Chinese people within Toronto, within The Ward, come to mind. These connections exist already in your work. In general, you're crossing a lot of boundaries. If you're centring Black women, it seems that you're interested in having a conversation that goes beyond Black people.

AJ: It's not a matter of moving beyond for me. It's a matter of holding multiple things at the same time.

DM: You did this with your latest work the *Mas'* series: *94 Chestnut at the Crossroads* and *Mas' at 94 Chestnut* – and especially *Mas' the performance* (2016). You had 30 intergenerational Black artists who are representing a multiplicity of Blacknesses.

AJ: The performance started from a feeling. I wanted this mass to move through the space uninterested in the fact that it was so great, and being witnessed. It was uninterested in time. So it took its time. It's not subjected to the laws of science, of the world, of gravity, of anything. It just is. It exists. I was interested in the feeling that could come from that. A feeling of awe. Of awe and greatness. And stillness, and reverence – and power, but in a way that superseded the ideas of power here. An omniscient kind of powerful feeling.

Mas' is rooted in ideas that come from carnival – socio-political commentary, costume, performance, rhythm, ritual, history, mythology, liminality and more. And as someone interested in fashion, I tend to be very meticulous with how the costuming is performed. I knew people would be wearing something that

was not time based or gender specific. That allowed for multiple things to be true at the same time. I want that complexity because I think that the mission of the colonial project is to remove complexity.

It's not a replacing because it's not a response. It's just life hot damn! [laughing]

So for *Mas' the performance*, I wanted this movement, which was also a type of procession that would have come out of the carnival masquerade process. But it is also a church mass, which connects to the still image of the Black church that existed in Toronto's old neighbourhood, St. John's Ward. Because the site of the old church is now going to become a provincial courthouse, I thought about mass in a courthouse. And it invokes the irony of Infrastructure Ontario insisting that building a courthouse on land where a Black church once resided is an apolitical project. I wanted to think about how now the space is neither of those things. It's neither the church nor the courthouse in this moment. It's a carnival ground. It's an in-between world where anything is possible. So it's ideal for thinking about Mas', in those three things:

the courthouse, the church and
the masquerader.

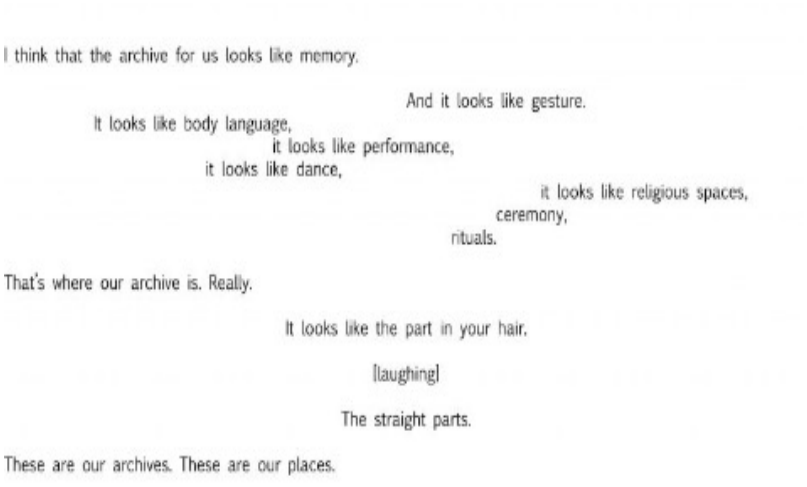
Having this mas' walk through the AGO sort of stunted all ideas of what could exist in that space. And created something totally new that forced the audience to reinterpret what it means.



I could feel a shift in power that made the Black audience members at ease, and the white audience members uncomfortable. Which wasn't my intention, but I felt it could happen. I recognize when you're performing, whether or not you're performing for a still image or for motion in this performance, you're being changed. And if you're being changed, then there are people that are in your triangle behind you who are also being transformed. And the people you meet will also be changed. I think that transforms the world really. Us. As people, as humans, physically embodying something that shoots out new possibilities to the world and begs that we experiment with them. That was my idea with *Mas'*.

DM: I want to go back to the difference between the "big A" archive and the "small a" archive. In other interviews, you've talked about the importance of photographic work being able to create an archive.

AJ:



And if I continue to invest my time in that library space,

– pulling out cards,
– getting the archivist to get the box for me,
– looking through fonds and,
– decimals systems – Dewey – whatever his name is. [both laugh]

If I continue to invest my time there I may miss what I'm really looking for.

DM: You've used a lot of Archive but there is this idea that the Archive isn't really the place. It makes me think of your thesis work *Possessed* (2015), where you're working with this family history that was bestowed upon you. But you're also working with oral history, asking the women in your family, "How did you survive?" How did you come to this idea of using both Archive in the "big A" sense, and archive in the "little a" sense? And how did you decide to make such a site-specific work, specifically with *Salt* (2015)?

AJ: I didn't really make the decision. *Salt* wasn't supposed to be a photo series. It was supposed to be a performance. When I was in Trinidad, I was looking for this white Caribbean women's housecoat. I don't know why. And then I put it on, and I just laid in my aunt's bed saying, "Tell me what I should do with you." I thought about all the different places that women in my family talked about, representing different means of survival. I went around to those different places and took pictures.

DM: And that's it.

AJ: Yeah. I was looking at the pictures and started stylizing them. I've always been interested in the deadpan expression, so that came out. Who says you're supposed to smile in a picture? It's ridiculous, that idea. I'm always interested in an expression that could be read in many ways.



But what's most important in my work is that it goes into both archives

The performance becomes part of the archive of the person who is performing it.

The work is also part of the Archive, because it's an object. It stays somewhere and it can be recalled at some point.

DM: I'm thinking of this idea where the work changes a person who is part of this performance. Have you had any conversation with your mom or your aunties? Especially about the pictures they were in, *The Sixth Company Battalion.*

AJ: Oh my gosh, yeah! That changed my entire family relationship. This is how I learned my family descends from Black Loyalists; it's where the costuming in this series comes from. I was gifted this book that was the genealogy of my family history.[1] When I started doing this work, my mom helped me a lot. We went to Trinidad, drove to this place that was written about in the book, found a man who was also part of the same lineage and learned of an entire part of our family we never knew existed.

Everything just came together and started choosing me. I followed; I had submitted to it.



DM: I'm thinking about all the works, from *Salt* to *The Sixth Company Battalion*, to the *Mas'* experience. It's intimate for different people in different ways. What I'd love to talk about is the intimate relationship you seem to have with yourself. This ongoing internal dialogue through journaling.

AJ: Oh, that's interesting.

DM: You shared your journals with me, which include lots of questions and affirmations – of yourself, of the work you are doing. In a context where Black women and their work are often devalued, you take the agency to say, "I am worth something. I am valuable," when no one else is saying that. I see it as an act of resistance.

AJ: I'm the darkest skinned person in my family. As a dark skinned person, as a girl, the youngest person in my family and my hair's natural, I knew these things. From very, very, very young. I mean in elementary school people called me "tar," "Blackie," "midnight". I knew that if I didn't make a decision to not hate myself that I could very easily.

I knew that so early.
So intimately.

I remember looking at my face and looking at my nose, and I would say, "Anique, if you start to find a problem with your nose, you will never recover from it. You cannot." I had to keep making that choice.

DM: With this choice, you also move into a haunting. You have this beautiful quote from another interview. Chiedza Pasipanodya asked you, "What does stepping into something look like? What is the idea of moving beyond? What is after survival?" You said,

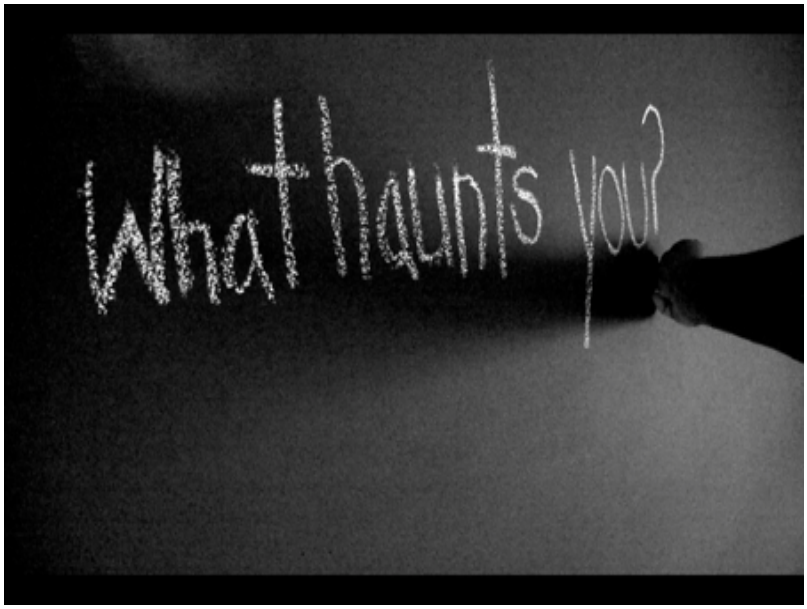
"For some reason I want to say haunting. If we think about survival as being alive because something is trying to make you not alive then the moving beyond survival is living without the fear of not living. Then what remains when you move beyond is the memory of that fear and that is the haunting. Now, what can be created out of what haunts us, is us – our own humanity. "[2]

AJ: A lot of my work – particularly the work with *Possessed* – taught me how I create art, and what type of art is important to me. *Possessed* all comes

from this place of disregard for temporalities. This is why I journal all those questions of my art. I want to know.

Where is it that you live?
Who else lives with you?
What are the relationships you have with people in this space?
This timeless space.
What comes from that?
And what went into it to create it?

So, all those questions become asked, of everything that I do.



Thinking about 94 Chestnut as an address,
as a space, as a plot of land,
which is an Indigenous space
now under construction.

I think about what was there, structurally. What is there now in its absence. And what is coming to it. In this in-between space is possibility; there's a space of absence and presence at the same time.

Because something is invisible does not mean that it's not present.
We're invisible all the time. But it doesn't mean that we're not present.

And, what then comes from this? What comes from the knowledge of these things that are intangible? What comes from it – which is so instrumental for

things that are intangible? What comes from it – which is so instrumental for me in my thinking – is that these things are sacred. What comes from it are movements, are rhythms, are mannerisms, are strategies, survival strategies. That little girl that's looking in the mirror that's saying, "Don't hate your nose. Do not hate your nose!" However, I was able to grab onto that piece of something that held me down until today, that is something that is invisible that taught me something about myself that allowed me to survive.

I think about that, this in-between space, as a moment of then creating something new. Where we then get to create for ourselves what it means to be human. I'm starting to understand that what humanity is for me is playing the keys with two different hands. It's the multiple complexities held at the same time that makes something new. I'm interested in how we harvest the potential that's there, and make something new or speak wholly about what is already there.

Now, the haunting for me is primarily a source of creation. It's a strategy of survival and a recognition of that strategy. Those are the two primary functions for me. I see it as something that doesn't get shaken, it doesn't get undone. Because no one else has access to your haunting.

DM: You're also playing with time. You talk about this disregard for temporality. Disrupting the linearity of time. The way you position characters, subjects, people within the performance works, within the photographs, is very disruptive of that idea. Where does that come from?

AJ: I think that could be understood as two things: one, as a queering of space; and two, as a type of futurity. I don't think they exist without each other. And I don't think of futurity in the way of something in the future. I think of it as in the afrofuturist sentiments of multiple times, multiple possibilities. But I'm more interested in thinking about it as a queering of time and space. Where what is said must be, is not, the only option.

When I think of the queering of space, I think about the layering of ideas, the layering of identities. I think of standing in the centre of a spectrum with arms stretched up, down and across. The queering of time is like a layering of time, which gives no one version of it any more privilege than any other. When you queer time, you inadvertently queer everything that is happening in that time. It comes down to all the different elements that I use. The queering of time, the haunting, liminal space, futurity, carnival, they all have relationships. They might even all be the same thing.

And that is the space where my work comes from.

Footnotes:

[1] Dating back to formerly enslaved Africans who fought as Loyalists in the 1812 war and were, in return for their service, granted land in Trinidad. See, Hackshaw, J. M., & Sampson, A. (1993). Two among many: The genealogy of Bashana Evins and Amphy Jackson. Diego Martin, Trinidad, W.I: John M. Hackshaw.

[2] Anique Jordan and Chiedza Pasipanodya (2015). In conversation. *The Scratch and Mix Project Exhibition Catalogue*. Toronto: Nia Centre for the Arts, p. 75.

Photo Credits

1. *Mas' at 94 Chestnut (*2016) digital C-print mounted on di-bond. © 2016 Anique Jordan.

2. Set documentation of *94 Chestnut at the Crossroads series* (2016) 4 photographs displayed at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Photographer: Paul Bailey.

3. Video still from performance documentation of *Mas'* (2016) live performance on July 7, 2016 at "First Thursdays", Art Gallery of Ontario, approx. 30 minutes. Videographer: Gesilayefa Azorbo.

4. *Kitchen, "Salt" series* (2015) Digital C-prints. © 2015 Anique Jordan.

5. Presentation documentation of *The Sixth Company Battalion* (2015) at xChange 2016 from January 15-17, Hamilton, ON. Photo courtesy of Engineers Without Borders Canada.

6. Video still from *Possessed* (2015) Single Channel Video, 2:08 minutes, Black and White, © 2015 Anique Jordan.

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Anique Jordan *is a multi-disciplinary artist, award-winning writer, scholar and social-entrepreneur. As an artist, her artwork plays with the aesthetics found in traditional Trinidadian carnival and the theory of hauntology challenging historical narratives and creating, what she calls, impossible*

images. Her art creation processes are guided by the questions: What stories do we tell that go unchallenged? And in how many ways can we know a thing? Anique's work has taken her to Jamaica, Costa Rica, South Africa, Ecuador, Trinidad and Barbados exploring the connections between art and socio-economic survival. Anique has performed and exhibited in galleries across Canada including Art Gallery of Windsor (2017), Eastern Edge Gallery (2016), Art Gallery of Ontario (2016), Nuit Blanche (2016), Gallery 44 (2016), Crossroads Artspace (2015) and The Watah Gallery (2015). She is currently the executive director of Whippersnapper Gallery and working on the manuscript for her first book, Possessed: Black Women, Hauntology and Art as Survival. @aniquejordan, aniquejjordan.com

Trained primarily as a researcher and mostly self-taught as a pattern-maker, ***Desmond Miller's*** *work explores themes of race, masculinity, identity, archive and the spaces in between. His research and writing are invested in Black Canadas, mapping connections throughout the Black diaspora. Artistically, he works primarily with textiles to produce garments and objects that speak to the stories we live. He focuses on the craft of constructing garments – from relatively simple to intricate, hand-made and time consuming pieces. In exploring the possibilities of using new, used, and recuperated textiles, Desmond seeks to generate something new that bears traces of the past. His practice employs workshop facilitation (Textile Museum of Canada, 2016; The Gladstone Hotel, 2016), storytelling (Black Lives Matter Toronto Freedom School, 2016) and collaborative projects (The Gladstone Hotel, 2016; BAND Gallery, 2016). Desmond is based in Toronto, Canada.*

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