



Peter Minshall,  
*Ratrace*, 1986.

## Quickening the Heart: Marlon Griffith, Masman from Japan

Claire Tancons

A boy child comes out of Belmont at the corner of Cadiz Road or Jerningham Avenue, and faces the Savannah. He soon sees them, throngs of them, on Queen's Park East, racing like the plague. Ten years old, he frames the scene, or, rather, his eyes register thousands of frames in minutes. An outbreak of black with slithers of pink and coatings of grey. Rats! Black are the masks, pink the standards, and grey the costumes. Rats! They've come down the hills, out of the gutters, to run their yearly race. "Dey say he get horn." "For Truth?" "A Homo?" "Punch say".... The slogans that adorn the standards they bear have turned into a loud gossip. Their protest, if it is one, is a carnival. Their race is a rat race. *Ratrace!*

Almost three times ten years later, I look for cues of Marlon Griffith's witnessing of what he would later describe as the foundational event in the formation of his artistic vocation. Beyond his recollecting and my fictional narrating, there is a flurry of photographs online and I have folders full of TIFFs and JPEGs of Peter Minshall's *Ratrace* mas' performance in Port of Spain during Carnival 1986. The teeth I can see in the photographs are frightening; the ears, grotesque. The whole thing seems to come out of a comic book, speech bubbles and all. And the tails. So long they needed to be held up—and they were: under the arm like a clutch, in the hand like a whip, above the head... for what now? The shimmer of freshly moulded plastic conferred appeal to otherwise unseemly disguises. Something about it must have captured the ethos of the era. I mean, we'd just entered the second half of the 1980s and people wore that for Carnival: rat costumes!

It's been almost 30 years since Minshall's *Ratrace* sprawled through the streets of Port of Spain and almost ten years since Marlon's performances started to unfold before the world in so many displaced Savannahs. In 2008, in Gwangju, South Korea, the May 18 Democracy Square—in effect a large traffic island at the confluence of three major avenues—became one such Savannah, and the seventh Gwangju Biennale the first international arena in which he presented a mas'-



**Left:** *RUNAWAY/REACTION* concept collage, 2008, vellum and white pencil on black paper.

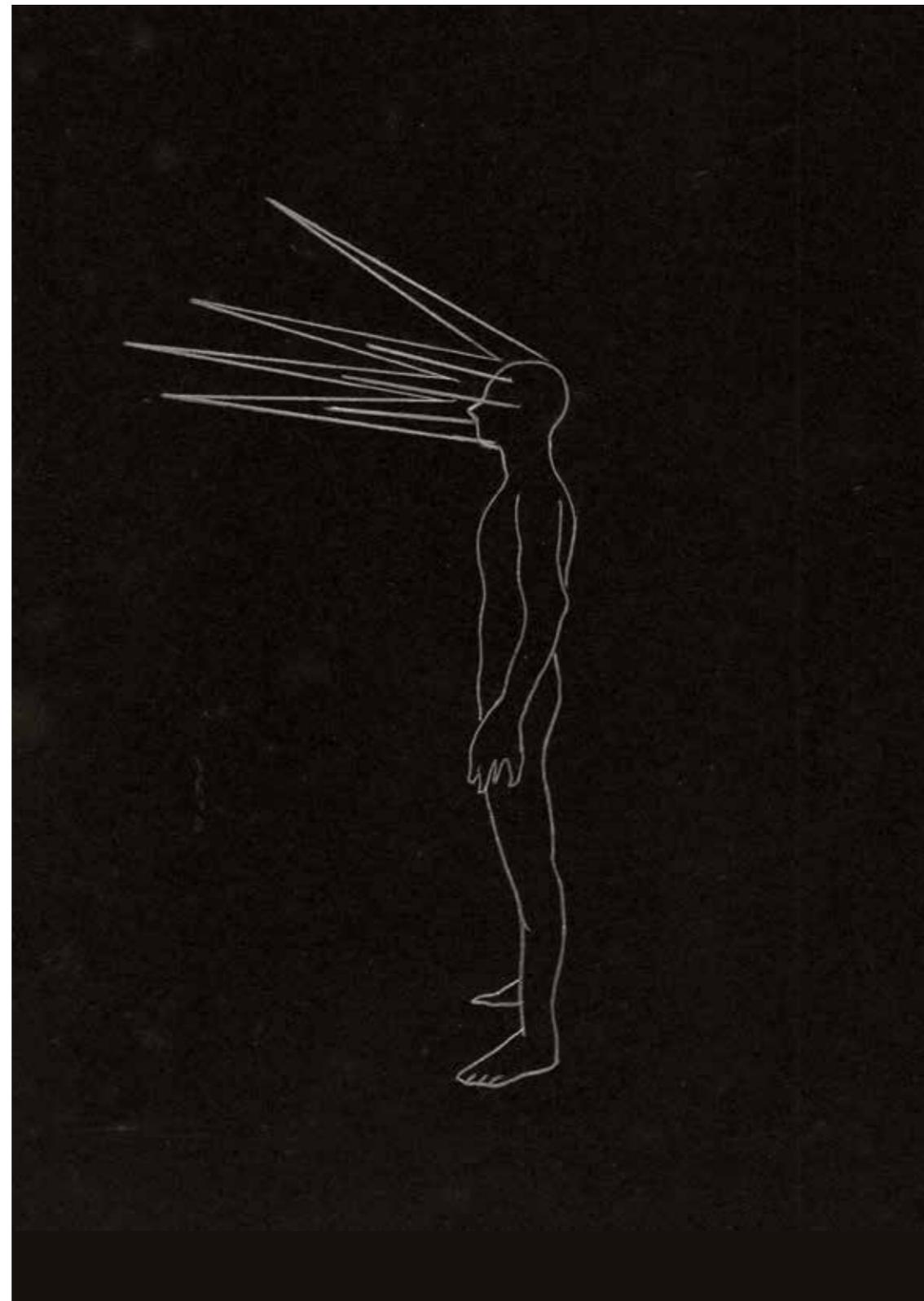
**Opposite:** *RUNAWAY/REACTION* concept drawing, 2008, white pencil on black paper.

inspired art performance.<sup>1</sup> Up until then, Marlon had kept his mas' making and artmaking activities separate, designing kiddies bands for Carnival on the one hand and making drawings and installations for exhibitions on the other. His artmaking practice was infused by mas' making techniques and themes and his mas' making designs were much touted for their distinct artistry.<sup>2</sup> Marlon was also invested in performance, though the first he did was on the smallest possible scale, his own body, and in Cape Town, far away from Port of Spain.

At an even farther geographical remove from Trinidad, and further into a conceptual leap forward toward an integrated artistic practice, Marlon created a potent precipitate as his contribution to *SPRING* in Gwangju. *RUNAWAY/REACTION*, whose title borrowed from the name of a chemical reaction, offered no king or queen, no jury prize, but it did offer a people's prize. Other photographs attest to the impact of Marlon's experiment in the early fall of 2008. The audience seems struck by surprise as *SPRING* sweeps through the streets. When *RUNAWAY/REACTION* rolled past, creatures of pure imagination

<sup>1</sup> It was envisioned as such by Anthony "Sam" Mollineau, a member the Callaloo Company, Minshall's now defunct artistic workshop and production company, with whose project manager, Todd Gulick, I collaborated closely.

<sup>2</sup> I have written about the impact of the teachings of the mas' camp onto Marlon's artistic formation in "Lighting the Shadow: Trinidad In and Out of Light", *Third Text*, vol 21, no 3, May 2007, pp 327–339. That essay took as a departure an eponymous exhibition at the now defunct Caribbean Contemporary Arts (CCA7) in which I first curated Marlon's work.



borrowed a futuristic disguise of projected abstractions of water and became moving human screens of spiked costumes. The rats are long gone. The images remain.

Enough already. All that old talk. Marlon is in Nagoya now and I am back in New Orleans. “He writes me from Japan. He writes me from Africa....” Halfway through *Sans Soleil*, 1983—or maybe closer towards the end, I can’t recall—Chris Marker introduces the motif of Carnival as part of his fictional epistolary recollection and filmic retrocollection of castaway images. Carnival in Guinea-Bissau, not Trinidad, though roughly from the same period that Minshall’s mas’ awakened Marlon’s artistic sensibility. As a backdrop, there are the independence struggles, though against the Portuguese, not the British. The role Carnival plays in national affirmation in the postcolonial period is better analyzed in—indeed is the centerpiece of—another, slightly earlier, landmark film essay, António Ole’s *Carnaval da Vitória*, 1978, but I digress. Then, of course, yes, there is Japan, the other pole of the sunless world, where Marlon has been based since 2009.

Carnival, anti-colonial resistance, Trinidad, Japan, film, and travel: these are the coordinates of Marlon’s artistic map, which *Sans Soleil* helps me navigate. In this essay, I want to talk about film and memory more so than mas’ and performance, framing rather than making or playing mas’. These are related (of course?), but not in the way in which I had previously thought, and maybe not in the way in which he thinks about it at all. This text is very much an introspective conversation about artistic intention and curatorial projection, conflated with a non-exhaustive account of my ten-year collaboration with Marlon (2004–2014).<sup>3</sup>

“He writes me from Japan....” I do wonder whether Japan’s “neighbourhood celebrations”, the counterpoint to “the economic miracle” which belong in the list of “things that quicken the heart”, provide a fertile ground from which to rethink Carnival, that other neighbourhood celebration (recall Belmont). I intend to ask him. *Sans*

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, I curated all the works mentioned in this essay:

- Lighting the Shadow: Trinidad In and Out of Light, CCA7, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 7 October–4 November 2004
- RUNAWAY/REACTION in SPRING, Gwangju Biennale, Gwangju, South Korea, 5 September 2008
- A Walk Into the Night, CAPE 09, Cape Town Biennial, Cape Town, South Africa, 2 May 2009

- POSITIONS+POWER, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 4 March 2014, performed for EN MAS’: Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean, Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans, 7 March–7 June 2015
- No Black in the Union Jack in Up Hill Down Hall: An Indoor Carnival, BMW Tate Live Series, Tate Modern, 23 August 2014

*Soleil* seems to suggest that link. Sandor Krasna, the film’s fictitious cameraman/narrator and stand-in for director Chris Marker, writes that “things that quicken the heart” are “not a bad criterion... when filming”. Did it quicken Marlon’s child heart to see grown up man-rats sprawl out of his neighbourhood in celebration of Carnival? My recollection of his account of the event registers like a still image, a framed scene, a film still: a fact further reinforced by the photographic frame through which I am now examining *Ratrace*. But this projection all goes back to one of his very first aspirations.

Marlon’s exhibition Symbols of Endurance, curated by Emelie Chhangur for the Art Gallery at York University, brings abundant evidence of the way in which Marlon framed *Ring of Fire*, and previous processional performances, in a quasi-filmic fashion. Sequence after sequence, storyboards which are on display here for the first time, have always been central in Marlon’s drafting process to show how he intends the performance to unfold processionally. Now, to be clear, at the time of the first experiment of SPRING neither Marlon nor I referred to the work he did as an artist nor the work I did as a curator as “processional performance”. The term I began using circa 2007 was “procession”, which I began envisioning as the possibility of curating public performance on a mass scale and for a large audience. Work included under this term might have initially come from a Carnival background but the concept could also embrace any contemporary artistic production.<sup>4</sup> “Processional performance” is the expression I have been using since 2014 or thereabout, and turns out to be well suited to Marlon’s brand of mas’-inspired large-scale public performance, as well as providing further insights into the relationship between mas’ making and filmmaking in this work.

This relationship between mas’ and film is one that begs further investigation generally, in which I cannot indulge at length within the context of this text. What I can share is of general knowledge (among Trinidad Carnival buffs, that is): in the 50s and 60s, masmen used film as a resource for selecting subject matter and as reference for making

<sup>4</sup> MAS’: From Process to Procession, Caribbean Carnival as Art Practice, the title of an exhibition I curated for BRIC’s Rotunda Gallery at Isolde Brielmaier’s invitation in 2007, attests to that breakthrough. It was to include a procession in the immediate vicinity of the Gallery in Brooklyn Heights, but this aspect unfortunately never panned out.

costumes. Mas' bands of Roman centurions had the pepla qualities of Cinecittà cinematographic productions of the same period, while Fancy Indians donned feathers as fake as those of Hollywood Westerns. The most important, indeed foundational, relationship between film and mas', however, is not referential but structural, corroborated by the history of film or, as it were, the motion picture itself. From the Lumière brothers' very first film (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*, 1895) to Georges Méliès' later cinematographic experiments (including *The Mardi Gras Procession* and *Mid-Lent Procession in Paris*, both 1897, to Jean-Luc Godard's "processional" filmic device (*défilement*), film pioneers and film avant-gardists have turned to actual processions to record images of bodies in motion and used the processional mode to set images into motion.<sup>5</sup> For the former, organic opportunities were still amply available in the waning popular culture of late-nineteenth-century Paris through funeral processions, military parades, and Mardi Gras parades, while for the latter they had to be reconstructed specifically for the camera.

Against this backdrop, Marlon's work appears proto-cinematographic. Marlon is concerned with two facets of the great experiment with images that led to filmmaking: the moving image on the one hand, and the projected image on the other hand. As concerns the moving image, Marlon, as evidenced in his use of storyboarding, does not so much look back to film for thematic references for making mas', as earlier masmen did, as he frames his mas'-inspired processional performances like film—akin to earlier filmmakers recording processional movement to highlight the technical capabilities of cinematographic machines. The relationship between projection and procession was not lost on William Kentridge whose early projection experiments and processional imagery date back to the late 1980s and early 1990s and are worth contrasting with Marlon's own experiments. Where Kentridge began with projections by way of drawing animation to figure processions only to arrive at processional performance over two decades later, Marlon furthered his interest in both projection and the performance of procession at the same time, with an emphasis on the latter.<sup>6</sup>

5 Blümlinger, Christa, "Procession and Projection: Notes on a Figure in the Work of Jean-Luc Godard", *For Ever Godard*, Michael Temple, James S Williams and Michael Witt eds, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004, pp 178–187.

6 For an in-depth analysis of the processional trope within Kentridge's work see Leora Maltz-Leca, "Process/"

Procession: William Kentridge and the Process of Change", *Art Bulletin*, vol 95, no 1, March 2013, pp 139–165. Kentridge's first live processional performance on record occurred as part of the unveiling of *Triumphs and Laments*, a monumental mural commission from Tevereterno in Rome on 21 April 2016.

As concerns the projected image, Marlon made his first experiment with projection with only the flimsiest of images: the cast shadow—where a solid object intercepts light between its source and the surface onto which it is thrown. In his installation for *Lighting the Shadow: Trinidad In and Out of Light* (CCA7, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 2004), the objects that acted as the intercessors for the images to be projected were five plastic "prints" made with the vacuum-forming technique used in mas' making—for moulding the *Ratrace* masks, for example. The light source was light bulbs precariously anchored to the ground with hand-made contraptions. The surface was the white walls of the gallery space. The figures, including the artist himself in a self-portrait, formed barely visible reminiscences of human forms emerging out of darkness as in *J'ouvert*, the nocturnal mud masquerade and cleansing ritual that inaugurates the two days of Carnival revelry in Trinidad.<sup>7</sup>

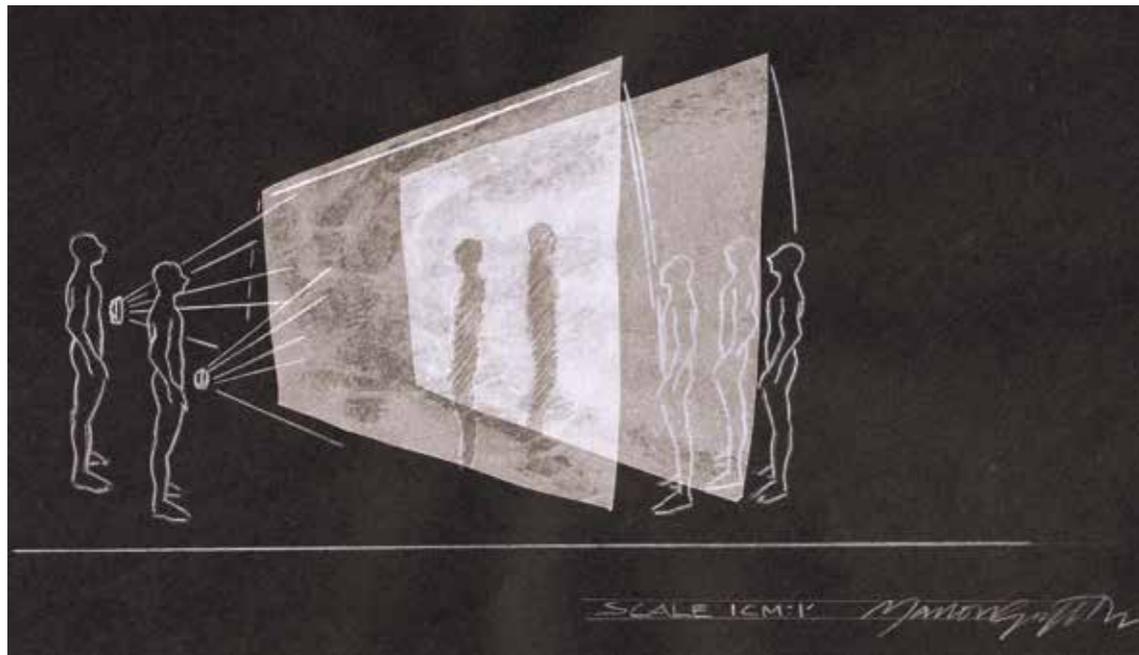
Marlon replicated this technique, this time adding motion, for his second processional performance, *A Walk Into the Night*, CAPE 09, 2009, which took place in the Company Gardens, downtown Cape Town. Where lights fastened to the ground projected shadows onto immobile walls in *Lighting the Shadow*, in *A Walk Into the Night* the whole projecting apparatus itself was set in motion. One hundred or so masqueraders, many coming from Cape Town's own carnival groups, doubled up as shadows projected onto moving screens. Kentridge's *Shadow Procession*, 1999, a stop-motion animation of torn black paper puppets walking in profile with a heavy burden, comes to mind. This "procession of the dispossessed" is particularly resonant within the context of post-apartheid South Africa out of which Kentridge's drawing animation work emerges and to which Marlon's nocturnal walk brings further fugitive figurations.<sup>8</sup> Marching three abreast, the line closest to the audience held white fabric screens aloft while those furthest away carried hand-held torchlights so that an abstracted likeness of the middle line was projected, as shadows, onto the other side of the screens. Fittingly, for a piece whose title referenced the almost eponymous anti-apartheid novel *A Walk in the Night*, 1962, by Alex La Guma, shadows were here used as a means to eschew the

7 For more on the making of this work and the exhibition in which it was featured see Tancons, "Lighting the Shadow", pp 331–332.

8 Cameron, Dan, "Procession of the Dispossessed", *William Kentridge*, London: Phaidon, 1999, pp 36–81.

**Below:** *A Walk Into the Night: Fire* comprehensive concept collage, 2009, vellum and pencil on black paper.

**Opposite:** *A Walk Into the Night: Deer* concept collage, 2009, vellum and pencil on black paper.





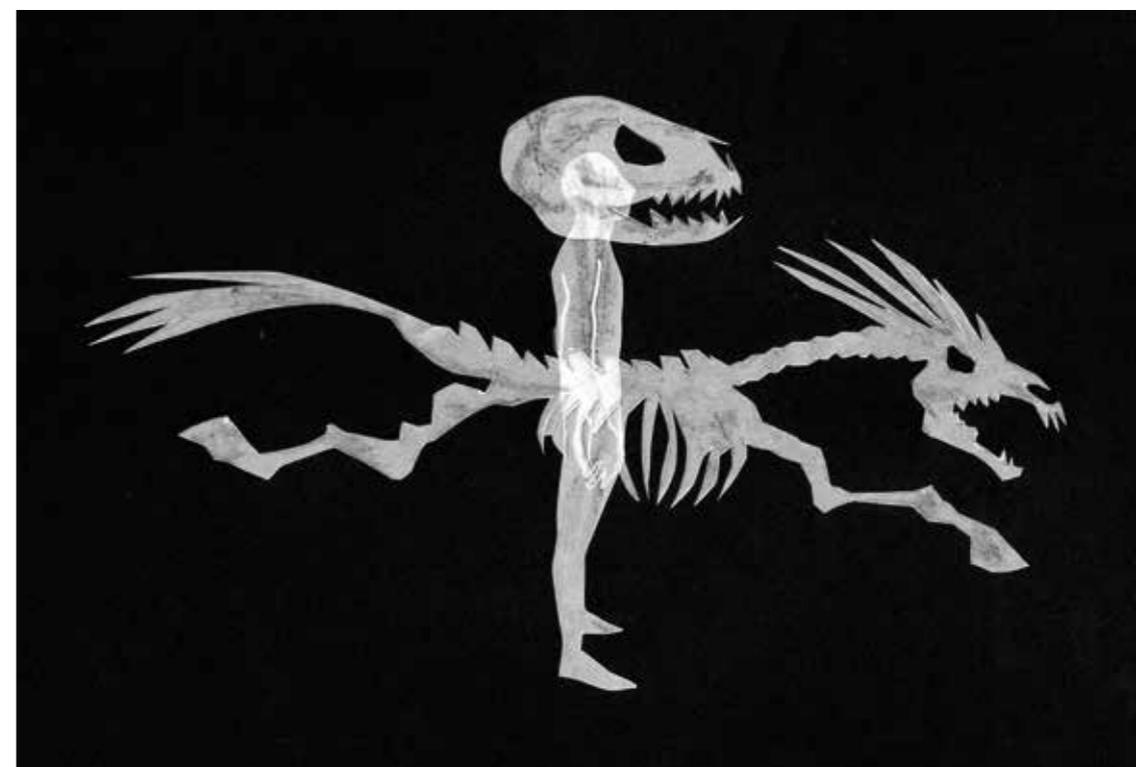
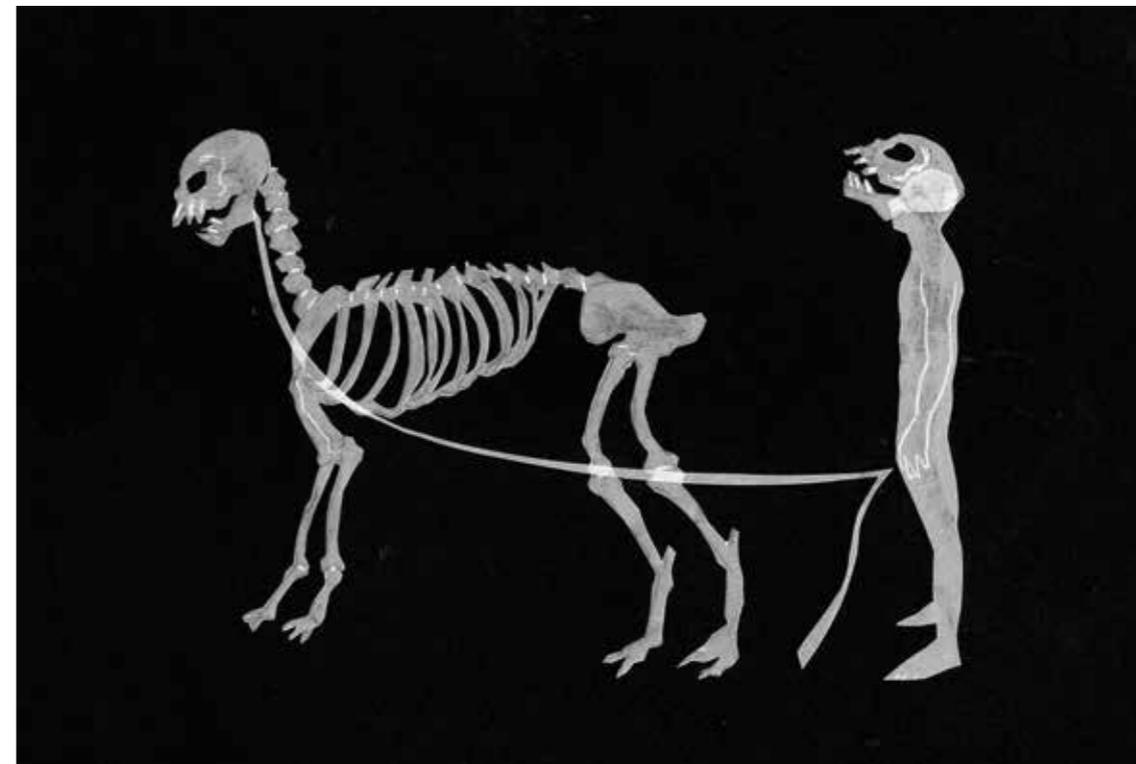
**Top left:** *A Walk Into the Night: Fire* concept collage, 2009, vellum and pencil on black paper.

**Bottom left:** *A Walk Into the Night: Lady* concept collage, 2009, vellum and pencil on black paper.

**Opposite top:** *A Walk Into the Night: Doberman* concept collage, 2009, vellum and pencil on black paper.

**Opposite bottom:** *A Walk Into the Night: Dark Rider* concept collage, 2009, vellum and pencil on black paper.

**pp 66–67:** *A Walk Into the Night*, 2009, Cape Town, South Africa.

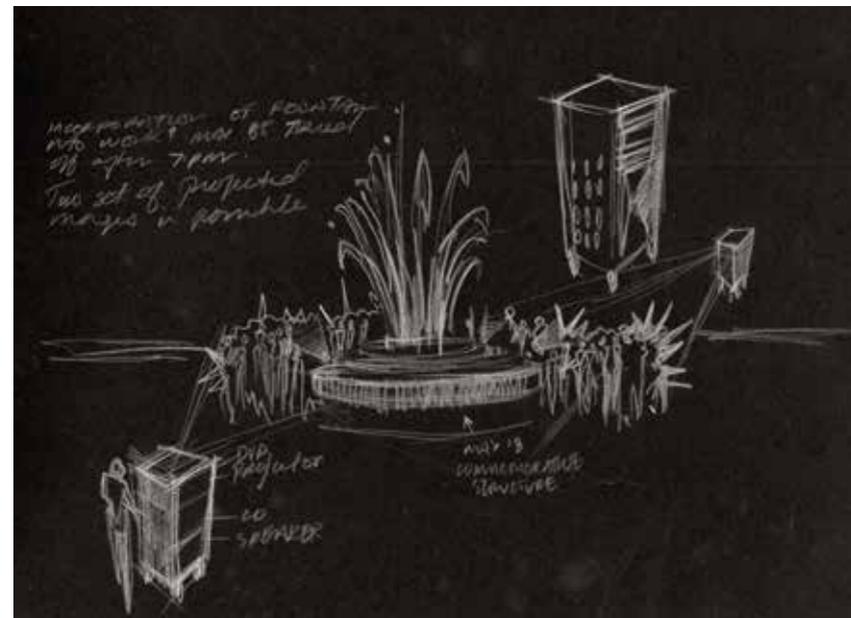




pitfalls of racial identification with skin color. “Holes in light”, as they were once called, shadows provide a representational gap to rescue the image from oversignification, the body from hyperidentification.

Marlon’s later experimentations with the projected image no longer involved shadows but rather light itself. For *RUNAWAY/REACTION*, a bluish hue unevenly highlighted fragments of costumes. Stemming from images of trembling water, alluded to in the title borrowed from the name of a chemical reaction, the projection turned the masqueraders themselves into ambulatory screens and turned Marlon, who walked backward with a hand-held projector during the entire 90-minute span of the performance, into the projecting apparatus. Light became the primary character in *POSITIONS+POWER* (in *EN MAS*, Port of Spain, 2014). Casting two beams of light from helmet-mounted flashlights, the “Overseer” opened a path out of the darkness for a small group of masqueraders while the “Watchdog”, seated at the bottom of the surveillance tower on which the “Overseer” stood, featured a mouthful of human-teeth-as-seeing-eyes thanks to a mini-projector hidden in the visor of his helmet.

In both nocturnal processional performances, *RUNAWAY/REACTION* and *POSITIONS+POWER*, the projecting apparatus is used as a functional instrument for lighting. In *RUNAWAY/REACTION*, the abstracted meaning of the projected image—the overflow of substances under pressure—brought about a symbolic re-enactment of the emancipatory impulses



**Below:** *RUNAWAY/REACTION* concept drawing, 2008, white pencil on black paper.  
**Opposite:** *RUNAWAY/REACTION*, 2008, Gwangju, South Korea.





**Above:**  
*POSITIONS+POWER:*  
*Overseer*, 2014, Port of Spain, Trinidad.

**Opposite top:**  
*POSITIONS+POWER:*  
*Doberman*

**Opposite bottom:**  
*POSITIONS+POWER:*  
*Overseer*

**p 72 top and p 73:**  
*POSITIONS+POWER:*  
*Doberman*, 2014, Port of Spain, Trinidad

**p 72 bottom:**  
*POSITIONS+POWER:*  
*Overseer*, 2014, Port of Spain, Trinidad

of the formerly enslaved and colonized, specifically as they manifested in the post-abolition, pro-Carnival Canboulay Riots of Trinidad (1881 and 1884), and continued to manifest in Carnival through to Independence. In *POSITIONS+POWER*, the “Overseer” and “Watchdog” duo imply a continuum between the repressive colonial policing of the old and the police state and surveillance society of the new. If Marlon’s referential titles provide cues to possible meanings of his works, it is the economy of light among the constituent parts of each work, whether turned inward onto the masqueraders as in Cape Town and Gwangju or outward at the crowd as in Port of Spain or London, that enables the processional performances.

What if, then, in simultaneously highlighting and disembodying the performance participants as spectres, Marlon’s lighting apparatus proposes a reordering of the lived and perceived experience of the performance? Though often thought of as participatory, might the use of the body as a moving surface onto or from which to project light diffract the attention away from the embodied dimension of performance? Might the nocturnal performances discussed in this text function as dark chambers within which light is captured to be later released, primarily into filmic and photographic memory? How might mas’ function within a diffracted global space in which participants are no longer neighbours invested in the year-long elaboration of their festivals but rather volunteers culled from workshops and enlisted for the performance? If the use of projected light and its ensuing disembodying effect function as a necessary disembodiment of a performance that is no longer localized within particular bodies, then Marlon’s most enlightening contribution might come from answering this fundamental question: how to be a masman from Japan?

