

Curtis Talwst Santiago: Can't I Alter

The Drawing Center

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Essay by

Claire Gilman

Poems by

M. NourbeSe Philip

Conversation

**Curtis Talwst Santiago
and Kenneth Montague**

Curtis Talwst Santiago: Every Place Has its Elsewhere

Claire Gilman

4 *What is home? What does it mean to feel safe? Who is my community? Where do I come from? Where am I going?* These are the questions that have preoccupied artist Curtis Talwst Santiago since he left Canada five years ago and embarked on an itinerant path that has taken him from Brooklyn, New York, to Brescia, Italy; Geneva, Switzerland; Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa; Lisbon, Portugal, and back to Brooklyn, where he has set up temporary residence. They are also the point of departure for *Can't I Alter*, an installation exploring the theme of ancestry and the struggle to access lost and tangled histories.

Born to Trinidadian parents who immigrated in 1968 to Edmonton, Canada, Santiago has felt the disconnection unique to the diasporic experience since early childhood when he made his first trip to Trinidad during the annual J'Ouvert celebration that marks the beginning of Carnival. Among other aspects of the colorful street parade with its fantastic characters, Santiago was deeply impressed by the tradition of applying red clay to the faces of family members. Years later, as an artist working in New York, Santiago began using red spray paint to draw radiating faces on portraits of imagined ancestors. For Santiago, the color red served as a vibrant indicator of the figures' uncertain identities as well as his own fraught effort to access generational knowledge. As he has observed, tracing family lineage is particularly difficult for people of African descent whose histories have been largely lost or rewritten, making it such that one "can only go back so far."¹ "My work is my way of yelling to

1 Curtis Talwst Santiago, in conversation with Magdalyn Asimakis, Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, University of Saskatchewan, December 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8gcDiEGcYw>.

the ancestors and my past that ‘I have not forgotten you, I have not abandoned you and I am trying to find you!’”²

Fast-forward to 2017, when, scrolling through a Tumblr page featuring representations of people of color in European art, Santiago came across an anonymous Northern Renaissance painting featuring a Moorish knight leaving a city square.³ When Santiago saw the digital reproduction, he noted only the heroic central figure whom he identified as being of the order of Santiago of the Red Cross, concluding that the painting presented a surprisingly egalitarian take on racial dynamics. Santiago sought out the painting in person, only to discover instances of torture—many to African bodies—taking place behind this central figure. For Santiago, this encounter sparked an urgent desire to find alternatives to the violent depictions of people of African descent in European literature and art, and ultimately prompted his move to Lisbon, where he began researching and creating work around representations of Moorish knights and their relationship to his own ancestry. What followed was a deep dive into cultural mixing, appropriation, and erasure: Santiago visited architectural sites in which he discovered Roman columns atop Moorish bases and Gothic heraldic symbols interlaced with Moorish arabesques; and he began to research the troubling eradication of Moorish facial features from ancient and Renaissance artworks.⁴

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At the same time, Santiago became interested in the world of seventeenth-century *capriccios*—landscape paintings where the real and the imaginary, and the contemporary and the anachronistic, share the same fantastical space. For Santiago, the *capriccio* served as a paradoxically vital corrective to orthodox histories, modelling an alternative to colonial narrativization in favor of multiple, non-hierarchical temporalities. “*Capriccio* means imagination,” Santiago has observed, and imagination is what allows us the “possibility of stepping out of time. Preserving the past and also altering it.”⁵ If characters from history were being repainted as entirely different

2 Curtis Talwst Santiago, “Fictional Ancestors with Curtis Talwst Santiago,” interview by Annie Jensen, *Nudapaper*, January 24, 2019, <http://nudapaper.com/2019/01/24/curtis-talwst-santiago/>.

3 <https://medievalpoc.tumblr.com/>.

4 One example is the widespread practice of removing noses from Egyptian sculptures. For more on Santiago’s exploration of this phenomenon, see Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, “Remediating Defacement,” exhibition handout on the occasion of *Curtis Santiago: Constructing Return*, University of Saskatchewan College Art Galleries, Saskatoon, Canada, 2017.

5 Curtis Talwst Santiago, in conversation with the author, October 17, 2019.

races or otherwise reimagined, he asked himself, why couldn't he create his own alternate reality? If those artists could substitute newly-imagined pasts and futures, why couldn't he?⁶

6 Back in New York, Santiago conceived his answer to these questions with *Can't I Alter*, an immersive three-dimensional *capriccio* built from scaffolding and medieval-style walls using casts of stones from his immediate surroundings, including Brooklyn brownstones, new construction, and his own rough-hewn, circa-1860 studio wall. In its scenic effect, the installation finds its origin in Santiago's earliest artistic enterprise, an ongoing series of miniature dioramas built in reclaimed jewelry boxes containing scenes ranging from real-life traumatic events, such as the murder of Michael Brown and the global refugee crisis, to more poetic motifs reflective of Santiago's current research. Santiago has noted that the *Infinity Series* is motivated by a desire to force people to stop and look closer while confirming "my sense of the vastness and the fragility of the world which I inhabit; and my fleeting memories of this world."⁷ The *Infinity Series*, in other words, is a way of gaining perspective on history. The tiny reliquary-like containers conjure other universes, complete in themselves yet removed by virtue of being of a fundamentally different order from that of our own world. They are Santiago's way of stepping back and beginning to alter.

By their very nature, however, the boxes are limited. For all their intimacy, we remain intentionally separate from the scenes they depict, reflecting on their contents rather than actively engaging with them. At The Drawing Center, Santiago brings the boxes to life. Upon entering, the viewer is confronted with a central archway and an abandoned, brightly-colored suit of armor made using traditional South African beading techniques. Metal scaffolding and construction netting gives way to cast-paper walls bearing layers of pigment and embellished with hand-drawn motifs of varying familiarity depending on one's cultural point of reference. Progressing further, one passes individual drawings and fabricated artifacts scattered throughout the installation until finally arriving at an inner chamber where one encounters a film. In it, Santiago,

6 Curtis Talwst Santiago, "Black Passages: Curtis Talwst Santiago interviewed by Ayasha Guerin," *Bomb Magazine*, June 12, 2018, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/black-passages-curtis-talwst-santiago-interviewed/>.

7 Curtis Talwst Santiago, quoted in Paul Ardenne, "Curtis Santiago, searching for Oneself @ art on paper," <https://analixforever.com/2018/03/10/curtis-santiago-searching-for-oneself-art-on-paper/>.

dressed in the abandoned armor, celebrates. It seems that he has returned home.⁸

References abound in Santiago's installation and their relative accessibility is part of the point. Looking closely at the cast-paper walls one might recognize a Jab Jab—Carnival's infamous blue devil and a potent symbol of the connection between Africa and the Caribbean, where he assumes various and manifold forms—alongside images of Benin statuary, South African and medieval European-style armor, as well as contemporary imagery such as stock images of palm trees from tourist websites. There are the anchoring red faces, Santiago's signature reference to Carnival and the ancestral spirits. And there are frequent images of boats—not the slave ships that are often rendered in stories about the migration of Africans, but simple vessels that for the artist indicate other ways in which his ancestors "arrived."⁹ Dark moments punctuate the fantasy space as in *Red Faced Ancestral Vision I*, a canvas in which a kneeling knight bearing a number seven on his breastplate conjures Colin Kaepernick and the lingering trauma implicit in his gesture.¹⁰ Santiago describes the drawing *I Apologize* as being about his conflicted desire to celebrate ancestors who were themselves colonizers and conquerors, while *Saint Monix Mumala to the Lost and in Need* is a beggar image in the tradition of Rembrandt and Frank Bowling, two of Santiago's core influences. "When I see a person in that situation," the artist has observed, "I can't help but think that, with one small turn of events, I could be them."¹¹ Some of the stories Santiago depicts are true and some are fictitious, but the difference is immaterial. *Can't I Alter* gathers recollections and projections, and disorientation is an inherent part of this process.

Assisting Santiago in this endeavor is his eclectic, unorthodox approach to image-making. His three-dimensional work incorporates

8 In the film, Santiago is cast as the knight Sir Dingolay, a whimsical reference to a Trinidadian dance form characterized by lively hand gestures. The word "dingolay" lacks an explicit translation but can refer to any activity undertaken with spontaneous, joyful, and carefree abandon.

9 Santiago references a history that is not often told in accounts of the migration of Africans to Europe and the Americas—a history involving people like Mansa Musa, the legendary ruler of Mali, who embarked on a religious pilgrimage to Mecca in 1324, supposedly traveling as far as Mexico.

10 Just prior to the exhibition opening, Santiago changed the number on the chest of one of the figures in the cast-paper panel *Road March* from a seven to an eight in honor of legendary basketball player Kobe Bryant and his daughter Gianna, who died tragically in a helicopter crash on January 26, 2020.

11 Curtis Talwst Santiago, in conversation with the author, December 27, 2019.

materials traditionally used on two-dimensional surfaces, while his works on canvas and paper include spray paint, pastel, charcoal, and acrylic. Line and color function together to create distinct pictorial moments which, according to the artist, offer portals to different temporal and sensorial realities. It is not incidental that the installation is anchored by four monumental drawings on cast paper or that the first glimpse through the archway is onto a wall drawing of two graceful orange trees executed in a pale, hesitant graphite outline with bursts of orange color.¹² In the words of renowned Renaissance scholar David Rosand, “Drawing is the fundamental pictorial act. To make a mark or trace a single line upon a surface immediately transforms that surface...[translating] its material reality into the fiction of the imagination.”¹³ It is the realm of the imagination that is Santiago’s playground. Whether working on paper, canvas, or cast surfaces, Santiago exploits the ambivalence that Rosand terms the “essential and functioning aspect of drawing...Between its reality as material mark and its mimetic responsibility in the creation of the visual fiction of an image... the drawn line exists, like the surface on which it is applied, in *potentia*.”¹⁴

Curtis has explained that for him different materials serve different functions. Charcoal, the oldest material in the world, represents a kind of anchor or grounding, however tentative. By contrast, Santiago terms spray paint a performative medium—one that registers on his surfaces like a shooting star, leaving dusty traces of its forward motion. In *The Four of Them Made a Promise* (2018), the charcoal that defines the figures against the black-painted ground floats above the color like a distinct, parallel entity fading in and out of view depending on the spectator’s position, while the glowing pink, blue, and yellow of the J’Ouvert Knight’s armor conjure an alternate reality that defies containment. When paint encounters charcoal here as elsewhere, it resembles two different moments of time intersecting. On the layered wall panels, Santiago exploits this

12 Santiago’s relationship with oranges is intense and manifold. As a child, he hated the texture of the fruit until his Trinidadian grandmother forced him to eat an orange from one of the trees in her garden. From then on, the fruit has been indelibly associated for Santiago with Trinidad and family lineage, even as he has become interested in the presence of the tree in Renaissance art. He was recently welcomed to eat from an orange tree while visiting a monastery in Portugal.

13 David Rosand, *Drawing Acts: Studies in Graphic Expression and Representation* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2002), 1.

14 Rosand, 2.

clash quite literally, as blocks of color push through the opaque, white-gessoed surfaces like an “acid flashback [or flashforward].”¹⁵

To make the cast-paper pieces, Santiago created multiple panels, which he then cut apart and rejoined to form new configurations. In the panel *Candy Flipping (Boogoo Pouring the Spell in Sir Dingolay’s Ear)*, the dominating charcoal outline of a hybrid knight dressed in Benin head-gear, medieval-style mail, and contemporary sneakers is interrupted by a vibrant, neon red-and-orange scene of an interracial couple embracing. In *By Sea II*, the knight appears with mythic ancestors, including the Dogon water god Nommo, in a composition jigsawed into the center of a white-washed plain that bears the graceful charcoal arc of a boat at sea. What is the fiction and what is the reality? Is the scene of the couple embracing a memory or the projection of a world that the protagonist would like to inhabit—a space where his composite identity finally makes sense? Indeed, this image is more vividly present than his own figure, which is executed in stark, hieratic profile. In both panels, moreover, the knight figure is physically doubled and split. In the former, his lower half is visible both in charcoal and in the spray-painted scene where he stands, cut-off at the waist, observing the couple. In the latter, the knight’s face has been cut and the dissected portion shifted right, where it is in turn bisected by Nommo’s swelling belly. All these figures exist in a state of in-betweenness, both incomplete and “*in potentia*.”

9

And in this lies the possibility for integration—not integration as fusion but as a kind of harmony in non-cohesion. An image of what this might look like can be found in the quiet composition *A luz* (The light) in which a robed female figure, executed by scratching into spray paint, emerges out of an archway suffused with hazy golden light, which itself hesitantly materializes from a black ground. Barely there, the etched lines are nonetheless a mooring within the dissolving, golden glow—a fleeting articulation within an awe-inspiring, ungraspable whole.

This is the state that defines diasporic existence. It is the condition that theorist Stuart Hall refers to as “*difference*” understood not as “a radical and unbridgeable separation” but as the inevitable complexity and diversity that defines all, especially black, subject positions.¹⁶ It is likewise what Caribbean writer Édouard Glissant terms circular nomadism or errantry. In Glissant’s

15 Santiago, in conversation with the author, December 27, 2019.

16 Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 446.

words: “One who is errant...strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world resides.¹⁷ Since, Glissant asserts, we cannot know the truth of the world or of our own identity—since, indeed, this holistic knowledge does not exist—“we imagine [this totality] through a poetics: this imaginary realm provides the full-sense of all these always decisive differentiations.... There is no place that does not have its elsewhere.”¹⁸

10 *Can't I Alter* presents just such a poetic space. It is a space that renders palpable a longing for totality and resolution, while refusing closure in its very structure. In this, Santiago's knight errant channels that famed literary knight errant Don Quixote, who steadfastly pursues his impossible dream despite reality's obduracy. The space that Santiago has created is a ruin built from rusted scaffolding and paper walls. Moments of trauma (aka Kaepernick and Bryant) erupt amidst an array of patchwork images, just as, in the wall panels, brightly-colored fantasies come up against the opacity of the white-gessoed surfaces into which they are inserted. But mostly, there is joy. The joy of having the opportunity to step outside of time, create alternate memories, and imagine possible futures. The joy, magic, and wonder that is art's domain.

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17 Édouard Glissant, “Errantry, Exile,” in *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 190. Originally published as *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 20.

18 Édouard Glissant, “The Black Beach,” in *Poetics of Relation*, 153-54.