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Curtis Talwst Santiago, Press Pack

- 2020
- Osman Can Yerebakan, "Artist Curtis Talwst Santiago Introduces an Alter Ego to Help Navigate the Past", The Observer, 22 February
- Chris Hampton, "Multimedia artist Curtis Santiago explores his ancestry using a time-travelling alter-ego", The Globe and Mail, 02 March
- Magdalyn Asimakis, "Curtis Talwst Santiago: Can't I Alter", The Brooklyn Rail, May
- 2018
- Kealey Boyd, "Best of 2018: Our top 20 exhibitions across the United States", Hyperallergic, 20 December
- Louis Abbene-Meagley, " "Infinity": Curtis Talwst Santiago", Site Santa Fe, 11 December
- "Curtis Talwst Santiago on growing up Black in Edmonton and the impact of his parents' support", CBC, 01 November
- Ayasha Guerin, "Black passages: Curtis Talwst Santiago interviewed by Ayasha Guerin", BOMB, 12 June
- 2017
- Paul Gallagher, "Powerful, anti-racist miniature dioramas created inside jewelry boxes", Dangerous Minds, 27 September
- Charles Reeve, "Tau Lewis, Curtis Santiago and Daniel Rios Rodriguez", Frieze, 01 September
- Jessica Bloom, "This artist creates amazing worlds inside antique ring boxes", Toronto Life, 21 August
- Gabrielle Moser, "Critics Pick, Tau Lewis and Curtis Santiago", Artforum, August

Martina Simeti

- 2016 Cristina Vatulescu, "Art and law enforcement in a ring box: Talwst's miniature aesthetic revolution", The Brooklyn Rail, March
- 2015 Alice Newell-Hanson, "Talwst recreates miniature historical atrocities in antique jewelry boxes", Vice i-D, 03 December
- "Talwst's tiny boxes are making a big mark on the art world", CBC Arts, 04 November
- Adam Leher, "Canadian-Trinidadian mixed-media artist Talwst explores art history in a fresh context", Forbes, 29 April
- Daniel Otis, "The miniature world of Talwst: Toronto's lord of the ring boxes", The Star, 20 March
- Kathryn Bromwich, "The imaginative ring-bon art of Talwst - in picture", The Guardian, 07 March
- 2012 Zoe Pawlak, "I am jealous of Talwst", The jealous curator, 02 July
- 2004 Martin Turenne, "Curtis Santiago", Georgia Straight, 26 February

Martina Simeti

Osman Can Yerebakan, "Artist Curtis Talwst Santiago Introduces an Alter Ego to Help Navigate the Past", *The Observer*, 22 February 2020

The Observer

Artist Curtis Talwst Santiago Introduces an Alter Ego to Help Navigate the Past

By [Osman Can Yerebakan](#) - 02/22/20 9:00am



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *Red Face Ancestral Vision I*, 2018. Spray paint, oil, charcoal, pastel, acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Curtis Talwst Santiago and Rachel Uffner Gallery

New York is an unending construction project; scaffolding shielding building façades and mesh covers hanging from metal rods are quintessential parts of the urban texture. Artist Curtis Talwst Santiago takes the architectural debris he encounters on a daily basis in his Brooklyn neighborhood, Red Hook, and the rest of the city, as a starting point for his new exhibition "Can't I Alter" at the Drawing Center.

Martina Simeti

"I thought about all the armor I needed while traveling the world as a person of color," Santiago tells Observer, of the motivation behind this body of work. He was standing by a Greco-Roman style arch affixed onto a scaffolding, finished with wooden panels in jungle green, a tone he learned is mandatory for construction panels in New York. The arch, a feature of the Drawing Center's show, is directly based on an ancient ruin that was located five minutes away from his Palazzo Monti residency in Brescia, providing a passage into the narrative he constructs for the rest of the exhibition.

Intertwining history with fiction, Santiago's presentation tells the fictional story of an African knight, his alter ego, whom he calls Sir Dingolay. The character wears a colorful armor, though the artist keeps the reason vague—either because he has just returned home from a battle, or for the annual J'ouvert celebrations, a Caribbean carnival tradition that starts at dawn and is characterized by participants covering themselves with dirt, oil or paint to symbolize the chaotic elements of humanity. Dingolay's covering is a bright beaded armor Santiago created. At the Drawing Center, Santiago's mockup of the armor sits by a passage facing the works *He Knight* and *She Knight*, two spray-painted pieces on salvaged embossed tin rooftops. Together they guard the rest of the installation, which tells a story of drawing from ancestral knowledge, while also acknowledging the precariousness of dominant historical narratives.



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *African Knight I*, 2018. Wire and beads on steel armature. Courtesy of Curtis Talwst Santiago and Rachel Uffner Gallery



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *Artist as Knight (self portrait)*, 2018. Mixed media diorama in reds metal jewelry box. Courtesy of Curtis Talwst Santiago and Rachel Uffner Gallery

Martina Simeti

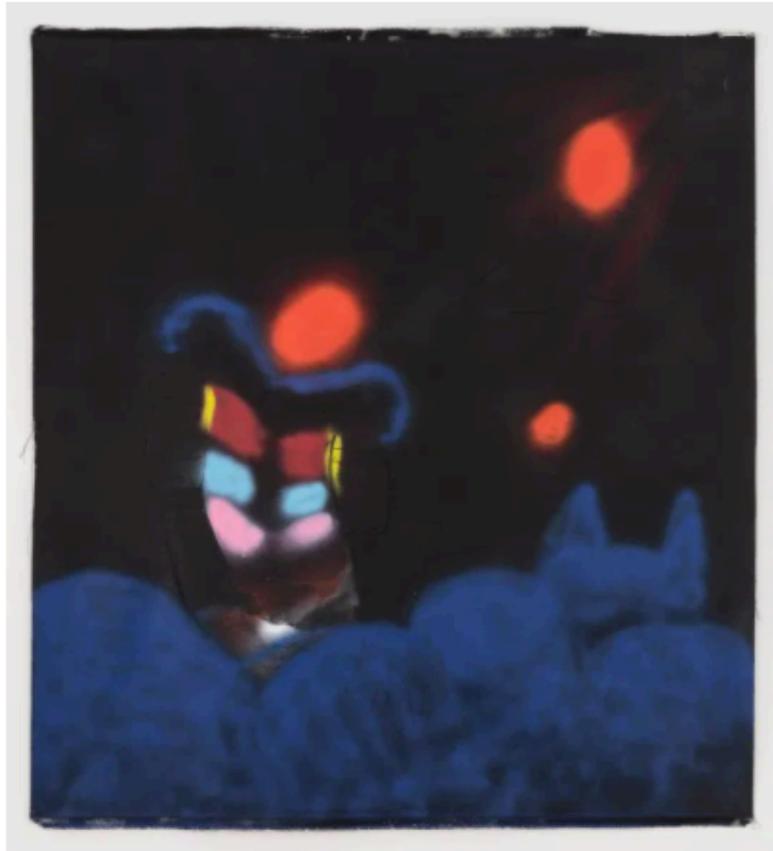
Santiago is best known for his intricately-built miniature dioramas that reenact mythical or factual histories inside elaborate jewelry boxes, from the murder of Eric Garner to Cézanne's *The Abduction*. These painstaking works have been shown at SITE Santa Fe Biennial, the FLAG Art Foundation and at the Toronto Biennial of Art. Though his large-scale takeover of the Drawing Center could seem quite opposite to his minute creations, Santiago explains they're conceptually the same. "They are both about tricking the eye with materials, whether I use plaster for the arch or pocket lint for a miniature figure."

This trickery is best embodied in a new series of drawings-cum-paintings on molded cast paper that he based on various walls he has encountered in recent years, including his studio wall and one from a Brooklyn brownstone. Semi-abstract figures in spray paint, charcoal, pastel, acrylic and even gold populate the corrugated surfaces, paying homage to history paintings as well as graffiti with juxtapositions of human figures who are seen either combatting in war or uniting for physical intimacy. These works are hung across the gallery space either directly onto the wall or placed within scaffolding, creating a labyrinthine structure dotted with small surprises Santiago has placed here and there, such as a miniature plastic replica of Sir Dingolay inside a diamond box—a subtle homage to his ongoing dioramas series. An upcoming solo exhibition at Lower East Side's Rachel Uffner Gallery, opening March 1, titled "an erratum," will further explore the artist's experiments with bronze and glass, displaying Sir Dingolay's vast collection of antiquity as the next chapter in his saga.



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *Origin as Tarty Told Me*, 2020. Spray paint, charcoal, oil, acrylic, and pastel on cast paper mounted on Baltic birch. Courtesy of Curtis Talwst Santiago and Rachel Uffner Gallery

Martina Simeti



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *The Four of Them Made a Promise*, 2018. Spray paint, oil, charcoal, pastel, and acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Curtis Talwst Santiago and Rachel Uffner Gallery

The exhibition at the Drawing Center culminates with a one-minute-long video projection, *Sir Dingolay*, in which Santiago appears as the titular character in red face wearing a beaded armor, dancing to his father's favorite song by Trinidadian Calypso pioneer Mighty Sparrow. Growing up among the Caribbean diaspora in Alberta, he remembers the basement parties his parents hosted for the community. He used to watch the disco ball lights reflect onto glass wall tiles, and, now, the same colorful lights appear throughout the film reflected onto an ancient ruin set he built in Toronto. The red face has also become something of a signature for Santiago in recent years, a motif he first came across when he visited Trinidad as a child and saw his relatives in red face in preparation for J'ouvert. "That memory came back the second I sprayed a red circle for the first time," he remembers. The red circle appears in various forms, sprayed onto figures' faces in paintings or onto found images he has wheat-pasted across the show. In essence, many of the elements that the artist has combined to create the show are like this: visual cues he has collected, manipulated, and changed through use, combining history and fiction into a construction-like installation of references he has culled from across the globe

Chris Hampton, "Multimedia artist Curtis Santiago explores his ancestry using a time-travelling alter-ego",
The Globe and Mail, 02 March 2020



Multimedia artist Curtis Santiago explores his ancestry using a time-travelling alter-ego



Santiago calls the project a work of "genetic imagination." MARTIN PARSEKIAN/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

History is funny in that it doesn't have a beginning, it has many beginnings. For multimedia artist Curtis Santiago, in his exhibition *Can't I Alter* at the Drawing Center in New York, the story might start with the first time he travelled from Alberta to Trinidad as a child. It was during Carnival. And he remembers the J'ouvert celebration vividly, when his relatives painted their faces with red clay and danced in the streets while the sun came up. "As a kid from Sherwood Park," he says, "seeing this freedom, this expression, this art form, it really resonated with me." Or maybe the story begins with a Renaissance painting Santiago found online by an unknown artist. What caught his attention was the distinguished black knight riding through bustling Lisbon on horseback. Some research revealed that his insignia represented the Order of Santiago – a connection the artist would travel to Portugal to investigate.

In the exhibition, Santiago explores his ancestry through the time-travelling alter-ego Sir Dingolay, the J'ouvert knight. ("Dingolay," the artist says, is a Trinidadian expression to "loosen up.") Visitors enter the knight's estate to explore the ruins and artifacts assembled there (sculpture, lm, painting, drawing, works of mixed media), which evidence his appearance – or at least his likeness appearing – in ancient Ethiopia or 15th-century Iberia or present-day New York. The images resemble Medieval and Renaissance scenes, but the characters, marked by the red-painted faces of the artist's memory, are engaged in the revelry of J'ouvert. The history Sir Dingolay has collected – like all histories, to some extent – are both factual and fictional.

Santiago calls the project a work of "genetic imagination." "If we have 'genetic trauma,'" he says, "why can't we also harness the other memories, creativity and joy?"

Martina Simeti

Magdalyn Asimakis, "Curtis Talwst Santiago: Can't I Alter", The Brooklyn Rail, May 2020

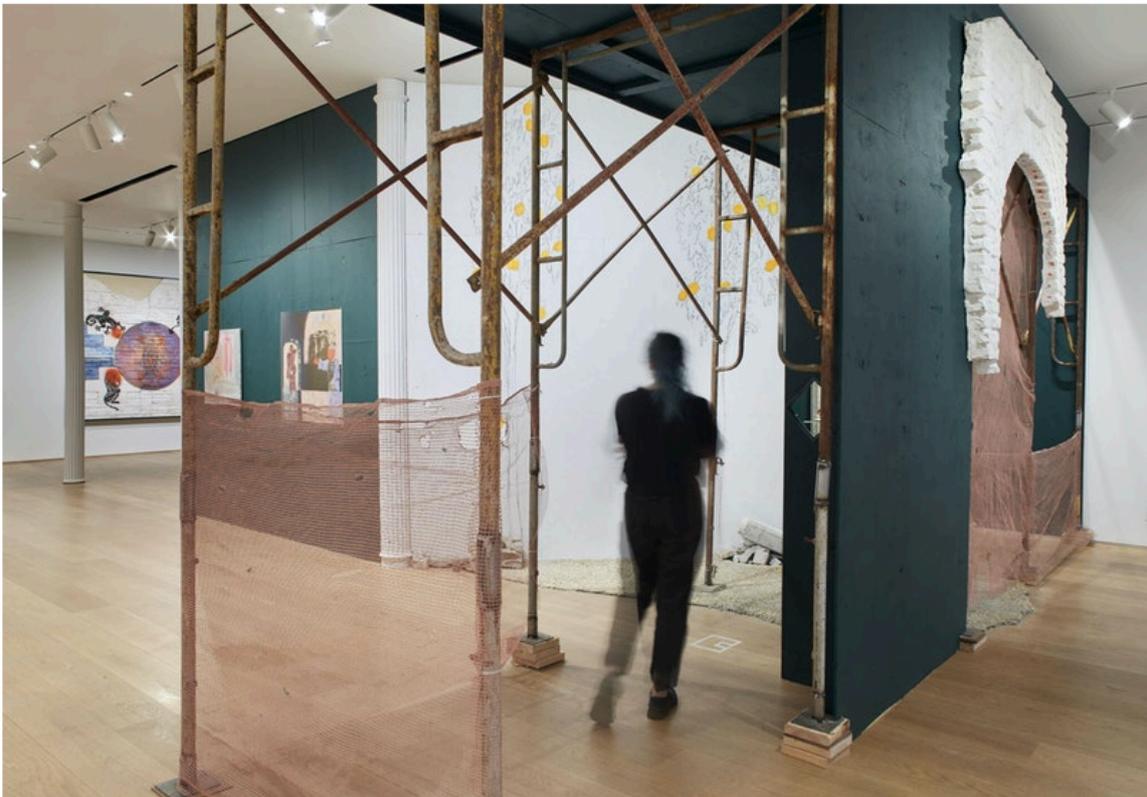
BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Curtis Talwst Santiago: *Can't I Alter*

MAY 2020

By Magdalyn Asimakis



Installation view: Curtis Talwst Santiago: *Can't I Alter*, The Drawing Center, New York, 2020. Courtesy the Drawing Center.

The Drawing Center

New York

This month, the scaffolding in Curtis Santiago's installation at The Drawing Center hits differently than it did when the show opened in February. *Can't I Alter* remains a meticulously arranged selection of interrelated sketches, sculptures, and murals installed into the hunter green scaffolding standard in New York City, where the artist is based. This exhibition looks to the simultaneity of interrelated narratives, including the history of the Black knights of the

Martina Simeti

Order of Santiago of the Red Cross in Portugal, the J'ouvert celebrations in Trinidad, skewed European histories, and more broadly to ancient lineages that are felt but not traceable due to colonization and empire. The scaffolding physically weaves Santiago's works together and creates a space meant to represent the home of the fictional J'ouvert Knight, who recurs throughout the exhibition in temporally ambiguous vistas. In the weeks since the city shut down this installation has adjusted, in my mind, to not only hold space for the unknown or



Installation view: Curtis Talwst Santiago: *Can't I Alter*, The Drawing Center, New York, 2020. Courtesy the Drawing Center.

fantastical, but also to point to the precarity of historical narratives and the need for structural malleability.

The scaffolding modulates the space, creating irregular rooms with awkward sizes and diagonal walls that ignore the white cube architecture and incorporate the permanent neoclassical columns into the address of Santiago's work. The altered space fragments the incredible range of work included in the exhibition, from lists of words on scrap paper to massive drawings on paper molded to look like brick walls. It creates a semicircular room to view Santiago's looped film *Sir Dingolay* (2020); it carves out a display space for a full-body beaded suit of armor; it frames unusual sightlines for early drawings. In some areas, Santiago creates subtle archways using the scaffolding, seemingly to acknowledge the archeological sites of his research and to avoid didacticism about the role of this aspect of his installation. At the same time, the scaffolding is not ornamental; the artist maintains its vernacular visual culture by drawing on it, pinning to it, and using cut-out areas for display, as in the case of the diorama *J'ouvert Knight, Self-Portrait* (2019). At points, the diorama falls into the background and you forget what the space looked like before.

In Santiago's drawings, some of which are on canvas, the artist uses his signature combination of graphite with charcoal, pastel, and aerosol paint to create dexterous yet opaque compositions that inquire into the liminal spaces of history. It is challenging to speak specifically about what one is looking at in the works, as they do not align with the way we have been taught to understand narrative through chronology or empire. For instance, in *Road March* (2019) Santiago references the Carnival dance path. Subtly reminiscent of old battle scene compositions, dozens of people are depicted in a range of scales, interacting in a way that seems to combine dancing, embracing, and engaging in conflict. Their dress is of the past and present, referencing the Caribbean, Western Europe, and South Africa, and their context is unidentifiable as they float along a curvy, invisible path. The narratives Santiago considers are not entirely knowable due to colonization, which, ironically, is characterized by the false assumption of complete knowability. The ability to gesture to these disparate interactions without visual descriptors is the truly wonderful thing about incisive drawing.

In other works, such as *Candy Flipping (Boogoo Pouring the Spell in Sir Dingolay's Ear)* (2020), the mythical J'ouvert knight appears centrally. His towering stature is rendered in charcoal, wearing a combination of a Beninese head dress, medieval mail, and sneakers, as he gazes into the distance. The lower half of his body is overlaid with a rich pastel drawing of an interracial couple embracing, being watched by Jab Jab, a trickster character. To the right of the knight, two landscapes are haphazardly superimposed. The multiple splits in narrative reflect on simultaneities and unresolved, perhaps contradictory, relationships which are further emphasized by the layers of paper from numerous panels that Santiago drew, cut apart, and pieced back together. Around the corner, the component-parts of these large wall works are parsed out as you are immersed in a series of ancestor portraits, dozens of visual and linguistic

Martina Simeti

studies, and two sculptures: a portrait drawn on a large rock, and a glass nose placed on a column. Which vandalized ancient sculpture is being reclaimed?¹

Around the same time of the opening of this exhibition, a translation of Édouard Glissant's first published essay *Sun of Consciousness* was released.² It was poetic timing to read Glissant's exploratory texts reconciling his lived experience as a Martiniquais man in Paris while thinking about Santiago's work. There is a shared interest in opacity and an acknowledgement of the density of transnational history that cannot be told solely through literary and artistic structures which lean towards summary or historicism. Santiago has previously said that he is interested in the potential of "genetic imagination"³—an embodied knowledge that exists outside of written history—as a way of moving into unknown spaces and stumbling outside of our conditioning. The exhibition's titular proposition, "can't I alter," reflects on this, suggesting a dialog between dominant global narratives and the artist's interest in exploring their liminal, precarious, evolving spaces. Santiago makes work that is intentionally decentering—floating real and hypothetical historical and contemporary narratives together, without searching for distinct beginnings, ends, or resolution. Ultimately, it is within this entanglement that "truth" lies.

Endnotes

1. For more on these sculptures see Masilela, Nomaduma Rosa. "Remediating Defacement" in *Curtis Santiago: Constructing Return*, p. 9-11, ed. Magdalyn Asimakis. Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 2017.

2. Édouard Glissant, *Sun of Consciousness*. Translated by Nathanaël. New York: Nightboat Books, 2020.

3. *Black Passages: Curtis Talwst Santiago Interviewed by Ayasha Guerin*. BOMB, June 2018.

Contributor

Magdalyn Asimakis

Magdalyn Asimakis is a New York and Toronto-based curator, art writer, and PhD candidate at Queen's University.

Kealey Boyd, “Best of 2018: Our top 20 exhibitions across the United States”,
Hyperallergic, 20 December 2018

HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

Best of 2018: Our Top 20 Exhibitions Across the United States

Art visualizing identity and community took center stage in our top 20 exhibitions across the United States for 2018.



Hyperallergic 2 hours ago



3. *SITELINES* | *Casa tomada* at SITE Santa Fe



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *Deluge VII*, 2016, mixed media diorama in a reclaimed jewelry box (image courtesy the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery)

The *SITELINES* biennial at SITE Santa Fe has existed since 1995, but this year it enjoyed an expanded building and impressive guest curators José Luis Blondet, Candice Hopkins, Ruba Katrib, and advisor Naomi Beckwith. Titled *Casa tomada*, after the 1946 book in which owners are forced from their home by an unseen entity, the biennial offers pivoting but coherent expressions of displacement. The highlights included Curtis Talwst

Santiago’s *Infinity Series* (2008–ongoing) displayed in a glass house, and Naufus Ramírez-Figueroa’s commissioned “Revindication of Tangible Property” (2018). Despite an expansive theme prescribed to 23 artists from eight countries, *SITELINES* challenged all expectations, proving biennials can be high stakes when innovatively curated. —Kealey Boyd

Martina Simeti

Louis Abbene-Meagley, “ “Infinity”: Curtis Talwst Santiago”, Site Santa Fe, 11 December 2018



(<https://sitesantafe.org/>)

NEWS



December 11th, 2018

“Infinity” : Curtis Talwst Santiago

It's winter time again for the Northern Hemisphere. For many, winter time also marks the beginning of SAD. That's Seasonal Affective Disorder, aka, Seasonal Depression, or Winter Depression. I grew up in upstate NY. There, the lake effect cloud coverage is so prevalent, that the average amount of sunlight for the month of December is about two and half hours a day. It's why so many people I knew growing up are now Vitamin D deficient, myself included. It's also why I saw some people use light

Martina Simeti

boxes in school, work, and home. Simply put, a light box is a box or screen that emits specific light which mimics outdoor light and is low-level or without ultraviolet light.

As part of a daily routine, or in moments of difficulty or sadness, a person could pull out their personal light, or open the lid on their light box, and reflect on a small source of positive energy. For those who have grown up in sunnier climates, this may seem outlandish or unbelievable. But those of us who have struggled with SAD know the difference that light can make. Light and its positive energy can help a brain balance its chemicals to stay optimistic. Much like the surprise of a friend bringing you a present; it's serotonin that you open.



This week I want to talk about the work of Curtis Talwst Santiago on display at SITE Santa Fe. In his "Infinity" series, Santiago has created a number of dioramas, crafted on a miniature scale, living inside of jewelry boxes. The care and attention to detail in his works are overwhelmingly present. The dioramas are populated with figures smaller than the size of a fingernail. Details such as collars, buttons, belts, pins, lapels, expressions, shoes, and hands are painted on with what I can only imagine is a size zero brush and a truly steady hand. The background, and objects surrounding these figures, are just as, if not more, intricate and detail oriented. If a tree exists it will have all its branches; if a wall is made of bricks you would need a magnifying glass to count them.



What is so amazing about the first time I observed these objects was the difficulty with which I struggled to even understand what I was looking at. My eyes and my brain were at odds. At their smallest, a diorama may occupy a space two inches by two inches by two inches. Yet within that tiny cube of an area, I may observe a figure or two, a tree or three, a bush, the grass, a stream, leaves, a chair, and a wall of straw. Or maybe the diorama features just the chair but I can see every pebble that makes up the ground surrounding it; and the chair and the pebbles are in proportion with one another! I am engaged as a viewer to really examine what is going on and what is happening in these tiny worlds. What I really want to emphasize is the sense of believability.

Not only do these small worlds exist saturated in color and texture, but they do so to scale, and with a sense of realism. This likely comes from the subject matter Santiago's works explore. While there is no single narrative that unifies the "Infinity" series into a sequential story, there are many themes that repeat between the individual works. These themes include contemporary and traditional art history, the intersections of everyday life and love, and modern news and myths.

Such themes push the humanity and realism of the "Infinity" series forward. A viewer uneducated in art history might not recognize the image of Manet's "Olympia", but because Santiago recreates the image, while adding Manet himself standing there, painting on his easel, it becomes more accessible. It moves the narrative away from naked woman, and into, artistic practice. Further examples include "Banksy Is Your Gran" being recognizable as a Banksy moment to some, and a street scene to others. Or "Chair", which the artist himself stated in an interview as being an homage to Van Gogh's gift for using painting to make the mundane appear amazing. Viewers, myself included, can create our own narratives and beliefs about the scenes unfolding. In Santiago's "Nubian Woman Attacked by Tiger" I am reminded of both Yann Martel's "Life of Pi" and a painting done by Horace Pippin which hangs in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C..

Santiago's works also feature scenes of romantic dates, families on the beach, and an African Knight covered in colorful beaded armor. Amidst these themes, the "Infinity" series has been affected by real world traumas which Santiago has reacted to. Works like "Deluge VII", which features a modern image of migrants in a boat, and "The Execution of Unarmed Black Men", featuring a group of police officers shooting black men in the street, reference modern news coverage of immigration as well as the killings of such black men in America as Michael Brown and Philando Castile. These works remind viewers that difficulty and horror exist alongside the joy and the mystery of life. Though important to acknowledge, Santiago also recognizes that creating too many of these images is problematic.

Martina Simeti

Too often our media and our history of painting depicts people of color suffering or in trauma. Santiago has stated that he is done with creating works that repeat such imagery because he doesn't "feel like it's necessary for art to contribute to these violent images that become fetish objects." As such, he denies collectors interested in more dioramas featuring migrant imagery. This is because he respects that those images feature individual people with real and personal struggles and stories. As a writer and artist I have a lot of respect for this ethos. There is a better way to address problems in society without re-engaging with the same disturbing imagery that keeps the disenfranchised feeling traumatized.

This is why it is so important to see and explore the "Infinity" series in person. Because in all these jewelry boxes there lives an encapsulation of life. Sometimes it is a difficult life, and sometimes it is an easy one. We do not get to choose all the parts of a life we live and often times we become overwhelmed with it. Whether our trials last for a little or a long time, human nature often leaves us feeling stuck in a rut. It's relieving to see Santiago create such a variety of moments expositied on such a small scale. It puts us as viewers and humans into a macro, or cosmic, scale of thought. These turbulent periods of time in our life are not unending trials, but simply little vignettes. Our small precious memories are not fleeting, but rather, unending tales of love.

In one interview, Santiago talks about how ideally he would present the dioramas in person to a viewer by pulling them out of his pocket or a bag and then handing them over to the viewer to open. How cool and great it would feel to open this box and be surprised by a small cosmic moment? To expect jewelry and receive theater? Unfortunately, logistics stops everyone from being able to experience Santiagos work in this "surprise opening" way. But those interested in directly engaging with the "Infinity" series will find two wonderful outlets to their curiosity.

Not only are these works available to see up close and in person at SITE Santa Fe, but Curtis Talwst Santiago will, himself, be there as well. This week the artist will be engaging directly with the community. Teaching others about his techniques, members of the Santa Fe area, will be invited to create their own jewelry box dioramas. The opportunity to work so directly with an established artist is as rare as it is wonderful, and I encourage all who can, to make an effort to stop by SITE this week to see Santiago's work, he truly creates beautiful memories for us to cherish and consider what is important.

Written By: Louis Abbene-Meagley, SITE Santa Fe Fall Intern

Edited By: Winoka Begay, SITE Santa Fe Indigenous Outreach Coordinator

Martina Simeti

"Curtis Talwst Santiago on growing up Black in Edmonton and the impact of his parents' support", CBC, 01 November 2018



Curtis Talwst Santiago on growing up Black in Edmonton and the impact of his parents' support

'There was never any, "No, don't do that, stop singing so loud, you can't be an artist" — anything like that'

CBC Arts · Posted: Nov 01, 2018 3:00 PM ET | Last Updated: November 1, 2018

In [Curtis Talwst Santiago's episode](#) of *In the Making*, we follow the Trinidadian-Canadian artist's travels through Portugal to explore his ancestry and create artwork to debut at the Frieze art fair in New York.



(CBC Arts)

Before that, though, there was Edmonton. In this clip from *In the Making*, Santiago talks about his parents' support and growing up Black in Edmonton.

Curtis Talwst Santiago on his parents, Edmonton and his calling

2 years ago 2:00

"Then art seeped in and took over and that was the greatest thing for me." 2:00

"My parents are incredible," says Santiago. "My room was my creative hub that I could do anything in. There was never any, 'No, don't do that, stop singing so loud, you can't be an artist' — anything like that."

Santiago's parents emigrated from Trinidad to Fort McMurray, Alberta, and moved to Edmonton where he spent most of his childhood. "They came to Canada to give their kids the best opportunity to do whatever they wanted, to be whatever they wanted, and they really supported that."

On growing up Black in Edmonton, he reflects: "You don't really notice you're different until people start pointing out you're different." Santiago found the stereotypes placed on him weren't right. "This stereotype of what it means to be a

Martina Simeti



A close-up of Curtis Talwst Santiago's artwork. (Curtis Talwst Santiago)

young Black man is not working for me. It wasn't a bother to me until I started feeling different from my Black community. Then I started to travel and meet a range of Black experience."

Before committing to becoming a visual artist, Santiago also made music — something he has shifted away from since. "I was trying to balance becoming a visual artist and being a recording artist." He recounts a time he played his music for a friend, a "music mogul": "He listens to it and he's like, 'This is really good, but it's not great. You can be great in art.'"

"Then art seeped in and took over and that was the greatest thing for me. I recognized talent vs. calling. I'm a talented singer — I've worked at that — but I feel this realm is my calling."

[Stream Curtis Talwst Santiago's episode of In the Making now](#) or watch it this Friday 8:30pm (9pm NT) on CBC TV.

What is In the Making?

In the Making is an immersive journey inside the creative process. The documentary series follows host Sean O'Neill across the country and around the world alongside some of Canada's leading artists as they bring new work to life and face pivotal moments of risk and reward. All eight episodes are available to stream online now, with individual episodes broadcasting weekly each Friday at 8:30pm (9pm NT) on CBC.

Each episode follows an artist from across the creative spectrum — visual art, film, music, dance, theatre — with a unique approach to art-making and something to say about the world. Sean visits artists at home, in studio, backstage, and in the field, giving viewers rare access to intimate creative spaces and inspiring moments of realization.

Martina Simeti

Ayasha Guerin, "Black passages: Curtis Talwst Santiago interviewed by Ayasha Guerin", BOMB, 12 June 2018

BOMB

Black Passages: Curtis Talwst Santiago Interviewed by Ayasha Guerin

Layering histories and identity.



Curtis Talwst Santiago and *African Knight I*, 2018.
Wire and beads, on steel armature. 82 x 24 x 24
inches. Photograph by Ayasha Guerin.

At the opening of Curtis Talwst Santiago's current exhibition, *By Sea*, an excited crowd snapped photographs of a chainmail do-rag, a beaded set of armor, and an "ancestor rock." On the walls, scenes of figures on canvas with sprayed red faces stood out. I met with the artist a few weeks later to discuss his process of making work inspired by diaspora, ancestry, and genetic imaginaries in Lisbon, Portugal.

—Ayasha Guerin

Martina Simeti

Ayasha Guerin

When we met in 2016, you were doing a residency at Pioneer Works, developing your *Infinity* series—miniature social scenes constructed inside jewelry boxes.

Curtis Talwst Santiago

That's right.

AG

These are some of the first pieces we encounter upon visiting your current show, too. Back then, you were making tableaus of protest scenes and forced migrations. Can you tell me a bit about the scenes that you depict in this latest series of boxes? I know this show has been inspired by the imagery of an African knight.

CTS

The series was initially focused on the identity of the black knight, but it became more and more about other things as I got deeper into making the work, and was able to view the painting that inspired the show's direction. The dioramas are of mythology, ancestry; there's a black Venus. The idea I'm playing with is genetic imagination. If there's genetic memory, I thought, and if we can hold trauma, then why can't we also hold the ideas and imaginings of ancestors? I'm not American, but as a person of color living here, this work offered me a way to get out of America, to explore this imagination and move away from all the trauma art I was making as a reaction to what seemed like weekly police killings. When you met me, I was coming to the tail end of making a particular style of protest imagery, and I felt making that work was necessary. But I have since changed my ideas on what political art and activist art is.



Curtis Talwst Santiago. *By Sea*. Installation view. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

Martina Simeti

AG

Can you tell me about your first encounter with the painting that inspired the show?

CTS

I had seen this painting—*Chafariz d'el Rey in the Alfama District (View of a Square with the Kings Fountain in Lisbon)* (ca. 1570–80), depicting an African knight riding out of a town square in Lisbon—on a Tumblr site run by Kimberly Drew. When you see it digitally, you tend to just focus on the knight. You can't pick up the subtle details of the painting. Through serendipity or divine timing, I went to Portugal, and early on in my stay, while at dinner with new friends, I found myself at a table with someone whose family owned that painting.

AG

Wow, that's lucky.

CTS

So I got to see the painting, and it wasn't as I'd imagined. In the middle-left side of the painting there is a black man being clubbed in the head. In the mob, an African woman's legs are being pulled open. It wasn't this image of the Portuguese, and Jews, and Moors all interacting peacefully; there was a lot of violence. You realize that Portugal had a history with Africans prior to slavery, and so it began to shift the story. I also felt a synergy between me and the knight, with me being in the art world and having to ride through scenarios where I wonder when I will be in a position to really do something, because right now I'm not. And what does really doing something mean on a global scale? For me, now it's become very immediate, very local. I overheard a teacher on the train last night, angry that her six-year-old student had dis-identified as black. I'm trying to get away from this trap of language—you know, black is beautiful. But it's also a label we did not give ourselves.



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *Chain Mail Du Rag 3 (protect ya neck)*, 2018. Chain mail on steel armature. 23 x 8 x 8 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

AG

You made this series in Portugal. Was there a different relationship to blackness that you felt there?

CTS

Definitely. I also recognize the privilege I walk with. I was being brought to homes of people who had fought in Angola, but were sitting there with me, a person of Afro-Caribbean descent, and showing me such kindness and love as a stranger, making food for me and leaving it at my studio door. There was this one man who asked me to help bring his older wife out of the house; I remember him turning,

Martina Simeti

and crying, and hugging me. I would step into situations with all the trauma and expectation that a person was going to treat me with hatred, with all these assumptions. Then I thought, "What if I can shift my reality by how I approach situations?" I remember my mom saying "skinfolk isn't necessarily your kinfolk." She learned that when she moved from Trinidad to Fort McMurray, Alberta, in 1969, where she encountered crazy racism. But she also encountered tremendous acts of kindness, and so she was like, "Wait, people are people."

AG

I love how this work reinserts a story of black experience into a traditionally whitewashed Renaissance context. It makes one think about all those black passages across the Mediterranean sea that have been happening for thousands of years.

CTS

Prior to the transatlantic slave trade.

AG

Exactly. Or the ongoing refugee crises in the Mediterranean. Did you do any historical research when you were preparing for this show?



Curtis Talwst Santiago, *Red Face Ancestral Vision 1*, 2018. Spray paint, oil, charcoal, pastel, acrylic on canvas. 39 3/4 x 39 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Rachel Uffner Gallery.

CTS

I intentionally veered way from that, because I wanted the imagination to do a lot of the lifting. In Lisbon, I went and sat in ruins. I looked at the foundation of a building and recognized it as Moorish, so the African history is there; but then there are Roman columns on top of these Moorish bases, so there's this idea of cultural layers. Almost like, finding out that my great grandfather was a white, French guy, married to my great grandmother. I don't want this work to be all based on research. Because a lot of history that I'm finding through research has been altered! So why can I not alter? Discovering that certain string instruments, the way we eat food, the aqueducts were all brought from Africa,

so this idea of everything being "European"—well, not really! The cultural foundations for a lot of these things are coming from elsewhere. There are some things that just merge because we're human beings, and we're supposed to share information.

Martina Simeti

bonds. Édouard Glissant, the French-Martinican writer, wrote a lot about the nuanced “multiplicity” of our identities, and he wrote about it as a resilient strength of our ancestral uprootings. I feel I can sense this in how you’re thinking about ancestry in your work.

CTS

Absolutely. That’s what I’m pushing toward. I don’t only want to know my African roots, because that’s not the complete story, and for me to be a complete person I have to imagine the whole picture. I’m tired of living in this trauma of thinking that my life only began in the Caribbean or in North America at the time of slavery.

AG

At the same time, there are very particular cultural influences that come out of that plantation-era context. For example, you were telling me about seeing your family in Trinidad, at J’ouvert, their faces painted red with mud, and now these red faces have become one of the central thematics of your show.

CTS

Right, yes.

AG

And so you’re bringing this Afro-creolized, Caribbean tradition across another sea, across the Atlantic, to your Lisbon paintings. That’s pretty interesting. Can you tell me a little bit more about the faces in your latest works, and why ancestry takes on this color red?

CTS

It’s the moment that I go to Trinidad for the first time. I’m about seven or eight, and J’ouvert celebration is happening, and I’m seeing the clay being applied to my family members’ faces. I remember the way the sun was coming up, shining red on their faces. The moment felt electric, it felt illuminated. In my mind, their faces were like these red light bulbs, and again, it was the first time I had made that connection of “I am from these people.” Prior to that, in Canada, I was not surrounded by relatives, only immediate family. I had a moment in the studio one night where I sprayed this red circle, and all that memory and feeling came back. I realized that this is my chorus; this is my ad-lib; this is the moment I can keep coming back to and expand upon. When I discovered that red, it felt like it will be important and fruitful for me to dive into this. And it just started to grow from that.

Curtis Talwst Santiago: *By Sea* is on view at Rachel Uffner Gallery until June 24.

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Martina Simeti

Paul Gallagher, "Powerful, anti-racist miniature dioramas created inside jewelry boxes", Dangerous Minds, 27 September 2017



**POWERFUL ANTI-RACIST MINIATURE DIORAMAS CREATED
INSIDE JEWELRY BOXES**

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Topics:
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Dioramas
diorama
Curtis Talwst
Santiago



'Deluge' (2015).

Martina Simeti

Maybe it was the miniature world of *The Sims* or the illustrations in *Where's Waldo?* with its crammed panoramic scenes filled with chaos and action that first suggested the possibility to Canadian artist Curtis "Talwst" Santiago of producing tiny dioramas inside jewelry boxes. Or, maybe it was the Parisian dude living in Vancouver, from whom Talwst bought old magazines and posters to make his collages, who one day tossed him an engagement ring box and said, "I want to see what you can do with this."

It didn't take long. Talwst's turned the box into a diorama of a beach scene with his girlfriend coming out of the water like Botticelli's *Venus*. It was the start of a process with which Talwst creates astonishing works of power and beauty.

Talwst—pronounced "Tall Waist" a reference to his Caribbean grandfather's and his father's nickname—was born and raised in Sherwood Park, Alberta, Canada. His father emigrated from Trinidad to Fort McMurray in 1969. The experience of growing up in Canada was different to the life Talwst discovered when he moved to New York. As a Black man then living in Brooklyn, he found himself stopped and frisked by cops for no other reason than the color of his skin.

When I came to the States, there was some difference between me and the young man here that I see. But the minute I put on that big black hoodie, my black sweatpants, and I'm standing outside having a smoke outside of my studio, I'm immediately viewed as 'nobody,' and they know nothing about me. I realized that could happen to anyone, at any time. How many young men, that are loved by their families and are good people, were being killed? That resonated with me. It was the start of looking at Black identity in America because it's significantly different than Canada.

Talwst to produce dioramas on the shooting by police of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, and the strangulation by police of Eric Garner on Staten Island in 2014.

[W]ith Michael Brown, it's almost like a Goya painting [The Third of May]. Where we have images of this person beforehand and then we have images of him dead.

It's a plethora of feelings. It's frustration, it's feeling thankful that I'm standing in a position where I'm able to observe and look at it, and not feel lost, locked in it, trapped by it. With the Eric Garner tape, you watch the whole thing happen in front of you. Working on that piece was so sad for me. I felt so much sorrow for his family. You hear him beg for his life.

Just before Garner's murder, Talwst had seen Goya's Disasters of War etching *Por Qué?* of "this guy being choked against a tree by three soldiers."

A few days later, it's 4 AM in the morning and I'm watching the YouTube video [of Garner being choked by police officers], and it draws to mind the etchings. I started crying, working and crying and feeling so sad and hurt. But I learned so much from that. I learned that I had the ability to channel my emotions into the work, if it's honest work. But I held in the back of mind, this is not a monument to death. This is the spark to thinking and looking differently for a lot of people that are going to view this and see the video. It had to be a catalyst, mainly for his family. They've seen the moment of his death so much, but they never saw a moment of his ascension, his soul moving. And that's what I wanted to create.

Talwst has also produced dioramas on the plight of Syrian refugees (*Deluge*) and the rape of indigenous people (*The Rape*). He also has produced work on environmentalism, gender and identity. His dioramas have been featured in art galleries and museums across America and Canada, and in Paris, Johannesburg, South Africa, and Geneva, Switzerland. And you can see more of Curtis Talwst Santiago's work here. Click images to see larger picture.

frieze

REVIEW - 01 SEP 2017



Tau Lewis, Curtis Santiago and Daniel Rios Rodriguez

Cooper Cole, Toronto, Canada

BY CHARLES REEVE

The stolid figure of Tau Lewis's sculpture *You Lose Shreds of Your Truth Every Time I Remember You* (all works 2017) took me aback as I glimpsed it through the gallery's window. Life-sized, clad in rolled-up cut-offs and casual shoes, holding a wire monkey by a leash, he leans forward in his chair, physically and emotionally shattered, but controlling the space. He doesn't care that he shouldn't go shirtless in a gallery. He's not belligerent, but he's self-assured and wants relief from the hot day.

I did a double take when I observed how alive the figure seems, despite being fashioned somewhat roughly from both conventional and more unusual materials: plaster, stones, acrylic paint and stuff listed, intriguingly, as 'secret objects'. Similarly, in *Untitled (Play Dumb to Catch Wise)*, a smaller figure (perhaps Lewis as a child) sits in a rocking chair but lacks the energy to rock. The

Martina Simeti

exhausted but aware visage enacts the Jamaican proverb in the subtitle, feigning cluelessness so as to be clued in.



Tau Lewis, *you lose shreds of your truth every time I remember you*, 2017, plaster, cloth wire, chain, acrylic paint, stones, secret objects, fur, leather, chair, pants, shoes, 116 x 185 x 119 cm. Courtesy: Cooper Cole, Toronto

Deliberately or not, this subtitle recalls both William Shakespeare (his fellow ‘wise enough to play the fool’ in *Twelfth Night*) and Italian reggae personality Alborosie’s ‘Play Fool (To Catch Wise)’ (2013) – a range suiting the expansiveness of this two-person exhibition that Lewis shares with Curtis Santiago. The show encompasses work that, while distinct, overlaps thematically and aesthetically. ‘I don’t want to talk about diaspora anymore,’ says Santiago, quoted in the improbably poetic exhibition statement. ‘I want to create spaces to think about it. Mobility is necessary and luxurious and peculiar given our past.’ Mobility can be physical (as when Lewis’s father arrived in Canada from Jamaica, or Santiago’s family from Trinidad), but also intellectual or emotional. Thus Lewis’s self-representation seems to ponder her out-of-placeness – or perhaps, if we follow in the vein of Homi Bhabha’s thinking, ‘between-placeness’. The face in Santiago’s painting *Higher Self-Portrait* floats toward us from its spray-painted background; its indistinct edges feel ethereal while invoking the visual codes of graffiti and urban grit, and its oversized glasses turn the tables by transforming the viewer into the viewed.

Meanwhile, in Cooper Cole’s downstairs space, Daniel Rios Rodriguez’s solo exhibition similarly employs a rough-edged aesthetic to thematize issues of identities that refuse to be limited by the synthetic boundaries of nation-states. For example, the upright snake in the colourful, impatiently hewn *Nerodia* suggests a do-it-yourself caduceus or rod of Asclepius (alluding to,

Martina Simeti

respectively, commerce and healing) while its name references a water snake common to Rodriguez's home state of Texas yet found throughout North America. The Nerodia is a curious figure for resistant, mobile identity: widespread, tough, adaptable, but dully coloured and non-venomous. Nonetheless, without capturing much attention, it has infiltrated a huge geographical range, which it seems destined to occupy for centuries to come.



Tau Lewis and Curtis Santiago, 'Through the people we are looking at ourselves', 2017, installation view, Cooper Cole. Courtesy: Cooper Cole, Toronto

Still, for me, Rodriguez's most compelling piece is his mid-sized, untitled graphite drawing on a paper oval, completed in 2017. Bounded by a drawing of a cord (is the similarity to Pablo Picasso's 1912 *Still Life with Chair Caning* deliberate?), it bursts with images of plants, sunsets (or sunrises?), landscapes and water, rendered in a vaguely cartoonish way that imparts a remarkable energy. This vigour seems like the flipside of the emotional exhaustion that characterizes many of the works in these two shows: maybe an emblem of a time and place beyond the historical conditions that perpetuate diaspora, where enforced travel and the fatigue it generates come to an end.

**Also published in Issue 190*

Jessica Bloom, “This artist creates amazing worlds inside antique ring boxes”, Toronto Life, 21 August 2017



ART

This artist creates amazing worlds inside antique ring boxes

By Jessica Bloom | August 21, 2017

Curtis Talwst Santiago has found huge fame creating tiny worlds. The Edmonton-born artist started his career in Toronto, creating intricate scenes in antique ring boxes. Since advising the AGO on its 2015 Jean-Michel Basquiat show, he's taken his studio on the road to New York City, Johannesburg, Oakland and Geneva (and, right now, back to Toronto's Cooper Cole Gallery). "I've just been riding this wave since the Basquiat exhibition," he says.

Through it all, his method has stayed the same. "I use a lot of model-making materials—like straight-up hobby-shop, train-set-building materials," he said. "I also use found objects from my travels—I collect sand, rocks, plants, pebbles, maybe hair from someone. They're these little voodoo charms full of so many things." Here, he explains the story behind five of his newest jewelry box sculptures, largely inspired by art history and his time in South Africa.



Christmas in Durban

"Tweezers definitely become my pencil," Santiago says of his work. He found this jewelry in Johannesburg antique shop and uses tweezers to place painted figures on sand he collected from Durban. "At Christmastime, people of colour gather in the South African city of Durban and it's insane how packed the beaches are. With this piece, I wanted to

comment on race without showing black

bodies suffering or labouring. When I was staying in Johannesburg, I noticed that the black people were always represented in 'work mode' because the rest of their lives occurred behind walls, away from the affluent white communities. I wanted to show a moment of ease, celebration and relaxation."

Martina Simeti

Empty Wagon Leaving Slave Market

“Again, I’m moving away from showing black bodies that are suffering,” says Santiago. “As the rapper Vince Staples says, ‘The black business is trauma.’ Black artists have been convinced that we make our living off of selling our trauma, including everything from gangster stories to the way hip-hop speaks about women. For this sculpture, I wanted to show the scene, and the history, without the people in it.” The casket-style jewelry box is a piece of history itself, dating back to the 1800s.



Gaia III

Santiago created this piece inside a simple black box using objects like dried plants and eBay finds, which he blackened with charcoal and spray paint. The work is from a series inspired by Kerry James Marshall's monochromatic narrative paintings. “It’s a ‘manifestation’ sculpture—I believe that through work and having conversations with

myself, I can manifest things in my life. This is the studio I’d love to manifest into reality. It’s dilapidated on the outside but inside it’s a nice hermitage. The glow from inside is a sliver of a Caravaggio painting. This sculpture is full of nerdy art history references.”

Olukun (Venus)

“The bodies of the South African Zulu women made me think about Serena Williams and her pregnant photo shoot for Vanity Fair,” says Santiago. “There I was in Africa, the cradle of life, with pregnant women all around. For the composition, I took cues from Botticelli’s The Birth of Venus.” The figure was custom designed, while the jewellery box came from a Paris flea market.



Zulu Mother and Child

This striking figure is an altered train set miniature—Santiago painted everything from the facial features to the traditional Zulu clothing. “I loved seeing the Zulu women with their children. It was so different from babies in baby carriages—they just wrap a towel around their baby and strap them on. That connection was so beautiful and intimate and I wanted to show that.”

ARTFORUM

Tau Lewis and Curtis Santiago

COOPER COLE

1134 Dupont Street

July 20–September 9, 2017

An admixture of antagonism and vulnerability animates the faces looking out from Curtis Santiago's paintings and those staring back from Tau Lewis's sculptures, visages that dare you to care. Entering the gallery, one is immediately confronted by Lewis's *you lose shreds of your truth every time I remember you* (all works 2017), a seated male figure with eyes downcast, shoulders hunched forward. He holds the end of a leash tethered to a small creature sitting cross-legged on the floor next to him—tufts of soft fur stretch across its wire and twig skeleton. The rusted chain linking the two connotes a long-term dependency, or a doubled portrait of interior psyche and exterior persona. In two self-portraits, Lewis imagines herself as childlike figures nestled in spaces of comfort and respite: a monkey, its head bedecked with the artist's hair, sits in a swing, while a young girl assembled from Lewis's own worn clothing reclines in a rocking chair. There is a provisional quality to these works that is reminiscent of David Hammons's self-portraits, but Lewis's sculptural proficiency and her deft use of unexpected materials also evoke the uncanny sensibility of Meret Oppenheim.



View of "Tau Lewis and Curtis Santiago: Through the people we are looking at ourselves," 2017.

Spare, gestural paintings by Santiago—a Trinidadian Canadian artist best known for his miniatures housed in jewelry boxes, often credited to his other moniker Talwst—depict lush tropical landscapes and crude self-portraits in pastel, spray paint, charcoal, oil, and watercolor. *Parktown*, titled after a neighborhood in Johannesburg where the artist has spent time, centers on a purple goddess presiding over an azure pool and a potted plant: a space of spiritual replenishment surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Together, these artists manifest worlds where the psychic costs of diaspora are made material, offering latitude where personal and historical memory can be reckoned with.

— Gabrielle Moser

Cristina Vatulescu, “Art and law enforcement in a ring box: Talwst’s miniature aesthetic revolution”, *The Brooklyn Rail*, March 2016



ART AND LAW ENFORCEMENT IN A RING BOX: TALWST’s Miniature Aesthetic Revolution

by Cristina Vatulescu

In writing about art and law now, I felt compelled to address a part of law that often gets left out of such lofty conversations: law enforcement, or more specifically, policing. Force is both fundamental to and obscured in the workings of the law; Jacques Derrida famously made this argument in *The Force of Law* already in 1990.¹ Yet recent events and technologies have made the force of law newly visible, and newly obscured. Notable in this renewed quest to make law’s force visible is the Canadian-Trinidadian artist TALWST, whose *Minimized Histories* (2014 – 15) restage, among other disturbing scenes of “marginalization and unrest,” the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner as miniature dioramas in antique ring boxes.² TALWST is certainly not the first in tackling these issues, yet, bringing together art and policing inside a ring box is new. TALWST’s miniature dioramas are the antithesis of the iconic history of art and policing writ large such as Andy Warhol’s famous *13 Most Wanted Men*, his enlargement of a 1962 NYPD police booklet of mug shots that became a massive mural covering a large part of a circular cinema at the 1964 New York World’s Fair. Art and censorship were both magnified, as exhibition officials painted over Warhol’s mural with silver paint, creating their own work. Allan Sekula drew another unforgettable link between art and policing in *The Body and the Archive*.³ This one, too, was on a massive scale, involving a whole medium—photography—and its foundational complicity, through mugshots and Bertillonage, to policing. Film has a whole genre, the noir. So a miniature gave me pause. That’s how this article started: with me paused, in front of TALWST’s *Por qué?*, recently on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem.⁴

Martina Simeti



TALWST, *Por qué?*, 2015. reclaimed 1950's ring box, model putty, plastic, crushed rock, gold leaf, Acrylic paint, 3v led light, 3v coin battery. Flag: encaustic and ball point pen on gauze/7.5×7.5 cm. Image courtesy of the Artist. Photo: Todd Duym.

Por qué? Why put the infamous scene of Eric Garner's death at the hands of the NYPD in a "reclaimed 1950's ring box," framing it in gold leaf and purple velvet? To start with, judging from viewers' body language, so that we stop and look closer. People instantaneously switch modes of attention: eyes squinting, neck pushed slightly forward. At first sight, this is not unlike the way we watch particularly striking things on our cellphones, whose screens—the hand holding the ring box reminds us—are exactly the same size, the size those images of Eric Garner's death actually came to most people through their cellphones. Miniature size. Framed in a little box made to fit in a hand, shiny and eye-catching. TALWST's ring boxes recall our cellphones, those shiny objects of desire we keep on unlocking in the hope of a present—a precious message, eye candy, news, something else than what's here now. TALWST delivers, and his ongoing engagement with ring boxes, the *Infinity* series, mixes sheer visual pleasure with politics, popular culture, and many layered references to art and histories usually other than the mainstream ones. It is only every once in a while that his enticing jewelry boxes open, with little or no warning (just like with our cellphones) to something deeply disturbing like the Eric Garner images.

Of course, TALWST's boxes recall many other things besides cellphones, depending on the viewer. To my friend, curator Sarah Demeuse, they brought up the connection to folk art through the memory of "miniature Mexican tableau

Martina Simeti

boxes (sometimes even nutshells)” typically furnished with domestic scenes. Against that memory, she had to contend with “police brutality taking the place of rolling tortillas.” She also thought of “smallness and smuggling” and subversion (“you could take this in your pocket and insert it into a hegemonic context”). Coming from Eastern Europe, I thought of camp museum displays of prisoners’ art. This was a miniature art form by necessity: made of wood, paper, stone, and (even that most precious material in the camps) bread, it was hidden from guards’ eyes in little handmade boxes.

But let’s return to TALWST’s ring box and the Eric Garner video it most closely remediates, focusing this time on its departures from the moving image.⁵ Right when you approach the piece, there is its undeniable tactile materiality. It comes from the clashing of media TALWST mixed in this diminutive space, gold leaf and velvet clashing with the pavement’s crushed rock. Of these media, the most unusual is encaustic, a mixture of pigment and hot wax, used for *Flag*. Which flag, you may ask, before you notice that the image credits call the off-white background created by the interior of the ring box lid by that title. The combination of “Flag” and “the long out of favor and largely forgotten, encaustic,” make unmistakable the reference to Jasper Johns’s *White Flag* (1955), famously created in that unusual medium.⁶ In her analysis of this “pivotal object within the history of modern American art,” Isabelle Loring Wallace explains that “the anachronistic encaustic,” was at the time “most closely associated with [...] Egyptian funerary portraits. Affixed to the deceased’s mummy prior to burial, these highly realistic portraits [...] were designed to preserve the image of the dead.”⁷ Johns commented that he chose encaustic because, as “pigmented wax sets quickly,” “each discrete trace was preserved, effectively embalmed.”⁸

TALWST took up working in this painstaking medium of hot wax for the first and only time so far in *Flag*.⁹ Providing a material reference to Johns, the encaustic, “with its mortuary, embalming, and trace preserving properties” perfectly fits TALWST’s own project of artfully preserving the dead body for eternity, while also preserving traces (not just of the artistic process but also of the crime). The reference to Johns’s *White Flag* adds layers of interpretations to the piece through a back and forth of echoes and dissonances. First there is the radical downscaling of the flag and art object. Placed against the black body and its incandescent white light, the off-white of the flag’s whitewash can never again pretend to be neutral. Similarly, set against the background of a whitewashed American flag, this everyday scene of police violence can never again be dismissed as a marginal accident; instead, this scene of the abuse of the force of law is cast as an iconic national tableau, a central stain on the flag.

Martina Simeti

Last but not least, there is the gauze, another fantastic choice of medium for this tiny background. Gauze usually conjures the thought of the body it covers and protects—a wounded body. Johns’s *Flag* may have hidden references to a dead body in its use of encaustic or in Johns’ autobiography (he recalled his father had shown him in his childhood a statue of a soldier uncle, another Johns, killed while raising the American flag). Yet a viewer could well look at Johns’s *Flag* without the thought of a dead body ever occurring to her. This is not a choice for the viewer of TALWST’s work: the abused dead body, its raised spirit, as well as its police killers are all unavoidably foregrounded. As much as the intricately layered background, with its exquisitely arranged materials and references attracts the viewer’s attention; as much as she would love to get lost in talk of encaustic, there is just no escaping the foreground. TALWST’s miniature “aesthetic revolution,” to borrow and adapt Jacques Rancière’s term, has to do with rearranging the relationship between what we consider foreground and background, central and marginal, national and minoritarian, stories to be told in courts of law or stories to be told in museums.¹⁰ Not surprisingly for an aesthetic revolution, this starts with our perception. To this end TALWST’s use of miniature, which he rightly credits with the “unusual physical engagement in both creating and viewing the work,” and, I would add, with summoning new and atrophied modes of attention, works wonders.

1. Jacques Derrida, “Force de loi: le “fondement mystique de l’authorite”/Force of Law: the “mystical foundation of authority” *Cardozo Law Review* 11 no. 5/6 (1990).
2. TALWST, *Minimized Histories: Marginalization and Unrest*, February 26 – April 12, 2015. Art Gallery of Mississauga.
3. Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39, no. 4 (1986).
4. *Por qué?* is currently on show as part of *A Constellation* (November 12, 2015 – March 6, 2016), at The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, curated by Amanda Hunt.
5. Ramsey Orta, “Original Eric Garner Fatal Arrest Video,” *New York Daily News* (July 17, 2014). The full 12 minutes of the unedited version of the video is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpGxagKOkv8>.
6. Isabelle Loring Wallace, *Jasper Johns* (New York: Phaidon, 2014), 14.
7. Isabelle Loring Wallace, *Jasper Johns*, 13-14.
8. Isabelle Loring Wallace, *Jasper Johns*, 14.
9. TALWST, personal communication with the author, January 13, 2016.
10. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London Continuum, 2004), 37-38.

Martina Simeti

Alice Newell-Hanson, "Talwst recreates miniature historical atrocities in antique jewelry boxes", Vice i-D, 03 December 2015

i-D talwst recreates miniature historical atrocities in antique jewelry boxes

We speak to the Toronto-based artist about the craziest year of his career so far.

A few years ago, in a cafe in Vancouver, a woman approached the Canadian artist Talwst (pronounced "tall waist") and told him that she was receiving a message for him. An artist that he loved and admired would become his guide for the next three years. He immediately thought about the photo of Basquiat on his wall at home, and knew that that was who she meant. He admits it sounds crazy, but his life has been full of so many strange coincidences lately that a message from the other side feels about as real as anything else.



Uh Huh Honey (2014)

Not long after the coffee shop incident, the Art Gallery of Toronto asked Talwst to act as an advisor for its major Basquiat retrospective this year. "Throughout my career—as much as I work my ass off—these weird moments have just lined up," he told me over the phone from Vancouver. This year, he's also showing work at a major museum in the U.S. for the first time, as part of *A Constellation*, the current exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Talwst, whose legal name is Curtis Santiago, grew up in Alberta, the son of a Trinidadian mother and father. ("Talwst" is a reference to his Caribbean grandfather's and father's nickname, Tall Waist.) And while he remembers feeling at home in Canada, he also recalls the anger he felt while watching American TV shows like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. "The lack of racial diversity just pissed me off," he says.



Execution of Michael Brown (2014)

Martina Simeti

For his ongoing series, *Infinity*, Talwst creates intricate reenactments of scenes from history and art history inside used jewelry boxes. They are often deceptively beautiful to look at. In *The Rape*, a miniature indigenous woman is carried into a tiny painted forest within a carved ivory box the size of a walnut. In one subseries, *Marginalized Histories*, Talwst restages the shooting of Michael Brown with painted figurines no taller than thumbnails. Each piece is a portable snapshot of cultural history that begs a closer look.

Why does telling stories in such a small form appeal to you?

I don't know why I do miniature. But I do know that it was probably triggered by my childhood. I come from The Sims and *Where's Waldo?* generation. I always think about the first time people saw a photo of the earth from space. And I often get the feeling when I'm working on this scale that I'm in a Google Map, zoomed into this point, and it's the first time we're seeing subject matter this sexual or this violent on this scale.

What scenes are you working on right now?

I'm looking at Shunga [Japanese erotic art] for my series *History of Touches*, named after the Björk song. Shunga is the erotic art of the people. It mixes class and gender. So I'm also thinking about my transgender friends as I continue the series. There are still stories that I want to tell—and Shunga artists sometimes made series of four or five hundred images.



Shunga (2014)

Is *Minimized Histories* an ongoing project also?

Yes, I'm working on one now about the Syrian refugees. It was partly triggered by going to the MoMA. The [exhibition](#) there told the story of the Black Migration after slavery, after Jim Crow. And I became obsessed with the movement of people, and how my own family from the Caribbean came to Canada in the late 60s and early 70s.

These mass migrations now are going to shift those countries, and I always think that's for the better. Look at New York—the Irish, the Italians, the African-Americans. I make art because it saves my sanity but I also have to tell these stories because I don't want them to be forgotten or pushed aside.

How much does your personal story and your heritage inform your work?

It's an ongoing thing. When I travel the world now, I constantly have my lens shattered, or sometimes cleaned up. I remember the first time I came to the U.S. I didn't fully understand what it was like to be a black man in America until I was stopped and frisked and called all sorts of names. I still feel like I'm just a small kid from Canada and I should be able to talk to everybody. So it always informs my work. You know that term "the male gaze"? I think my work is based on my gaze, and my gaze is expanding all the time—especially as I am gaining sensitivities to what [life] is like for other genders and races.

Martina Simeti



Portrait of the Artist with Henri Matisse (2014)

What other experiences do you want to explore in your work?

The treatment of indigenous people in Canada, which is echoed in many countries. My mentor is a Canadian indigenous painter, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun. I grew up in the studio with him telling me, "You got to do it with candy." Candy is what gets them in the front door and then you have to have a message. His paintings are beautiful, with these bright colors, but they are talking about issues, about the atrocities that went on in Canada. He talked to me about the connection between the African spirit and the indigenous spirit and how in times of grief and loss our tribes have communicated and connected here in Canada. It sounds really idealistic, but I think there's enough space in everyone's heart to care enough about the atrocities happening outside of you.



Frida's Entry into Iguala (2015)

Was there a specific moment when you realized that you were going to make art professionally?

When my brother showed me Basquiat for the first time. Later, after the Art Gallery of Toronto asked me to be an advisor for the Basquiat show, and had commissioned a performance piece, all these things started to fall my way. I was coming out of a hotel in New York and I bump into a guy and I say, "You look familiar. Oh shit, you're Glenn O'Brien!" I show him my work, and he says, "This is fearless. The only other person who I have met who pulled out work from their pocket is Basquiat."

Then I meet his sisters and we go to a lenders' dinner and the person sitting next to me is Suzanne Mallouk (I had a picture of her and Basquiat on my wall for the longest time). I had two pieces in my pocket, one called *Sad Boy* and the other is a troubadour. I hand her *Sad Boy* and when she opens it her eyes start tearing up and she says this is exactly how Jean felt.

Martina Simeti



The Troubador II (2015)

Later, she said, "Jean would have loved you. You talk about race the same way he does." I know how many young artists feel a connection with Basquiat, but I felt like we would have been home boys. And to have it validated and be accepted by his peers...

That's a crazy story.

I even left out some weirder parts because I don't want this woman to think I'm a kook! But my life works in this weird, serendipitous way. I spent so much of my career rushing, being, like, "I want to be the first. I want this. I want that." Now I am taking my time and enjoying it. It feels like I am living a dream.



El Torero (2013)

“Talwst’s tiny boxes are making a big mark on the art world”, CBC Arts, 04 November 2015



Exhibitionists · Video

Talwst's tiny boxes are making a big mark on the art world

CBC Arts · Posted: Nov 04, 2015 1:13 PM ET | Last Updated: November 4, 2015



Curtis 'Talwst' Santiago in his studio, constructing one of his small artworks. (CBC Arts)

[Curtis "Talwst" Santiago](#) (pronounced "tall waist" — a nickname given to him by family friends due to his lanky physique as a child) was a promising young musician when he began making art on the side as way to combat the rainy Vancouver blues. After experimenting with various painting techniques, a friend handed him a small jewelry box and challenged him to do something with it. His first art show featured a series of paintings and a small collection of tiny dioramas built inside jewelry boxes. The paintings were well received but the ring boxes stole the show.

Now based in Toronto, Talwst has since exploded on the art scene, particularly after his dioramas were featured on Vancouver-based design blog booooooom.com.

Images of his work went viral, and he has since been singled out on dozens of websites including [Forbes](#), [The Guardian](#), [the Toronto Star](#) and more, earning him a large following not only online, but also in the art world. He is currently showing at Toronto's Angell Gallery and is part of an upcoming exhibition called "A Constellation" at the Studio Museum in Harlem.



Por Qué, a piece depicting the death of Eric Garner. (Courtesy the artist)



Curtis 'Talwst' Santiago. Execution of Michael Brown, 2014. (Courtesy the artist)

His work may be small, but the subject matter it tackles can be big, often incorporating homage to art history (he loves the impressionists) and connecting it with current events and popular culture – from Kim Kardashian as the Venus de Milo, to depictions of the murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown at the hands of police – two events that resonated strongly with the young black artist, who has himself been stopped and searched by police for looking "suspicious."

Martina Simeti

Adam Leher, "Canadian-Trinidadian mixed-media artist Talwst explores art history in a fresh context", Forbes, 29 April 2015

Forbes

Apr 29, 2015, 07:48am EDT

Canadian-Trinidadian Mixed-Media Artist Talwst Explores Art History in a Fresh Context

Adam Lehrer Former Contributor
Arts
I write about New York's art gallery system and museum structure.

Mixed-media artist Talwst, AKA Curtis Santiago, has worked very hard to express his creative vision. A Trinidadian by way of Toronto, Talwst originally pursued a career in pop music, longing to be something of an experimental R&B star and found some success, even receiving council from André 3000 on a few occasions. But music in the early aughts was very different and Talwst was faced with a racist infrastructure that told him that his sound was "too indie for black kids and too urban for white kids." This was a pre-80s and Drake world.

Fed up, Talwst moved to mixed media visual art searching for a venue that he could express himself relatively free of pre-conceived notions of what his work should be. Talwst utilizes painting, sculpture, performance, and off-kilter found objects to create an engaging visual world. Always fond of playing with new materials, Talwst sometimes uses jewelry boxes and creates scenes of life within them. He is as interested in the new as he is exploring art history, and education never finds itself alien to his work. Talwst wants to learn as much as he wants to educate.

Forbes: You are a multi-media artist in every sense of the word, but you also explore art history, is this modern meets the past aspect of your work pre-meditated?

Talwst: I can't get into something without exploring the entire past of it. When I discover a piece by an artist or a record, I have to dive into the whole back catalog. I don't think you can make something new without knowing what has come before.

Forbes: What was the first image you saw that you were like, "I get art, I want to do this."

Talwst: At first I was into music. I was obsessed with Hip-hop, all the way back to my parents' stuff with Sugar Hill Gang. I wanted to be the next Ginuwine, I was working hard to be an R&B singer. But I went back and forth with labels for a long time, because they thought I was too indie rock for black kids, and too R&B for white kids. I battled with labels. Eventually I got really depressed, and I started focusing on visual art about six years ago as a new outlet to express my vision.



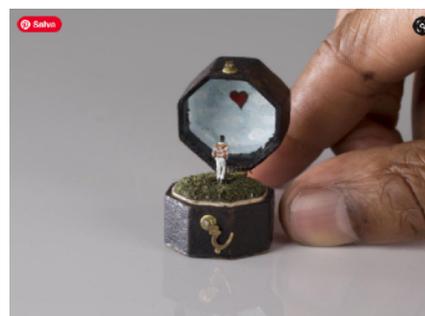
"Rough Trade" (2015), image via Talwst

Forbes: How did Fuse Gallery approach you for your first solo show, "Death of Swag," and how nerve-racking was it to be featured in a solo show for the first time?

Talwst: My first solo show in Canada came about when I decided to start making art to counteract the frustration I was having within the pop music world. I spent a year making work and not even telling any friends about it. One day a friend came by and was talking about a gallerist, and said, "You have to show these," and arranged for a studio visit for the gallerist and I. That ended up being my first gallery show.



"Bankey to Your Gran" (2015), image via Talwst



"The Troubador" 2014, image via Talwst

Martina Simeti

Forbes: And then that lead to "Death of Swag" at Fuse Gallery?

Talwst: As for New York and the "Death of Swag," the series before that was "Swagged Out," it ended up being a moment where I was in New York and growing frustrated with being in Toronto and not being able to crack into the gallery system there. So in New York, I was after hours at Lit Lounge, and a friend had mentioned to Erik Foss from Fuse Gallery that I was an artist. Erik asked to see some of my work and I grabbed some pieces out of my car to show him. On the spot, he opened the calendar and said, "You need to do something here," so we set a date for a year later, and that show was successful, we had tons of great people come through; Gracie Mansion, Baron Andre, etc. It was great to see the Lower East Side scene show up for this kid from Canada that had never even shown in the states before.



"I Know Places We Could Go" (2014), image via Talwst

Forbes: What's the name about?

Talwst: "The Death of Swag" basically refers to how I would get harassed in Brooklyn about six to seven years ago when I would buy women's skinny jeans at Top Shop because they didn't have men's skinny jeans yet. But 10 years later everyone has skinny jeans, so that's the death of swag.



"Frolic" (2013), image via Talwst

Adam Lehrer: Can you tell me about the Massive GALA, how you got involved with it, and what was your intent with it?

Talwst: Last year I designed uniforms for an all black Canadian hockey team in reference to the colored hockey league of the 1800s. I was really inspired by how the coach would give these amazing speeches to the players and the attendants before game time, and basically I had the coach give the speech to these players and then sent them out to push people around in the gallery. And it was a smash success, so they asked me to curate the event this year.



"Dejeuner Sur Lherbe" (2013), image via Talwst

Adam Lehrer: Your bio says you were exploring your shared Caribbean heritage with Basquiat at the Massive GALA, do you feel close to Basquiat in any sort of conceptual sense?

Talwst: People tell me I act Trinidadian, even though I've never lived in Trinidad for any extended period of time. It's like the heritage is innately inside you. Toronto is finally recognizing African-American artists and Canadian institutions are recognizing the lack of diversity in their programming. The [Art Gallery of Toronto](#) is trying to usher change. Because the Basquiat show was coming up, they decided that I should curate the show. We created a performance piece based on the Trinidadian [Carnival](#), which is totally performance art in and of itself. I made the Carnival costume based on Basquiat's "Riding With Death" (1988) painting that was inspired by [Trinidadian Carnival Artist] Peter Minshall and my first experience seeing Carnival, my first experience with performance art. Minshall tried to make a piece based on Trinidadian folklore: Mocojumbie. His Mocojumbie looked like a Basquiat painting. It was very influential in my piece and lead to my making my work with costumes and puppetry.

Martina Simeti



"Nubian Origin Story According to Artist" (2014), image via Talwst

Forbes: What does beauty mean to you?

Talwst: It has to be something that you feel in your gut. It's like when you see a Van Gogh for the first time and you start to see that up close, the piece isn't perfect. Imperfection is beautiful.

Forbes: What in the world inspires you these days?

Talwst: I was at a party, and this woman was feeding her dog under the dinner table, trying to hide the dog from everyone, and she looked at me and said, "If it's not the dog, it's the Lithium." That's how I feel right now, I need to make art and if not, it'll be lithium. It makes me sane.

Forbes: The Roots and Branches Residency through [The Art Gallery of Mississauga](#) that saw you creating a month-long curriculum for over 400 students in grades seven to eight and other education projects are commendable, are these done out of longing for an education that you hoped for as a kid or do you just really want to illustrate the importance of creativity amongst youngsters?

Talwst: It's a mix of the fact that mentors have been so important to me throughout my creative career. Working under a master painter like Lawrence Paul Yuxwelupton or being counseled by André 3000 in music, it showed me that having people to teach you in an intimate way is extremely important. Also, working alongside young people keeps you fresh. It's why David Bowie enlisted younger singers to tour with him as backups. It keeps you young.



Adam Lehrer

Follow



"Execution of Michael Brown" (2014), image via Talwst

THE STAR

VISUAL ARTS

The miniature world of Talwst: Toronto's lord of the ring boxes



By **Daniel Otis** News Reporter

▲ Fri., March 20, 2015 | ⌚ 4 min. read

🕒 Article was updated Mar. 19, 2015



[Eric Garner's illuminated spirit](#) hovering over the police who killed him. Canadian painter [Tom Thomson](#) revisited on a flamingo-headed acid trip. A selfie-taking [Kim Kardashian](#) as Venus emerging from the windshield of a sinking Lamborghini.

Welcome to the eclectic miniature world of Talwst.

The Toronto artist is a creative polymath, deftly working in music, television, film, fashion, painting and performance art. But it's the dioramas he crafts in small antique ring boxes that have become his raison d'être.

"This form is calling me," Talwst says from his Toronto studio. "I can make these feel like a poem; I can make these feel like a movie; I can make them feel like all the other mediums I was working in."

It all started seven years ago when a Vancouver street peddler of found miscellanea handed the artist a small ring box.

"I want to see what you bring back," Talwst was told. He crafted a diorama of his then-girlfriend [emerging from an azure sea](#). From there, his passion for the minuscule form — the dimensions of which would deter most artists — grew.

Born in Edmonton to Trinidadian parents, a young Curtis Santiago would spend the long Alberta winters locked in his room building car models and Plasticine dioramas.

Martina Simeti

The “Talwst” moniker, the 36-year-old artist says, is pronounced “Tall Waist,” which was a family nickname inspired by the spider-long legs he shares with his father and grandfather.

“Alberta taught me how to hibernate,” he says. “When there’d be a week of minus 40 and no one could go outside, I’d be in my room just making models.”

Talwst’s Toronto studio sits next to an abandoned Kodak plant near the old [Ontario Stockyards](#). Tucked into the corner of a high-ceilinged room, there’s a calculated madness to the artist’s workspace. Found objects dominate Talwst’s world and, wherever he goes, you’ll find him eyeing the ground for material.

Scattered about are bits of copper wire, tufts of cotton and moss, hunks of stone, tiny twigs, clips of tapestries, shreds of postcards, patches of snakeskin and all matter of paint chips. There’s also an array of model paints, LED lights, packages of glitter and coloured powders, and hundreds of scaled railroad model figurines that Talwst chops apart, embellishes and Frankensteins to create the people that populate his dioramas.

Talwst works at a stand magnifier. Tweezers, glue, modelling knives and fine paintbrushes are all close at hand. Every project is meticulously researched. Some of the miniature works took years to make. Most take several months. Today he’s crafting a Mesopotamian hut where a laptop-wielding ancient will be bathed in the glow of an LED light.

“Sound, light, attention to detail — that’s where I’m going.”

Talwst readily cites the late Caribbean-American painter Jean-Michel Basquiat — currently [being feted](#) at the Art Gallery of Ontario — as the inspiration for his colourful, socially conscious cut-and-paste work.

“I really like looking at the artists that were told ‘no,’” Talwst says. “Because these were told ‘no’ for a long time.”

Talwst’s dioramas are mixtapes of materials and themes that create multi-faceted layers of meaning by blending pop culture, art history and social justice issues into seamless wholes. Each is like a visual haiku: a universe encapsulated in the palm of your hand. Essentially, they are snapshots of Talwst’s expansive world view and glimpses into his restless mind.

The Execution of Michael Brown, which is on display at the Art Gallery of [Mississauga](#), commemorates the August 2014 shooting death of the unarmed black teenager by a white police officer in Ferguson, Mo. In the box, the killing plays out underneath the windows of a red brick building: Brown gunned down, tufts of cottonlike smoke billowing from the rifles. The scene is modelled after Édouard Manet’s [19th century painting](#) *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*.

Martina Simeti

Isha: Evening Prayer is a piece inspired by Talwst's former art students, who feared talking about their Muslim faith in our post-Sept. 11 world. In this box, a lone dark figure prays into the night to show the beauty and universal truths of all religions. All in a diorama whose diameter is only slightly larger than a quarter.

In *Uh Huh Honey*, rapper Kanye West grips a microphone while walking on water, as wife Kim Kardashian emerges from the windshield of a sinking black Lamborghini, taking a selfie in a white swimsuit, like Venus in a bed of flowers. Above them is a detail from Jacopo Pontormo's 16th-century painting *The Deposition from the Cross* — a jab at West's messianic posturing.

"I respect his courage to say something outlandish and then make it happen," Talwst says of the notoriously self-aggrandizing rapper. "Everything that I have achieved is because at one point, as crazy as it sounded, I said it out loud."

In one corner of his desk, there are stacks of jewelry boxes roughly arranged by size and colour. The boxes are bought or found, or donated to the artist. One pile of boxes has been earmarked for a Picasso-esque blue series. Talwst shows off another: a frayed, pale box that once held a ring designed by Napoleon's personal jeweller.

"I don't want a box that looks new," he says. "I want it to have dirt and dust in the detail. I'm not going to clean that off. I want it to be torn and shredded and frayed. I want it to have had a life before it enters my studio."

A selection of Talwst's work is on display at the Art Gallery of Mississauga until April 12. Talwst is also the artistic director of the AGO's 11th Massive Party, which will be held on April 23. The event runs concurrently with the Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibition.

Martina Simeti

Kathryn Bromwich, "The imaginative ring-box art of Talwst - in picture", The Guardian, 07 March 2015



The imaginative ring-box art of Talwst - in pictures

Seven years ago, Canadian-Trinidadian artist Talwst was given an old ring box by a Parisian street vendor, who told him: "I want to see what you make with this." Talwst placed a miniature figure emerging from a tiny seascape inside and, ever since, has been creating dioramas of scenes inspired by pop culture, current events and everyday experiences. "I like to capture memories and fleeting moments," he says. "They feel all the more moving because of their fugitive nature." He hunts out the ring boxes in antique markets and on eBay, and is sent old ones by fans. "I want the viewer to open the box and feel they have been transported to another world."

Kathryn Bromwich

Sat 7 Mar 2015 16.00 GMT

search /// i am jealous of Talwst

[july 2nd ~ 3rd](#)

weekend guest {zoe pawlak}

[Zoe Pawlak](#) is very easy to be jealous of. Not only am I [jealous of her paintings](#), but she also has a beautiful studio that she shares with [Fiona Ackerman](#) {yet another huge talent!} at [1000 Parker Street](#)... an old four storey warehouse that is overflowing with *amazing* artists. I have recently had the pleasure of meeting Zoe in person, and it turns out that she's not only a gifted artist, she's also one of the loveliest people you'll ever meet. Oh, and speaking of meeting lovely people, Zoe did just that for her guest post:

I am jealous of [Talwst](#) (pronounced 'Tallwaist') [Santiago](#).

Talwst is a gorgeous, enigmatic man on a mission to create meaningful art and music about social issues, personal triumphs and love. So, what is there not to be jealous of?

I met up with the charismatic Talwst in Toronto a few weeks back to ask the man what makes him move. These are a few musings we came up with to make you super-jealous.

*The man is on FIRE. Working with one of the top producers in the world, [Illangelo](#) (co-producer of *The Weekend*), Talwst is kicking it into high gear with his music. As for his art practice, he has plans for an upcoming fall group show at the [AGQ](#) and a solo show next year at [Fuse Gallery](#) in NYC. Taking his own unique style and authentically channeling the African Aesthetics that were introduced to him at an early age by his favourite artist, his brother, Talwst looks to artists like [Kerry James Marshall](#), and musicians [Kanye](#) and [Outkast](#) who have pioneered the way in making relevant work that merges their heritage with social topics in a most revolutionary fashion. Talwst's "All Black Everything" series speaks to the heart of his mission: informing the world about water. "Water and the role it will play in the future is my absolute creative focus these days." If that doesn't make you jealous enough...*

Talwst is going to make art and music. That's right. Both. Jealous? Talwst has currently aligned himself with Creative Advisor Danny Lee and Music Manager Joseph Segarra to help him fuse a new model for making art and music. This is a whole rebranding process wherein these two men take Talwst's ideas and help him channel them into a cohesive body of work so that he can continue to have vision and make soul felt work that will no doubt blow up. Get this. Talwst paints his face most mornings to remind himself that 'everything in you that is true and creative, even if it is dark, must be expressed.' That is effortless, true cool. So, if that doesn't make you jealous yet, let's get to the heart of the matter...

Talwst is a family man. "I wear my heart on my sleeve." says Talwst. Though he himself has not yet found 'the one', she is out there and he is certain their life together will be filled with babies and travel and continuing on the meaningful artistic work he is aiming to do in the next era of his burgeoning career. He calls his future wife his 'running partner.' Get in line ladies, the man is a LOVER in the truest sense of the word. He speaks most highly of his parents and plans to spend winters in his homeland of Trinidad ([Peter Doig](#) is also down there... jealous?) caring for them into their old age and making art.

When I ask Talwst what it means to be a Lover, his response is clear. "It is the best way to be in the world. I was taught this by my mother." he says, "It opens you to the world. Travel also opens you and let's you move through the world with an open heart."

The man travels a lot. Definite Jealousy. It is no wonder that some of the most highly creative individuals like [Illangelo](#) are wanting to work with Talwst. He claims that there are people all over the globe making music and art about some of the most difficult current topics. With idols like [Yoko Ono](#) and [Malik Yusef](#), you can be certain that any fame that finds this man will be leveraged for good. That is something worth being jealous of.



Music

MUSIC »

Curtis Santiago

by Martin Turenne on February 26th, 2004 at 12:00 AM

Outside the Ritz Hotel in London, Curtis Santiago is having a hard time staying focused. "Sorry, man," he says, interrupting our call, "but have you been to London? Have you seen the girls here? Damn!" Before the Edmonton native gets too carried away, I steer him back to the topic at hand: his ascendant career. After all, Santiago isn't in London to ogle girls but to accompany DJ Vinyl Ritchie for shows at some of England's best nightclubs, including the 3,000-capacity Fabric.

All week long, Brits have been catching a glimpse of the Vancouver-based tandem that appears every Saturday in this city at Shine, where the pair have been nurturing their tag-team act for the past year. Regular visitors to the Gastown bar will recognize Santiago as one of the best freestylers in town, as he spits conscious rhymes in a style reminiscent of golden-era greats like A Tribe Called Quest.

According to Santiago, time spent fronting Edmonton's soul-oriented Hi-Phoniqs in the late 1990s prepared him for any live environment imaginable. "Being in that band taught me absolutely everything I know about performing," says the vocalist, his focus returning to our conversation. "Here we are, a soul band from Alberta, and we're playing rocker bars in Thunder Bay for a roomful of bikers. Once you've done that, you can do anything."

In 2002, Santiago left the Hi-Phoniqs, moving westward to break into Vancouver's music industry. In his brief time in B.C., Santiago has made deep inroads, earning the Galaxie Rising Star award at 2003's NewMusicWest and cutting his solo debut, *Portrait of an Artist*. Santiago, bearing the influence of '90s-era rap and '70s-vintage soul, is that rarest of local performers, a man whose rhyming skills are matched by his confident tenor leads. Once the frontman in a teenage a cappella group, the bespectacled entertainer comes off like a Maple Leaf version of OutKast's André 3000, a man who can spit fire and ice in equal measure.

Like Dre, Santiago cuts an outlandish sartorial figure, with his red-plastic-framed eyeglasses and flashy jackets giving him the air of the coolest professor on campus. "Getting on the mike dressed the way I do, cats will immediately doubt me," he explains. "They'll be like, 'Come on, now. Who's this joker?'" But as soon as I start rhyming, they'll recognize my skills."

If there's a theme running through Santiago's career--from Thunder Bay biker bars to West Coast freestyle sessions--it's of the artist as an outsider who wins over doubters with his endearing stage presence. As for his fashion sense, the former Albertan is among the leaders of hip-hop's new breed, and urban clothiers like Triple 5 Soul and Ecko are starting to sell blazers like the ones Perry Como once wore. In a rap world flipped upside down, Curtis Santiago may soon find himself sitting on top.

"I hate this stereotype of people in this genre having to wear baggy track suits and stuff like that," he says. "It's great to see hip-hop cats going chichi now, but it's also forcing me to start doing something different because I've been into that style for quite a while. Whether it's clothes or freestyling, I'm always trying to stay one step ahead of the game."