

## To Be the Other of the Other: An Encounter with Frohawk Two Feathers / *Grégory Pierrot*

📅 December 7, 2017 (<http://asapjournal.com/to-be-the-other-of-the-other-an-encounter-with-frohawk-two-feathers-gregory-pierrot/>) 👤 Grégory Pierrot  
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Frohawk Two Feathers, *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la gouverneurs. Or, Borough Check. The old money don't want a new world so the Revolution had to get sabotaged somehow. Murder was the case. And Horus wept* [detail](2017). Courtesy of the Johannes Vogt Gallery.

Can paintings still move you? Can they work on you outside of criteria enunciated and constantly revised at a mass level? Can they move you by moving *to* you, by taking to the streets, integrating a mass politics? Can they hail you? Does graffiti do this work? Did it ever, or how long, in its natural element, confronting the public as series of passers-by on its own turf, in its early days, before the market, and the trends, and the galleries and the institutions swallowed it up? Can it still have anything near this effect—whether it ever did, whether nostalgia reconstructs it? Can accidents of aura still happen?

Here's one:

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(<http://asapijournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/fig1-IleGouverneurs-e1507033313184.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la gouverneurs. Or, Borough Check. The old money don't want a new world so the Revolution had to get sabotaged somehow. Murder was the case. And Horus wept* (2017). Courtesy of the Johannes Vogt Gallery.

That day, fall of 2016, I was walking into the high-ceilinged, open atrium of UConn-Stamford on my way to my office when I saw it. There, on the usually bare wall, hung one of several art pieces from the traveling Race & Revolution show hosted by our campus.<sup>1</sup> A riot (fig.1): under three arches of sand, antique Egyptian gods jostled for space with Napoleonic-era soldiers riding three-headed horses, on each side of a colonial mansion in front of which rested a gigantic black, two-headed, hermaphrodite mermaid. Long-haired blonde men sporting orange riding coats, dark-skinned men and women in black uniforms and florid party clothes filled the canvas, while in the foreground lay a rampant, bicephalous snake flanked by two drummers in loincloths with the heads of cobras. Center stage, a tragedy: on a platform shaped like a fort, two assassins were stabbing a black man and woman dressed like rulers of Ancient Egypt. In the king's hands, a declaration: "A FREE HARLEM." Easy to miss among the chaos, a black and a white Jesus were wrestling for a wooden cross.

Habits help shape our perception of art in the age of mass: museums train us to look at the walls for little white cards with basic information on exhibits and, when needed, explanations. The reflex paid off: there it was, on the wood paneling, a white card with expected but nonetheless intriguing information:

\*Author: Frohawk Two Feathers.

\*Title: *Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la gouverneurs. Or, Borough Check. The old money don't want a new world so the Revolution had to get sabotaged somehow. Murder was the case. And Horus wept.*

Taking most of the card space was a long description penned by this puzzlingly-named author of the event depicted: the murder of Horace and Isabel, King and queen of Free Harlem, by assassins in the pay of the Dutch East India Company, in the aftermath of the War Between the Rivers. Further down, another card, quoting Dunmore's Proclamation of November 1775, by which "all indentured servants, Negroes, or others" who would join loyalist troops in putting down the American rebellion were promised freedom.

A good one, that.

"The deepest impulse of the historian lies not in writing but in *rewriting* . . . getting closer in their own account to something that seems to them essential," says William Dowling: "it is the historian's counterpart of what happens when an individual sets out to recover a memory."<sup>2</sup> While history asks us to look through its narrative to an external reality, historical fiction references factual events "as one feature of a setting already established, on quite separate grounds, as belonging to an imagined world," Dowling explains.<sup>3</sup> What, then, of narratives that simultaneously do both? Some memories are not easily recovered: for good and bad, narrative is an essential element for individuals coping with trauma—or for those meaning to downplay the trauma they caused.

## Parallel worlds

Telling black stories in this world often feels conspiratorial, pseudo-historical, or acutely paranoiac, a constantly shifting combination of these modes, which even the freezing cold gaze of authority cannot quite stabilize. The many-faceted oeuvre of Umar Rashid (Frohawk Two Feathers' civilian name) grows in these trembling, blurred borderlines and lines of vision, one foot on each side of the chasm that separates fact and fiction, history and story. There are lineages to this—inheriances that travel in blood but are not of it; embodied memories that manifest themselves in family traditions, talents, ailments, tales.

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Rashid was born under the double sign of storytelling and of history-making in Chicago, that monument to segregation and African American endurance. His parents were both actors active in the thriving 1970s black theater scene. They first met playing Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz in Norbert Davidson's *El Hajj Malik*. His mother was also an educator; his father a playwright and a painter, who later became a set designer working for theater troupes around the city. Art runs in the family: Rashid's paternal grandfather was a successful jazz musician. His maternal grandparents were artists of a different kind. Back in Alabama, "the old country,"<sup>4</sup> people would come to them with their dreams and Rashid's ancestors would interpret them. "They were basically witches," doing for rural black communities what psychoanalysts got paid to deliver to rich whites.

Born in 1976, Umar was his parents' second son. Then as now, life in the South Side was rough, but Umar also got to see the houses that black power built. He spent his first years of schooling in Haki Madhubuti's Institute of Positive Education, "an alternative charter school to get black children to learn about black history before they'd fall into the Western canon, so to speak." And fall he did: when money became scarce Umar had to enter the US public school system at Alexandre Dumas Elementary. In IPE he had learned black history and culture, Swahili. Now, at a school named after a French author whose African lineage was never discussed, his only black teacher taught him French, and Umar was mostly learning about the lies George Washington supposedly did not tell: "everything was topsy turvy."

Imagine waking up in a world that tells you that you do not exist.

Books provided Umar with a welcome anchor: he read whatever he could get his hands on—sociology, anthropology, and world history, works like J.A. Rogers' *A Hundred Amazing Facts about the Negro* and other black intellectual fare he could find at the Jean Baptiste Pointe Du Sable Museum—named after Chicago's Saint-Domingue-born, African diasporic founder—then and now the hub for black art and political activities, which became one of Rashid's favorite hangouts. "I remember that being such a source of pride for me when I was a child, to know that a black man from Haiti came all the way up river and founded Chicago." Everywhere, clues pointed to hidden layers of black history. Rashid also read "straight, pure mythology," ancient and contemporary. In the 1980s his uncle introduced him to the Marvel pantheon. There were next-door, teenage wasteland superheroes like the X-Men; tragic loners like Rashid's favorite, the Incredible Hulk: "he was in a struggle with himself, and I felt I was in a struggle with my own history"—a reading of Bruce Banner as a peculiar twist on double consciousness, "two warring ideals in one green body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."<sup>5</sup> There were also cosmic-scale beings like Galactus, Eater of Worlds, or the Beyonder, the alien containing an entire multiverse: stylish demiurges beyond good and evil, with the power to create and annihilate timelines. Such works of fantasy afforded him an escape from difficulties at home and in the street, but they also informed that reality. The crack epidemic was ravaging the South Side and the hood had its own anti-heroes in gang leaders. Their ostentatious and fleeting wealth, sense of style, short and brutal lives and awe-inspiring feats overlapped peculiarly with the myths and histories Umar consumed in industrial amounts.<sup>6</sup>

Rashid "grew up in the church" but he converted to Islam in his mid-teens, following which he took to hanging out with Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam followers, two black Muslim movements with deep roots in the Midwest and breathtaking myths of their own. In those days he "always found himself surrounded by these black Afrocentric scholars who studied John Henrik Clarke, Ivan Van Sertima, Yusef Ben-Jochannan, all these kind of fringe Afro-Egyptologists" whose work on African history—generally debunked and roundly scorned in mainstream academia—nevertheless perpetuated the sense of racial pride and self-understanding planted at IPE. "Being black, you gotta believe in some sort of conspiracy," says Rashid with a smile, but of course, the joke cuts two ways. For all the outlandish theories discussed in these circles, there have always been incredible stories real enough to warrant general distrust of US institutions and holders of official truth. Didn't the good citizens of Tulsa wipe out an entire black neighborhood with complete impunity in the 1920s? Weren't US governmental bodies involved in infecting African Americans with syphilis for decades? The two groups delivered welcomed doses of black antibiotics in a country where white alternative history—like, say, the notion that the Confederacy fought honorably for a decent cause—is embedded in the US landscape. Their stories and related elaborations hovering on the fuzzy border between history, myth, and outright fiction opened onto peculiar, if somewhat futile, dimensions of truth: in spite of these tales of past grandeur or utter woe "you still get treated like second-class citizens. You live in all these different worlds, three, four, five, different worlds, but the only one that's offered to you is the one that's dictated by the color of your skin."

## How to keep warring worlds inside a dark body from tearing it asunder<sup>7</sup>

There is a story I like to tell about myself, an origins story of sorts.

My parents, my two siblings, and I were at the house of my father's cousin André in the Meuse region of France. Every stone whispers of history there, but that day, history was a loud topic of conversation at the table. Ten-year-old me was a history buff and Napoleon fan; I knew all the battles and their dates, had a sixth sense for finding statues of Napoleonic generals in the tiny villages where they stand. André knew I liked history, so that day as he often did when I saw him, he tested me with questions I was proud to answer easily. I was still smiling and happy with myself when he hit me with this: "I don't understand why you like Napoleon so much. You know everything about him: surely you know that he reestablished slavery?"

I bought the classic French narrative by which General Bonaparte had turned into tyrant Napoleon to protect the gains of the French Revolution in the face of global hostility. André's question left me nothing to grab onto, so I turned to my mother. She was wearing a slightly sorry smile, and when I caught her eye she shook her head a little, and shrugged. Not a Gallic shrug, mind you: the shrug of a black West Indian woman exiled in cold Lorraine, who needs no words to say "I told you so." And she had told of many things, dropping soft hints here and there. She hails from Martinique, like Napoleon's first wife Joséphine, but Joséphine Tascher de la Pagerie was a white creole in a planter family. Our ancestor Joséphine was born a slave on the same island in 1791, and only after the 1848 emancipation was she graciously given a full name, officially recorded in an "act of individuality" (*acte d'individualité*). Make of that what you will.

My mother had told me of a man whose name she always said in full, first and last names strung together as a kind of password: Toussaint Louverture. Such a Caribbean name—religion, calendar, and program all in one. An engraving of him on a bucking horse, sabre aloft, graced the pages of my father's twelve-volume illustrated popular history of the First Empire (fig.2). Louverture's military achievements went unmentioned but for a few equivocal lines that said nothing of the ten-

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year-long war involving Spain, France, Great Britain, in the wealthiest slave colony in the West Indies; nothing of the violence, the body count, the atrocities, the utter ignominy of Napoleon's attempt at reestablishing slavery, the geopolitical earthquake of the eventual defeat of his elite troops at the hands of former slaves; nothing of the formidable tale of the birth of Haiti, of the women and men who looked like me and had made such a wonder possible.



(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig2-ToussaintLouverture-e1507033422905.jpeg>)

*Toussaint Louverture, chef des noirs insurgés de Saint-Domingue* (1802). Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

I knew, and somehow I had managed to repress that knowledge, tsk-tsk it under the dust jacket of French history, like good white Frenchmen were taught to. But I was not white: French history was only partially mine, and my history only partially French.

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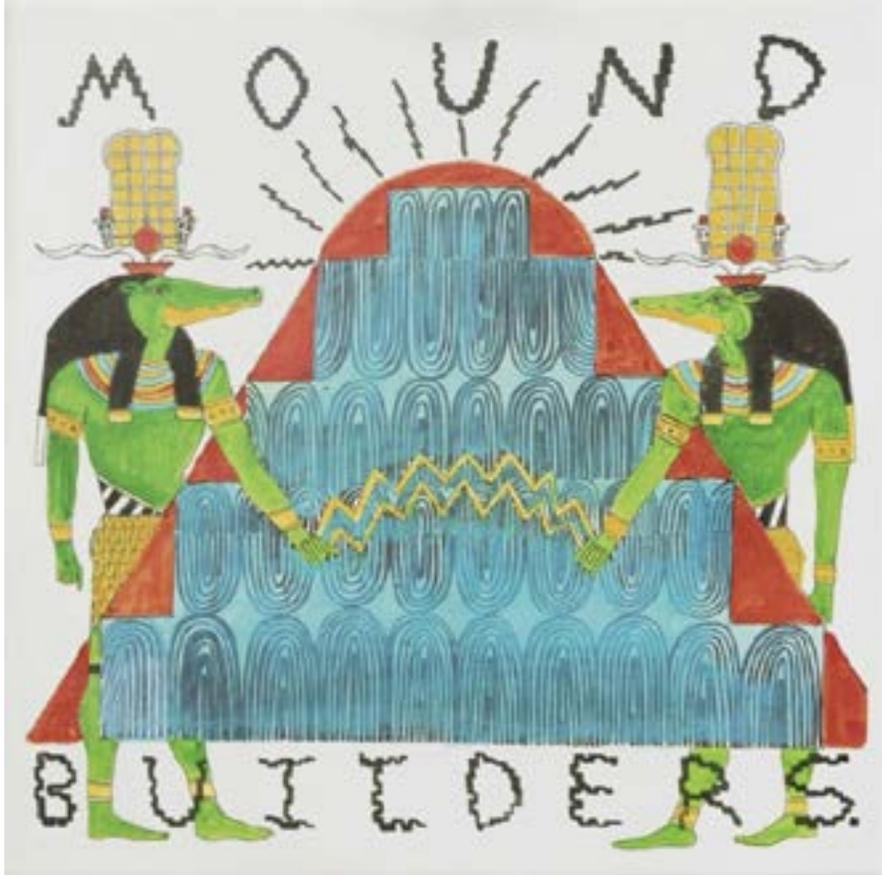
My Napoleon anecdote flattens a personal timeline: it took me years to get a sense of the effort necessary for a country to so efficiently erase an event so crucial to its modern history. A necessary effort, one might argue, after French historian Ernest Renan, who thought that national harmony demands an alternative history in which the worst gets forgotten. That Renan made this point at the height of French colonial adventurism is hardly a coincidence. French schoolchildren may still read Alexandre Dumas, but they learn as little of his Saint Domingue roots as their American peers. Imperial history demands the erasure of all that does not fit: black and brown French people of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—people with familial geographies much like mine—for all accounts and purposes have traditionally been either whitewashed or erased. Yet those who would look can still see and hear them, even in the record of Empire. On certain occasions, they have made themselves subtly apparent, scratching that record and daring you not to hear, or see. A statue of Joséphine has long stood in the main square of Fort-de-France, Martinique’s capital, a dainty rendering, dressed in the neo-classicist style she helped make fashionable, made of blindingly white stone. In 1991 people cut off the statue’s head, poured red paint down its neck. Aimé Césaire, then the city’s mayor, neither fixed nor debunked the statue. It stands in state today, one symbol of both the island’s white supremacist history and its legacy of black resistance through creativity. Hint hint.

In an essay on Afro-Briton abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, Paul Youngquist boldly states: “I think Gustavus Vassa, a.k.a. Olauda(sic) Equiano, a.k.a. the African, a.k.a. Himself, is a DJ . . . [T]o survive in this fascist police state . . . you gotta always be able to come up with a name, your name . . . Equiano is not an individual but a crowd, a pack of aliases.”<sup>8</sup> All hail the Beyonder: Youngquist evokes a multiverse of black cultural practices familiar to us by way of its popularization in hip hop, to argue that the hijacking of technology (here the book, there the turntable) on which these practices often rely was born of horrendous strife in the Atlantic World. “It is worth remembering that Equiano was black. That he was a slave. That he was on his account sold twice in Africa and four times in the new world. That his multiple names announce imperial and economic power and map its geographical dispersion”: blessed are those who can trace with assurance their lineage through the ages and to minute points of authoritative maps, for they have long benefitted from the spoils of Empire.<sup>9</sup> For the rest of us, official rumors and family tales will have to do: much like Equiano’s, our identities are “diasporic, routed, multiple, motley, hybridized.”<sup>10</sup> Our names are the liner notes of Imperial records that were never released. What if a DJ dug these out of their dusty crates, sampled and remixed them? What if a “most dangerous MC” drew on those age-old rhymes to “drop the ancient manifested hip hop”?<sup>11</sup>

## What art might accompany this music?

“I started my own crew because I didn’t like following very much. I was never a follower.” When Umar got into graffiti in high school he took the head of his own crew under the *nom de spraycan* Gras, his first alter ego. In Audre Lorde’s words, “the actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose.”<sup>12</sup> Black street artists are criminalized like the rest of their community; Gras got in trouble, and the crew folded. Umar left the city to study film at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, a town lying within the triangle formed by St Louis, Memphis and Nashville. The soundtrack of these years prominently features Nas, but also David Bowie, Miles Davis, or the drum n’ bass outfit 4hero, in whose work—consider their second album, *Parallel Universe*—he caught a “resonance, affinity with a cosmic and terrestrial reality” which in turn evokes Sun Ra’s: “avant garde, unapologetic blackness with hints of conspiracy.” This was hardly a surprising place for it. The SIU student newspaper’s name—*The Daily Egyptian*—evokes the Southern corner of Illinois between Tennessee, Missouri, Kentucky and Arkansas also known as “Little Egypt,” sitting as it does around the Mississippi, that American Nile. Direct references appear in town names such as Cairo, Karnak, Thebes, and Memphis, but also indirect ones in such archeological wonders as the Cahokia mounds—which, incidentally, some authors see as evidence that pyramid-building people from Egypt traveled to the Americas before Columbus (fig.3). A region of wonders in a land full of them.

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(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/fig3-MoundBuilders-e1507033476907.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Mound Builders* (2016). Courtesy of the Johannes Vogt Gallery.

There Rashid met Michiyo, his future wife, in Japanese class. He acted in plays, dabbled in poetry, and otherwise got involved in all the arts he could approach, hanging out with other actors, painters, poets, and musicians. A person for every season. Rashid by day turned into rhymelord Hi Fidel by night. Hi Fidel released *Madeira*, his first EP, on his friend and partner in crime DJ Crucial's label F5 Records. Their collaboration would thrive along the years, yielding two more albums, *Traveling Between St Louis and Chicago* (2001) and *The Company of Wolves* (2007), which also featured another persona, scotch whisky lover Kent Cyclone. "I can't help thinking to myself if I was somebody else that was better than me things would have turned out differently," Cyclone muses in a plaintive falsetto on "Christine."<sup>13</sup> But then, Cyclone was always somebody else.

After graduating in 2000, Rashid left Carbondale with Michiyo, Hi Fidel, Kent Cyclone et al. to go to Los Angeles, California. Spanish conquistadores named the region after an island populated only by strong black women skilled at taming the native bloodthirsty griffons depicted in Montalvo's sixteenth-century *Adventures of Esplandian*. Calafia, queen of the black Amazons, hears of an expedition of heathen peoples against Constantinople, capital of the Christian empire, and sees an opportunity to see the world and gain global fame. She and her California girls join the siege, along with their man-eating griffons. Calafia eventually converts to Christianity, marries a knight, and the newlyweds go to golden California: "we decline to say more about what became of them," says the narrator, "because, if we wished to do so, it would be a never-ending story."<sup>14</sup> This is both a statement of intent and a lie: Calafia eventually reappears, a consort in her own queendom now fighting Christian wars. Thus passes the glory of the black, female world.

Umar's Western progress reverses the dynamic of erasure of *Esplandian*: he brought along a stowaway chronicler of black history. Umar's training in photography did not yield a job, and he started "selling hookahs downtown." In boredom, Umar developed *Tales of Heroism*, "little drawings of natives in America, Asia, anywhere, indigenous people fighting maniacal, gold-hungry Europeans" told in the timeless tongue of a griot, "a shaman, a houngan." People noticed, asked, and soon he gave the chronicler a full name: Frohawk Two Feathers, "the noble savage that recounts all the tales; the immortal Herodotus of the Colonial Age." As interest grew, Umar "started building up [Frohawk's] history, faux narrative of the self, and the work started to reflect that more." Frohawk took over like a vodoun lwa riding its horse. Here was "the other of the Other," the blustery voice-over artist of an unsung, colored West.

Frohawk Two Feathers is the author of chronicles of the rise and fall of the Empire of Frengland, the superpower born of the fusion of England and France following Oliver Cromwell's and Louis XIV's untimely demises. Cash rules everything around men, but sugar runs the world: Bertrand, a white merchant from the French West Indian colony of Saint Domingue trains slaves to become a mercenary unit, the Sugar Cane Army. They become central players in European affairs, eventually assassinating Louis XIV. All global hell breaks loose in the subsequent power vacuum. So far, those fragments of Frohawk's writings that have been recovered focus

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on several of the many conflicts that make up the Fifty Year War (1737-1797). The heroes and villains of Frenghish history are all mutts of the Empire. They are native American chiefs turned generals, mixed-race heiresses looking for adventure, and former West Indian slaves who remade themselves into assassins for hire or the next best thing: rulers of nations. They are all preserved for posterity in series of portraits all the more striking for these characters' unquestionable sense of style.

Frohawk cites Harlem Renaissance photo portraitist James Van Der Zee, Revolutionary-era, neo-classicist painter David, Romantic painter Géricault, and the woodblock print artist Paul Jacoulet as influences on his style.<sup>15</sup> The paintings are often executed on paper dyed with tea, a process that literally infuses the work with imperial commodity. Add to this a peculiar swagger: not one of Frohawk's sitters without her head cocked or his hip out, holding a rum bottle aloft or a saber, mugging for the artist, bicorn hat, fez or shako slanted low to the side (fig.4). The Napoleonic era changed European clothing: cuts and accessories of military uniforms spread to civilian clothing and created fashion conventions that hold sway to this day. The spirit of this fashion revolution breathes in Frohawk's portraits. So do elements of black representation in white Western visual culture that emerged in the same period, such as "ethnographic portraiture."<sup>16</sup> One also thinks of the striking individual portraits and caricatures of the black Jacobins: Belley, deputy for Saint Domingue, painted by Girodet or the engraving of Martinican revolutionary Etienne Mentor by Bonneville (fig.5). Every other riding portrait evokes Louverture on his horse (fig.6). Yet the strongest spirit haunting these images may be that of the first head of state of independent Haiti, Jean-Jacques Dessalines (fig.7). Although he never sat for an official portrait, he was represented throughout the slaveholding West as an inhuman, demonic character. Some say the liberator of Haiti wore facial scarifications: whether these were proof that he was born in Africa, marks made in the initiation ritual for a secret society or even remnants of beatings incurred in bondage, we do not know for sure. The meaning of these signs, ignored by Western history and for the most part absent from the visual record, has been lost.<sup>17</sup>



(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig4Majestic.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Majestic, successor to Supreme of the Axes of Ogun* (2017).

Courtesy of Johannes Vogt Gallery.

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(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig5-EVMentor-e1507033866226.jpeg>)

Bonneville Valain, *E.V. Mentor* (1800). Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Images are portals to different dimensions, planted in the heart of the West, and those portals cut peculiar shortcuts through historical timelines. Much of the Frenghish style of portraiture and the sitters' cockiness can be connected to impressions made by figures and events of 1980s Chicago on a young boy. Telling of a confrontation between his father and movers that left the former "reduced low" in front of his young sons, Frohawk explains that "I never want that to happen in front of my children . . . so if you die in front of your children in Frenghland it's the worst form of disrespect. The three worst ways to die: poisoning; die either by a child, or in front of your child; and the other one is dying without even being remotely addressed pictographically." Those that made it into the visual record proudly flaunt symbols according to the Imperial Tattoo System by which one indicates slave or freed status, national allegiance, military specialization and rank, but also emotional engagement, through marking on cheeks, lips and necks: the teardrop tattoo becomes a subliminal link between gang leaders of the 1990s and revolutionary generals of the 1790s. For Ellen Caldwell, Frohawk casts himself and other characters in his chronicles simultaneously as "player *and* pawn of empire . . . with a limited and predefined future" as claustrophobic as the cartouche frames often used in his paintings.<sup>18</sup> Call it the West: in Frohawk's chronicles, everyone, no matter how dedicated to struggles for personal or collective freedom, is of necessity a "conscript of modernity," to borrow David Scott's phrase about Toussaint Louverture and the Saint Domingue revolutionaries.<sup>19</sup> Everyone is involved willy-nilly in a global system that allows for black existence even as it is predicated on its exploitation. Whether the modernity of Frenghland is fundamentally different from ours or a distorted reflection of it may be in the eye of the beholder. But beholders of Frohawk's work, of course, are never just anybody.

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(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig6-Flamboyancy.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Flamboyancy is Currency* (2012). Image courtesy of Umar Rashid.



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(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig7Dessalines.jpg>)

Manuel Lopez Lopez, *Desalines*, in *Vida de J.J. Desalines, jefe de los negros de Santo Domingo* (Mexico, 1806). Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University.

## How can a black artist produce work bound to appear in white spaces without participating in a system designed to exploit black bodies and culture?

As Kobena Mercer points out, “Afro-modern practices are culturally and politically ‘black’ not just because of the artist’s biographical origin or just because of the ‘racialized’ conditions of their social production, but because of the critically dialogical relationship that such practices engender in relation to the prevailing discourses of modernism and modernity that define a diaspora’s worldly surroundings.”<sup>20</sup> Expectations of what black art should do and show, evolving as they have over the years, remain informed by white supremacy.

In *Bound to Appear* (2013), Huey Copeland focuses on works by contemporary African American artists Lorna Simpson, Fred Wilson, Glenn Ligon, and Renée Green. The artists circumvent the fraught issue of representation notably by producing works of “antiporraiture . . . meant to refuse the gaze, to deny any presumed access to the sitter’s personality, and to refute both the classificatory drives and emotional projections typically satisfied by photographic portraiture of black subjects.”<sup>21</sup> These works also illuminate the fact that “every mode of capitalism . . . is haunted by the body of the slave, who incarnates the changing form of the commodity,” a reflection inseparable from a questioning of the artists’ “own positions as commodities within the multicultural art world economy.”<sup>22</sup> Artists of color have long had to deal with what Howardena Pindell once dubbed “an industry-wide ‘restraint of trade,’” and while the situation has evolved somewhat since the 1990s, it nevertheless remains that being granted access into the hallowed halls of Western art warrants self-questioning: what is it about one’s art that convinces a drastically white market to consider paying for it?<sup>23</sup> These are concerns shared by artists of the African diaspora throughout the black Atlantic world, and their practices mutually influence each other. Haiti is in many ways an unavoidable reference in matters of the black Atlantic, but it is especially important to help assess Frohawk’s work.

The first generation of painters in independent Haiti were trained in fine arts schools founded in the 1810s by Henry Christophe and Alexandre Pétion and employing artists from Great Britain, Germany, and France. The schools closed prematurely and under Pétion and Christophe’s successor, Jean-Pierre Boyer, the government gradually stopped funding the arts. For the next century, art education in public institutions followed the whims of heads of state and became a staple of private education. Still the visual arts thrive in Haiti. Generations of Haitian painters developed styles simultaneously deeply informed by Western influences and conventions, and outside of them.<sup>24</sup> A fraught term, *outside*. Haitian painting suffered from lack of means, but not exposure: Haiti was always tapped into the heart of the West, and its painters exposed to forms of double consciousness peculiar to this corner of the black Atlantic.<sup>25</sup> In this way, Haitian painting also suffered from the skewed eyes of Western collectors and commentators, notably in the aftermath of the US occupation (1915-1931). Haitian painting burst upon the broader art market in the 1940s, thanks notably to the creation of the Centre d’Art through the joint efforts of Philippe Thoby-Marcelin (also a founder of the influential *Revue Indigéniste*), painter Lucien Price, architect and sculptor Albert Mangonès, and American painter DeWitt Peters, to name but a few. The Centre allowed accomplished Haitian painters such as Hector Hyppolite or Philomé Obin access to material for their art and also to viewers and international buyers; it also helped and continues to help train generations of new artists. Simultaneously, the Centre served as a gate through which Western collectors and critics shaped the flow of Haitian art into the Western market. “Naïve” and “primitive” art, promoted internationally by tastemakers such as Pope of Surrealism and *art brut* aficionado André Breton, had a tremendous influence on global expectations of what Haitian painting should look like, even as it coexisted with so-called “sophisticated” Haitian art. These trends in turn influenced the way the Centre dealt with its members; in 1950, a group of Haitian artists—among whom Lucien Price and Dieudonné Cédor—unhappy with the Centre’s emphasis on so-called primitive art, broke away to found the Foyer des Arts Plastiques.

The precepts of the Foyer underline the paradoxical position in which Haitian art in particular and black art at large find themselves in the global art market. Foyer members felt that in order to preserve a style whose popularity rested on its alleged existence “outside” of canonical Western style, the Centre did not train its young artists in academic painting techniques: “it seemed unjust to them not to provide for the younger ones of the popular painters an academic training which would make artists of them in the true sense of the word so that they might act as a bridge between the primitive experience . . . and new forms of expression which [would permit them] to translate [their] feeling into a stylized realism.”<sup>26</sup> The notion that “primitive” Haitian art is somehow more authentic for being allegedly free of Western aesthetic influence—even as the very idea of authenticity pervaded Western tastes, commercial influence, and in turn Haitian artistic production—and the notion that academic training can lead to higher planes of artistic expressions participate in the same system steeped in Eurocentric tastes and values. It breathes Modernist obsession with the arts of Africa and the African diaspora as repositories of the ritualistic function lost by Western art—so-called primitive art as “magical commodity.”<sup>27</sup>

As Michele Wallace has argued, the label of primitivism served as a “fundamental way of discounting the ‘blackness’ of the occasional black artist” allowed in the highest circles of contemporary art.<sup>28</sup> She mentions this in relation to the reception of Basquiat, whose work pointedly evokes Haitian visual art. Andrea Frohne similarly points out how “Basquiat’s African and African Diasporic identities have been ignored, altered, or erased . . . reconceived to signify primitive or European-influenced art.”<sup>29</sup> Similar identities were in your face in Frohawk’s paintings, smeared thick enough to open up a black space on the canvas, rip through dimensions unto whatever blackness might mean, in the overlap of history, myth, conspiracy, and fiction, in the uneasy chasm between art as expression, consciousness, and means to make a living. Basquiat’s influence on Frohawk’s style was especially clear in his early work; he has since taken on a “more distinctive voice.”<sup>30</sup> Yet both artists have in common a knowledge and appreciation of Haitian art expressed in stylistic reference and remixing, as well as a related, tongue-in-cheek evocation of the commercial cachet of so-called primitivism in the art world.

“Let’s get paid, motherfuckers.”<sup>31</sup>

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To be aware of the strictures put on black art and still choose to confront them does not come easily or without cost. That cost is especially high in figurative black art and the way critics and patrons receive it. Two decades ago Wallace underlined the tendency in black critical discourses to erase body and sexuality “in response to the over-sexualization of black images in white mass culture” and “to block the primitivization of the black subject by white critics.”<sup>32</sup> In a related development, rigid understandings of what can be deemed black art have threatened to keep some black artists out of black artistic circles. As Mercer reminds us, “diasporic blackness distinguishes itself by the translative drive of appropriation that always transforms the various cultures and ethnicities it comes into contact with.”<sup>33</sup> What defines black art, then, is precisely the awareness of having to navigate expectations from within and without, friendly and hostile, well-meaning and misguided: “Afro-modern practices are culturally and politically ‘black’ not just because of the artist’s biographical origin or just because of the ‘racialized’ conditions of their social production, but because of the critically dialogical relationship that such practices engender in relation to the prevailing discourses of modernism and modernity that define a diaspora’s worldly surroundings.”<sup>34</sup> Just recently, a visitor to Frohawk’s studio was commenting on what he considered to be excessively “Eurocentric leanings” in his art, and its apparently befuddling eclecticism. “Maybe that’s why a lot of black institutions don’t necessarily attribute me to this whole modern black renaissance of painting,” Frohawk further conjectures. It would be difficult to argue that Frohawk’s work, like that of the artists singled out by Copeland, does not also expose slavery as the ghost that haunts the West. For all the seeming approachability of his figurative work, it is nevertheless unsettling.

Since the mid-2000s when his chronicles first emerged, Frohawk has had multiple shows, most of them focused on revolts, coups, and clashes of the Fifty Years War taking place in the very locations in which the shows have been set. They have emerged around the United States, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, at the Mémorial ACTe Center on the History of Slavery in Guadeloupe, and in South Africa. In all of them, maps have held a central position. They provide “keys to his shows,” as Caldwell notes, addressing simultaneously Frenghish history and Frohawk’s personal story and itinerary in the art world.<sup>35</sup> In turn, the ensembles of objects displayed in his shows—sculptures, portraits, varied artifacts—map Empire as fact and concept: with the art objects themselves, the individual triumphs and catastrophes, the dizzying array of crossing and overlapping storylines that make up the narrative halves of the exhibitions are so many shoots suggesting a gigantic root system of imperial geographies, political, economic, and territorial changes submerged. Frohawk’s shows present the flotsam and jetsam of nations that could have been. In the process, they ask what we know of those nations that were, that rose and drowned in the sea changes of Empire. They encourage us to ponder how the sundry objects of those nations washed upon familiar shores, and through what unavowed lenses we see and make sense of them.

The Johannes Vogt Gallery—where Frohawk Two Feathers’ exhibition *The Messier Objects. (You Get the Gods You Deserve). Part 3 of The Americas 1795* was on display throughout March 2017—is hidden in NYC’s Chinatown in a skinny building tucked between two makeup parlors. The chrome door opens to more chrome, bright white walls. In order to get to the gallery on the upper floors, you must walk past one of those Escape Rooms companies have been so fond of using for team-building exercises lately. The irony. The gallery itself is a big open room with chalk white walls. Inside the door and to the right were two imposingly black and white pieces, *The Historical Origin of Diabetes: Or, Black Power/White Wealth ‘Suiker,’* and *Laocoon and Sons*, maelstroms of figures, words and icons that evoke hieroglyphics as much as they do comic books. On the wall facing the gallery door were two maps, one showing the lower swathes of Novum Eboracum (New York’s Latin name): New Thebes, the duchy of Boswyk, Breukelen, Staaten Eylandt, Queens, Broncks and Manhattan (fig.8); the other was a 1793 map of the short-lived kingdom of Harlem proper. Portraits were hung in a second room separated by half a wall, in which Vogt and his collaborators sat hunched over laptops around a giant table occupying most of the space, making circulation a bit awkward. Several other massive paintings adorned the remaining walls. *Zenithing in the Time of Yeah* shows King Horace and Queen Isabel of Harlem deified as Egyptian rulers shooting thunderbolts out of their eyes to zap the chains off the enslaved.



(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig8-NovumEboracum.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Map of Novum Eboracum* (2017). Courtesy of Johannes Vogt Gallery.

The bigger paintings are priced highest in the exhibition catalogue. Size matters certainly, but familiarity does too. Frohawk’s work has been compared to fellow Chicagoan Henry Darger’s and, perhaps unsurprisingly, to Kehinde Wiley’s. Yet much of Wiley’s spectacular work hinges on one conceit: remixing classic works of Western art by replacing central figures with black people in contemporary garb on a background of garish floral patterns. If Wiley self-consciously remixes art history, Frohawk remixes history on a wide variety of supports. At the Vogt, you could find a sheet of leather stretched over a triangular wood structure adorned with cowrie

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shells: it is dedicated to the memory of the assassinated royal couple of Harlem, Horace and Isabel. The structure was hung above four small statuettes of crouching human figures inscribed with the name Ogun: canopic jars, the vessels in which ancient Egyptians kept the viscera of mummified royalty (fig.9). Similar wooden sculptures of “river people” sitting in boats were set on the floor around the space. The varied collection of artifacts made the gallery feel like a display in a historical exhibition rather than a corner of the art world. And indeed, Frohawk’s dealings with the art market have been complicated. “You have to deal with gatekeepers, and gatekeepers give the platform to people . . . that already micromanage themselves,” and whose work can easily be framed, if not so easily understood.



(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig9-canopicjar.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Ogun/Shango canopic jar* (2017). Courtesy of Johannes Vogt Gallery.

Not that there are no buyers: “it’s generally Europeans that get it,” Frohawk asserts; “because they tend to know their history, they know what they’ve done.” And, arguably, they have the money. The work has also found an audience in the United States, but “the problem with America is this sense of historical amnesia . . . here they don’t see their role in it.” Frohawk has grown to know how to match audience expectations with the demands of his work, into a “mechanism devised to bring the people in. A fish isn’t just going to look at a shiny metal hook in the water: you have to put a worm on it, or something they can recognize as food,” and the familiar winks and nudges to comic books, hip hop and broader popular culture have certainly helped people into this world. But it still packs a punch. At the Vogt gallery, the Flag of the Free Kingdom of Harlem was the first item one might see walking in: a broad off-white rectangle stark against the white wall (fig.10). With its giant snake uncoiled through the word HARLEM and over a One-Eyed pyramid, its Egyptian deities wielding scimitars and shooting thunder at a prostrate white man, it seemed a rejoinder both to the Gadsden flag, the utterly whitened version of the American Revolution for which it stands, and its afterlife as the standard of the Tea Party. It cannot but also reflect on the sickening ubiquity of Confederate flags out in the open rather than in museums. Americans seem to love their flags, and yet: “I make flags. Nobody buys the flags. I design them, I have a seamstress who helps me make them. They never sell.”

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(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/fig10-HarlemFlag.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Flag of the Kingdom of Harlem. Residence of Ogun and Shango* (2017). Courtesy of Johannes Vogt Gallery.



(<http://asapjournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/fig11-ChimeranFlag.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Chimeran Flag of Frengland and New Holland* (2015). Photo by Gindare Bandinskaite, courtesy of Umar Rashid.

I don't know, but I can guess why: Frohawk's flags radiate in the darker tones. They whisper of wars and blood, speak of nations, demand territories; they weave politics, economics, and class and gender strife in their fabric. The French tricolor flag was born during the Revolution, but it was first designed for an expeditionary corps sent to Saint Domingue to put down Vincent Oge's struggle to gain equal rights for free people of color. The work repeats history in more troubling ways: think of the seamstresses attached to myths surrounding the birth of flags—Betsy Ross, Catherine Flon—women making in the shadow of men and peculiarly mirrored in Frohawk's own self-tale. Flags fly at the end of poles people grab for dear death; their colors bleed into narratives: consider the Chimeran flag of Frengland and New Holland, made up of juxtaposed pieces from Frenglish and Batavian battle flags and described as evidence "that the soldiers, attempting to destroy each other became the same monsters" (fig.11).<sup>36</sup> Though every country prides itself on heroic feats and every democracy will claim the most moral army, all soldiers, given the opportunity, become monsters. Flags carry the weightless burden of the people who died and killed to keep them upright. That burden and the unworded questions it carries about black Atlantic spaces—the phantasmagoric one of Frengland and the one we live in—color Frohawk's more deeply than the darkest of teas.

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“If I tell my grandchild a tale my grandfather told me, I am not only handing down a community in time but creating the time in which such a community exists.”<sup>37</sup>

Umar and his alter egos have many projects coming up: as Prince Midnight Dark Force, he is involved in a bit of musical alternative history with the hip hop crew Tha Grimm Teachaz—whose career, the story goes, failed to take off in 1993—and as himself in The Special Two. He is working on a potential collaboration with a choreographer. His work was featured at the opening of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town in October 2017, and he was also visiting Reno, Nevada, for the Art and Environment Conference. When I spoke to him in the Summer, Frohawk was finishing a new map for an upcoming show in Miami—it would feature the Antilles, and focus on the myth in which this name originated. In this other tale of a mysterious Atlantic land, seven Visigoth bishops and their flocks sailed out into the ocean to escape Moorish invasions in the eighth century. In what Umar calls “the first incident of white flight,” the bishops “found” the uninhabited island of Antillia (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BbnX6Cdj5gO/?taken-by=frohawktwofeathers>) and founded Seven Cities where they lived in peace and abundance. The story made an impression: Antillia was routinely included on speculative maps and nautical charts of the Atlantic until the European invasion of the Americas. When it became clear Antillia did not exist, conquistadores mustered it into a semblance of existence by renaming the Caribbean archipelago after the imaginary island, beginning on paper the work of erasing the natives that would take them a little over a century to accomplish. The Empire’s maps are never wrong: Frohawk’s maps, in turn, do not show the Empire in which we live, but the Empire that lives in us.

Still, people live in these lands. As I was interviewing Umar, my daughter jumped into the frame; she had questions to ask me, and no time to waste. She bears as a second name my Antillean great-grandmother’s name, Agnès. I tell anecdotes and tales of one Agnès to the other, tales of strength and kindness set in a feudal colonial plantocracy owned by a few on the backs of many. Even then, in spite of everything, Agnès and others still created the time in which her descendants have existed. I hope the ancestor name my daughter bears will afford her this time in the historical, cultural, and geographic game of Twister she is bound to play her entire life—one foot in the Midwest, another in Eastern France; a hand in the Black Atlantic. That it will tell her that she’s not playing by herself, because her ancestors did it before her, and others she does not know yet are playing next to her. Umar’s daughter was born a day earlier than mine, and her second name is Caledonia—the same as his maternal great-grandmother. “As bedtime stories,” he says, “I tell my daughter the history of Frengland,” tales of the good and the bad people who live in inner black Empires, tales by which to play Twister across oceans real and imagined. “One day, they will rule us as Amazons.”



(<http://asajournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Fig12GuyanaGirls-e1507034423653.jpg>)

Frohawk Two Feathers, *Guyana Girls* (2015). Photo by Gindare Bandinskaite, courtesy of Umar Rashid.

People will know their names, what became of them and their never-ending story.

**Acknowledgments:** A million thanks to Tabitha McIntosh for her help at every stage of this article’s research, design, and revisions. It would not exist in this form without our conversations.

## Endnotes

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## Wall To Wall | The Speculative Histories of Umar Rashid, aka Frohawk Two Feathers

History, mythology and weirdness wonderfully collide to address race and identity on a global scale.

 CRAVE

by Andrew Berardini

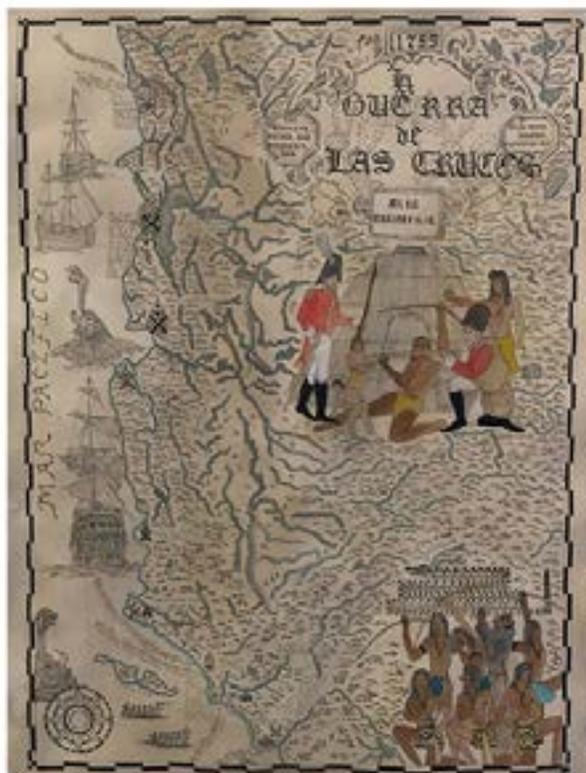
🕒 Oct 31st, 2016



It's not hard to forget the allure of old maps in history textbooks. Spidery script scratched out with quill pens on sheets of yellowed leather and old-fashioned papyrus with all the menacing curls and cuts of a pirate's treasure map. Bloody beheadings, naval battles, and first contacts dance in small pictures over the wavy lines and curving contours representing oceans and islands, mountains and rivers. Unknown treasures and almost certain death. Here there be lions. Faced with the mysteries of the world we have, history books tempt the curious with facts and educated guessing about all the secrets of how the world came to be, or even hinting perhaps at others ways it could have been.

**Umar Rashid** goes by many names. Kent Cyclone, The Grim Teachaz, and most often **Frohawk Two Feathers**. This last name arrived according to its bearer on the wings of a hawk swooping through the hard blue of a Los Angeles afternoon when this Chicagoan, far from home, looked skyward for a direction, a voice, a story. A nom-de-guerre, a persona, one part punk Afrofuturism, one part indigenous homage, Two Feathers is a tireless visual chronicler of a history that Rashid's invented.

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Frohawk Two Feathers, "Map of Alta California before the discovery of gold. (antes de ora)", 2016.

The artist has crafted an alternative history of the Americas, cast with villains and heroes, soldiers and warriors, aristocrats and chiefs, their faces usually modeled after those of Rashid's friends and colleagues in Los Angeles. His visual inspiration pulls from the art of the indigenous nations of the Great Plains, Mayan codices, George Catlin's ethnographic paintings of the 1800s, and 18th century European portraiture, all this along with the tattered maps and simple sketches of colonists and explorers coming to the Americas from across the Atlantic. Americans collectively live in the debris of that collision.

A few of Rashid's predecessors have also found force in rethinking the corruptions of the past and the present with a dream of alternatives, reflections on who we are and where we might go. Sun Ra's Arkestra took us to outer space, Iain M. Banks imagined a civilization without scarcity, Octavia Butler remade the hierarchies of society with hybridities of sexuality, ethnicity, and species.

Two Feathers largely chronicles the history of the Frenglish Empire (the imagined political union of France and England, of course) during the colonial period with all the ethnic mixing, strange turns, and wild inventions that come out of such a proposition. His histories have all the

nerdy joy of a kid wide-eyed over a textbook, eyeballing with glee the maps and uniforms of admirals and warriors, medicine men and murderers, but also the fervor to conceive of a world. Rashid remixes what we know into something else, equally complex and violent, but different and with all the possibility that can come with that.

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*Frohawk Two Feathers, "The Cosmology of Colonialism. Codex Cortez", 2016.*

Though he only began exhibiting recently under his birth name, Rashid has found a practice outside of his Frenglish speculations via Two Feathers, an investigation of his own history. His Southern family migrated to Chicago and this work reflects the negotiations and often harsh realities of being black in the United States during a long, tragic period of American history. Still in progress, this series promises to add another rich layer to Rashid's beautifully fresh and geeky speculative fictions, deepening the strange stories of what might have been with the sharpness of what was and is.

## New American Paintings

### A SMILE THAT AIN'T A SMILE BUT TEETH: NEW WORKS BY UMAR RASHID

In *A Smile That Ain't a Smile But Teeth*, artist, performer, and storyteller, Umar Rashid opened his first solo show under his aforementioned birth name this past weekend at the [Reginald Inghram Gallery](#). In the art world, Rashid is better known as "[Frohawk Two Feathers](#)"—his *nom-de-plum* and alter ego ([NAP #73](#)). This Homeric and Tolkien-esque raconteur is known for reweaving and reinventing a master narrative based on the supposition that France and England had united as "Frenland." In his painted and sculpted saga, *Two Feathers* invites viewers through tales of woe and into bloody battles, introduces them to traitorous heroes and lost loves, and amuses them with his wit, humor, and [biting sense of irony](#). – *Ellen C. Caldwell, Los Angeles Contributor*

# JOHANNES VOGT



*Umar Rashid / installation view of "Post Physical Slavery American Negro Archetype Numbers 1-4," acrylic and graphite on canvas, four canvases - each 36" x 48.5". Photo by Ellen C. Goldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Ingham Gallery.*

Rashid has cultivated an empire of mythical proportions – both in his development of the Frenghish Empire and in his creation of his artistic alter ego. Writers and critics often examine Two Feathers and his empire through an art historical and somewhat psychological lens, supposing and suggesting that he is playing god historically and make-believe more personally, as he inserts himself and his friends into the Frenghish narrative. In *A Smile's* then, it is particularly interesting to see Rashid flip this script and wholly own his name, portraits, and the very game he originally wrote through the Frenghish saga.

# JOHANNES VOGT



Umar Rashid | "Berlin Conference Finals Official Merchandise (Replica of an original tragedy)," Embroidery on basketball jersey, Edition of 2. Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Inghram Gallery

Compositionally, both bodies of work contain a combination of text and image – in maps, portraiture, and advertisements. In *A Smile*, Rashid moves away from Two Feathers' historic, detailed, and aged maps and instead uses geographic forms and names to suggest, alter, and problematize historic colonial and imperial events. In his jersey *Berlin Conference Finals Official Merchandise (Replica of an original tragedy)*, for instance, he plays on the NBA's Eastern and Western Conferences and on one of the most devastating divisions of a continent by colonial powers – the Berlin Conference of 1884. Beginning with the Berlin Conference and leading through 1900, major European nations carved up and divided Africa along arbitrary lines in what became known as the "Scramble for Africa." (For a great introduction to and analysis of the Berlin Conference and its aftermath, watch Al Jazeera's documentary *Scramble for Africa*, 2010.) Rashid alludes to this geographic division through the jersey name and moves beyond the word play on "conference" to question the very legacy the scramble produced worldwide including the subjection, enslavement, and exodus of African people and products.

# JOHANNES VOGT



*Umar Rashid | Detail of "Post Physical Slavery American Negro Archetype Number 4. "Knowledge (born Kevin Bigsley). Radical leftist (in theory and in practice to a lesser extent.) The greatest ally to himself and visual champion of the proletariat. Born hero." Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 36"x 48.5". Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Ingraham Gallery.*

# JOHANNES VOGT



*Umar Rashid | Detail of "Post Physical Slavery American Negro Archetype Number 3. "Marvelous' Marvell T. Powers. Strong, god-fearing, hard-working, wage earner. Any government's ideal citizen. Desires nothing except for guap and physical love. A purely tactile creature. A lifelong acolyte of the temporal condition. Born soldier." Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 36"x 48.5". Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Inghram Gallery.*

# JOHANNES VOGT



*Umar Rashid I Umar Rashid, Detail of "Post Physical Slavery American Negro Archetype Number 2. George Washington Filmore Jackson. Brilliant scholar, jazz saxophonist, perpetual self-hater, master of the waltz Viennese, the kowtow, and the bow and scrape. His body is always tilted at a 45 degree angle to his imagined superiors. Born disappointment." Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 36"x 48.5". Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Ingraham Gallery.*

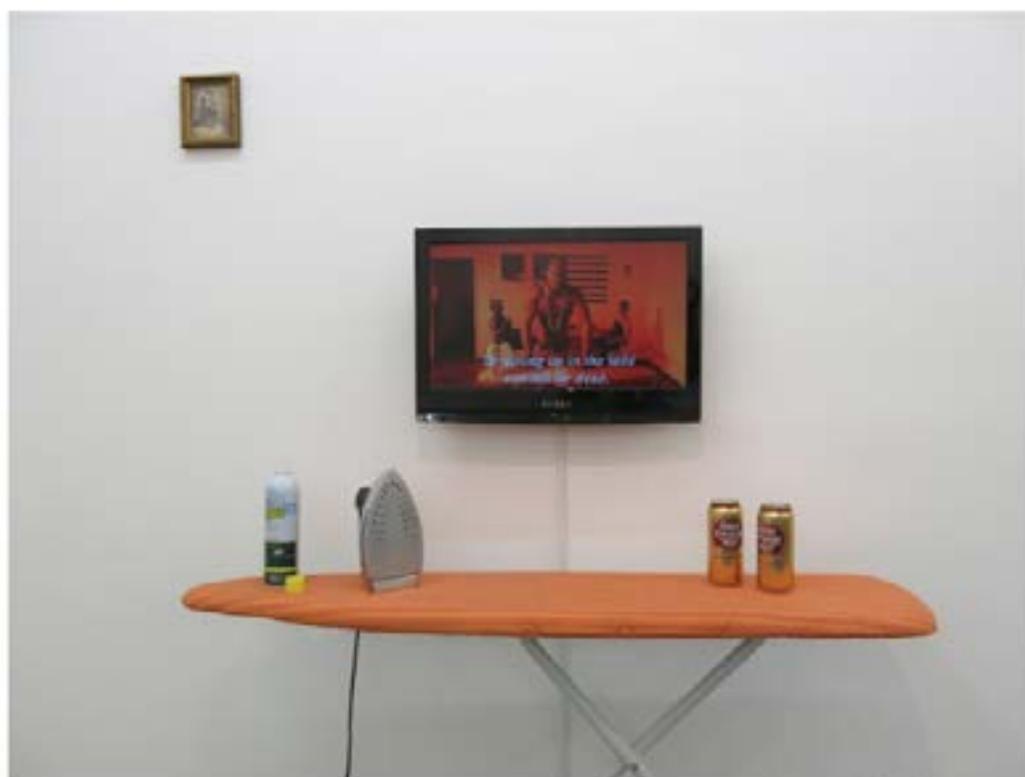
# JOHANNES VOGT



*Umar Rashid | Detail of "Post Physical Slavery American Negro Archetype Number 1.. Just 'Toine Aka 'Self Serve' Informant and known traitor to the cause. Born snitch." Acrylic and graphite on canvas, 36"x 48.5". Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Ingraham Gallery.*

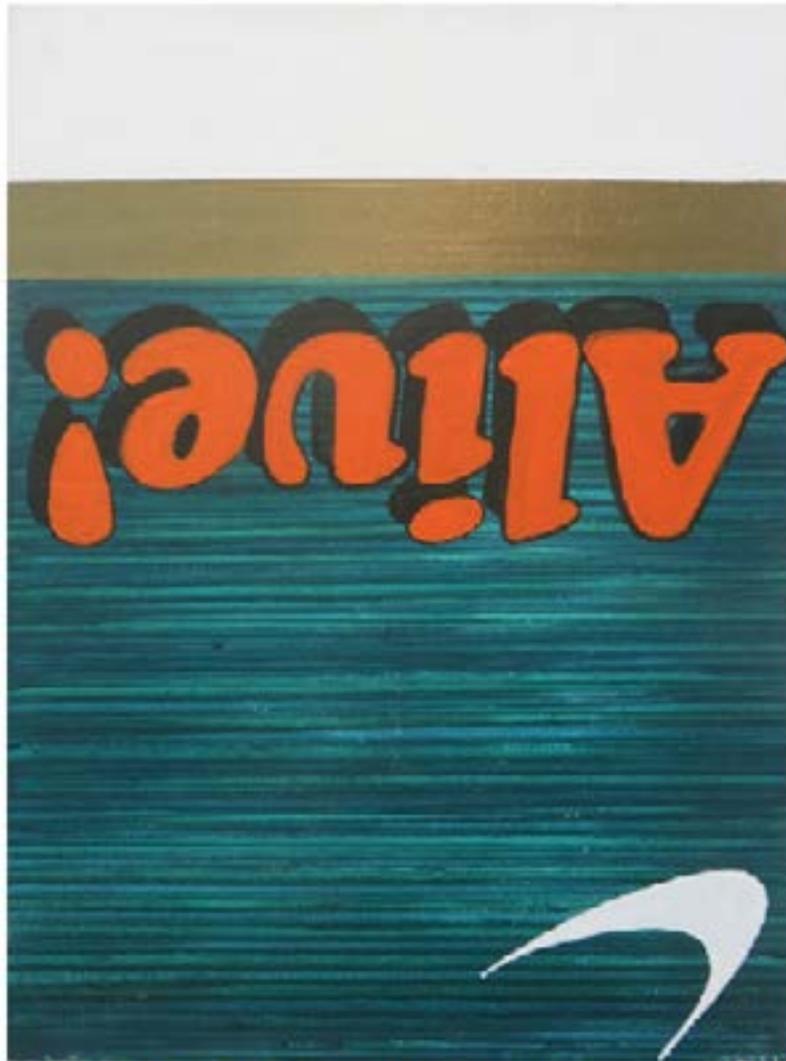
# JOHANNES VOGT

In his portraits, Rashid uses a similar painting style to that of *Two Feathers* – but rather than using his friends as his subjects, Rashid himself is the focus and medium throughout. Rashid said he wanted to apply the Jungian concept of an archetype to all the facets of his identity as a black male in America, so he himself embodied the archetype and the portraits became self-portraits. Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung believed that there is an overlying collective unconscious similar to instinct, from which all humans can derive certain shared and similar archetypes or patterns that are manifested in one's culture through mechanisms like art, stories, songs, dreams, and religions. Jung used this idea to explain why very different cultures, separated by oceans and miles, might share very similar archetypes of mother, trickster, and hero figures in popular religion and lore. As Rashid looks back to examine his formative years as a black American male, he paints himself as archetypal characters and figures—from the hero, to the snitch, to the disappointment, and soldier—but as Rashid explores these archetypes, it is clear that they have transformed into and become deeply seated stereotypes.



*Umar Rashid | gallery view of "El Soldado Negro (The Black Soldier)" video (5:20) and installation. Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Ingraham Gallery.*

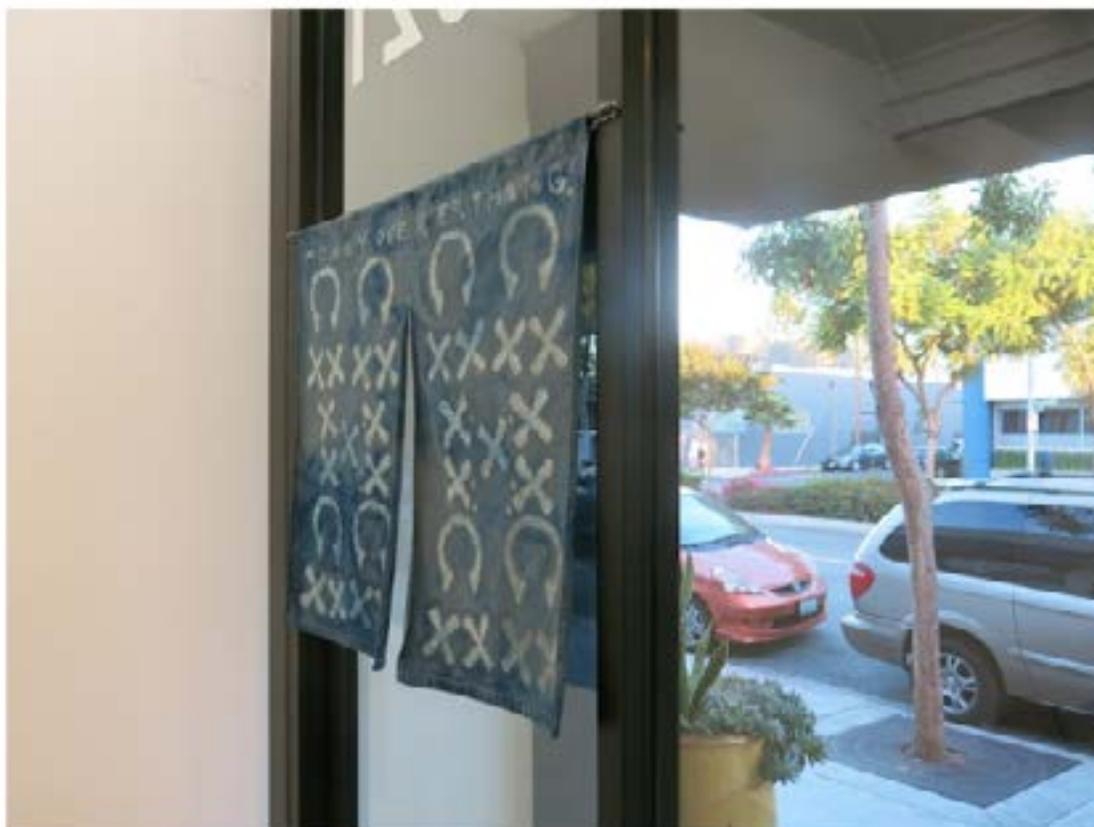
# JOHANNES VOGT



Work: Rashid / Alive (A tribute to menthol as a lifestyle decision and occasional currency), acrylic on canvas. Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Ingham Gallery

In this same vein, Rashid turns to advertisements to challenge and poke fun at popular narrative, just as Two Feathers does with the Frenglish company ads. Here, though, in his video *El Soldado Negro (The Black Soldier)* and his painting *Alive (A tribute to menthol as a lifestyle decision and occasional currency)*, Rashid examines, questions, and recreates advertisements whose after effects ultimately kill a large percentage of the black community. In *El Soldado Negro*, for instance, Rashid jabs at the typical army recruitment advertisements that air on MTV and target underprivileged youth through action montages, video game graphics, motivational scores, and the directive challenge to “be all that you can be.” In *Alive* (which also hangs in the background of *El Soldado*), Rashid paints the Newport cigarette logo and alludes to their motto “alive with pleasure” – inverting it upside down, and clearly questioning and detonating the choice word “alive” since both the army and cigarette marketing tactics would more likely wind you up dead.

# JOHANNES VOGT



*Umar Rashid | Mind on my money. Money on my mind. The way has been opened. Batik on cotton, 30.5" x 34.5". Photo by Ellen C. Caldwell, courtesy of artist and Reginald Ingraham Gallery.*

In his examination of self, Rashid presents a rich body of work and an enticing series of questions about the same topics that haunt the Frenghish Empire – the role of influential and pejorative stereotypes, racism, capitalism, and imperialism. Here, we see *Two Feathers* as Rashid and the reverse – something Rashid described as a “*trompe-l’œil* effect of *Two Feathers* without the long extensive narrative story.” In that sense, Rashid replaces the epic historical narrative with a more personal, contemporary American narrative – though I would argue that the Frenghish and American worlds and messages are far more similar than they are different.

Umar Rashid’s *A Smile That Ain’t a Smile But Teeth* runs at the [Reginald Ingraham Gallery](#) through October 18th and it is a must-see—especially when coupled with [Edgar Arceneaux’s](#) show *A Book and a Medal* across the street at [Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects](#).

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*Umar Rashid is a Chicago-born and LA-based artist. This fall, he will exhibit as a MATRIX artist at the [Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art](#) in Hartford, CT. To learn more about his work and his Frenghish Empire, see Caldwell’s other reviews and writing: [Myth, Midtopia, and Mapping: Frohawk Two Feathers and the Making of the Frenghish Empire \(2013\)](#); [Fact, Fiction and Friction: Frohawk Two Feathers \(2011\)](#); [Museum Admission: Frohawk Two Feathers at MCA Denver \(2012\)](#); and [Reframing History: In the Studio with Frohawk Two Feathers \(2010\)](#).*

*Ellen C. Caldwell is an LA-based art historian, editor, and writer.*