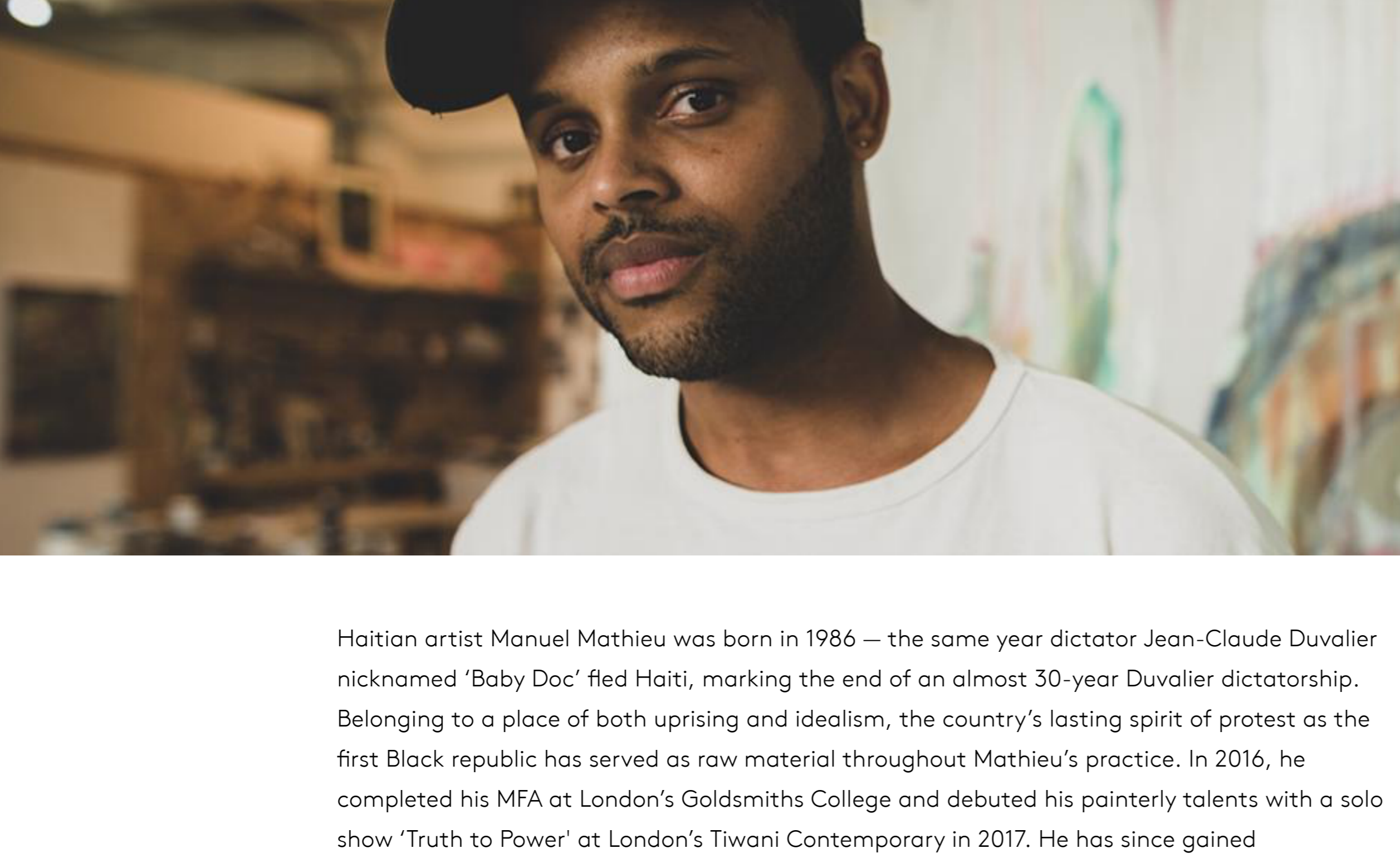


Interviews /

'We Are Rebellious Souls': Manuel Mathieu Imagines a Caribbean of the Future

The Haitian-born artist discusses the climate crisis, losing his memory and belonging to a country of ruptures and profound dreaming

BY RIANNA JADE PARKER
03 SEP 2019



Haitian artist Manuel Mathieu was born in 1986 — the same year dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier nicknamed 'Baby Doc' fled Haiti, marking the end of an almost 30-year Duvalier dictatorship. Belonging to a place of both uprising and idealism, the country's lasting spirit of protest as the first Black republic has served as raw material throughout Mathieu's practice. In 2016, he completed his MFA at London's Goldsmiths College and debuted his painterly talents with a solo show 'Truth to Power' at London's Tiwani Contemporary in 2017. He has since gained international representation from Kavi Gupta Gallery, Chicago, Maruani Mercier, Belgium and HDM Gallery, London, proving that Mathieu's works are universal.

His latest work of large-scale polychromatic canvases features in a refreshingly relevant survey of Caribbean artists, 'The Other Side of Now: Foresight in Contemporary Caribbean Art' at Pérez Art Museum in Miami (PAMM). This thematic group exhibition anchors on the question, 'What might a Caribbean future look like?'. Mathieu's abstract imagination reveals distinctive but morphing figures of power and purpose, having fully realised the power of the local. Most recently, he has relocated to Stuttgart, Germany, where he will undertake a seven-month residency at the esteemed Akademie Schloss Solitude.

Rianna Jade Parker I have yet to visit the island of Hispaniola but all in due time. What are standouts of your childhood in Haiti?

Manuel Mathieu Haiti is the most beautiful country in the world. Growing up there, I was exposed to the beauty of living in a country so vivid, artistically, and people have the biggest heart that I have ever seen. On the other hand, it is a country that is unstable, misunderstood, has a level of insecurities but I guess all these things add up to intensify your capacity to be present in time. We are rebellious souls in Haiti, so I think it makes sense that we stand up when things are not working well and that we fight for what is right. Living in a country of ruptures certainly feeds my capacity to adapt wherever I go. Like Dany Laferrère said: 'Haiti is a country of incessant ruptures with the hope of founding a new American mythology.'

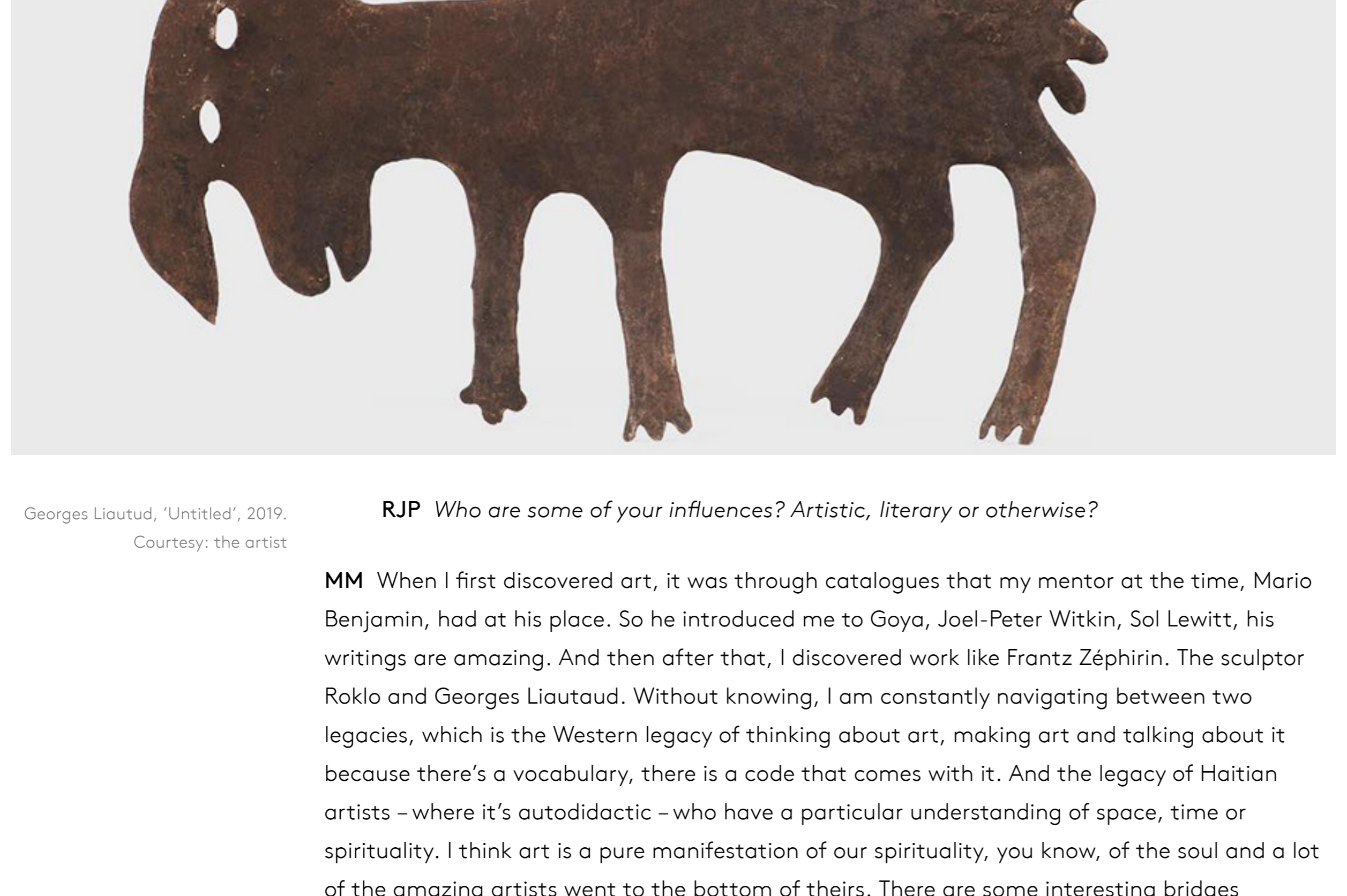


Manuel Mathieu, Solitude, 2018, mixed media. Courtesy: the artist and Guy L'Heureux

RJP When I first came across your work at Tiwani Contemporary here in London, I immediately thought of Laferrère, the Haitian-Canadian author who posed in his book *The Almost Forgotten Art of Doing Nothing* (2011): 'And what is the difference between art and culture? Art only happens if we put its culture in danger.' Can you speak to that?

MM The idea of danger for me equates to an aspect of limits of comfort, the limits that we pose yourself, the limits of the others. When it comes to culture, something that is close to our identity, blurring the limits forces us to constantly be in a space where we are re-creating ourselves. Our capacity to grow is a real gift. The best way to actually express my presence is through art and that act of creation talks about my culture, talks about my heritage without a secret agenda. What you see is what you get.

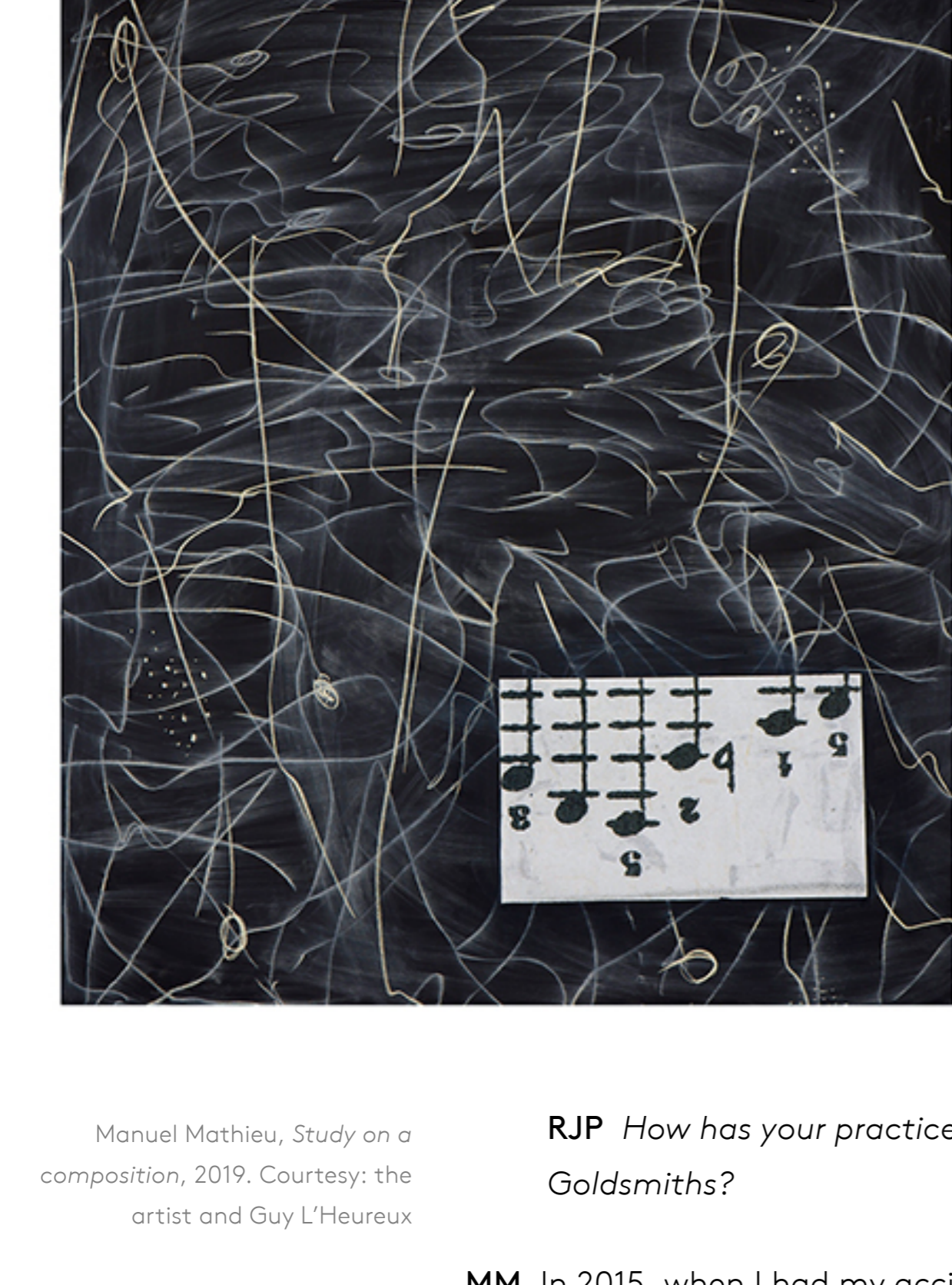
As a Black country who took their independence a bit more than 200 years ago, we've been articulating our freedom on the land that we procured, through art, writing, music, preserving that invisible and physical culture — putting us in a certain understanding of ourselves. Dany was asking how come this land, that he describes as a convulsive land, produces so many artists?



Georges Liataud, 'Untitled', 2019. Courtesy: the artist

RJP Who are some of your influences? Artistic, literary or otherwise?

MM When I first discovered art, it was through catalogues that my mentor at the time, Mario Benjamin, had at his place. So he introduced me to Goyo, Joel-Peter Witkin, Sol Lewitt, his writings are amazing. And then after that, I discovered work like Frantz Zéphirin. The sculptor Roklo and Georges Liataud. Without knowing, I am constantly navigating between two legacies, which is the Western legacy of thinking about art, making art and talking about it because there's a vocabulary, there is a code that comes with it. And the legacy of Haitian artists — where it's autodidactic — who have a particular understanding of space, time or spirituality. I think art is a pure manifestation of our spirituality, you know, of the soul and a lot of the amazing artists went to the bottom of theirs. There are some interesting bridges between those legacies because they don't think about the functionality and the purpose of art the same. The fact that art has been so institutionalised and with the legacy of conceptualism, the relationship with the object is completely different.



Manuel Mathieu, Study on a composition, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Guy L'Heureux

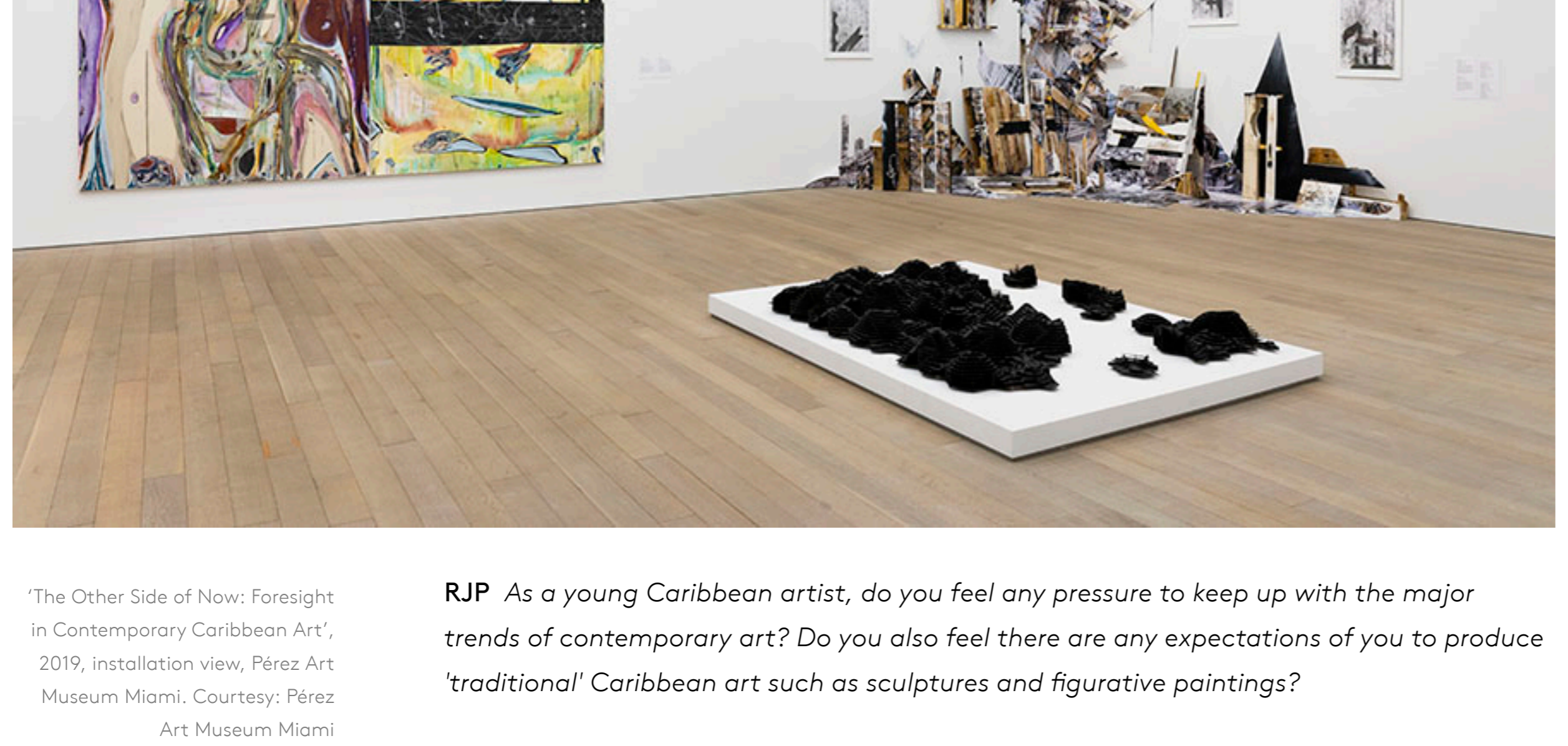


RJP How has your practice changed over time, let's say, since graduating from Goldsmiths?

MM In 2015, when I had my accident, that shifted my perspective on what art is, or what it actually can be. I had to stop because I could not physically work so I spent a lot of time thinking. And I had to ask myself, if this were my last show, what would it be about? At the same time my grandmother was dying and I had to wonder what is her legacy. As you know, art is the memory of the world and society. I asked myself what it is that I am bringing into the world — what am I here to channel?

By revisiting my youth in Haiti, I understood that the Duvalier dictatorship played an important role, thirty years of trauma that we don't talk about. After my show the residue of the accident was still present in me; I had a concussion, I lost my memory, I lost my capacity to see and hear for a while, broke my face and my jaw. I got more personal around concepts like solitude, vulnerability and self-destruction. The work has become a way for me to deal with mental and physical scars. Just like history and the land we walk on we all carry invisible scars.

Today, I am examining the common abstract space that music and painting operate in and how can a painting I'm working on, leave itself and extend its aura to another object. I am also combining Claude Parent's drawings and Blossfeldt pictures in my mind. I am dreaming of building cities. How has it changed? I am more at peace and much behind in my readings.



'The Other Side of Now: Foresight in Contemporary Caribbean Art', 2019, Installation view, Pérez Art Museum Miami, Courtesy: Pérez Art Museum Miami

RJP As a young Caribbean artist, do you feel any pressure to keep up with the major trends of contemporary art? Do you also feel there are any expectations of you to produce 'traditional' Caribbean art such as sculptures and figurative paintings?

MM The trends are there to serve who is in power, I mean it's only recently that people who created hip hop are owning and capitalising on their culture. I refute all of these trends, whether it's contemporary Caribbean or typical. I don't want to see my work as something that is helping a white system deal or face with their issues. My freedom comes from not considering them at all in my process. The answers to the questions 'who is watching what and where,' put in that order says a lot about the political dynamics around contemporary art today. The fact that it has become a more money driven industry, questions the limits of the kind of narratives that can pop up and own a space. We are dealing with the gaze of white collectors running the show, artists trying to survive and racial disparities. It's a really complex set up.

It's ironic to come from a place of a region where the future and the planet is currently at risk. Because I talk about the future of profound dreams and positivism and idealism, my idea is for a group of islands to get together as a unit, that rely on each other and find strength. The Caribbean has many different histories embedded with power structures, such as past colonialism, present capitalism and Christianity which often dehumanize us. A dehumanization based on the colour of our skin, our language, spirituality and our economic vulnerabilities. This dehumanization unfortunately affects the way we see each other, as Caribbean brothers and sisters. This struggle is no longer a geopolitical one but a humanistic one. Can we overcome the fear we have of each other and our differences? Can we speak one language?

So, in the pieces for the show, I talked about one future as it's bigger than the Caribbean. The perspective of whether or not we believe in climate change, what is going to happen to us is going to happen to all of us. If people don't see the value of a Haitian life, the same as a Canadian life, they will not make decisions for the good of everybody. Trump is fighting for a wall, I am investigating the invisible wall that is already separating us.

Main image: Courtesy: Portrait of Manuel Mathieu, Marie-Anne Letarte.

RIANNA JADE PARKER Rianna Jade Parker is a writer, critic and researcher based in London, UK. She is a founding member of interdisciplinary collective Thick(er) Black Lines and is a contributing editor of *frieze*.

Share this: [f](#) [t](#) [p](#)

Advertisement

SUBSCRIBE NOW from just £45

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

frieze

MORE LIKE THIS

- 'The People's Account' of State Violence in Britain
- What ACT UP Can Teach Us About the Current Health Emergency
- Perfume Genius: 'I Am Conjuring a Feeling and Magnifying It'
- Yuri Ancarani's Drifting Youth
- McKenzie Wark on the Future of Trans Literature
- What Next for the Artists Elected to District Council in Hong Kong's November Elections?
- Ja'Tovia Gary Breaks Through the Art World with Her Compelling Audio-Visual Portraits
- Jane Fonda and Judy Chicago on Art and the Climate Emergency
- David Blandy and a Cadre of Essex Gamers Introduce us to a World After Homo Sapiens
- Judy Chicago: the Fight for Gender Equality is Not Over
- Trying to Survive 'On Venus': Patrick Staff at the Serpentine
- Yvonne Rainer on Reviving an Iconic Work of the 1960s for Performa 19

Advertisement

Save up to 30% on *frieze* magazine

frieze

Interviews /

MANUEL MATHIEU CARIBBEAN CLIMATE CRISIS INTERVIEW

RIANNA JADE PARKER

MORE INTERVIEWS

- The Dirty History of Cleanliness, from Racist Purity to Recent Right-Wing 'Hygiene Demonstrations'
- What ACT UP Can Teach Us About the Current Health Emergency
- Perfume Genius: 'I Am Conjuring a Feeling and Magnifying It'
- Cindy Sherman Thinks She's Ordinary Looking
- Can Germany's Cultural Bailout Set the Groundwork for a 21st Century New Deal?
- Tarek Atoui on Forgotten Lives, Whales and Haider Ackermann

MOST READ

- The Threat to Freedom of Expression in Japan
- Things: Hans Ulrich Obrist Remembers Marisa Merz (1931-2019)
- Editors' Picks: Our Favourite Art World Holiday Destinations
- An Afrofuturism Show With No Black Artists: What Went Wrong at Berlin's Künstlerhaus Bethanien?
- Pop Culture Is the Great Educator: An Interview with Peter Saville
- 'Learning How to Be Queer Again': Remembering Douglas Crimp (1944-2019)

LATEST MAGAZINES

Subscribe now and save up to 40%

SUBSCRIBE