



HAL
open science

Reclaiming Memory and Crafting Futures: The Diasporic Aesthetics of Zak Ové

Frédéric Lefrançois

► **To cite this version:**

Frédéric Lefrançois. Reclaiming Memory and Crafting Futures: The Diasporic Aesthetics of Zak Ové. 2025, 10.5281/zenodo.14676229 . halshs-04892682

HAL Id: halshs-04892682

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04892682v1>

Submitted on 17 Jan 2025

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial 4.0 International License



Digital resources in the Social Sciences and Humanities OpenEdition Our platforms OpenEdition

RECLAIMING MEMORY AND CRAFTING FUTURES: THE DIASPORIC AESTHETICS OF ZAK OVÉ

Abstract

Zak Ové, a prominent British-Trinidadian artist, bridges African, Caribbean, and Western cultural motifs to interrogate the legacies of colonialism and celebrate diasporic identities. His multidisciplinary approach—spanning sculpture, film, and installation—reclaims ancestral memory and situates Black identity at the nexus of contemporary global art. This article critically examines Ové’s artistic philosophy, key works, and his negotiation of diasporic belonging through a lens of decolonial aesthetics and cultural memory. Particular attention is given to his seminal installations *The Invisible Man and the Masque of Blackness* (2016) and *Moko Jumbies* (2015), as well as his engagement with Carnival traditions as vehicles for reclaiming agency and crafting diasporic futures.

Introduction: Art, Diaspora, and the Legacy of Zak Ové

Zak Ové (b. 1966) is a London-born, Trinidadian-rooted artist whose work explores the multiplicity of Black identity in the context of diaspora. As the son of Horace Ové, the pioneering filmmaker of *Pressure* (1976), Zak Ové was steeped in the art and politics of cultural resistance. While his father addressed racial injustice through cinema, Zak expands this legacy through visual art that interrogates the interplay between history, spirituality, and identity. His practice reclaims African and Caribbean artistic traditions, creating works that challenge Eurocentric art histories and amplify marginalized voices.

Drawing on Stuart Hall's notion of "diasporic positionality" (Hall 1990), Ové's work positions diasporic identity as a dynamic interplay of belonging and dislocation. Through his art, Ové constructs a "third space" (Bhabha 1994) that bridges ancestral memory and contemporary expression. His installations are not merely celebratory; they are acts of resistance, critiquing colonial narratives while forging a language of cultural renewal.

Thematic Anchors in Zak Ové's Art

1. Reclaiming African and Caribbean Memory

At the heart of Ové's art lies a commitment to reclaiming the historical and spiritual narratives erased by colonialism. His sculptures and installations reimagine African diasporic traditions, often invoking ancestral spirits and ritualistic motifs. For instance, his installation *The Invisible Man and the Masque of Blackness* (2016) features over 40 identical statues, crafted in graphite and standing in silent unity. The title references Ben Jonson's 1605 court masque, critiquing its dehumanizing depictions of Blackness. Ové reclaims the narrative, transforming the statues into embodiments of resilience and cultural continuity.

In an interview, Ové remarked, "I am not inventing these characters; I am channeling them" (Ové 2016). This statement underscores his role as a cultural intermediary, reconnecting contemporary audiences with African spiritual traditions. His works evoke what Paul Gilroy calls the "living memory of slavery" (Gilroy 1993), reactivating suppressed histories and transforming them into sites of empowerment.

2. Diasporic Rituals and the Carnival Aesthetic

Ové's deep engagement with Carnival—both as a Trinidadian cultural practice and a diasporic phenomenon—is central to his artistic vision. His 2015 work *Moko Jumbies* captures the essence of Carnival through its towering sculptures of stilt walkers, inspired by West African spiritual guardians. The *Moko Jumbies* embody protection and transcendence, bridging the physical and spiritual realms. Through these figures, Ové

reclaims the performative and symbolic power of Carnival, which, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, destabilizes hierarchies through “festive inversion” (Bakhtin 1965).

In the context of diaspora, Carnival becomes a site of cultural negotiation and resilience. As Kobena Mercer argues, diasporic art often “remixes” cultural forms to assert new identities (Mercer 2000). Ové’s *Moko Jumbies* exemplify this process, combining traditional African motifs with contemporary materials and techniques. The result is a vivid representation of diasporic hybridity, celebrating the endurance of African cultural heritage in the Americas.

Key Works and Artistic Strategies

The Invisible Man and the Masque of Blackness (2016)

This installation, first exhibited at Somerset House in London, challenges historical representations of Blackness. The graphite figures, with their elongated limbs and exaggerated features, draw from both African masks and modernist sculpture. Ové’s choice of material—graphite—hints at the duality of resilience and erasure, reflecting the enduring scars of colonialism. The statues’ identical features suggest collective strength, while their individuality emerges in subtle variations of texture and posture.

Moko Jumbies (2015)

Exhibited as part of the Venice Biennale’s *All the World’s Futures*, this work exemplifies Ové’s capacity to blend traditional and contemporary aesthetics. The *Moko Jumbies* are not static sculptures but evoke the movement and energy of Carnival. Their elongated forms, adorned with colorful patterns, embody the spirit of celebration and defiance. Ové’s use of fiberglass and industrial materials bridges the ancestral and the modern, underscoring the adaptability of diasporic traditions.

Ancestral Figures (2018)

In this series of sculptures, Ové delves deeper into the symbolic role of African masks.

These figures, with their intricate carvings and textured surfaces, pay homage to traditional African artistry while asserting their relevance in contemporary art. The masks serve as “repositories of memory,” linking the spiritual and the material (Rush 1985). By reinterpreting these forms, Ové critiques the commodification of African art in Western contexts and reclaims their cultural significance.

Theoretical Contexts and Critical Reception

1. Homi Bhabha’s Third Space

Ové’s work exemplifies Bhabha’s concept of the third space, a site of hybridity where new cultural meanings emerge (Bhabha 1994). His art bridges African, Caribbean, and European influences, creating a space where ancestral traditions and modern identities coexist.

2. Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic

Gilroy’s notion of the Black Atlantic provides a framework for understanding Ové’s diasporic sensibilities. His art navigates the transatlantic flows of culture, memory, and resistance, positioning the Caribbean as a critical locus of global diasporic identity.

3. Decolonial Aesthetics

Ové’s practice aligns with decolonial aesthetics, which seek to dismantle colonial hierarchies and celebrate marginalized perspectives. Scholars such as Walter D. Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez emphasize the importance of reclaiming indigenous and diasporic narratives (Mignolo 2011). Ové’s art reclaims the agency of African and Caribbean voices, challenging Eurocentric canons.

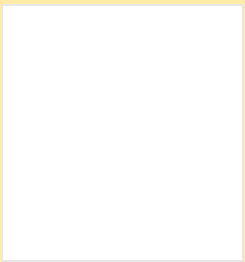
Conclusion: Crafting Futures Through Art

Zak Ové's oeuvre represents a powerful engagement with the complexities of diasporic identity. Through his innovative use of materials, symbols, and spaces, he reclaims ancestral memory while crafting visions of cultural resilience and renewal. His art challenges historical narratives, celebrates hybridity, and envisions a future where diasporic voices shape global cultural landscapes. As Ové himself asserts, "Art is a way to reconnect the threads of our shared histories and imagine new possibilities."

By celebrating the intersections of African, Caribbean, and Western aesthetics, Zak Ové's work offers profound insights into the transformative potential of diasporic art. His sculptures, installations, and films resonate as acts of cultural reclamation, affirming the enduring power of memory, resistance, and creativity.

References

1. Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Indiana University Press, 1965.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3. Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard University Press, 1993.
4. Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Routledge, 1990, pp. 392–403.
5. Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke University Press, 2011.
6. Mercer, Kobena. *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies*. Routledge, 2000.
7. Ové, Zak. "Interview with Zak Ové." *Somerset House Archives*, 2016.
8. Rush, Jean M. *Masks of Africa: Symbols and Meanings*. Thames & Hudson, 1985.



Frédéric Lefrançois

[More Posts](#)