

The background of the page is a black square with a rough, hand-drawn border in yellow and purple. Overlaid on this background are numerous vertical, wavy lines in yellow, blue, and purple. These lines are interconnected and form a dense, intricate pattern that resembles a stylized, abstract representation of a forest or a complex, organic structure. The lines vary in thickness and color, creating a sense of depth and movement.

“My Afternoon with an Alien Folk Artist”

Darius James

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“You must write about this artist” Eric was effusive. “I’m going to present his work at a small exhibition I’m doing here in Berlin.” I trusted Eric’s tastes and had nothing pressing usurping my time, so I consented sight unseen. Eric forwarded some links by email and put me in touch with a man named Boris van Berkum.

I saw his talent immediately. His work was a *Modern Jazz Quartet* composition for the eyes. Classically European (Boris had trained at art academy in Prague) yet very black. Fecund African black. Like subtropical soil. Boris and I exchanged some brief yet friendly emails, finally agreeing to an interview. And, having no deadline, I quickly forgot the assignment.

Weeks later I awoke to a text message on my phone. *Can you come to New York? I am here until early next week.* It took me some moments to gather my thoughts until I realized who had written. It was *Boris*. He was visiting Manhattan from the Netherlands.

I couldn’t I replied and explained my situation. However, he could visit New Haven. It was a two-hour train ride from Grand Central and I would meet him at Union Station. Boris was delighted and agreed.

My sister and I pulled into Union Station’s taxi lane on a Saturday. Boris waited by the station’s pneumatic doors. Unfortunately, it rained that afternoon. A dull, depressing, drizzling rain. This canceled plans I had to escort him through the Yale University Art Gallery’s hallowed halls of plunder.



Boris piled into the back with his satchel. We shook hands and I introduced him to my sister. I apologized for the weather, but he brushed it off. He was in New Haven to meet me he said, not to look at Gothic Revivalist architecture.

I must confess Boris was not what I imagined. His Facebook photo was in shadow, giving one the impression his complexion was of a dark hue, so I assumed he was of mixed parentage--the dusky pride of a Dutch moms and African pops (or some variation thereof).

His work’s recognizable “Africaness” was possibly an attempt to discover who he was in the context of a European upbringing.

But this was not the case. Boris was not only “white” he also had the shared history of his nation--a nation that initiated the transatlantic slave trade (and gave us *Black Pete*). However, there was a “feel” that was undeniably “authentic”; and to dismiss his work -- because he was “white” -- as ‘appropriation’ was a disservice to both its power and art-world connoisseurs. How

was I going to resolve this *tantalizing* contradiction?

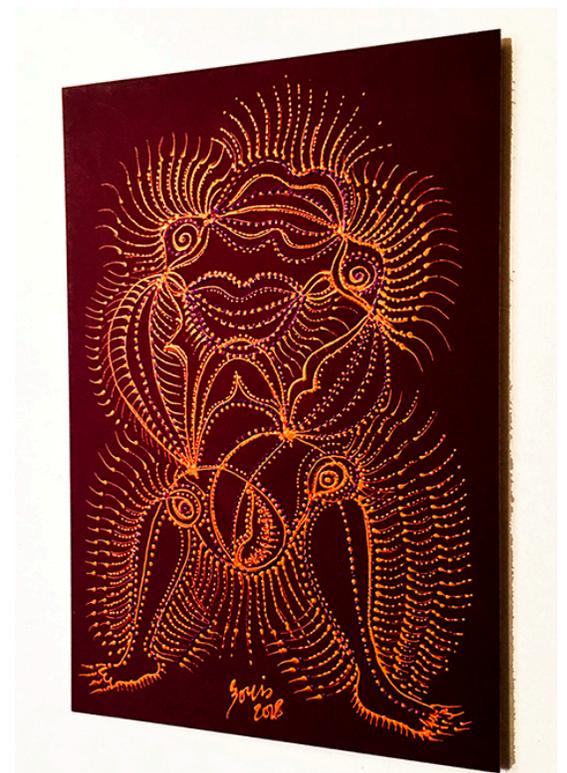
My sister pulled out of the taxi lane and drove north on State Street. Despite the weather, there was at least one tourist attraction Boris *had* to see in New Haven. The Skull and Bones crypt. We were near the secret society's secondary building on the corner of Whitney Avenue and Trumbull Street. This isn't to be confused with the Bonesmen's main building on High Street, between Chapel and Temple. This building was the desecrated grounds rumored to be the disturbed resting place of revolutionary heroes like Geronimo and Pancho Villa. And the founder of the Democratic party and eighth president of the United States, Martin van Buren. It's a curious configuration of power. By way of magical thinking, the purpose of cannibalism is to possess and control the soul of a defeated opponent. The same could be said, again, by way of magical thought, of a skull of the deceased. Along with the usual frat boy pranks like shoving coke bottles up your ass, drinking whole kegs of beer in a single gulp, the Bonesmen were into some serious black magic no matter how you sliced it. I directed my sister to park.

Boris got out, walked down a short flight of cement stairs and snapped some photos of a door marked with cryptic writing. We surmised it was an outsider, possibly a member of a rival society. He got back into the car and we drove off.

The last time I visited the crypt was in April, 2013. I was with my friend Yvette Mattern and her husband George Polke. They lived in a castle on the outskirts of Berlin. Apparently, Yvette's husband George made gobs of money because he was the owner of an Oxberry animation stand--the only one of its kind in the world-- and Steven Spielberg absolutely *needed* it for his production of *E.T.* Yvette had been invited by the city of New Haven to help celebrate its three-hundred and seventy-fifth birthday with her Global-Rainbow laser-show atop East Rock park. However, before the event, we wandered through New Haven, and eventually stopped and gawked at the Skull and Bones Crypt. Yvette and her husband were just about to snap a quaint tourist pic of the mausoleum when a leggy cat-eyed woman in a pert ass-hugging skirt, split along the thighs, dolled up in a twirl of expensive animal pelts, stepped out of a sleek stretch-limo idling at the curb and disappeared into the vault. Much to our eye-goggling--and jaw-dropping--astonishment, this lithe lovely young woman of green cat-eyes was black.

Honey-colored amber *black*.

Was she a black Boneswoman? Or a five-thousand dollar an hour call girl like those I spied hailing cabs on the Lower East Side's Avenue B? She could have been either. I couldn't tell. However, even with the expert utilization of all her appendages, I found it difficult to believe a *single* woman could service the whole of this dark society, no matter how gifted she might be. If she were a call girl, she would have arrived in a pimp clown-car, tumbling to the sidewalk with



her assorted stable mates. I could only assume she was one of its secret members--contradicting the idea this mysterious society was a white-boys-only paticharcal oppressor-class, thus proving *Evil* was not only color-blind but without gender bias.

I related this incident to Boris as my sister drove along Whitney Avenue to our home in Hamden.

My sister had to work her drudgery of a job at Target that afternoon, so Boris and I were left alone to talk. He sat in a chair by my meditation pillow and alter. I laid on my bed. He reached into his portfolio and handed me a stack of drawings. I slowly shuffled through the pages.

Now, by drawing, I don't mean a meticulous hand-rendering in pen and ink. These are painted sketches on paper, comparable to the playful line figures of Picasso. And by "painted" I don't even mean he achieved these effects by brush stroke. He used squeezable bottles like those on the tabletops in roadside diners; but instead of ketchup, his bottles were filled with acrylics.

Each drawing shimmered with a numinous radiance of undeniable life, literally glowing with iridescent luminosity. Bold colors oozed in tubular coils on the sheets of paper in playful spurts. There were two sets of drawings. One set consisted of bands of amorphous faces in irregular patterns, often with bulging eyes. The second suggested constellations of whimsical mythological creatures, predominantly earth-goddesses *Mama Aisa* and *Mami Wata* (or black mermaids of African and Haitian legend).

Initially, his patterns confused me. They were busy and overlapped. However, the irregularity of the ornamentation detail suggested a pictographic language. *Hieroglyphs*. His paintings seemed to intuit a language with a unique alphabet and vocabulary. Each "letter" was a blob (or microbe?) with an expressive face--each expression representing an emotional tone or "note" in a scale. The lattice of overlapping patterns creates "words"; thus, his drawing literally spoke a "language", albeit an alien one. Boris's head, it turns out, is a receiver of telepathic radio-signals

Yes, dear reader, I am aware of how far-fetched I sound. However, as you read how our discussion progressed that afternoon, there is a possibility my reasoning may become abundantly clear.

Boris smiled and described a stage in a series of Ayahuasca initiation-rituals he had undergone in the Netherlands. “The Shaman said to me-- ‘Now, we go inside. You are going to observe your ‘silent observer’--who has been there, who will always been there and who is there now’. I go inside and see this big and very proud black man sitting naked.”

‘Are you my silent observer?’ I asked him.

The man nodded yes.

‘What is your name?’

‘Akumbuka Tutu’ he answered.

I have to remember this name! he thought. He later looked up the name; and, in the Chewa language of the Bantu family of languages, it translated into *Just remember*. That was the first message he received from his inner guide. The second was during his fact-finding trip to Ghana with Winti Priestess Marian Markelo.

It suddenly became clear why Eric asked me to write about Boris and his work. A film I made with Oliver Hardt, “The United States of Hoodoo”, was released in 2012. The film explored a stage of my own journey into the subtle etheric states of mind. Since its release, my involvement, experience and knowledge of Vodun has only deepened. That experience has included the use of psychoactive (or “healing”) plants to facilitate moments of ‘spiritual awakening’ and communion with the sublime.

This also reinforced my notion Boris was documenting an alien language in his drawings. In *Food of the Gods*, ethnobiologist and psychonaut, Terence McKenna posited the psychoactive ingredient in Ayahuasca, Dimethyltryptamine (or DMT), worked in the language centers of the brain. This also accounts for the vivid, hallucinatory quality of his work. He clearly represented higher energies.

Tutu, Boris discovered, is the founding father of the Ashanti kingdom. ‘But Akumbuka? Where does this name come from?’ he wondered. He was told it was a really common name in Mali.

“I don’t know but I have a hunch Marian and I made a promise to each other in a previous lifetime to do this work. Our problem: ‘What can you do when humanity creates such a monstrous system as slavery?’ Our answer? *Create art!* I don’t know why because I am a white guy. Maybe in the spiritual realm it doesn’t matter so much. That is what I understand. That is how I perceive myself.”

His answer was not so simple and naive as it appeared on the surface. In the course of “The United States of Hoodoo”, I learned many of the treasures looted from African civilization were miscontextualized as ‘art’. For example, the making of tribal masks may involve the insight and skills of an artist but they are not art. They are spiritual instruments used for direct contact with ‘god’ or to become *as* ‘gods’. Masks can be compared to the crosses, censers and baptismal shells in the Catholic church. Michelangelo’s painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel may be

considered a great work of western art but it is primarily an expression of Christian spirituality.

“Unfortunately,” I add, “with modernity, there is a tendency in the west to divorce the spiritual from the art-making process.”

“It is interesting you say that. Marian says when she looks at these ethnographic collections, I see a graveyard. They are empty shells. They once were spiritual objects for healing, community, protection...”

“But when I see these collections, I see a *database* of forms, shapes, patterns that can be used with integrity for new art that will function as new religious objects. There is no longer any discussion about preservation. You can’t take the masks out of the museums because they are too fragile. But now you have 3D scanning and printing. You can scan the shapes, make them into something new and use them in ritual.”

“Our Winti rituals in Holland are three-to-four hundred people strong. And the mask that I made always follows Priestess Marian Markelo around for the libations in the official opening ritual for the commemoration of the abolishment of slavery. It was the first piece I made.”

“That mask is also used in a *Kabra Neti* -- the ancestor ritual in the evening. It is a ritual that simultaneously honors both your existence and the spirits of the ancestors. Now I am doing a monument for Mama Aisha; the most important goddess of the Winti. Through this project, I hope to centralize the importance of spirit in daily life and restore honor to the ancestors.”

Boris reached into his satchel and produced a small 3D maquette of an enthroned African Queen. I turned it around in my hands. The maquette was constructed out of three different scans; using the Zbrush 3D modeling program. The program is used both for animation and jewelry making. One scan was of a 19th century Congolese figure, another of Priestess Marian Markelo and the last of a chair. The figure was garbed in traditional Surinamese dress.

“Mama Aisa is not only the goddess of life but also the goddess of death. See her hands? She receives and she takes. The final version will be in gold.”

I heard my sister’s car roll into the driveway. This brought our visit to a close. We planned to drive directly to Union Station, but Boris decided postponed his trip back to Manhattan. He invited us to dinner instead. I suggested Seoul food. As we ate a brilliant meal of Stone-pot Bibim-Bap, a spicy Bul-Go-Gi and a savory Jam Bong with assorted sides, I smiled and thought-
-Boris is quite the unlikely Shaman...

--- Darius James 11.23.2018 22:00 hrs.

This essay was written to the occasion of the exhibition *AFRICA not African? Recent Drawings & Silkscreens* Upstair’s at Erix Berlin, curator Eric d. Clark 23 11 2018- 27 02 2019 by Darius James.

Darius James (aka Dr. Snakeskin, born 1954) is an African-American author and performance artist. He is the author of *That's Blaxploitation: Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude (Rated X by an All-Whyte Jury)*,^[2] an unorthodox, semi-autobiographical history of the Blaxploitation film genre, and *Negrophobia: An Urban Parable*, a satirical novel written in screenplay form. His work is influenced by the Voodoo religion. Darius James lives in Hamden Connecticut United States.