

*Financial Times*

“Che Lovelace channels TT spirit for LA, NY art exhibits”

by: Janelle De Souza

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Looking back on his body of work, artist Che Lovelace realises it has all been about Trinidad and Tobago.

With that in mind, he is even more excited about introducing new markets to his work and his country.

Lovelace, 52, recently exhibited his work at Various Small Fires gallery in Los Angeles (LA) where one of his pieces was acquired by the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) LA to form part of its permanent collection, and several other pieces will be shown at the upcoming Independent art fair in New York.

He told Sunday Newsday he has travelled to many countries but has never been bored of being in TT.

“I’ve never felt like I’ve figured this place out or know everything about it. When there are things to discover that keeps you going.

“It’s really a wondrous place to be a creative in. I feel that I have a lifetime of work to do here and I don’t think I’ll run out of things to paint here, ever.

“When I look at my own work I almost feel like my subject, in a way, has been Trinidad.”

He explained that all his work generally follows a few themes – the human body, interiors, and nature images. These themes encompass dancers, musicians, still life, Carnival, landscapes, flora and fauna.

Nyabinghi Drummers, his 2021 piece acquired by MOCA LA in July, is part of a recent body of work along those themes.

“I had not really done many paintings where I focussed on the idea of music. I’ve been doing that for the last few paintings including one called Drum Spirit. There is also one I just finished called The Blind Drummer where I’m trying to find a visual equivalent to sound – something that feels musical when you look at it.”

Nyabinghi Drummers also has a “community feel” with intersecting worlds. It features drummers, school girls looking on, a female singer and a village or town in the background.



The Tuning Yard, a painting created in 2020 by artist Che Lovelace.

“It’s one of those paintings that managed to bring three elements together in one window. It was a unique one in that sense because I tend to tackle one scene but this particular painting was a couple scenes within a scene. There is a complexity to the image that I was trying to bring across.”

Lovelace recently started working with and being represented by the Various Small Fires art gallery which is based in LA, California but also has a space in Seoul, South Korea.

There he had a solo exhibition from March 6-April 17 called *From the Edge of the Rock*. Representatives from MOCA LA saw the exhibition and expressed interest in his work.

*Nyabinghi Drummers* was not part of the exhibition as it was not yet completed when the 11 large pieces were chosen for the show. Since the show was “quite well-received,” there were “no more works available” from the exhibition so other completed pieces were presented to the reps who were happy to see and choose from the never before exhibited works.

He did not attend the opening because the city was bogged down in Covid-19 cases at the time. However, he did make it up for the closing week of his exhibition. His was one of the first exhibitions gallery goers saw after a heavy lockdown and he believed that worked in his favour.

“When people are locked up for that length of time and then they come out, having not seen art for a long time, imagine coming into an exhibition for a Trinidadian artist who’s painting with a lot of colour. I think it made a very strong impact because of the optimism of the imagery and the strong colour in that particular suite of paintings.

“I feel *Nyabinghi Drummers* is a painting that represents a kind of energy that you find throughout the Caribbean. It’s an Afrocentric image because the African pulse, I feel, is the foundational influence in the modern Caribbean. We are a diverse region but there is no mistaking the African influence in



Che Lovelace at his exhibition, *From the Edge of the Rock*, Various Small Fires art gallery, Los Angeles, in May 2021. PHOTOS COURTESY CHE LOVELACE.

music and movement. It’s very profound.”

The drawing and fine arts lecturer at the University of the West Indies said working with Various Small Fires has opened up opportunities, getting more art institutions and collectors to look at his work.

“An artist like myself living and working here in Trinidad, with the ambition to have my work seen outside of here, you do need to have the mechanisms by which that is possible. It’s sometimes not possible for that to happen on its own.”

He found the acquisition to be exciting and an acknowledgement of the work Caribbean artists have done.

Showcase at The Independent art fair

From September 9 to 12, Lovelace’s work will be shown at The Independent art fair in New York where several art galleries are expected to gather to showcase and sell art.

This year, Various Small Fires will present his work only – five to seven large pieces that are re-imaginings of coconut trees, drummers, street dancers, gardens and other pieces

following the themes with which he usually works.

“It’s going to be a good introduction for the New York crowd. And coming off the back of the exhibition in Los Angeles, it’s going to be interesting to see how NY looks at the work.”

He said it is possible that LA’s relatability to the Caribbean in terms of the climate contributed to his success there. However, he was not certain how NY would respond to his work as it is “way too big and way too complex to ever figure out.”

But he rarely considers his audience before putting paint to canvas so he is thankful the team at Various Small Fires is knowledgeable on the matter.

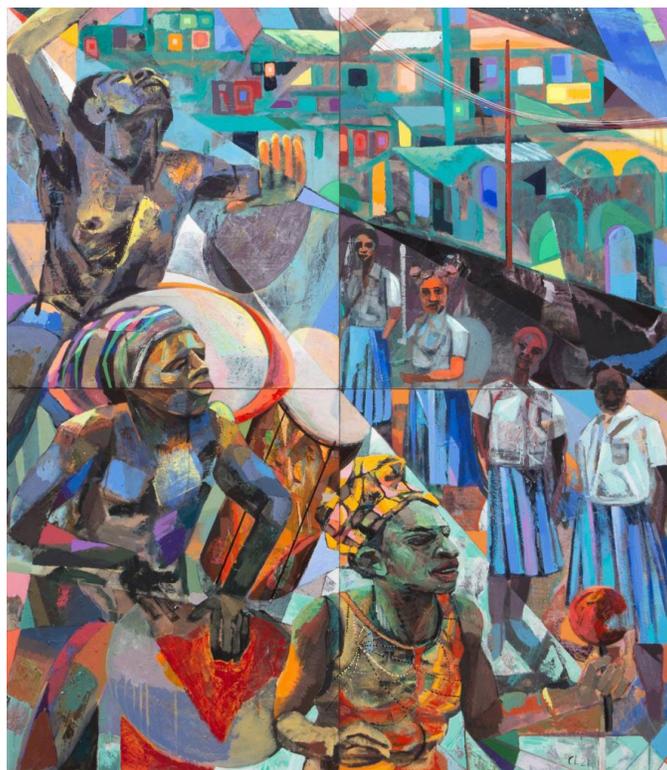
“I’ve never thought of that as a massive consideration. I think I carry on my work as I would and then see maybe, in terms of choosing which paintings to show in a particular place, I may choose the ones that may work best in a particular context.”

Like much of his other work, the pieces soon to be shown at The Independent incorporates strong geometric shapes but he would not call them cubist because all his works are full of elements of various styles, brought together in a natural way.

He added that it is difficult to do, and it took a long time for him to take the things he is interested in and drawn to, to bring them together harmoniously.

“I’m never completely inside of one thing. I’m always in that in between space. I don’t know where that comes from. It could be the fact that Trinidadians are very much like that – we adjust very quickly, we are very malleable, you’ll put us in a place and we’ll check it out and we’ll still be us but we’ll know how to make adjustments to fit.”

It could also be the fact that his mother is East Indian and his father, of African descent. It could be that he grew up in Matura and was poor but intellectually rich as his father, writer Earl Lovelace, was part of a vibrant artistic community whose members often visited the writer. He then went



Nyabinghi Drummers, acquired for the permanent collection at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

to school at Queen’s Royal College before studying at L’ecole Regionale d’Arts Palstiques de la Martinique in Martinique and later lived a “middle class experience” in Port of Spain. In fact, he still lives in Cascade and works out of his studio in Chaguaramas.

He said Trinidad is a great place for creativity and inspiration as it is not an “idyllic Caribbean island.” Instead, it is complex with politics, crime, beauty, with an overlapping of race and culture, creative and artistic innovations, with witty and intelligent people, and a lot of energy and possibilities.

He said the steel pan was a good example of the creativity of the people who got around the prohibition of playing a skin drum by making one of steel. And that steel drum became the country’s national instrument that brings all types of people together.

He said it was important for people to understand how much of himself and his experiences he invests in his work. As a regular Blue Devil masquerader during Carnival, he uses his own body to express himself, helping him better understand the culture he is a part of.

“The work is coming from a deep appreciation for what the place is and hopefully people will see that in my paintings.”



Lovelace working on Street Dancers in preparation for The Independent art fair in New York.



Drum Spirit by local artist Che Lovelace.



Interior with Cutlass from the From the Edge of the Rock exhibition.