

JEFFREY CHOCK AND THE CITY:

1943-2013

Jeffrey Chock in *Trinidad Carnival: Photographs by Jeffrey Chock* through nearly two hundred portraits taken over two and a half decades, presents the viewer with a detailed visual narrative of important aspects of the metamorphosis of Trinidad's Carnival. Chock's eye for the different colours, moods, masks, faces, sights, lights and movements of Carnival startles this normally impassive spectator, veteran of only thirty-seven Carnivals and still young in the business, with the variety of what one has not seen, either because one hasn't been there, or because of a defect in the eyes through which one has been gazing on the seemingly familiar.

Chock's *Trinidad Carnival* pays homage not only to costumes and masqueraders, but to the crowds, the spectators, passers-by, and the venues, the backgrounds, the various stages on which the Mas is played – that is, the streets of Port of Spain, the city's parks, and the Savannah. The book presents the “livingness” (if such a word exists) of Mas, capturing Mas, off-stage, waiting to move, having lunch, buying cold foreign imported Polar Beer, caught sometimes in the midst of pure bacchanal and at other times in repose, or hunched dead tired against some crumbling jalousied door of Old Port of Spain. The Mas is captured at night, in silhouette, in full light, half-light, in as they say, living colour, or in stark intense black and white, as in that cluster of a dozen portraits of the Blue Devils of Paramin (155-165) which appear towards the end of the collection.

The ever-disappearing, ever-emerging city of Port of Spain is a major subject here, and it is fitting that this magnificent book of portraits should be published this year (2006) when the Savannah, major venue of Carnival since 1919, is due to be transformed into what, one is not yet certain, beyond the architects' drawings that have from time to time been published in the newspapers. Chock's portraits are a tribute to and an archiving of the Savannah as a venue for the performance and the playing of Mas.

One is aware of the city itself as subject from quite early in the text. The Mas is played against the street which is at once stage and backdrop; the Mas is sandwiched into the converging lines of the street; where the angular facades of buildings merge to contain the actors whose presence humanises and gives meaning to the street. Opposite the contents page there is the

photograph of a wall of an old Port of Spain house, dark grey in pre-dawn, with a louvred window that will reappear as a major motif, four or five times in the text. The receding lines of this dark wall define the stage, whose lighting filters in from the distant end. There are five figures silhouetted in the semi-dark, two sitting, three standing, all apparently waiting... gazing towards the light... Eyes of the old city awaiting light, movement, sound, anticipating Mas (like the reader). The camera picks out the “Carib” advertisement visible even in this half-light.

On pages 12-13 the scene changes. The time is now day-clean, pre-dawn. The sky is blue to near purple. A street-light glows like a small low moon; the high wall of what may be the Royal Jail looms from blackness to turquoise where the street light shines on it. Roof-tops recede. The lampposts, receding too, are linked by wires. There are clusters of people in the street in silhouette, waiting for Mas. The city, its walls, its houses, its jalousies and the eyes behind them, are all recognised by Jeffrey Chock as part of Carnival. This understanding is established early in the text.

Much later (130-131), in a portrait entitled “Early Morning in Old Port of Spain”, Chock’s sense of the city as stage and venue is even more clearly illustrated. This image is taken after dawn, so one can see the rusty galvanize roofs with their sharp acute angles, the looming blue hills in the background, and the flood of sunlight on white and ochre facades. The jalousies are there and some modernised replication of the old early 20th century wooden fretwork. The street is full of people; though this does not seem to be a Carnival scene, but an ordinary morning. So why is this portrait of old Port-of-Spain included? To pay homage to particular spaces that are seen, sanctified and eternalised, even as they dissolve before our faces.

Page 153 is a portrait of the jalousies of old Port of Spain, deprived of several of their wooden louvres and reinforced with BRC wire. This, we are told, was a venue chosen for the re-enactment in 2005 of the 1881 Canboulay riots. The portrait was taken the day before the building burnt down. Chock is painfully aware of a landscape of old brick and wood that is fragile and prey to time, termites, the disastrous fires that Kitchener was singing about in “Town Burning Down” (1975) and the many other fires that have happened since.

So that one of the ways of reading or viewing these photographs may be as a memorial to the city as it was, and the people who each year still humanise its squalor, and bring rhythm and grace and ritual to its misery. People like the tired vagrant masquerader on page 89, eyes deep in shadows, body caked in mud, sitting on the edge of a pavement, feet in the gutter keeping company with empty plastic soft drink bottles... A picture of the dereliction outside of Mas out of which Mas grows and against which Mas is an affirmation. Or there is on page 172 the image of a “Bookman at Rest in Old Port of Spain”, a symbolic portrait that comes close to the end of

Chock's long visual narrative. Is the soft sad yellow light in which our Bookman is seen, that of dawn or sunset? Or that of a street light? The figure, tired of counting and recording the city's innumerable dead, sits in profile, back to the crumbling jalousied door of a house whose walls are also crumbling – several of the red/brown bricks having, like the louvres, fallen out. The portrait says everything that needs be said about endings: endings of traditions, of cycles of time, of whatever men and women build.

If Chock's *Trinidad Carnival* seems to begin with the empty stage of the street and end with what is potentially a vision of desolation, on what does he focus between these two extremes? Who are the actors that populate his stage? What is the body of his visual narrative? *Trinidad Carnival* begins with a sort of "visual prelude" of eight images of traditional Mas: Blue devils of Paramin, Laventille Rhythm Section, a modernised version of an old time Iron Band; a Fancy Indian, a Black Indian; a 2005 enactment of Canboulay in Duke Street and two excerpts from Minshall's *Song of the Earth*, a 1996 presentation which will be featured a number of times in the body of the text. The "Prelude" on the italicised pages before the Contents page is Chock's appropriate method of introducing the portraits that will form the body of his visual narrative, whose emphasis will be on traditional Mas, with frequent references to Minshall's *River* (1983); *Callaloo* (1984); *Papillion* (1982); *Tantana* (1991); *Golden Calabash* (1985); *M2K* (2000); *Donkey Derby* (1993); *This is Hell* (2001); *Danse Macabre* (1980); *Song of the Earth* (1996); *Picoplat* (2002).

Minshall is, in fact, virtually the only big band leader (apart perhaps from Young Harts which is photographed once, and Jason Griffith) whose work appears in Chock's anthology. *Trinidad Carnival* is not a conventional pictorial history of the festival, which would probably present images from a wide range of bands, and proceed in chronological order. Chock's method is altogether different. He proceeds from J'Ouvert with its darkness and half-light towards sunrise and full daylight. Images correspond to this unfolding of light; so that J'Ouvert is peopled by the black, grey and dun mud masqueraders and varieties of traditional mas, the more colourful of which – the Fancy Indians, Mokojobies, Sailors, Dames Lorraines, Jab Jabs, batonniers etc. – will occupy the body of the text. The movement then is from black and white, grey and brown towards the spectrum of rainbow colours; a movement indeed that one might see in Minshall's work from, say, *Danse Macabre* towards *Tantana*.

This perhaps explains the preponderance of Minshall in the text; Minshall and Chock are embarked on parallel visual journeys in which the modern and futuristic (e.g. Minshall's "Man Crab") are in fact variations of the traditional in which everything needs to be rooted. Chock indeed, as he explores the many different facets of Carnival – drummers, steelbands, calypsonians in full cry, tamboo-bamboo, iron bands accompanying mud

mas or jab jab bands, bats, an almost unending variety of beautiful Fancy Indian costumes, and even contemporary bathsuit/harem/bosom and buttock bikini mas, never ceases to let us know where his true interest lies: in the J'Ouvert tradition to which he continuously returns – pp. iv-xix; pp 3-33; pp 77-89; pp 155-165.

He has an eye for little incongruities; a visual wit and gentle subtlety that guide his eye as he selects his images. Mas is a restless kinetic force and the photographer of Mas needs to be able to spot and capture the image, to recognise the portrait as it temporarily composes itself. You have to be there and you have to be seeing all of the time. Chock's eye is alive to many things as it renders the silhouette of some other distant masquerade, the grass of the Savannah or a bed of wild yellow daisies.

On page 32 we get a taste of this visual wit when a red-faced, horned, scaly beast, his arms flung out against the iron railing of Greyfriars churchyard, with the doomed church in the background, seems to be challenging the stony static solidity of Christian belief. The iron fence of the churchyard resembles Haitian vèvè markings and symbols. Is anything intended here?

Similarly on page 47, four mokojumpies, resplendently attired stand commandingly in front of a church. Number one in the forefront is dressed in olive-green trousers with motifs of leaves and red and orange heliconia, his brown oval face haloed in a Minshall *Callaloo* headpiece of yellow. The three in the background – are dressed variously, one in red and black striped pants with a peppermint striped top and straw hat; the second in a similar peppermint top but purple and red-flowered pants, the third in deep purple and mauve chequered top and dark-green pants.

These four figures are caught against the converging vertical lines of the tall white church, but from the angle in which they are photographed, it is they who seem to command one's attention, with the first figure's haloed hat rising some inches *above* the crest of the steeple. On the whole, Chock's mokojombie portraits suggest majesty and exaltation. They seem particularly so when they appear as Minshall's luminous "Skywalker" in his *Song of the Earth* (p. 137), silver-grey and white with long drooping trailing silver leaves for hair, seen against a deep blue sky with luminous white clouds, his hand regally outstretched, Minshall's sky-walker is like a Dogon Nummo, a being sent to link sky with earth, an unearthly being with a mission of reconciliation.

Seen however in the late evening (pp 170-171) with light only on the first sky-walker and his five other companions receding into increasing gloom, Minshall's mokojumpies are still impressive, though their trailing leaflike clothing of hair now resembles fragile rusting thin scrap-metal in the semi-dark. Now they are post-historic agencies who signal the spiritual detritus that may possibly succeed the Apocalypse. I don't know if any of

this is meant by either Chock or Minshall, but that is how these images strike me. What I am sure of is that Chock's eye seeks meaning in the images that take shape and go out of shape with every movement of the Mas, and with every change of light and backdrop.

I'll just cite a few more examples of Chock's perceptive eye, his chuckle as he captures six mokojobies slumped on a van in Nelson Street (131) looking like tired unstuffed rag dolls; three Dames Lorraine seen, most appropriately from behind (149), their full figures filling the entire foreground of this street in old Port of Spain even as its converging lines of rooftops hold them in their frame. Female reveller from *This is Hell* (133) sleeping on a green bed of wild yellow daisies; face covered with the black and gold – oil and sugar – headpiece of that band, arms folded across chest; nestling on the crest of her very brief black panties the tag: "This is Hell".

Finally, I must mention three beautiful images – or three of the many beautiful images that held my attention: (50-51) a detail from *Callaloo* (1984), angelic Minshall characters, fully robed in a white made softer by pinkish-grey shadows of light; at the centre a child, face haloed by the full moon of the headpiece. The whole composition is a study in circles, discs, curves, folds of cloth. This is a portrait of Mas in repose (128-129). Then there is that remarkable portrait of drummers for a stickfight, hands brown and golden with the sheen of light, ebony shadows over the golden discs of the drumskins, shirts red. One bows his head reverentially over his drum (182-183). The penultimate image of the text is that of the painted doors of Savannah booths in the light and tree-shades of early morning. The doors are shut. Green, yellow and pink they exude quietude as their lines recede into the dark green background. This portrait of, perhaps, the end of Carnival gains its strength from being juxtaposed to the huge dynamic portrait of one of Minshall's sky people, splendid in white and in full motion. These are two of the sides of Carnival; the kinetic and the reflective that have been consistently explored in the book.

One should point out that the last portrait on page 180, an afterword to this narrative, is in black and white and is captioned, "the whimsical face of a blue devil". The face seems to be smiling secretly, knowingly, though, one can't be sure. I tell myself this is Chock's final chuckle, his mask in this text where the narrator/photographer has allowed the images to speak for themselves.

One emerges from *Trinidad Carnival: Photographs by Jeffrey Chock* with mixed feelings. One feels that Chock has been cataloguing a city that is gradually disappearing because of time, change, neglect, rot, riot, fire and the forces of gentrification. In many pictures there is a dominance of advertisements, pointing to the age-old link between commerce and commesse, but signalling that Mas and its indomitable spirit have always had to face a threat of absorption in the whirlpool of commerce. Calypso-

nians such as Chalkdust (“De Spirit Gone”, 1978) Stalin (“De Jam”, 1980) or Valentino (“King Carnival”, 1976) have been saying this for nearly three decades now.

Yet Chock’s photographs suggest otherwise as they recognise the persistence of traditional Mas; the power of Carnival as memory, innovation and revisitation. Far from signalling any loss of spirit, Chock reveals in image after image the presence of affirmation and intensity. One feels privileged to have been part of this life-force of celebration if only as stolid spectator, as a rock around which have swirled these tides of colour and light. So I want to thank Jeffrey Chock for this anthology of portraits; a small selection from the thousands that he must have accumulated over the years. He has seen in terms of light and colour and the spontaneous self-composition of carnival revellers in motion or repose – what most of us would not have seen; and he has preserved for those of us who were not there or who, even if we had been there, might not have seen in quite this way, these startlingly beautiful images that are at once fluid and frozen, moving and made still through the clear eye of his bright lens.

26th September 2006.