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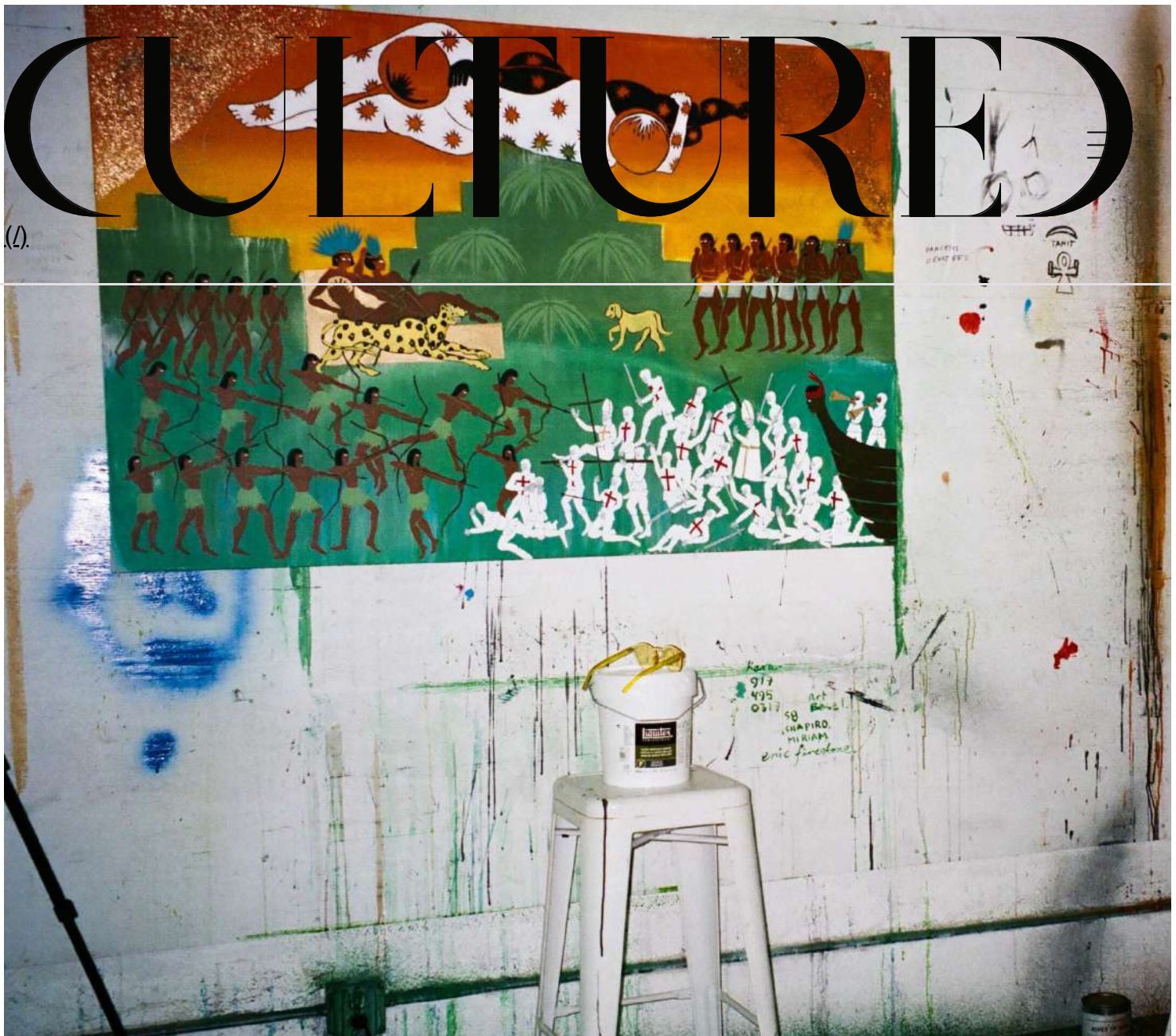
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ART

Polymath Creative Umar Rashid Considers the Imperial Effects of Pandemic

The paintings of the Los Angeles-based artist, historian, poet and musician, also known as Frohawk TwoFeathers, reconfigure colonial and imperial histories. His characters walk the same earth we do, and are beholden the same histories, but their reality is a hyper-saturated, detailed explosion of colonial reimagining that spans a multi-layered matrix of time and geography. Reminiscent of the work of Hector Hyppolite and Henry Darger, Rashid's two-dimensional worlds flatten our expectations of victory and loss. Working within and through the static limitations of history, Rashid reinvestigates ideas about domination and suppression through nuanced portrayals of historical anecdotes that go beyond colonial criticism and revenge fantasy.

Gallery 



Photography by Nevena Dzamonja.

Nevena Dzamonja spoke with Umar Rashid at his studio earlier this year, during LA Frieze Weekend and the Armory in New York. As his work deals with the mechanisms through which empire shapes the eventuality of history, she caught back up with the artist to consider what forces alter the boundaries of power.

What were you doing in the Netherlands?

UR: I had a show in Rotterdam at Cokkie Snoei and then I was in a big show, with Kehinde Wiley and Amersfoort.

Do the Dutch have a colonial fetishization thing where they love your work?

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UR: They love it, but it's actually that they're just happy they get mentioned [laughs]. This one what we did... I'm like, "Look, I don't do the whole white guy thing; I don't need it; I don't want to move forward." I'm just here to let the rest of the world know — and people who don't know will be trying to shame anybody. I'm not cancelling people. This is just some shit that I've always been monetizing it [laughs]. And if I have to sell it to you, I have to sell it to you, and if I have to sell it to you, I have to sell it to you, because this is something I feel deeply about. But I don't need your motherfuckin' tears for you to be a better human being.

Let's talk about your work: the "Frenglish," your antagonists, are the combined power of France and England. Is that one character? What purpose does it serve to consolidate colonialism into one singular power?

Actually, Frengland is the combination of France and England during the reign of James II — King of England. The Spanish empire has been remodeled as has the Portuguese Empire. The Dutch Empire has split into the name of the Kingdom of Holland and Zeeland and a republican government under the name of the United Provinces. The Ottoman Empire survives as Ottoma, while, conversely, the Austro-Hungarian Empire goes by the name of the Austro-Hungarian Empire along with the Papal States and a few cities. The Scandinavian countries have merged to form the Fennoscandian League, but this is short-lived as the Frengland divides the land. The Russian Empire remains the same while Germany is broken into various

So, the short answer is, I didn't consolidate colonialism into one single power, but I did combine them into one and made that my focus. And, I'm only listing the European colonial powers, whose historical malleability of the world during this period influenced my decision to make Frengland my narrative. It was possible by political and religious stability, science, greater knowledge of seamanship and the standing army equipped with the most powerful weapons, revolutionary tactics, medicines and just happened to be the place where all of this culminated. A perfect storm, if you will. Not the Roman Empire 2000 years earlier.



Is the mash-up theme of the Frenglish a permanent fixture of your work?

UR: Yeah, that will never change, but what I'm trying to do now is get more into the cosmology influences culture, and culture influences religion. Seeing what's happening right now in the U.S. becoming—I'm actually going back to look at primordial religions from all faiths, from all different cultures, doing my colonial stuff but it's mixed with this cosmological stuff and it's pretty interesting. It's like some bullshit transcendence but, in ways, I guess I also am, because right now what I see with great art, and people are painting mummies and shit, and the audience just eats that shit up....I

Did you study painting?

UR: No, I studied film. I went from film to photography, and then moved to LA and couldn't get a job. I graduated in '99 and moved here in 2000. I couldn't get a photo job because I didn't know how to use a dark room. I ended up selling hookahs over the phone for this Bosnian dude to head shop.



Was your family political?

UR: My family was heavily political. They were on the forefront of the Black Power movement kind of tapered off. In the '60s and '70s you were trying to get out of this Ozzie and Harriet ki Cosby living.

My main motivation was the fact that when learning in a Eurocentric curriculum, none of the I in this country, with the United States based on slavery, you don't learn your roots. The only r oppressor. The colonial period, for me, represented the time when that all began. I started wit of the 18th century, and all these other rebellions that people never talk about. There was a r my narrative, but that's not my main focus. I want to talk about that, but I also want to talk ab the triumphs. The triumphs and the tragedies—it's a grand narrative in scope—and right now book.

What's that writing process like?

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MR: For each show that I do, I write 5 to 2 pages depending on the scope. Right now I have made these various shows. I write an opening treatise about the rise and fall of the Frenglish Empire. The writings inform the paintings in ways that don't truly factor in for the viewer at first. I have only the public. When the work is in a museum, or an elaborate gallery show, I will have a written narrative that I don't want to read, but every now and again I receive a request. I guess the writing serves me as a linear and I can easily reference past characters and their motivations, battles and outcomes.

A lot of people think that what I do is modify or revise history like, "He's changing history to suit his needs." But I'm just remixing history. That's the hard part; there's this confluence where Black artists are taking history and making it their own. I was always glad I started off with these narratives, because when it was time for Black art to be taken seriously, I'd been doing this since I started. I've always been making fun. I use a lot of humor; it's very funny. I'm getting off a ship with a priest and getting shot up.



What about critiques that say your work is about Black superiority?

UR: I saw that somewhere on Instagram. I read it in the comments. I didn't even get into it and a point dies within the narrative of the work. The white people who sit for portraits, who are my going to die? I'm like, "Actually, you're not going to die...not right away. And when you do, you're white. You're going to die because you caught a stray bullet, or you ate some bad fish." There with it is illuminating because I get to see how people might see the work.

But that reading takes away—it diminishes. I always tell people, "I'm not making Django." I'm white folks. This is how the shit went down; it happened. I'm just choosing not to show people how a lot of white Americans see the work—as a kind of revenge fantasy, but it's not a fuckin'

Was colonialism, then, a force that shaped our mindset into thinking about everything in terms of Black revenge fantasy, but really it's just narrative fact; why do you reject the dichotomy of domination and suppression?

UR: I think that some people see my work as "Black revenge fantasy" because they have not read the common historical narrative. Black people, other people of color and disenfranchised whites are the model, even while some members of these groups have supported it directly or by proxy. I'm sure that people who look like me, are included in this narrative as equals, and not just as the subjects of publications describe. History's tendency to create a dichotomy of domination stems from the means of power, which usually manifests itself as divide and rule. A top-down power structure that the monarch is no different than the pauper. The rejection of these simple notions has convinced everyone wants to rule the world.

What do you think about the covert mechanics of empire and domination in our day and age?

UR: A virus that is disproportionately ravaging communities of color makes me think of how indigenous people on a mass scale in the Americas directly led to the development of the transatlantic. Portuguese sought to replace the human labor that they had wiped out; or, how during the Black Death, blamed for the epidemic, burned alive and wiped out, resulting in a massive migration to East

In both of these instances there is a racist and prejudiced motivation, yet the mechanism of empire is to believe that there are unintended collateral consequences to imperial forms of control? Do we have any control and how we are controlled, or are even the imperial powers still winging it?

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UR: Colonialism is merely an evolution of an idea about wealth and power that, within the heart of the modern world, has morphed into a terrible monster. Many unique conditions must be met in order to sustain the taste of the wealth and power from such an enterprise, have continued building on this mechanism of the colonial mind to influence the actions of the very people it was meant to control. It has only begun to see some signs of slowing in deference to climate worries, due to various factors. It has only begun to see some signs of slowing in deference to climate worries, due to various factors.

take note of the autocratic actions of former colonies, post-independence from the European powers. It has only begun to see some signs of slowing in deference to climate worries, due to various factors. So, yes, colonialism is a mutating and replicating force.

Unfortunately, the familiar pattern of blame and recrimination is already beginning to play out from the hands of governments, all of a sudden wishing to embark on a paradigm shift of unhappiness. Change always begins in the individual and radiates outward. A comingling of like-minded individuals can, with fortitude and nurture, form new polities. This process is long and difficult, and multi-faceted. It is the most predatory of the ancient systems, and a constant evolution of the nascent change, will eventually emerge. However, must have faith, quell the desire to “see that change with our own eyes” and be happy.

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June 11, 2020

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