

Bold Tendencies 2021

Q&A with Rene Matic

To start, could you give us a bit of background on yourself, such as where you studied, where you're currently based and some of your key interests as an artist?

My name is Rene and I'm 23. I grew up in the funny little city of Peterborough. I moved to London when I was 18 to study fashion design but quickly realised I preferred fine art, so I dropped out after my first year. I moved in with my then-fiancé (now wife) in Liverpool where I had a studio at The Royal Standard. I lived and worked there for a year to get a portfolio together and then we moved back to London so I could study Fine Art at Central St Martins. I graduated in June 2020 during lockdown and have been making and showing work ever since.

I tend to take my departure point from dance and music movements such as Northern Soul, Ska and 2-Tone. A lot of my current work explores the Skinhead movement, its founding as a multicultural marriage between West Indian and white working-class culture and its subsequent co-option by far-right white supremacists. My research reaches back to post-war Britain and the survival tactics and 'tap dances' of Britain's Brown Babies, from then to now and beyond.

What first inspired you to become an artist?

I honestly couldn't and cannot do anything else. I have spoken with it and through it forever. It enlivens me. It is my favourite language.

A recurring theme in your work is your relationship with skinhead culture. Why is this subject so important for you, and what do you hope to discover or reveal about it through your work?

I have found home in my Dad's Skinhead roots because once upon a time, identifying as a Skinhead represented unity between Caribbean and British culture. Its birth in 1969 was the cultural manifestation of multiculturalism — like me — born of a mixed marriage between West Indian and white working-class culture. I am a product of black and white working-class Britain and I can taste it in my fists and in my heart.

By the end of the 1970s, the name 'Skinhead' developed ongoing toxic associations with white supremacist political groups such as the National Front and the EDL. It has been recuperated to align with racist ideals in order to stamp out the multiculturalism that the original Skins relished and encouraged. Skinhead culture posed a threat to white supremacist systems and hierarchies, and so does my diasporic body — a body that holds war and conflict inside it.

The Skinhead is the perfect metaphor to examine my own experience of living in the Black British diaspora, to excavate white jealousy, the continued legacy of colonialism and the fear of a Black planet — all things which find convergence within and upon my mixed-race identity.

Your recent solo show at VITRINE Gallery, London, was called *Born British, Die British*. For the exhibition you received the eponymous tattoo across your back from Lal Hardy, a well-known figure from the punk and skinhead scene since 1979. What did this gesture mean to you, and have your feelings toward it changed since?

It speaks of the reality of hailing from the Black British diaspora, connoting the historical violence enacted on Black and Brown bodies in the name of 'Great' Britain, both historically and today.

The image of a middle-aged white man inscribing Britishness on the body of a 23-year-old, mixed-race, non-binary femme reads like an inauguration or an initiation. By reclaiming this body marking as my own, I signal and celebrate my skin as a subversive surface that undermines what it means to be born British and to die British in modern-day, multicultural Britain. I exist as a glitch and this work mocks those who refuse to embrace the error. It throws shade, it's sarcastic, it's ironic, it's rude... but it's right.

The onus of this work as a performance is what allows it and I to be on a continuous journey together. Sometimes I love it, sometimes I hate it, sometimes I am embarrassed by it, sometimes empowered, sometimes humoured. It and I can never be one thing other than forever... and we can't even be that.

You speak frequently about the irreducibility of your work. For you, why is it important that your works remain open ended to the viewer?

Who am I to attempt to define any kind of truth other than my own in this world? To leave room is so integral to my survival and in turn my practice. The cognitive dissonance is not a choice, it is — again — reality. Why would I attempt to straighten anything out when there isn't anything straight about me, lmao.

I'm not talking about letting things be, because of course I am here as an explorer. But if I was to conclude my explorations then it would be to assume my journey has an end. I am terrible at articulating this through words because the whole thing really is just poetry and using the abstraction of poetry to convey the abstraction of one's experiences.

As Audrey Lorde writes in 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury' (1985): "We can train ourselves to respect our feelings, and to discipline (transpose) them into a language that matches those feelings so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream or vision, it is the skeleton architecture of our lives".

I suppose my answer is that the works remain open because I do. Of course I do — I'm 23.

In May this year, you will have a new permanent commission unveiled at Bold Tendencies in Peckham, London. It is called *no more quick, quick, slow*. Can you tell us about the new work and what are the ideas that inspired it?

no more quick, quick, slow is inspired by this messy dance of de-colonisation and how dancing alone cannot always protect me. Really, it is a call to action — to do/dance better and to remember who we should be dancing with and who we should let lead. It's about empathy.

The title of the work is a reference to a quote in Lucy Bland's book, *Britain's 'Brown Babies'* (2019), that reads, "We English girls took to it like ducks to water. No more quick, quick, slow for us. This was living." Can you explain the significance of this quote and what it is referencing?

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The quote references meeting, loving and dancing with black men (specifically black G.I.s) during WWII. The more I read it the more weighted and nuanced it becomes. I think the onus is on this idea of 'living'... that whiteness feels alive when dancing with blackness. Is this the same when the roles are reversed? And at what cost? When whiteness and blackness are intimate, who comes out alive?

Quick, quick, slow is a rhythm that we are all familiar with. *no more quick, quick, slow* means a change of pace, a reconfiguration, a high hat, an 808... it's rhythm and blues... it's blackness.

A number of your works include dancing – whether as indirect references, such as in your new work, or through video works that show yourself dancing in particular locations across the UK. What is it about dancing that you find interesting as a medium, formally and as a means of storytelling?

I started using dance in my work because I wanted to imagine the conflict between my blackness and my whiteness. Dancing alone looks and feels like a fight with the self, the body becomes in discussion with itself and the space that it's in.

The first time I filmed myself dancing I noticed I would fluctuate between different genres and eras of dance from Northern Soul to Voguing to moshing. These eras of dance have grown from violent and oppressing political climates. Each dance move is a way to communicate outside of the language of the oppressor. Dance allows for opacity and when filmed in slow motion it captures the body in all of its clarity and all of its abstraction.

***no more quick, quick, slow* was first conceived as part of the Bold Tendencies 2020 summer programme. That summer was a significant time, both in terms of our easing from the first COVID-19 lockdown but crucially the worldwide Black Lives Matter protests. Did the climate of that period influence how you thought about the work, and has this changed with the new iteration for 2021?**

The work came about, not only as I was thinking about but being bombarded by performative allyship in the form of black squares and images and slogans and all this (literal) white noise that became more violent than the usual silence black folk are

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used to. This is when I started ruminating on this word 'leadership' because I was so confused by who was steering the ship. It sure didn't feel like black folk were.

Throughout those heartbreaking moments in 2020, I didn't encounter a single moment of genuine empathy and love from an 'ally' (sadly, nor was I expecting to). 'DANCE WITH ME' is the invitation and the call out. 'LET ME LEAD' is the opportunity to hand over agency and power. The same goes for this year and the next and the next. Ain't nothing changed.

How do you think about your new commission in relation to the Bold Tendencies 2021 programme theme of Arcadia?

I really think this idea of pleasure and harmony work beautifully with *no more quick, quick, slow*. Again – who's pleasure? Who's harmony? Who's arcadia... and at what cost?

What have you got planned for the rest of the year – are there any special projects in the pipeline?

I am currently working on a book of photographs with Arcadia Missa Gallery called *flags for countries that don't exist but for bodies that do*. The launch of the book will also involve a show which I am really excited about. I have a few lovely group shows in the works which I am in the studio preparing for. And of course, the reveal of the new flag with you guyssss.