

# FLUENT IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE UNHEARD

DIANA NAWI



Fig. 1 *Untitled (Flâneur nyc-mia)*, 1999–2001 (detail).  
12 chromogenic prints, 8 x 10 inches each; 30 x 75 inches  
overall. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

*Adler Guerrier: Formulating a Plot* is an exhibition that reflects the specific histories and methodologies of intellectual pursuit that define the artist's practice. Guerrier selected this title, "formulating a plot," because of its rich significance to the conception and artistic production of his work. In July 1967, Amiri Baraka, a black radical poet, playwright, and activist, was arrested on questionable weapons charges during the uprisings that swept through the city of Newark, New Jersey. Baraka, an important figure in the black power movement, stood trial on these charges the following January. During the course of the trial, the judge accused Baraka of being "a participant in formulating a plot to ignite the spark" of Newark's violent civil unrest.<sup>1</sup> This accusation was based in part on Baraka's poems, which were submitted, despite Baraka's objections, as evidence against him. The assessment of Baraka's role in Newark's civil unrest—and the role that his poetry played in that assessment—suggested that his artistic practice, which could itself be described as "formulating plots," was at issue.

Guerrier has appropriated this phrase, and variations on it, in a number of projects. "Formulation"—suggesting a process of development—captures the formal methods and speculative tone that define much of Guerrier's output, as well as his use of history, as an always open, ever-shifting subject. The full phrase, particularly as it was uttered in a courtroom, also suggests the role of the artist and the imagined space of literature and language as inextricably tied to and capable of engendering real-world events. The multiple meanings of the word "plot"—a narrative arc, a conspiracy, a diagram, a small piece of land—attest to Guerrier's interest in the rich mutability of language and outline the varied spaces in which an individual (and an artist) can make meaning and assert claims and desires for self-determination. Plotting, from large and small conspiracies to narratives of history and place, informs Guerrier and gives charge to his modest, trenchant objects. Through an extensive engagement with photography and printmaking, as well as subtle, handcrafted works, Guerrier's practice interrogates and reinterprets definitive moments of historical rupture and revolution.

*Adler Guerrier: Formulating a Plot*, a survey that brings together 15 years of work, establishes his interest in the elements that tell stories: character, setting, and plot itself. The interwoven nature of these themes as they emerge in the artist's practice also guides our ability to read his works. Alongside a chronological view of his production, these elements have proven to be generative constructs through which to understand Guerrier's work and serve as the foundation for the exhibition and this catalogue. A close consideration of early works to his present-day production illuminates Guerrier's trajectory and the constellation of forms and references that constitute the lexicon through which he explores vital histories and geographies.

Many thanks to the following people: Naomi Beckwith, Layla Bermeo, Huey Copeland, R. Ruthie Dibble, Carole F. Hall, Elliott Hundley, Ryan Inouye, Naima J. Keith, Bouchra Khalili, Moises Medina, René Morales, David Nawi, Mylinh Trieu Nguyen, María Elena Ortiz, Tobias Ostrander, Emily Vera, and most importantly, Adler Guerrier.

1 Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a "Populist Modernism"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 201–02. Baraka's arrest and conviction, purportedly for weapons charges and resisting arrest, were widely contested. After much public outcry, including from fellow writers and intellectuals, the American Civil Liberties Union, and civil rights groups, Baraka's conviction was reversed. See also James Barron, "A Poet Looks Back on a Bloody Week in 1967," *New York Times*, Oct. 10, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/11/nyregion/amiri-baraka-newark-poet-looks-back-on-a-bloody-week-in-1967.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/11/nyregion/amiri-baraka-newark-poet-looks-back-on-a-bloody-week-in-1967.html?_r=0).

## THE CHARACTER: A FLÂNEUR

Guerrier's best-known work is an early series of photographs that depict him in the urban landscape. *Untitled (Flâneur nyc-mia)* (1999–2001, fig. 1) was included in the groundbreaking 2001 exhibition *Freestyle* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, alongside *Untitled (Airport)*, a suite of three moody photographs from 2000 taken at the Miami International Airport at the close of the pre-9/11 era. These seminal works introduce the character of the flâneur and formalize Guerrier's photographic language. Huey Copeland's essay in this catalogue, "Sinuous Coordination: On the Photography of Adler Guerrier" (p. 42), considers these works within and outside the delineations of "post-blackness" (the much-debated term that emerged from Thelma Golden's catalogue text for *Freestyle*), closely reading the images for suggestions of Guerrier's positionality as a literal and symbolic body in the photographs, while situating the works within a larger framework of related contemporary practices. Considering these photographs as the genesis of Guerrier's practice also serves to chart a course of intellectual exploration and interests that have come to define his work.

The flâneur emerged from the context of 19th-century Parisian literature and thought as modernity and city living took hold. This much-theorized white male character embodies the idea of the dilettante and cosmopolitan urban explorer walking through and visually consuming the city and its crowds, marking new and serendipitous paths.<sup>2</sup> In the 20th century, this figure was revitalized and reconsidered by the Letterists and subsequently by the Situationist International. Their notion of the *dérive* (literally "drift"), an unplanned wandering through the city by which one could map the "psycho geography" of a place, proved especially resonant in Guerrier's early photographic projects.

While Guerrier's work is never biographical, his own history provides insight into his relationship to these and other intellectual touchstones. Born in 1975, he grew up in Port-au-Prince and moved with his family to Miami when he was 12. His own natural interest in exploring the world around him, an early affinity for mapping and navigating the city, and a later desire to explore the new environment of Miami gave rise to a rigorous artistic engagement with place.<sup>3</sup> Studying architecture at Miami Dade College and subsequently sculpture at the New World School of the Arts, Miami, Guerrier became increasingly attuned to the nuances of the built environment—what he has referred to as the "macroarchitectural"—and this course of study is everywhere evidenced in his production.

In *Untitled (Flâneur nyc-mia)*, Guerrier imagines and documents himself as a flâneur in New York and Miami. In these 12 photographs, which he shot using a timer, he is pictured in (relative) anonymity: from behind, with arms akimbo, observing the scene; in mid-stride entering a train station; or obliquely, his leg barely entering the frame. The concept of the

2 Numerous artists have taken on the persona of the flâneur and the centrality of urban experience in their work and it remains a resonant construct through which to understand one's own position in the world. In 2008, Thomas Collins (now director of Pérez Art Museum Miami) curated *The Person of the Crowd: The Contemporary Art of Flânerie* at the Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase, New York. The exhibition examined the artists' varied approaches to and interactions with the city and "the crowd." Recent art historical scholarship has sought to expand the bounds of the flâneur, unpacking its construction with particular attention to gender.

3 Adler Guerrier, in conversation with the author, 2012–ongoing.

flâneur resonates with Guerrier's Francophone and Creole roots: in Haiti, a teenager may be referred to as a *petit-flâneur*, or little wanderer, a moniker that evokes the leisurely freedom or undirectedness of youth. This playful characterization of an adolescent stroller, the linguistic inheritance from many years of French rule and continued cultural influence in the country, has stayed with Guerrier. As an artist, he revisits with acute self-awareness his own position in this historical discourse and opens it up to new meanings and interpretations.

Guerrier's early series takes on tropes and expressions of European modernity—the city and its quintessential inhabitant, the flâneur—into which he interjects a distinctly contemporary and postcolonial subject: himself. Positioned at the center of the images, his body enters into the narrative of the modern metropolis, offering a subtle but radical mode of historical and geographical disruption. When discussing these works, Guerrier has suggested that much of their content exists outside their frames; it is as much a question of what is not pictured as what is. Likewise, colonialism is the often unmentioned aspect in discussions of 19th-century France and its process of modernization. The interrelated nature of modern, colonial, and postcolonial identities and fates cannot be ignored. Taking a cue from Hannah Feldman's recently published work, we can read Guerrier's project through these intertwined positions, reconsidering their fixity and their contingent relationships.<sup>4</sup> Guerrier's replotting of this territory constitutes a *détournement* of sorts, a diversion that reveals invisible coordinates. In his embodiment of the flâneur, he confirms the provisional nature of historical narratives, suggesting them as a material into which we can imprint the contemporary. If Guerrier plays with his own positioning within a postcolonial framework, introducing black and diasporic identity into a discourse that was inclined to neglect it, he likewise uses Miami as a contemporary site, representing a kind of urban landscape that the 19th century could not have predicted. Guerrier's Miami—a sprawling, consummately New World suburban city full of derelict and empty spaces—parallels his own role in these works, and constitutes a mode of profound spatial and temporal transposition.

In their formal construct, Guerrier's images of himself as flâneur have a distinctly cinematic quality about them. Not coincidentally, cinema emerged alongside this character as a distinctive feature of modern experience. By creating several similar images of a single place or action, as in the two works both titled *Untitled (Flâneur)* (2000, figs. 2–3)—two images of the same street, one with the artist in the foreground, one with him receding into the background, replaced by a couple pushing a stroller—he suggests a narrative. As Dean Daderko wrote of *Untitled (Flâneur nyc-mia)*, it "references film as much as photographic documentary in its temporal unfolding, this 'film' just happens to be composed of successive still images."<sup>5</sup> Photo essays are necessarily vague, relying on the viewer to look closely, presume, and fill in the gaps between images. Guerrier's use



Fig. 2 *Untitled (Flâneur)*, 2000. Chromogenic print, 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery



Fig. 3 *Untitled (Flâneur)*, 2000. Chromogenic print, 8 x 10 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

4 See Hannah Feldman, *From a Nation Torn: Decolonizing Art and Representation in France, 1945–1962* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). Thanks to Huey Copeland for bringing this reference to my attention.

5 Dean Daderko, "Adler Guerrier," in *Freestyle*, ed. Thelma Golden, Christine Y. Kim, Hamza Walker, and Franklin Sirmans (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 37.

of still imagery to suggest plot is a formal device that perfectly reflects his deployment of history as a porous and open entity, unfolding on the periphery, just off stage and out of sight. The style of the images themselves—informal with sharp perspectives and moody lighting—also heightens their filmic quality, resonating in particular with film noir.

Guerrier's work also deploys the instructional and exploratory logic of certain forms of 1960s and 1970s Conceptual art: the establishment, execution, and simple documentation of a self-imposed, seemingly arbitrary performative undertaking. While his photography and lesser-known early video pieces are less “task-based” than the typical work of Conceptual artists, many of these artists were likewise engaged in an earnest but wry dialogue with their urban environs, questioning and undermining the normative constraints of civic space. Guerrier evokes most closely the combination of banality, romance, and mystery seen in Bas Jan Ader's *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in LA)* (1973/2014, fig. 4). This series of photographs consciously engages filmic tropes and likewise features bland urban sites at night and the artist as an ambiguous protagonist. Ader combs the city for miracles, as exploratory (and leisurely) a pursuit as Guerrier's intellectual wanderings. Both artists are keenly in control of the poignancy and underlying narrative relayed in their images, suggesting the singular, romantic relationship between the artist and the city; both plot their own journeys through the landscape—navigating their coordinates according to an unseen, unknowable logic.

While we trail Guerrier through the city in *Untitled (Flâneur nyc-mia)*, in other works focused on the flâneur, the character is not actually a visualized presence. Rather, he is a vehicle for the production of imagery: we are shown the world from his perspective, offered the views and objects that result from his experience of the city. This is demonstrated in two series of photographs, *Untitled (nook, verdant salon)* (2003, fig. 5) and *Green is the color of my quotidian space, but I hear brown* (2003, fig. 6), in which the artist roamed around his suburban Coral Gables yard. These landscapes capture the tropical suburban quality that defines many of Miami's neighborhoods and are similar to those that form the basis for the later suite of prints *Untitled (Orchids and Boutonnieres)* (2010). Transposing the flâneur from the city to the private space (or plot) of the yard, Guerrier produces images of a lush, green world complete with backyard fence and lawn chair that question the personal, spatial, and temporal boundaries of *flânerie*.

Part of Miami's latent oppositional stance against the idea of the modern European city is bound up in its complex relationship to ideas of public space, and by extension, civic responsibility. Guerrier's use of privately owned property in these works exemplifies the many ways in which Miami resists the notion of the public sphere or commons. Guerrier also tested the viability of *flânerie* as a mode of looking at and exploring the many small, insignificant environments that constitute ordinary life. It is for the artist a means to both possess and defamiliarize one's daily



Fig. 4 Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous (One Night in LA)*, 1973/2014 (detail). 26 silver gelatin prints, 3 ¼ x 4 ¾ inches each. Courtesy Mary Sue Ader-Andersen, the Bas Jan Ader Estate, and Patrick Painter Editions, Santa Monica



Fig. 5 *Untitled (nook, verdant salon)*, 2003 (detail). Chromogenic print, 16 x 20 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

experiences.<sup>6</sup> In the context of Guerrier's practice, the flâneur and his *dérives* must also be understood as a methodology.

## THE SETTING: MIAMI NOIR

A number of Guerrier's photographs focused on the flâneur seem to perfectly capture something of Miami—its anachronistic downtown architecture, its immense and riotous skies, and its tropically inflected landscape—while some feature explicitly indistinct scenes that could be taken anywhere.<sup>7</sup> Miami's unique atmosphere and its ebbs into generic placelessness are part of what has long fascinated Guerrier about the city. It appears—and often feels—as if it were a tropical Caribbean outpost on the edge of the mainland. In his works, Guerrier explores and exploits Miami as a multivalent city, one with what he has referred to as a “thin history” but a rich psychogeography.<sup>8</sup> It provides a compelling site within the broader contours of the 20th century, subject to events and agendas from inside and afar (a circumstance Guerrier suggests is aligned with Caribbean history as well).

Guerrier posits place as the central subject of his work. He consistently presses our capacity to see landscape as full of meaning and draws this out through formal means, exploring what tone, perspective, lighting, and framing can do to banal scenes. *Untitled (Morningside Night)* (2006, fig. 7), one of two works with the same title that shows a perspectival image of a deserted, gravel-strewn parking lot, is shot as if the viewer were lying on the ground. This is an image without explicit subject matter, and yet it speaks volumes, conveying an uneasy story for the viewer to infer and exploiting the camera's ability to convey charge and portent. Reading images like this, we are forced to wonder what has led us to this prostrate perspective.

In *Untitled (Overtown North)* (2006), a work comprising seven individual photographs, Guerrier appropriates the visual tropes of film noir (which literally translates as “black film”), using them as a broad metaphor for urban history. Overtown, a historically African American neighborhood located near Miami's downtown, was once a thriving district, the hub of black culture and community in the city. However, it was decimated by economic and political factors in the mid-20th century and never recovered after it was bisected by a massive freeway in the 1960s (as were many other inner-city communities in US cities).<sup>9</sup> Overtown North, a nonexistent geographical designation of Guerrier's making, refers to an area known as Wynwood. This former industrial warehouse district that borders Overtown to the north is an embodiment of Miami's use of culture and arts as an accomplice (sometimes unwitting) of massive real estate development. Taken in 2006, the photographs capture the neighborhood as it was beginning to undergo this gentrifying transformation.



Fig. 6 *Green is the color of my quotidian space, but I hear brown*, 2003 (detail). Eight chromogenic prints, 16 ¼ x 24 inches each. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery



Fig. 7 *Untitled (Morningside Night)*, 2006. Archival pigment print, 6 ½ x 8 ½ inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

6 These works are represented in the exhibition by one color photograph from the work *Green is the color of my quotidian space, but I hear brown* mounted on newly produced black-and-white wallpaper depicting a “verdant” landscape. With this gesture and shift in scale, Guerrier invites the viewer into a place of respite and offers a rich and detailed view of a small place in the world.

As Copeland suggests in his essay, we cannot clearly read Guerrier's images of a black man alone wandering deserted city streets after dark, but nonetheless, they are ripe with a sense of ominousness. The nighttime photographs of the artist standing with his back to the camera amid anonymous, generic scenes—stark streetlights, empty intersections, massive electrical stations—begin to suggest the ways in which a fraught, multilayered history can be both present and invisible. The small, implicit dramas Guerrier creates through his staging give way to major issues of 20th- and 21st-century urban decimation and growth. His body becomes a stand-in for the role of the individual within these histories and his or her ability to control or claim space. When considered in light of a sociopolitical past, present, and future, we can see traces of the danger to which Guerrier's cinematic images point.

Like Miami, Los Angeles is a city that experienced (perhaps more acutely) the spasms of rapid urban change in the mid-20th century, defined by white flight, the erosion of its central core, the rise of car culture, and the influx of large immigrant populations, among other factors. In his work, scholar Eric Avila draws a cogent context for the emergence of film noir, situating it within the shifting postwar landscape of Los Angeles itself.<sup>10</sup> Films such as *Double Indemnity* (1944), *D.O.A.* (1950), *M* (1951), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) are full of intrigue, malevolence, and suspense.<sup>11</sup> They painted a “dark” image of the city—characterizing it as a site of moral corruption and racialized and sexual impropriety. As the racially homogenous, postwar suburbs beckoned, this depiction of the city both fed into and fueled burgeoning anxieties on the part of the white middle class.<sup>12</sup> Guerrier's photographic project seems to intuit and extend this interpretative framework onto Miami. He infuses his photographs with a distinctly forbidding, cinematic feeling drawn from film noir, using it to intimate the uncomfortable racial histories of the cityscape.<sup>13</sup> His choice to include the imagined geographic description of Overtown North also points forward, to the way in which these realities and anxieties are continually played out as cities evolve and are developed.

### THE PLOT: THE REVOLUTION IS COMING

Following on his investigations of figure and site through photography, Guerrier's work would come to include overt indications of a plot in all its narrative and conspiratorial potential. Simultaneously, he would greatly expand his material and formal vocabulary to create sculptures, prints, videos, and large mixed-media installations. Best exemplified in *Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)* (2007–08, fig. 8), first exhibited as part of the 2008 Whitney Biennial curated by Henriette Huldish and Shamim Momin, this move toward overt narrative brought with it increased attention to language and an embrace of varied modes of making, especially collage. While Guerrier's photographic projects had moved from notions

- 7 It is worth noting that bodies of water—the rivers, bay, and ocean that define Miami, its tourist economy, and its multiple influxes of immigrants—never appear in Guerrier's work. In his imaginings of the city, Miami retains its tropical disposition, but is distinctly urban (we are on the mainland, never the beach).
- 8 Guerrier, in conversation with the author, 2012–ongoing.
- 9 “The death knell was struck with the decision in the early 1960s to run Interstate 95 right through the community.... The building of Interstate 95 in the Miami metropolitan area provides a devastating example of the human and social consequences of urban expressway construction.” Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 156. See also Eric Avila, *The Folklore of the Freeway: Race and Revolt in the Modernist City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 109–15.
- 10 Eric Avila, “The Spectacle of Urban Blight: Hollywood's Rendition of Black Los Angeles,” in *Popular Culture in the Age of White Flight: Fear and Fantasy in Suburban Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 65–105.



of the 19th century through to the present, paralleling the medium's historical bounds, *Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)* is firmly grounded in the 1960s and the history of black radicalism in the United States—its methods and forms signaling a conversation with this moment.

Guerrier's approach is attuned to the broader context of the 1960s and its relation to global and historical precedents for activism, social justice, and revolution. This broader contextualization is in part an echo of the complexity of his relationship to this history, which is personal, but about which he retains a critical distance, reluctant to lionize histories, calcify meaning, or perform a political position.<sup>14</sup> Guerrier also gestures to this history's specific manifestation in Miami. Like much of the United States during this era, Miami was beset by racial injustice, segregation, and discrimination, and emerged as an early site for the civil rights movement. The year 1968, a pivotal moment around the world, was likewise significant in Miami's history. As the Republican National Convention gathered on Miami Beach to nominate Richard Nixon for the presidency, the predominantly black neighborhood of Liberty City, on Miami's mainland, erupted

Fig. 8 *Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)*, 2007–08. Graphite, silkscreen ink, colored pencil, solvent transfer, and paper collage; chromogenic prints; plywood, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), and oil-based wood stain; and digital color video, transferred from VHS, dimensions variable. Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, museum purchase with funds provided by Irene and Irv Barr. Installation view: 2008 Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, March 6–June 1, 2008

- 11 Directed by Joseph Losey, *M* is a remake of the 1931 German film of the same name. Losey's version is set in downtown Los Angeles.

in violence in response to police brutality.<sup>15</sup> It is against this backdrop that Guerrier imagined BLCK, a fictionalized, radical artist group, under whose name he created work. While in solidarity with black power movements emerging around the country and internationally, BLCK members were conceived as neither militants nor political organizers; they were artists. In making BLCK an artist group, Guerrier conflates the role of the artist and the “participant” of Baraka’s complex story—reaffirming the crucial role that visual production, poetry, and other creative modes play in moments of revolutionary social change.

Guerrier echoes common forms of political expression in this project—in particular protest signs and prints on paper. “Welcome to Liberty City this summer of ’68 / our summer of freedom and disobedience,” reads one of the monochromatic protest signs included in *Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)*, its surface disrupted by abstract, star-like forms. The other black-on-black signs include bits of text borrowed from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s prophetic final speech and Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask,” from which the installation derives its title. *Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)* also comprises revisited forms and content: photographs of indistinct buildings and an ambiguous portrait of the artist, in this case standing bare-chested with his shirt draped, masklike, over his face. Imagining the buildings in Liberty City as the headquarters, studios, and hideouts for the group, Guerrier extends his earlier investigations of urban landscapes as charged and pregnant sites and continues to insert his own body into history. The prints that are included in this work incorporate varied techniques, including collage and solvent transfer, and introduce a vocabulary of formal devices that the artist continues to use. A video of found footage appropriated from the television documentary *Fabulous 60’s: An Overview*, *Untitled (Rhetoric that Preaches Revolution)* focuses on the political and social turmoil of the 1960s, providing context for the piece and grounding it firmly in a particular moment.

As if clues to a moment of radical potentiality, this body of work evidences Guerrier’s interest in language and symbols and points to the relationship between our current moment and social and political histories, opening a space for a reinscription of those histories. Many artists of Guerrier’s generation have turned their attention to the 1960s as rich territory for consideration. The work of Sharon Hayes would seem a particularly useful comparison by virtue of its trenchant acuity with text and language, its appropriation of protest forms, and its use of the street. Her work *Everything Else Has Failed! Don’t You Think It’s Time for Love?* (2007), in which she publicly read a letter beginning, “My dear lover,” about the trauma of war, conflates the intimacies of language and desire with the rhetoric and urgency of political speech. Her work *In the Near Future, New York* (2005, fig. 9) documents the artist carrying protest signs around city streets, their content and font copied from historical protest images. In borrowing the forms of political protest and layering ambiguity and



Fig. 9 Sharon Hayes, *In the Near Future, New York*, 2005 (detail). 35 mm multiple-slide-projection installation: nine actions, nine projections, 223 original slides (729 slides total), dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

- 12 Numerous scholars have interpreted film noir through a social and political reading.
- 13 Guerrier speaks about the relationship of film noir to his flâneur works in “Adler Guerrier: The Body of the Flâneur,” interview by Leopold Lambert, *Archipelago*, podcast audio, April 5, 2014, <https://soundcloud.com/the-archipelago/adler-guerrier-the-body-of-the>.
- 14 I am grateful to María Elena Ortiz for her reflections on notions of displacement and exile within Guerrier’s work.
- 15 Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*, 246–50.
- 16 Chester Himes, “Tang,” in *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1990), 407–11.

speculation on top of them through language and displacement, both Hayes and Guerrier expose conflicted relationships to these histories of civil unrest. They do not offer a lament for the unfinished utopian projects of the mid-20th century; rather, they use these histories as sites for interpretation and renewed meaning. Political art as such would seem to open history and the present up for careful examination, and more importantly, for profound reimaginings.

The black-on-black signs that appear in *Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)* are a form Guerrier continues to explore, beyond the guise of BLCK. The works employ a unique handmade font that the artist cuts out of medium-density fiberboard (MDF) and mounts on plywood. The signs themselves use a mode of appropriated and collaged poetic language that stands somewhere between avant-garde concrete poetry and powerful political speech. “BLCK Fluent in the language of the unheard,” a text that adorns one sign, is a charged linguistic abstraction derived from Dr. King’s quote, “a riot is the language of the unheard.” “We won’t march on Miami Beach / We won’t witness the coronation of the establishment / We’re here for Liberty,” is an overt reference to the 1968 Republican National Convention and a subtle play on liberty as a concept and a place, Liberty City. A more recent sign, *Untitled (blk participant in formulating a plot)* (2012, fig. 10), bears the text of its title, borrowed from Baraka’s 1968 trial, combined with Dr. King’s phrase “Walk in the light of creative altruism.” These works most overtly exemplify the long-running presence of important black intellectuals, writers, activists, and leaders within Guerrier’s work. The artist consistently returns to these figures for their resonance with the contemporary and for the crucial way in which they form a foundation, or platform, for his practice. While inanimate, these art objects, displayed propped against the wall in a group, carry in their forms the seeds of insurrection. They are not simply props, but tools: we can imagine picking them up and taking to the streets.

This notion of latent revolution and radicalism also infuses a group of prints included in this exhibition, which the artist refers to as his “’68 work.” Film noir, discussed in reference to Guerrier’s photographic works, has a literary counterpart in hard-boiled crime fiction, and Chester Himes, a well-known author in this genre, has been a touchstone for Guerrier in his exploration of setting and plot. Himes’s detective novels and short stories explore race and the conditions of black life in the United States, and many contain intimations of revolution and racial uprisings. Guerrier’s print series *br&t* (which stands for black, red, and Tang) emerges from a short story by Himes titled “Tang.” The story’s characters are a man named T-bone Smith and his “old lady,” Tang, to whom he is both boyfriend and pimp. One afternoon, a knock at the door brings an unexpected delivery of flowers. Upon opening the box, however, they find an automatic rifle and a note ordering them to “Learn your weapon and wait for instructions!!! Warning!!! Do not inform police!!! Freedom is near!!!”<sup>16</sup> While



Fig. 10 *Untitled (blk participant in formulating a plot)*, 2012. Plywood, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), and oil-based wood stain, 96 x 23 x 3 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery



Fig. 11 *Untitled (br&t-Tang)*, 2008. Graphite, solvent transfer, and paper collage, 30 x 22 inches. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

Tang is poised to participate in the “uprising” at hand, T-bone wants no part of it, threatening to tell the police. Himes’s story ends with an argument about the approaching revolution, leading T-bone to kill Tang.

Guerrier imagines Tang as an exotic dancer whose image he appropriated from a street flier for a club, and loosely constructs images around Himes’s notion of impending revolution (fig. 11). His works are visually defined by a recurrent collaged symbol, a six-sided, hexagon-like star shape that first appeared in *Untitled (BLCK-We wear the mask)* and the related blk protest signs, but has increasingly found its way into numerous projects. Guerrier has cited his interest in Himes’s story as residing not in the rifle, but rather in the note. A revolution does not begin with arms, but with language—a call to arms is itself a communicative, linguistic expression. Taking Himes’s writing as a point of departure for his prints, Guerrier does not illustrate the story but rather allows its narrative to give form to an idea of radical potential on the city streets, which are pictured in grainy black-and-white reproductions on Guerrier’s prints. The other prints that comprise this series make reference to Liberty City and 1968, and embody both the suggestion of and invitation to a long-dormant revolution.

### IN THE STUDIO AND ON THE STREET

Recent works have found Guerrier weaving in and out of his own artistic history. New projects have taken him into the public arts sector and performance, extending his reach, evolving within the methodologies and avenues of interest he set for himself 15 years ago. Beginning in 2010, Guerrier has incorporated the ephemera of the city in his art; its forms and material traces have become the basis for his work. His interest in the communicative abilities and failings of that which comprises the urban landscape led him to collect the political campaign signs and advertisements that dot the roadsides, fences, and intersections of Miami—artifacts of a continued flânerie. He has transformed these inexpensive, mass-produced signs, using them to create wall-mounted works and small sculptures.

*Untitled (Shadow & Act)* (2010, fig. 12), which derives its title from a collection of essays by Ralph Ellison, is a diptych made of multiple signs, cut up and mounted on plywood. Guerrier has incised the signs, strategically removing patterned shapes that speak to and contradict the existing color schemes and graphic qualities of the found material. Like the décollage artists of 1960s Paris, Guerrier is using the materials of the street, making deft inscriptions into the preexisting visuality of the city.

Guerrier’s interest in the street as a place and an idea, keenly expressed in his earlier works as a recurrent site for exploration and revolution, is extended in these works. He has referred to the street as a “palimpsest” of information, bearing insistent traces of its role as the spatial



Fig. 12 *Untitled (Shadow & Act)*, 2010. Two plywood panels and found Coroplast signs, 72 x 48 inches each. Courtesy the artist and David Castillo Gallery

embodiment of the public sphere. Mark Bradford, who is best known for his large abstract canvases, also makes work that directly addresses and often employs the language and signage of public streets. Like Guerrier, he uses the multilayered visual strata and ephemeral artifacts of the city to point to its construction, economies, politics, and undergrounds. While Bradford’s work often reflects the specificity of particular neighborhoods within his native Los Angeles, cataloguing the unique infrastructure and culture produced in these enclaves, Guerrier’s materials are drawn from across Miami and its diverse populations and would seem to reflect the distinctive mix of cultures and nationalities one might encounter on a typical commute there (as the artist did). Using these found materials as collage elements, sometimes greatly obscuring them and sometimes presenting them with little or no modification, both artists mine a history of everyday communications and exchanges culled from the real world.

When Guerrier presented *Untitled (Shadow & Act)* in *New Work Miami 2010*, curated by René Morales at the Miami Art Museum, the piece was shown on the floor, leaning against the wall and accompanied by a series of small sculptures that were also made of found signs and plywood. These geometric three-dimensional objects are an amalgamation of forms: stools, Minimalist sculpture, small platforms, architectural models, and boxes. Each is exceedingly modest and has the posture and affect of a failed design object or an idea in formation. The inchoate form of the sculptures, which has its basis in models Guerrier made when studying architecture, appear in a number of drawings and prints and seem propositional rather than fixed. The materials of the boxes bear traces of political advertisements, often illegible but nonetheless serving as markers of a moment and place in time and gesturing outside themselves. In



Fig. 13 *Untitled*, 2009. Wood, medium-density fiberboard (MDF), and Plexiglass, 44 x 12 x 16 inches. Collection of David Greer and Liza Perdomo Greer



Fig. 14 Installation view: *Adler Guerrier: Formulating a Plot*, Pérez Art Museum Miami, August 7, 2014–January 25, 2015

various projects, Guerrier has expanded his treatment and exploration of these sculptural shapes; they have grown increasingly sophisticated and formalized (fig. 13).

Guerrier's tendency toward speculative objects, handcrafted production, and sketched ideas are embodied in the modes and materials with which he works: drawings, prints, cardboard sculptures, Xeroxed papers, snapshots, cut-up fliers, stencils, magazines, and scraps of paper. Using mark making and patterns as if elements in a sentence—words to be constructed into thoughts—Guerrier employs collage and drawing as a mode of poetic structuring. A honed vocabulary of shapes (squat X's, geometric stars, elongated diamonds) and patterns (lattices, grids, stripes) appear in much of Guerrier's print work and are used as discrete collage elements. A broad selection of works on paper, with an emphasis on recent works, forms the coda to this exhibition; in it we see photographs from previous works, texts, patterns, color swatches, ink splatters, and a multitude of gestures and images that reveal the artist's lexicon and his deep interest in the handmade and temporal aspect of drawing and printmaking (fig. 14). Guerrier has reflected on these mediums as discursive forms that offer an open-ended space in which he can continually revisit works. Handmade objects and drawings find their analog in the artist's understanding of history and the cityscape as sites primed for constant reconsideration and continued excavation—they resolve and reveal themselves only over time.<sup>17</sup>

**LANGUAGE, CHARACTER AND NARRATION.  
THE STRUCTURE OF STORYTELLING, OF RECITING A TALE,  
OF TELLING A FABLE.  
CONTEXT (SPACE AND PLACE) IS OBJECTIFIED (THE CITY AS  
A STAGE SET) AND SHAPED INTO A NARRATIVE ELEMENT.**

**THE FLÂNEUR. THE PRO(AN)TAGONIST. A NON-NARRATIVE.**

— Adler Guerrier, unpublished artist statement, 2001

Never taking him at his word, we can still see Guerrier's guiding concerns laid bare in this early artist statement. It comprises a nuanced use of language as a poetic device, straddling its communicative potential and obfuscating tendencies. It establishes his interest in the character, the city, and the telling of things. Guerrier understands and continues to investigate the significance and complexities of narrative in his practice: who tells, how they tell, and what they tell dictates histories. His insertion

of himself, his fictions, and his revisions within the contours of these frames, in ways both subtle and radical, recognizes the weight of history on our present moment as well as its necessary malleability. Guerrier would seem to position his practice within the imagined spaces of creative production—his works take the street as their subject, not their site, and rebellion as their genesis, not their goal—but ultimately he is a participant. The plots he narrates, the plots he conspires to construct, the plots he maps, and the plots to which he lays claim chart a course that speaks to radical potential and revolutionary aspirations, ambiguous, poetic, and in formation as they may be.

17 Guerrier, in conversation with the author, 2012–ongoing.