

Giant Steps for Chaves



Photo cred: Maji Staff

Him say, this uprising will bring out the beast in us
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-Fela Kuti "Beasts of No Nation"

The first time I saw Chaves' work was on a waning afternoon on the block of Oak and 12th. I saw it on the side of downtown Oakland's many unassuming yet content-wise obscure buildings. I remember being stopped in my tracks to see a work of art spray-painted in hot yellow. The figure was skull-like in composition, with horizontal rectangular bars for teeth and a mule-like, hooked jaw. The skull contained various incongruous patterns and swirling shapes, and the head was crowned with three lines emanating in its own riddling power.

I was floored. It was unlike anything I had seen in a gallery or on the streets, something so new and puzzling, I couldn't take my eyes off of it. After I observed the skull that day I began to see a great manifold of figures appear and seem to be from a world outside our own. At first there were skulls, then profiles of creatures, then they grew arms, torsos, legs, and then they began to commune with each other. Seeing this develop over the course of three years has been incredible. Quite literally from an embryonic skull evolved a small community of creatures. Some

stout with tiny arms, others with serpentine figures, all completely original and with their own personalities.

It was as if some individual was plucked from a time and place completely outside of our own. This artist walked among us, in secret, to display the depictions of life from their world. There are no contextual, historical, or cultural innuendos to guide your thinking. The viewer is left to their own imagination. Amid the graffiti culture in Oakland, Chaves rose to the top as my personal favorite, and one who is the most provocative and experimental artists in the Bay Area.

I also had to work to find him. It wasn't easy, and it eventually spanned a year long manhunt to find him. I was told something to the effect of there being no use, the man is as elusive and enigmatic as his work. All I could get was an Instagram handle, which I followed immediately and thus began the beginning of correspondence.

And now here we are, I am sitting on a sofa in Chaves' studio in the Fruitvale, he is sitting on a grey industrial bucket across from me, a painting of his looming behind him. One wall has cutouts from Time magazines, notes, and sentimental photographs. He tells me this is a wall where things stay. The wall across from it has paint slashes and scrawled notes. A few of them read "Mississippi Mud, Beasts of No Nation", a phone number, and an address to somewhere in East Oakland. He tells me that this wall is constantly being painted on, crossed out, and written anew.

He tells me he's thriving in Oakland, all things considered. Being the son of a naval officer caused much of his childhood to be in constant motion, from New York City, to Washington State, to New Mexico, and now to Oakland, where he currently resides. He tells me it's a much better fit, the art scene here is much more enthusiastic and accepting of his self described "kinetic" art. In New Mexico, he often dealt with an arts scene that



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9 10 was terrified of his work. As he puts it, "They just didn't know what to do with it" and in their defense, he tells me the Nevada arts scene specializes in "landscape paintings".

Chaves has an upcoming show at Vessel Gallery on May 4th, he decided to title it Beasts of No Nation. Chaves gathered inspiration from Fela Kuti and Egypt 80's classic 1989 album Beasts of No Nation, where an always charismatic yet frustrated Fela Kuti shares his experiences and opinions after being jailed for five years in Nigeria on fraudulent foreign currency violation charges. He asks the world why they want to hear about his time in prison so badly, and that he'd rather talk about the "craze" world that jailed him in the first place. Kuti sets his frustration towards the United Nations, America, the waning politics of the Cold War, and his native Nigeria. Kuti's exasperation with this "craze" world is akin to Chaves' explosive rage with the world around him. "It's hard to

consider myself to be a part of America or even humanity at times. What does it mean to be human? Because I don't feel like it's the way we're acting right now. As humans, we're acting like something else."

There are underlying anarchistic element in his work and ethos. Chaves tells me he repudiates any titles placed on his artwork. This may be in reference to his roots in New Mexico, where his artwork has been called "like cave-paintings", "primitive" and "childlike" he figures it would be best to stay away from titles altogether. There is a certain gaze most galleries and gallery-

goers hold, and when the gaze is shifted on Chaves, a racially ambiguous (yet nonetheless black) man, the interpretation is to the primitive. He tells me it used to infuriate him, but now he is indifferent to hearing it.

Chaves takes these descriptions to task: "Oh you want primitive? You want cave paintings? I'll give you cave paintings" he challenges, and with that he revolts by churning out art which mocks the world that attempts to pigeonhole him, while he can't personally find a thing to pigeonhole himself in. Instead of conforming to the projections of his artwork, he inflates it, makes it comically so, just to destroy it for his own amusement.

And the art speaks for itself, he draws his creatures in thick, bold, black outlines, the colors are just as bold, layered in bright blues, reds, yellows, greens, splattered, and mixed on top of one another. The layering of gestural lines

make some of the characters in Beasts of No Nation nearly indistinguishable. The paintings are even more layered and kinetic, and the stories are clearer-a painting with a figure standing over a buried comrade, another figure seething with corporate devils on its mind. Chaves' visual lexicon is that of seething rage, volcanic imagination, with a playful element that keeps the viewer engaged, with always something new to observe.

In this solo exhibition, I hope you experience the artwork of a man that evades description and has no interest in being described. Chaves lives his life on his own terms, uncompromising and furiously original in his artistic vision. May you visit Beasts of No Nation and experience borderless artwork, and may your mind be blown.

Beasts of no nation, Egbe Ke Gbe
Beasts of no nation, eturu gbe ke
-Fela Kuti, Beasts of No Nation

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BEAST OF NO NATION
MAY 4 - JUNE 23, 2018

OPENING RECEPTION:
Friday, May 4, 6-9 PM
ARTIST TALK: 7-8 PM

Vessel Gallery
471 25th Street
Oakland, CA 94612



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