

TRADITION || INNOVATION

American Masterpieces of Southern Craft & Traditional Art

Darryl Montana

The following text is an interview summary from a conversation conducted by interviewer Laura Westbrook on behalf of the curator.

Darryl Montana is aware, when talking about his art, of the heavy weight of tradition. Making the costumes for his Mardi Gras Indian Tribe, the Yellow Pocahontas, is a time consuming task, but was something that his father, Chief of Chief's Allison "Tootie" Montana, did for fifty two years, and which Darryl, in fact, has been doing since he was ten years old (although he jokes that his first suit was only "nice for a child.") He has, since then made many suits, and been recognized for his art both nationally and internationally.

Like many New Orleanians, Darryl is committed to the city of his birth. He has lived there his entire life, as has his entire family since the 1800's. Despite traveling extensively to New York and London, where his suits are on display, he feels that there is no other place he can do his work, and there is no other place he would rather be. In his words, "Traveling is fine, it is an experience, but there is no place like home."

Darryl has a great drive and personal commitment. In his interview he talks about growing up around masking, mentioning that he feels so driven partly because his father didn't actively encourage him to mask. He takes a great amount of personal pride in his suits. When he was first starting out people would come around and say "oh, his daddy helped him with that." It is something that he has been battling with, and he takes pride in this year's suit because this is the first year that his father hasn't been around to help him. Part of his endeavor to set himself apart from his father has resulted in increasingly innovative and asymmetrical designs.



Darryl Montana - Chief Suit Close-Up

Photo by Herbert Lotz. Courtesy of SITE Santa Fe.

Where his father approached masking from a traditional and community stand point, Darryl is an artist.

Next year's suit begins almost directly after Mardi Gras celebrations (although he vows he won't start until after his birthday in April). He paces himself out on a strict timeline, made more difficult in recent years by Katrina. He and his wife are living in a one-bedroom apartment while rebuilding their home in New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward. The storm also ruined his suits, but thankfully not the patterns. Managing his time determines his completion of a project – it is a battle. “No matter what is going on in life, Mardi Gras day you have to be in feathers.” It's a never-ending process and takes a lot of discipline and a lot of commitment. To be in a tribe you have to be committed to doing the work.

Describing the process in his interview, he says the first thing he does is to buy some cheap materials, do some sketches, maybe make a model, but keep it around, and keep looking for flaws in it, and deal with it until it is satisfactory. The model can help him visualize the final product and help him place the feathers. When he is satisfied, he will cut the model or sketch, enlarging the model and making a sewing pattern. Once this is finished he cuts out the details, making a stencil, so that everything lines up smoothly.

The basis of the suit is corrugated cardboard, and the apron is canvas. The fabric is satin, and the glue usually Elmer's, although there is fabric glue which is more expensive but is preferred because it dries much faster. He uses nylon thread to sew the pieces together (in addition to glue) because Elmer's will melt with moisture. Once finished the back is covered in satin as well – it is a fully finished piece. After a few years cardboard will disintegrate, and the canvas and satin create longevity. The process, a legacy from his father, is intensive but the end result is very well made. In picking colors he tries to put together those color schemes which you wouldn't necessarily think of. He will put together gray and bright turquoise and a bit of yellow. He likes to have base colors that differ from year to year.

The rewards of his efforts are fulfilled on Mardi Gras Day. He describes it like Christmas morning, “All you want to do is put the suit on.” All the adrenaline is flowing, and he can hear the appreciation of the audience, and it was worth it. The day starts as the tribe comes by the Chief's house. Before they go on their journey they sing “Indian Red” the spiritual song that the tribes would sing before they went out to fight each other (in fact, his father was instrumental in stopping the violent aspect of the tribes warring). Now it is an artistic fight.

On the street it is a war game. For Darryl's first fifteen years, he didn't have a position. He was the invisible man. Then he became the Trail Chief, and he gained authority. He feels that he has earned his position. While he was never a Flag Boy or Spy Boy, he has been Trail Chief, Third Chief, Second Chief, and Big Chief. On the streets, the “Spy Boys” go out and scout, and they are usually

looking for the Yellow Pocahontas, as the tribe to meet, because they keep it traditional. Their practice, for example, uses tambourines, and the other tribes can come and go through the rehearsal – it isn't the micro-phoned, Hollywood version that prevails today. The Suits are worn Mardi Gras Day, Super Sunday, and St. Joseph's night. If a suit goes on exhibit it is never worn again.

Darryl mentions that “back in the day” you wouldn't get a chance to see another artists work. It was a secret process. He remembers his father hiding his suits away from his children. Now, Darryl mostly interacts with his students instead of other artists, and that is to get them to a point where they can continue his work. As to the isolation and secrecy of the work – it is not that he feels threatened, it is just that no one can see it and understand it until they see it whole. Even his wife, who lives with him and can see him work every day won't comprehend the piece until it is finished.

Taking on students, which he did with Xavier University for three years, took its toll. It takes a lot of time to make a suit, and he devotes his life to it. He makes the time and commitment every year to sew a suit (usually in addition to a full time job). Even though he is finally being recognized as an artist, and can focus on his art, and have a life, masking still takes up most of his time. He hopes to be able to do miniatures, wedding gowns and hats, and be able to support himself with his art. He still teaches, and is committed to training the next generation of New Orleanians. While he was in Texas he worked at a University where he was well paid, and to which he is returning for a few months to conduct a course.

Darryl also has taught after school classes and at a summer camp in Gretna (his Queen is now teaching that summer camp). Xavier also has a summer camp, which hopefully will run in addition to the summer camp in Texas. In part his commitment to teaching comes from knowing that children today can get into so much trouble. He can provide himself as an example that people can overcome mistakes. His camps focus on fostering a talent, maybe it is beading, maybe not, but he inspires the children to do the best they can do.

Darryl is approaching his fiftieth year as a leader in his tribe. Some ask him if he is trying to break his father's record, but he denies it. To him, his father will always be the “Chief of Chiefs” - that is his father's legacy. His own legacy comes from teaching his students, and continuing the tradition in the next generation. His dream is to start the Big Chief Allison “Tootie” Montana Institute of Art, Culture, and Tradition, a place where his family's art can be displayed after his line has died out. He would like to be able to sell the materials used in masking at the institute, to put himself in a position where can help those struggling to mask, financially. The institute would also create a venue where all of his students could come together, instead of relying on a school's facility and restricting the student to those who attend.