

9 MAY –  
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Online

CURATED BY  
REA MCNAMARA

ORGANIZED BY  
THE MACKENZIE ART GALLERY

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT  
CAT BLUEMKE AND JONATHAN CARROLL

## **WAKE WINDOWS: THE WITCHING HOUR**

Participating artist Rodell Warner with curator Rea McNamara

Rodell Warner is a Trinidadian artist working primarily in new media and photography. Rooted in the exploration of race, nature, and technologies of representation, his artworks draw on personal and institutional archives to rethink the past and digital processes to index emancipatory futures. For *Wake Windows*, Warner created new AI-generated images—installed as 3D animated graphics—from his ongoing series, *Artificial Archive*, which uses a text-to-image AI generator to intervene in the traditional Caribbean photographic archive.

Below is an edited and abridged interview I conducted with Warner via Zoom in May 2023 and via email in May 2024.

**Rea McNamara (RM):** I first encountered your work on Tumblr in 2009 when you were doing your *Too Much Eyes* project. At the time, I didn't self-identify as a curator. And I know that you were primarily a photographer and a graphic designer around the time of *Too Much Eyes*, right?

**Rodell Warner (RW):** Yup. And yeah, I hadn't even—so when I started *Too Much Eyes* is when I started working at CMB [Communications], this ad agency that used to be in [Woodbrook, a district in Port-of-Spain]. And Richard Mark Rawlins was an artist and a designer—he went to school in Canada [and] did his undergrad there. He was the Creative Director of the studio. And he hired me because he was excited about my sketchbook. And, Rea, I didn't even have all the skills I needed to work in that studio—I had some of them. [But] he was like, "Just come in." It was this thing where I just ended up joining this studio, and it was like maybe twenty artists and

designers? Richard would come down there every day. Even in our assessments at the end of each year, he would give points to people who sent links to the rest of the group. He just wanted the environment to be nourished and enjoyable.

It was also the first time I had unlimited fast internet access. Also, they were all older [creatives at the ad agency], always commenting on how [Trinidadian art and design] was changing. All this art was happening at the same time in 2008–09... [So I was] going online and looking for Trinidad online.

I didn't think of myself as an artist at that time, exactly, the same way you didn't [think of yourself as a curator].

**RM:** Did you start *Too Much Eyes* for that initial audience—Richard, the older co-workers you encountered?

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**RW:** I was doing it so much for myself [but] they would do lots of reminiscing.

They would talk a lot about Trinidad [and] how it was when they were younger. Pre-globalization Trinidad seemed so romantic and beautiful.

There was a moment when the government focused heavily on local cottage industries. Trade protections were implemented. The country would not import clothes from the United States because of all this activism to protect local industries. Local creators flourished.

**RM:** I love how we, ourselves, are reminiscing about connecting on a now-inactive social platform because that's how we met, and that's how we each realized different creative projects that propelled our careers forward. *Too Much Eyes*, for you, as an artist, and I guess *Sheroes*, for me, as a curator.

We both recently chatted about Rhizome's latest Tumblr preservation efforts and admitted to having crunchy feelings that our own projects haven't been considered. How did you feel about that?

**RW:** I felt jealous. The jealousy is not because I don't think the other Tumblr projects were worthy—it's not that at all. A lot of the GIF files have been changed to WEBP. You cannot download them the way you used to. They're un-downloadable files now. For example, on the *Sheroes* Tumblr, I sometimes encounter broken links. And, you know, I always thought of that Tumblr as a time capsule, a kind of

historical record. But every couple of years, I end up on it, and I go through the links, and then, more and more, I discover the things that are broken.

As an archive, it's degrading.

**RM:** I can tell you why. What has happened is that when we were posting, many of the GIFs were produced by artists who first posted them onto Google Plus. Or, they were posting on their [personal] Tumblrs, and you would reblog it. So that was where those GIFs I would pull to post were. Lorna [Mills] would get it directly [from the artists]. She was focused on presenting the GIFs in the in-person space at The Beaver. So, she was getting the raw files. But *Sheroes* was such a sprawling project. There was the music, the GIFs, and so many facets of it that prepared me for the institutional work I ended up doing. But it was so sprawling that I couldn't be a traditional curator in the sense of being very mindful of conservation.

**RW:** I don't think it's your fault, or it should have been done differently. I was trying to get at that, given the nature of Tumblr and the fact that Tumblr itself, as a platform, switched over to the WEBP format, it ruined the display of all these GIF works.

So what I was saying is that in the face of this degradation that's happening over time, if Rhizome decides to select some blogs that it considers important for conservation, naturally, I would feel jealous because I know the thing I made and the thing that you made that I participated in and that I find so valuable...what's going to happen to those? And I'm sure many people would love to have

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their Tumblr projects and blogs considered for conservation. So, jealousy functions to let me know what I would like. When I used to talk so much shit about this one trendy photographer, I used to criticize their work so much. And then one day, it hit me like, “Why do I talk so much shit about this? It’s because I want to do stuff like what they do.” And so I was just like, “Oh, when I’m jealous, and I’m feeling the way about somebody’s thing, it’s because I want to do that.”

That’s how I see this conversation that we’re having. It makes us aware that these blogs will not necessarily be preserved forever or in a way that we would like them to be. And so if somebody is saving blogs, we want all of us to be saved in the same way. And it’s not just about anybody. But to have Rhizome do it is the kind of, you know, to be included in an archive of valuable Internet stuff.

**RM:** You have such a beautiful way of reframing jealousy as not necessarily this bad feeling.

Now, to shift gears, I want to discuss your work for the show. It’s part of your ongoing series, *Artificial Archive*, which uses a text-to-image AI generator to intervene in what we think is the traditional Caribbean archive. Can you talk about how this series came to be?

**RW:** So, [in 2019] I made this project called *Augmented Archive*, where I [made works using] archival images from the Caribbean because [when I moved to the US] I was afraid of losing [my] connection to [the art community] in the Caribbean.

I have colourized them using AI...And I make

these objects that exist in the photos. These pictures are from the 19th and [very early] 20th century Caribbean. And the people who are photographed in them are often photographed just as part of the machinery of the colonial project—not as individuals. My intention is to redirect the viewer to [consider] the hidden interiority of the people in the pictures. And so putting these objects into the photos literally intends to direct your eyes to these people.

With *Augmented Archive*, I’m urging the audience to imagine the lives of the people of the Caribbean’s past in greater detail than is depicted by, and suggested by, the limited gaze of most of the photos in the Caribbean’s early photographic archive. Once artificial intelligence text-to-image generators came online, I could simply depict my imagination of what Caribbean life could have looked like instead of asking the audience to imagine. The AI tools allowed me to illustrate what the early Caribbean photographic archive might have looked like if, for example, the photos were made by the people themselves, including all the complexity and intimacies of their lives. I imagine an archive that gives a richer picture of life for Caribbean subjects during photography’s infancy.

I call this ongoing series *Artificial Archive*. The works in my *Artificial Archive* are created using AI text-to-image generators to speculate on details of life in the Caribbean’s past and to fictionalize it to override the limited view we inherit from the photographic archive as it exists in real life.

**RM:** The specific works for the show, *The Wisest, Kindest, Most Beautiful Humans*, stem from an experience no parent wants to go through: being

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in the hospital with their sick child. How did that challenging personal experience inform the work?

**RW:** At the children's hospital in Jamaica, it seemed to me that some of the families there with their sick children, particularly those who seemed less-resourced, were also suffering from a lack of access to information on parenting. People with more help and more time are freer to check out blogs and social media accounts that are constantly sharing research and methods, discussing best practices for handling difficult parenting scenarios, and finding community in that. Some of the parents we met were so overwhelmed by a lack of support and resources that they and their children generally had huge difficulties in an already challenging scenario without any intervening agent. I wondered if finding a way to share helpful information, tips, and attitudes about parenting could improve these families' experiences.

In searching for an effective form of information sharing, I looked at the educational posters on the walls of the hospital and later, while at the Institute of Jamaica archives, at photographic postcards from early 20th-century Jamaica. Many of the postcards were produced in great numbers when they were initially released, and the photos on them became iconic images in the nation's visual life and self-image. The postcards would often have captions that titled or described the scenes in the photos.

Seeing these old Jamaican postcards allowed me to imagine vintage postcards from different Caribbean islands, captioned with short hacks

and tips that could share parenting techniques or perspectives. The postcards could feature instructive and inspiring imagery to impact these parents and their children's lives positively.

**RM:** I might have mentioned, [but] one of my favourite online communities is this [Reddit] dad community I lurk a lot. It's called Daddit. And I think something is fascinating at this time right now with fathers today where they're very conscious about being more involved and present [in the labour and care of their children but] don't feel like they have access to resources, or [being able to] connect with other fathers.

So I've been interested in that experience that's happening right now... A lot of men are looking at the toxic masculinity they were raised with and undoing that, but at the same time, [asking] what does masculinity look like? What does being a good father look like?

Does this resonate with you?

**RW:** It does a lot.

One of the things is that [I have] the ability to work remotely. The fact that I don't leave the house to go to work means that I can be with [my son] Ayo in a way that my dad [couldn't] be with me. My dad was a tailor in the Coast Guard in Trinidad. The work schedule involved you [going] to work on Thursday [and coming] back on Friday afternoon. And when you do come back on Friday afternoon, you're tired, [because] you worked all night on your shift, and you needed to rest. So my experience with my dad growing up was of this very hard-

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working but also very tired person who [didn't] have a lot of time between his responsibilities of being a sailor but also being the head of a tailor shop and a mentor to his subordinates... He also does not have a model outside of that for fathering. His dad was a workaholic and didn't have much time. And they didn't have the internet. They didn't have access to the perspectives and books and podcasts or the time or the ability to be in their children's place. So many factors make it possible for us to father and parent differently than our fathers. And then also all this information that's just available now. And not to just everybody, but more available than it was before about toxic masculinity and about how the patriarchy, patriarchal practices damage men, too.

**RM:** What information have you accessed that's helped you, as a father, address the impact that patriarchy has had on you and in the raising of your son?

**RW:** One of the books I read that I feel like named a lot of [the] phenomena for me is bell hooks's *The Will to Change*. That book basically talks about patriarchy and practices that come up in patriarchy...I feel like that one book named so many other things that were previously unnamed to me that it just decoded it all. And I'm like, "Oh, my whole shit is decoded right here." She did all this work and put it in this book, and now I understand so many different family relationships. Also, when I meet other men who are willing to consider that they're wrong in whatever intuitive approach they have and collaborate with their partner on the very difficult work of learning how to parent, it's really valuable.

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## ABOUT THE ARTIST

**Rodell Warner** is a Trinidadian artist working primarily in new media and photography. Rooted in the exploration of race, nature, and technologies of representation, his artworks draw on personal and institutional archives to rethink the past, and on digital processes to index emancipatory futures. His digital animations intervening in early photography from the Caribbean have been exhibited at the Art Gallery of Ontario in the landmark exhibition *Fragments of Epic Memory* in 2022, and in 2024 in the solo exhibition *Fictions More Precious* at Big Medium in Austin, Texas. His digital animations using hand-drawn digital 3D renderings of plants he has encountered throughout his increasingly diasporic life are currently on show at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) in the exhibition *Sea Change*, and have been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei in *NEXUS – Video and New Media Art from the Caribbean*. Rodell works between Port of Spain in Trinidad, Kingston in Jamaica, and Austin, Texas in the U.S.

## ABOUT THE CURATOR

**Rea McNamara** is a writer and curator based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Her curatorial work has long been shaped by networked counterpublics' participatory cultures, particularly the collaborative processes of transformative fandom, alongside a social practice shaped by organizing community-based art initiatives. In her research, she often focuses on the emergence of otherness and hybridity within digital identity formations, informing an on/offline curatorial approach that connects and capacity-builds.

McNamara has previously held curatorial and public programming positions with the Gardiner Museum and Drake Hotel, and been awarded grants from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. She has curated and organized a range of exhibitions and public projects, including *dis-ease* (Vector Festival, 2021), *Obsessive Pop Tendencies* (Pleasure Dome, 2019), *Community Arts Space* (Gardiner Museum, 2016-2019), and *Safe Space* (Scotiabank Nuit Blanche 2024). In 2011, she founded the art party series *Sheroes*, which engaged with female celebrity fandom through music, performance, installation, and internet-based art. Her work has been presented at The Art Gallery of Ontario and is in the Whitney Museum of American Art collection.

Additionally, McNamara has written about art, culture and the internet for *frieze*, *Art in America*, *The Globe and Mail*, and been commissioned to write exhibition texts for Trinity Square Video, the Remai Modern, and Daniel Faria Gallery. From 2020-2021, she was the Emily H. Tremaine Journalism Fellow for Curators with *Hyperallergic*. She also gives talks, moderates panels, and lead workshops on fandom, curatorial practice, and the labour of mothering for The Toronto Public Library, Toronto Metropolitan University, NYU Tisch School of the Arts, and more.

## ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

### ***Wake Windows: The Witching Hour***

Led by a rebellious AI Chatbot, this interactive online exhibition guides viewers through interactive and time-based art by artists who are parents, caregivers, or educators who engage with public databases and “living archives.” In touching on maternal world building and our ever-evolving relationship with AI, *Wake Windows: The Witching Hour* intends to make visible the missing datasets in our collective understanding of the often invisible labour that is mothering. From animations to machinimas or virtual reality (VR) to interactive narratives, the digital exhibition traces how the artists' creative outputs have shifted since taking on this care work. Curated by Rea McNamara, participating artists and collaborators include Claudia Cornwall, Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera, Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter, Wednesday Kim, Lauren Lee McCarthy, Rory Scott, Skawennati, and Rodell Warner. *Wake Windows* is part of a series of digital exhibitions created through the MacKenzie Art Gallery's Digital Exhibitions Toolkit and Art Installation Launcher (DETAIL)—a newly developed resource championing the development of art exhibitions for digital platforms.

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## ARTISTS

Claudia Cornwall  
Alejandra Higuera with Magnolia Higuera  
Faith Holland with Ben Bogart and Hildegard Holland Watter  
Wednesday Kim  
Lauren Lee McCarthy  
Rory Scott  
Skawennati  
Rodell Warner

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Crystal Mowry  
Nicolle Nugent  
Jayne Wilkinson  
Lisa Karen Cox  
Onika Powell  
Sharn Peters  
Natalie Haddad  
Rosemary Heather  
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