



# Creators

ALAINA SIMONE

## A Post-Basel Retreat Brought Performance Art to St. Croix



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Artists including Rashaad Newsome, Oceana James, David Antonio Cruz, Jeanette Ehlers, traveled to St. Croix for what was billed as a “Post Art Basel Miami Beach Art World Retreat.”

Billed as a “Post Art Basel Miami Beach Art World Retreat,” the inaugural Caribbean performance series, *Take Five*, took place roughly 11,000 miles southeast of Miami Beach, on the US Virgin Island of St. Croix. The week-long series featured performances by artists Rashaad Newsome, Oceana James, David Antonio Cruz, Jeanette Ehlers, studio visits with local artists, and the opening of Kharis Kennedy’s *Touch Has Memory*, a solo exhibition of painting and performance at The Caribbean Museum Center for the Arts.

“We were inspired to create an art exhibition and performance series on the beautiful island of St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Island, because of the island's rich



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their performances.” St. Croix is a part of the US Virgin Islands, along with St. John and St. Thomas. The Dutch ruled the eastern Caribbean islands for nearly two centuries, until America purchased the suite in 1916.



David Antonio Cruz, *Green, howiwantyougreen*. Photo credit: Quiana L. Adams. Images courtesy of Take Five

The week began with David Antonio Cruz's performance, *Green, howiwantyougreen*, at Whim Estate Museum, the oldest and only remaining sugar plantation in the US Virgin Islands. Using the Estate's neoclassical interior, Cruz framed a conceptual work that uses *Sonnets of Dark Love*, the last eleven poems by Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, and personal experience to create what the artist calls, “a work that acknowledges queer history and the things that disappear.”

FIVE (St. Croix) clip from RASHAAD NEWSOME on Vimeo.

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Rashaad Newsome's *FIVE St. Croix*, an ever-evolving vogue performance series, also explored queerness. "The piece expands on John Cage and Merce Cunningham's concept of chance performance, the music and dance elements are created separately and are brought together at the performance," explains Newsome. The rhythmic structure that anchors the performance featured Crucian rhythms created through a digital drum beat based on a four-count—a house beat synonymous with Vogue Fem performance—fused with djembe and congas, revealing that vogue performance and house music are entrenched in West African rhythmic structures.



Rashaad Newsome, *FIVE St. Croix*. Photo Credit: Quiana L. Adams. Courtesy of Rashaad Newsome Studio and Take Five.

"When I came to *FIVE* I was thinking a lot about action painting and sculpture, but also my friends," explains Newsome. "So I thought, *Could vogue in a way become a part of my practice that could allow for me to talk about very personal narratives I've experienced in my community as well as use my exploration of this language as a way to employ the community? Could this marginal material, especially as it relates to more traditional material, do something that painting, drawing, and sculpture might aspire to do?*" He adds, "So I found myself not only thinking about vogue, but my community and the performance of gender, sexuality, desire, and power."



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used a folktale structure for the performance, which took place on the plot of land once owned by Venus Johannes, an African slave who gained her freedom by marrying her slave ship captain who sold her back into slavery once the ship docked in St. Croix. (Johannes eventually won her freedom again.) On the ruins of Johannes' home, James told of the shared history between black Americans, those living on St. Croix, and the larger African Diaspora. At one affecting moment, James walked through the street below Johannes' former home and shouted, "They were people not slaves!" before breaking into dance, keeping rhythm with a shekere as she called out names of black Americans killed by the police and vigilante white men.

"Eric Garner was people!" she yelled. "Martin Luther King Jr., people!" Members of the audience whispered the Yoruba philosophical concept for change, "Ase." "Michael Brown, people!" "Renisha McBride," an audience member called out. "People!" James said, jabbing her finger into the air as other names were said, too. "We gave birth to people. Not slaves, not slaves, not slaves! People!" she said, as the audience cried, "Ase! Ase! Ase!" James fell silent and then handed out sheets of paper with slave ledgers printed on them.



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The week concluded at Fort Christiansted, a location where slaves were publicly punished, with a projection onto one of the fort's vast walls of Caribbean artist Jeanette Ehlers' *Whip It Good*. The nearly three-minute-long video captures the artist violently whipping a white canvas. The performance alludes to the violence slaves endured and the ways that history informs African diasporic identity today.

"We will continue to develop programming with Crucian and international artists," says Simone, who is developing *Take Five* into an annual Caribbean art series timed after Art Basel Miami Beach. "We want to create a platform," she adds, "that allows us to investigate and explore the intersectionality of race, identity, gender, power and the environment," in the Caribbean and beyond.

For more information on *Take Five*, [click here](#).

