

# When We Start Thinking: Charl Landvreugd's Multivalent Afropean Aesthetic

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Elsewhere I have argued that imagination can itself be considered a methodology.<sup>1</sup> This idea might seem obvious in relation to visual art, but it is particularly useful when examining the oeuvre of an artist who is also an intellectual. Charl Landvreugd has been presenting visual art formally since 2006, and his multigenre work includes video, installation, performance, and sculpture. While most of his art eschews narrative, instead embracing spectacle and suggestive abstraction, the artist has some very clear ideas about race and culture.

Landvreugd, who is completing a PhD in curatorial studies at the Royal College of Art in London, was born in Suriname but moved to the Netherlands at a very young age. He is focused on delineating a black Dutch and, more broadly, an Afro-European—or *Afropean*—visual art aesthetic. Landvreugd has a rising profile in the art world, and his work has been shown at venues such as the Dak'Art Biennial, the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, and the Marowijne Art Parc. Though several interviews with Landvreugd have been published, and the artist-intellectual is in the process of releasing his own academic research, little criticism exists that addresses the content and structure of his art or his art in relation to his theoretical ideas. This essay traces the aesthetic continuities and major themes of Landvreugd's visual art and also explores how his art and scholarly ideas intersect.

I

Landvreugd's work between 2006 and 2014 includes two major series, the *Anarusha* sculptures (2009–10) and the *Atlantic Transformerz* (2010–14), that will be addressed here; more recent work will be addressed at the end of this essay.

The *Atlantic Transformerz* series is Landvreugd's largest and most widely exhibited work (in part because he repurposes the footage in multiple installations). The series of videos features very-dark-skinned black men, with a focus on their heads and chests; they are mostly in spectacular costumes and most have their skin covered with black pigment. The videos take place in the Netherlands, Suriname, the United States, and Senegal—locales that cover what is known as the black Atlantic. These videos and the performances they capture are nonnarrative; instead of a story, the viewer is confronted with a black man's visage (sometimes Landvreugd himself) against a black background or, in the Senegalese and Surinamese iterations, in specific landscapes. When their faces are visible, the men have either serious expressions or the slightest hint of a smile.

Figure 1. movt nr. 2: Atlantic Transformerz - Amsterdam: Lerone Mask (2010), Digital Print.



By focusing on close-ups of the head and shoulders, Landvreugd contradicts stereotypical ideas and images of the black man as all body (especially sexuality and brute strength) and no head or heart (specifically, intelligence or emotion). Even when an image portray a black man wearing a mask, it is neither ordinary nor expected because the mask used is not “African” but robotic, propelling the black man into the (Afro-)future as opposed to a stereotypically “primitive” or mythic past. In fact, the mask used is modeled on the *Transformers* animated show, specifically on the character Optimus Prime. Landvreugd seems to have been impressed by these characters for years; as a young person he was part of a breakdance crew called the Transformerz.<sup>2</sup> In the *Transformers* cartoon and movie franchise, Optimus Prime is a leader of his kind—beings that can change their shapes between vehicles and robots and who have come to Earth from another planet. Prime, who transforms between a robot and a truck, is distinguished by his extreme intelligence and martial arts fighting skills as well as by his sense of morality and desire to promote the “life and liberty of all sentient species.”<sup>3</sup> Even without this depth of knowledge about the *Transformers* reference, the symbolism is clear: black people, reviled and discriminated against by the majority in the global North, might prove to be intelligent *and* strong and might possess the knowledge and moral character necessary to save the human race. Finally, the “transformerz” of the title could be a metaphor for the ability of everyone—but especially of diasporic blacks, the descendants of people who survived some of history’s greatest atrocities—to transform into anyone or anything they wish.



Above Right:

Figure 2. *movt nr.1: Anaruka 5 (2010)*, Lava, Ceramic, Swarovski, Beads, Sequence, Lace, Felt, Ribbon, Hair, Nails, Paper, Gold leaf.

Opposite Page:

Figure 3. *movt nr.1: Anaruka 5 (2010)*, Lava, Ceramic, Swarovski, Beads, Sequence, Lace, Felt, Ribbon, Hair, Nails, Paper, Gold leaf.

Landvreugd’s other major body of work to date, the *Anarusha* series, also engages unexpected images of blackness. The sculptures, named simply *Anaruka 1*, *Anaruka 2*, and so on, challenge stereotypes by facing head-on, gesturing simultaneously toward the past and toward the future. The *Anarukas*—all made of ceramic covered in black enamel, all adorned with elements such as hair, lace, crystals, sequins, and glass—are figurative but not exactly human. The faces are melted; with no discernible eyes or mouth, they seem disfigured, grotesque. The adornment is also nontraditional: hair often surrounds the base of a bust, while lace might protrude out of the back of the head. These sculptures address the stereotypes of blackness as frightening, even evil, but they do so in a seductive way. The shininess of the enamel, the near-liquid quality of the material, along with the beauty of the adornment, compel you to look, even though the figure as a whole might be repellent. While the existing writing about these pieces has focused on the front and side views of these



striking sculptures, the rear should not be ignored. Other angles feature the glossy “faces” and the incongruity of natural (feathers, hair) materials with seemingly unnatural ones (the sculptures appear to be made of metal). The rear of each figure also displays this juxtaposition, but instead of a focus on the seemingly metallic lacquer, each back features a large natural element—the crystal part of a geode or a large lump of lava or rock salt. These elements are surrounded with more lace, crystals, hair, and other adornment. Without the disturbing faces to contend with, the rear views of these figures are quite beautiful and inviting. Again, the implication is that if we were to look from a different angle, and more closely, at what (or whom) we fear, we would be able to see inherent beauty and value.

Another important element of these sculptures that has gone unnoted is that the artist prefers for them to be displayed on the ground. They range from approximately twenty to thirty inches tall; of the nine sculptures, four are busts, while the others each stand on three short legs. Because of the combined scale and placement of the *Anarusha* sculptures, to see the details viewers must bend over. This dynamic emphasizes that humans are (supposedly) superior to the Anarusha, and that in order for us to truly understand this species, we have to alter our normal way of being. The relevance to twenty-first-century reality is clear: living by the status quo will not change either individuals or the world.

Both *anarusha* and *anaruka* are Kiswahili words; the former means “he who makes fly into the skies,” which the artist translates as “to fly,” while the latter translates as “to jump” or “to propel.”<sup>4</sup> Both words have a sense of traveling forward and into the future, with an emphasis on the volition of the verb’s subject that implies the agency of black people. For stationary sculptures to have such kinetic titles seems contradictory, but it reveals the artist’s intended meaning as more positive than negative. In fact, according to Landvreugd, the title *Anarusha* includes another positive intention: to pay homage to *The Arusha Declaration*, written by Julius Nyerere in 1967 while he was president of Tanzania. This declaration, one of the most important documents of that country’s history, begins by declaring the equality and rights of all human beings, both in absolute terms and in relation to self-expression, economic justice, and other matters.<sup>5</sup> This document also details the then government’s commitment to socialism, and it “resulted in the nationalization of a number of industries and public services.”<sup>6</sup> Although few gallery and museum visitors in the global North are likely to know this reference, it signifies Landvreugd’s own knowledge and priorities and that the *Anarusha* beings seek to propel us not only beyond antiblack racism, stereotypes, and mistreatment but toward a world more fully equitable for all human—and perhaps nonhuman—beings.

A predominant image in Landvreugd’s major body of work is the modified or distorted head and torso. This image traces back to an earlier work, *If I Could Be Anything* (2010), in which black

men's faces are very subtly altered via video editing to remove all footage of them blinking. Body modifications become more pronounced in both the sculpture series *Anarusha* and the *Atlantic Transformerz* performances and videos. In the latter, the transformation occurs through the application of makeup and other adornment, though the individuals remain easily identifiable as people. Ironically, the series with the word *transform* in its name transforms the human body less than the *Anarusha* series, the former leaning more toward modifying the body to make it a spectacle.

In contrast, the heads and shoulders of the *Anarusha* busts are distorted, and often are not even sitting upright but are leaning. Even the figures with legs seem not to have complete bodies, in any recognizable sense. The black lacquer is glossy and inviting, making you want to touch them. But the shapes—which, depending on your perspective, might seem to be slightly more than or slightly less than human—both invite and repel, especially when placed near to the floor. They invite you to come closer and examine them, perhaps to determine whether they are, in fact, human. And when you see that they are not fully or traditionally recognizable, the sculptures become a bit frightening.

In all of Landvreugd's major work before 2014, he used different media to communicate a consistent message, to invite a particular experience, and perhaps to encourage a particular response. Although the actual images are quite different—static, distorted faces; kinetic, adorned faces—the aesthetic of his work contains significant continuities. Together, these series communicate the message that black bodies (for Landvreugd, black male bodies in particular) are always already seen as distorted, difficult, possibly a little less than or a little more than human. Landvreugd's artwork invites and challenges the viewer to acknowledge the persistent stereotypes of black people in both Europe and North America and also to consider other possibilities—the black body as supernatural being, as space alien, as humanoid, as intergalactic traveler. The implicit response is that if we can acknowledge such a range of possibilities for black people, then we must also acknowledge that the centuries-old stereotypes have no basis in truth.

## II

Landvreugd's art is, of course, directly informed by his own experiences, in addition to his formal training in studio art and art history. Born in Suriname but relocated to the Netherlands at the age of three, Landvreugd typically identifies himself as a nonhyphenated Dutch person, which he describes as a “political choice” that emphasizes his right to full Dutch and European citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Though it is not his home, he regularly returns to the Caribbean, and he admits that Surinamese culture, such as the concepts related to the Afro-Surinamese religion Winti, influences his art.<sup>8</sup>

The artist describes one of his earliest major creative influences as *Deep in Vogue* (1989), an extended music video for the song of the same name by Malcolm McLaren and the Bootzilla Orchestra, featuring Lourdes and Willie Ninja. He studied the film and practiced and practiced to emulate the moves and style it portrays, including the voguing of the legendary Ninja.<sup>9</sup> Not long after, the young Land-

vreugd became involved in the local Dutch club scene. “I was twenty-two then,” he says, “and even at that age I was already a curator of sorts, a curator and artist. It was a great period.”<sup>10</sup> He indeed became a curator—not of “fine” art, in the traditional sense, but of DJs, drag queens, and other club performers.





The club influences on his work are enduring, and in a 2015 interview, he acknowledged the primacy of nightlife in the *Atlantic Transformerz* works in particular.<sup>11</sup> In fact, one of his most recent installations, *movt nr. 8: Destination Inner Space* (which includes several of the *Atlantic Transformerz* videos), part of the 2015 Rotterdam *AfroFuturism Now!* exhibit, mimics a nightclub environment.<sup>12</sup> Landvreugd's intention was to have people stand outside behind a velvet rope and be admitted into the gallery for an hour, during which time they would be encouraged to dance within the installation to a DJ spinning live. A review of this work described it as follows: "The original idea was that this space would be most profoundly experienced in a true clubbing setting, with a DJ guiding the multi-sensory experience of the meaning of dislocated connections, but unfortunately, this was not allowed for formal reasons so instead, a minimal, hypnotising trap beat, produced by Landvreugd himself, sampling afro-Caribbean non-verbal sound-language, looped through the speakers."<sup>13</sup>

Landvreugd's art in general, and the *Atlantic Transformerz* series in particular, can be read as within both queer and Caribbean aesthetic traditions. Faces encrusted with crystals, bodies swathed in feathers, stylized poses—all these are part of a broadly queer, and specifically *black and Latino* queer, aesthetic, as seen particularly in ball and voguing culture and drag performances. Landvreugd is well versed in the origins of voguing. He notes of 1930s Harlem: "The 'old style performance' had a heavy showgirl element with feathers and beads, as a picture of elegance and uber-femininity." He adds that in the 1990s voguing "integrate[d] angular and linear body movements, quickly moving from pose to pose."<sup>14</sup> Not only is Landvreugd aware of these cultures and traditions, he is also a participant in them. He organized the first voguing ball in the Netherlands, and he was the "vogue king" of Holland at age nineteen.<sup>15</sup>

Opposite Page:  
Figure 4. *movt nr. 6: Destination Inner Space* (2013),  
performance 15 minutes.



Figure 5. *movt nr. 2: Atlantic Transformerz*, New York: Nicky (2010), Digital Print

Making reference to a very different black queer influence, Landvreugd notes that he was attracted to Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston* in part because Julien "place[d] himself within a history." That history was one that featured another artist who was both black and gay. "As an artist, it is important," Landvreugd explains in the same interview, "that if I am going to speak about the self-evidence of being black, that I relate myself to black artists from the past, to a tradition."<sup>16</sup> He claims as within his tradition Surinamese writer Edgar Cairo, who has been described both as gay and as bisexual. This lineage is significant because neither Julien nor Cairo nor Hughes—giants of the black British, Afro-Surinamese, and African American art worlds, respectively—focused their work on sexuality. Most of the works of these three men focus on race and culture. Thus, though we cannot trace a specific type of artistic expression through Landvreugd's black "queer" lineage, we can notice that his reticence to explicitly include or address sexuality in either his artwork or his scholarship is similar to his chosen forefathers (until 2015's *movt nr. 8: Lobi Singi*, discussed below). His research into a lineage of Afropean artists, writers, and intellectuals is an important connection between his art and his theoretical intellectual work.

The *Atlantic Transformerz* and the *Anarusha* sculptures can also be understood as part of a Caribbean visual aesthetic. While Suriname and the broader Dutch Caribbean do not have a carnival tradition as dominant as that of Trinidad and Tobago, there are numerous popular performance traditions in Suriname, from tourist-oriented “Brazilian-style” carnivals to popular theater, dance, and song, such as the *banya*. *Banya* is a popular theater form that combines music and dance and that can have several topics and purposes.<sup>17</sup> It was first documented in the early eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> During slavery, the *banya* song “traditionally served the purpose of passing messages that only could be fully understood by” those within the culture.<sup>19</sup> For instance, *banya* was sometimes performed to communicate details about plans for mass escapes from a particular plantation into the country’s interior. The relationship between the *banya* and Landvreugd’s twenty-first-century art is metaphorical rather than literal; some messages within the work are most readily available to people with particular cultural backgrounds or knowledge.

Landvreugd has researched *banya* and in 2012 published the essay “Spirited Gestures: Notes on Life Masquerading as Art,” in which he explicitly links Surinamese *banya* and US American voguing. He states that both traditions belong to “Diaspora performance histories.” In both *banya* and voguing “membership [in] the performing group guarantees a level of escape, liberation, protection, and prestige. Both found a way to experience a sense of freedom and escape from daily life through self-expression by means of performance.”<sup>20</sup> The *Anarusha* and *Atlantic Transformerz* series present alternate realities, avoiding both the banality and (for members of stigmatized groups) the danger of daily life through futuristic distortion and adornment.

Notwithstanding his cosmopolitan education and lifestyle that regularly crosses national and continental boundaries, Landvreugd is rooted primarily in the two cultures he grew up within: the Dutch and the Surinamese diaspora. Neither of these influences is obvious in his artwork, but they are there. The concept of the *Atlantic Transformerz* resonates with both the historical and contemporary experiences of African and Caribbean people who have prolif-

erated into diaspora largely through violent physical or economic coercion. Similarly, Landvreugd is convinced that some viewers of his *Anarusha* sculptures identify them with Caribbean culture, whether with Winti or with obeah. “If you are brought up with the knowledge of our [Surinamese] philosophical system,” says Landvreugd, “then you recognize what you see even though it is not obvious you may feel the intention that was there when the sculptures were made.”<sup>21</sup>

The so-called gay window theory argues that advertisers can appeal to sexual minorities without alienating heterosexuals by placing in their ads queer cues and clues that are recognizable by those who are part of particular queer cultures but not to those outside of them. Following this logic, what you see in Landvreugd’s work depends a great deal on what your experiences are. In fact, also following this logic, not all the artist’s audience will have the context to recognize both—or either—the Caribbean or the queer references. There may be a mosaic through which audiences can consider Landvreugd’s art—a black window, as well as a Caribbean one, one that is specifically Surinamese, and a queer one.

Any engagement with Landvreugd reveals that he has researched individual artists as well as particular performance traditions. It makes sense, then, to consider his scholarly research and how those ideas are connected to (or contradict) his artistic oeuvre.

### III

As any survey of contemporary journalism or social media will reveal, most European countries are struggling with the notion of nonwhite people as *Europeans* rather than only as immigrants, temporary workers, or refugees. Landvreugd, however, is interested in the existence of black Europeans as fact, not as a question or even an identity in formation. He focuses his intellectual work on delineating what comprises the Afro-European experience and what makes the art created from that experience unique. Similarly, Landvreugd argues that the discourse of postcolonial theory “does not always suffice” to analyze the art created by black people who live in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

It is significant that Landvreugd himself is more interested in a black Dutch and an Afropean aesthetic than in a (black) queer or Caribbean (diasporic or otherwise) aesthetic. As an increasing number of critics have pointed out, most of the “African” artists celebrated in the global North live in Europe, which presents a distorted view of contemporary African art. A similar situation exists for Caribbean art, though it is not as extreme—several celebrated Caribbean artists do actually live within the region. Thus, Landvreugd’s research project, examining the visual strategies of Afro-Dutch artists with a focus on the production of cultural citizenship, is important. He advocates for local European concepts and terms that have the potential to encapsulate the sensibilities of that continent.

While his ideas, building on the growing field of Afro-European studies, are still in formation, Landvreugd is clear about his core concept: he is interested in blackness as “fact,” as “normal space,” as “self-evident” rather than blackness “as referential to whiteness.”<sup>23</sup> Two other interview quotes detail his intellectual focus: “The idea is to move away from a particular idea about blackness rooted in colonial history and to try to reimagine our lives from the point of view of the present and future modes of being on the [European] Continent. The question is, What does it mean to be black—here [in Europe], today”; “a black identity can be a self-referential space, with its own richness, rather than a space for struggle. For me, blackness is simply the lens through which I live as a Continental European. Blackness is me as *fact*.”<sup>24</sup>

Taking blackness—and queerness—for granted, instead of trying to explain or justify them is, for Landvreugd, when we *start* thinking.<sup>25</sup> At the *Small Axe* “Queer Caribbean Visualities” symposium, Landvreugd frequently used the phrase “When we start thinking” as he argued for those present to move beyond what seemed to him to be unnecessary and counterproductive explanation of and justification for the identities Caribbean, black, and queer.

For the years between 2006 and 2014, Landvreugd’s preoccupation with blackness and Afropenness as fact appeared in his visual art via the color black. This was an extremely conscious choice, one related to the artist’s interest in exploring the concept of race and the lived experience of Afro-European people. The men’s already dark faces covered with pitch black makeup in the *Atlantic Transformerz* series, the slick lacquer of the *Anarusha* sculptures—all serves to emphasize race, and specifically blackness. Referencing his “black works,” Landvreugd states that he used the color but was “refusing to be black in the understood way.”<sup>26</sup> Until 2014, blackness was “a point of departure” for nearly all his work.<sup>27</sup>

In 2014, Landvreugd’s visualization of “blackness as fact” shifted in a major way. He realized that blackness does not have to be emphasized. Subsequently, in his most recent work, the color black no longer dominates, and race is no longer the primary topic or an explicit focus. However, this should not be seen as a progress narrative. Rather, this shift exhibits a different way of conceptualizing and manifesting the same fundamental idea the artist has been working with for years.

Landvreugd explains that he makes art because he is “trying to understand something,” and the topic he was preoccupied with understanding for years was blackness.<sup>28</sup> Now, as he nears the completion of his doctorate and becomes clearer about his ideas around race, both Landvreugd and his art are trying to understand something else: “At this stage in my career I feel that the Queerness needs more deliberate attention on my part.” He also clarifies that his current research includes an examination of “Queer strategies as tools to re-imagine Blackness in continental Europe.”<sup>29</sup>

Landvreugd has said about sexuality in his work; “It is present when one is looking for it.” While one does not have to look very hard for queerness in the heavy adornment of the *Anarusha* sculptures and the black men’s bodies of the *Atlantic Transformerz* series, in *movt nr. 8: Lobi Singi* queerness cannot be avoided. *Lobi Singi* is Landvreugd’s first artwork to directly address same-sex desire and to include explicitly sexual imagery. Before *Lobi Singi*, Landvreugd had said of his work, “Rather than stating the obvious it is much more compelling to play with the idea of the Caribbean and hide the presence of queerness within the visual.”<sup>30</sup> But now, with this film, queerness is not hidden at all.

The video, just over four minutes long, consists of several layers of footage, predominantly interracial gay pornography overlaid with a white man in a uniform with a gun and with various background images, as well as with audio text of James Baldwin from *Take This Hammer*, a 1964 documentary featuring the author and activist. Landvreugd’s film begins with an eye looking through a hole, marking the audience both the voyeur and the watched. Most of the footage is black and white, which along with the peephole is reminiscent of surveillance video while emphasizing the different skin colors of the sex partners—the white men are always in a “bottom” position. In fact, the multiple layers of footage make the film physically difficult to watch; your eyes do not know what to focus on. *Lobi Singi*, which has only been screened twice, is likely to further unsettle viewers, not because of the explicit gay sex scenes but because the power dynamic in some of the interracial sex scenes is unclear, and because of Landvreugd changing the word *nigger* to *faggot*.





Figure 6. Still from *movt nr. 8: The Quality of 21* (2016).

The text Baldwin speaks in the film is quite well known. He explains to the interviewer that “niggers” are the invention of white people and that such an invention reflects on those same white people. Landvreugd’s changes—bleeping the word *nigger* while simultaneously flashing “\*\*gg\*\*” on the screen—claims Baldwin as someone more open about his homosexuality than he in fact was. It also emphasizes the presence of both race and sexuality in Landvreugd’s oeuvre. While he states that his previous work focused on race to the exclusion of sexuality, I argue that a queer aesthetic has consistently been present. Similarly, with *Lobi Singi*, Landvreugd seems to be focusing on sexuality, but the deliberate choice of interracial sex acts with black “tops,” and of course the use of James Baldwin’s voice and text, mean that race is also very present. The film’s lack of subtlety is one of the reasons that it is the least strong of the works examined here. So much of Landvreugd’s other work is precise and polished; in contrast, the details of *Lobi Singi* seem uneven and rushed. The unnecessary self-censorship of “faggot” to “\*\*gg\*\*” and the sometimes too-easy use of visual text do not stand up to the images and audio that Landvreugd chose. Nevertheless, the video marks an important shift in his work.

The title *Lobi Singi* is Sranan for “love songs.” With nineteenth-century origins in the Surinamese du theatre, which itself is related to the banya form, *lobi singi* are unique because the tradition, which continues today, “sings the praises” of friendships and other relationships between women and because all of the participants in the tradition are women.<sup>31</sup> Although some scholarly work has examined the *lobi singi*, as well as bisexuality, homosexuality, and other practices of Afro-Surinamese *mati*, very little research has been done on male same-sex practices in Suriname or elsewhere in the Dutch Caribbean.<sup>32</sup> Landvreugd’s *Lobi Singi* does not attempt to do that work (though it gestures toward the need for it); rather, the title implies a deep connection to Suriname. As a whole, the video signifies links to three major components of the African diaspora: North America, through Baldwin’s words; Europe, through footage from a Jean Genet film; and the Caribbean, through its title.

*Movmt nr. 7: On Cairo* (2014) is also part of Landvreugd’s shift away from an explicit focus on race in his artwork; this performance’s focus is on culture but in an unexpected way. A three-channel video with English translation of the 1969 Sranan text from *After Temekoe*, by Surinamese author Edgar Cairo, is consistently in the center. To each side is an image of a black man, resonant of the *Atlantic Transformerz* figures, with chest uncovered and lower body covered with a Surinamese cloth. The man on the left has his face and shoulder adorned with crystals, while the man on the right has some body adornment, but his head is covered by the Optimus Prime mask. With the exception of the color of their cloths, the style of adornment, and the mask, the two figures appear to be the same man.

The language, sung by a female chorus interspersed with a male voice reading, addresses topics such as community, ancestors, and the concept of time. The language is full of proverbs and call-and-response practice. According to Landvreugd, during a live performance of *On Cairo* in Holland, many young black Dutch in the audience became frustrated because they could not understand the Sranan text or songs and had to rely on the written Dutch translation. The artist himself struggled reading aloud some of Cairo's text, and he was publicly admonished during the performance by several older Surinamese women. As Landvreugd explains, the performance was "about the tradition, the loss of tradition, and how we reinvent it" in the diaspora.<sup>39</sup> The video supports this message: the text is centered, both visually and aurally, and yet the small size of the text in relation to the images implies that while it is important, even intellectually, emotionally, and culturally central, it is not wholly or exclusively important. The figures—two versions of the same person—represent who the Afro-European is and can become, but there is no option to remain in the center, in the place of the cultural past. While body adornment is present, the overall tone of the piece is quieter than Landvreugd's earlier work, and each man's gaze is less confrontational and more meditative.

Created and exhibited in 2015 in Suriname, *movt nr. 8: Robby* also demonstrates a shift away from race—here, toward interiority. While the *Anarusha* sculptures and the *Atlantic Transformerz* series presented different possibilities for the black subject, they also focused on spectacle. *Robby*, however, shifts to a portrayal of the black man with everyday objects—and even such objects on their own—portraying spaces that are both domestically and emotionally interior. The installation consists of a mirror and five framed photographs hung together. From afar, they make a tableau that could exist in many homes. But a closer look reveals that the installation is not so normal. The mirror is hung too high for the average person to see themselves. Some of the images are crisp, while others are blurry; one is rotated ninety degrees, and another is hung upside down. One image portrays the artist on an outside bench, in a position that could be despair or repose; another shows the artist, pensive, standing in a ramshackle building that is open to the natural world. *Robby* illustrates Landvreugd's concept of blackness as fact by emphasizing that blackness both is



Figure 7. *movt nr. 8: Uitkijk* (2015).

and occupies normal space.<sup>34</sup> Even the title, a simple name, is intimate and straightforward. If his earlier work focused on blackness as a place to start thinking, the newest work emphasizes the black person as thinking and feeling. The installation is all the more poignant because we do not know *what* the subject is thinking or why the setting and objects near him are significant.

While it lacks the flash of earlier pieces, the new work is exciting; its emotion, combined with its inscrutability, invites a longer gaze. After all, while it is true that the majority of the global North struggles to accept the full range of possibilities of what black people are and can be, it is also, unfortunately, true that these discourses are even farther away from understanding the range and depth of what black people *think and feel*.

#### IV

Imagination can be a tool to help us investigate the world we share. And, as Landvreugd points out, “artwork can produce new knowledge.”<sup>35</sup> Yet neither of these obviates the fact that scholarship and criticism are also useful tools. In the end, Landvreugd’s artwork exhibits but does not prioritize a queer Caribbean visuality. Often, both the queerness and the Caribbeanness are visible mostly to those who recognize the cues. And yet one could argue that this very subtlety is one manifestation of a queer Caribbean visuality. Part of multiple communities and diasporas, it makes sense that Landvreugd’s art will be viewed differently by different audiences. After all, notwithstanding Landvreugd’s repeated comments, not all of us “start thinking” in the same place. If we did, we would not need the hashtag BlackLivesMatter, nor would we need to explain the problematics of #JeSuisCharlie. Hopefully, our collective (Afro-)future will continue to include both artwork and scholarship that helps us all to recognize each other’s multivalent human potential.

## Endnotes

- 1 See the introduction and afterword to Rosamond S. King, *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014).
- 2 Victoire, “The Art of Afrofuturism,” *Generation Bass*, 28 October 2015, [www.generationbass.com/2015/10/28/the-art-of-afrofuturism](http://www.generationbass.com/2015/10/28/the-art-of-afrofuturism).
- 3 “Optimus Prime,” *Wikipedia*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optimus\\_Prime](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Optimus_Prime) (accessed 22 November 2015). “Freedom is the right of all sentient beings”; see “Optimus Prime,” *Transformers*, no. 70, September 1990, [www.ntfa.net/universe/english/index.php?act=view&char=Optimus\\_Prime\\_PM](http://www.ntfa.net/universe/english/index.php?act=view&char=Optimus_Prime_PM).
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- 7 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 6 November 2015.
- 8 Charl Landvreugd, e-mail message to the author, 25 March 2015.
- 9 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
- 10 Charl Landvreugd, quoted in Wayne Modest, “On the Self-Evidence of Blackness: An Interview with Charl Landvreugd,” *Small Axe*, no. 45 (November 2014): 125.
- 11 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
- 12 According to the artist, “Thematically, all the movements are connected.” His use of numbered “movements” (or, as he writes them, “movt nrs”) corresponds to particular moments in his personal and intellectual life; some overlap, some have ended, and some are ongoing. See Clelia Coussonnet, “Exclusive Interview: Charl Landvreugd—in the Framework of the Exhibition *Who More Sci-Fi than Us*,” *Uprising Art*, 25

- July 2012, [blog.uprising-art.com/en/exclusive-interview-charl-landvreugd-2](http://blog.uprising-art.com/en/exclusive-interview-charl-landvreugd-2).
- 13 Victoire, "Art of Afrofuturism."
- 14 Charl Landvreugd, "Spirited Gestures: Notes on Life Masquerading as Art," *Who More Sci-Fi Than Us? Contemporary Art from the Caribbean*, exhibition catalogue (Amersfoort: Kunsthal KAdE, 2012), 2.
- 15 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
- 16 Landvreugd, quoted in Modest, "On the Self-Evidence of Blackness," 132.
- 17 Trudi Guda, "Banya, a Surviving Surinamese Slave Play," in Albert James Arnold, ed., *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, vol. 2, *English- and Dutch-Speaking Regions* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2001), 616.
- 18 G. M. Martinus-Guda, "Banya: A Surinamese Slave Play That Survived," in Jay B. Havisser and Kevin C. MacDonald, eds., *African Re-Genesis: Confronting Social Issues in the Diaspora* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2006), 106.
- 19 According to Guda, "Today in combination with a religious ceremony, forming part of their Winti religion, *banya* serves to establish spiritual contact with the ancestors as well as with certain gods" ("*Banya*," 616).
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- 25 Interestingly, although Landvreugd's research does not address sexuality, his ideas about it are similar to his thoughts about race: "Queerness is a circumstance, not a badge." Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Landvreugd, quoted in Modest, "On the Self-Evidence of Blackness," 126.
- 28 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
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- 30 Charl Landvreugd, e-mail message to the author, 22 July 2015.
- 31 Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 20.
- 32 See especially the work of Gloria Wekker and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley.
- 33 Landvreugd, interview by Perrée.
- 34 Modest, "On the Self-Evidence of Blackness," 128.
- 35 Charl Landvreugd, quoted in Lih-Lan Wong, "Charl L.," *Who More Sci-Fi Than Us?*, 52.