

SEANKELLY

Haden-Guest, Anthony. "Melo X: Humble in the Jungle," *Flatt Magazine*, May 2014.

FLATT *magazine*



MELO X

Humble in the Jungle

interview

ANTHONY HADEN-GUEST

Even nowadays most careers in making art move along, whether chugging or zooming, on trajectories that haven't changed greatly since Giorgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists, meaning there's the grind of schooling, sometimes followed by an apprenticeship, then by setting up a stand of your own. But in our times of galloping cultural melt, that's no longer necessarily so. Some segue into art out of other art-like careers, such as architecture, but a few become artists – good ones even – by an act of will or by accident of positioning. And then there's MeLo-X.

MeLo-X grew up in Brooklyn. His earliest career move was to tape goings-on around him, like TV shows. He was, he thinks, about six at the time. He persevered as he pressed on into his teens and began molding his materials into sounds of his own.

A lot of kids you knew must have been doing the same, I suggested.

"Yeah ..."

So just when did he figure that his future might lie in that direction?

"When people told me that what I was doing sounded good."

MeLo-X learned the A to Z of production at the Institute of Audio Research but he was also focusing upon and involving himself with visual elements almost as soon as he was making the music. "I picked up stuff from friends who had been to art school," he says. There was also the Golden Age of Album Covers to draw on. "I'm from the CD generation," he says. "But I was DJ-ing and working with vinyl." So naturally he would design album covers of his own. MeLo-X is now in the eighth years of a career which includes production, live performances and video. His references would seem to include Surrealism and the deadpan nonchalance of France's Nouvelle Vague. But there's nothing much here which would prepare one for A Movement in Africa, the suite of photographs he took on a 2012 trip to Equatorial Guinea.

Some background. There was a Good Cause, the trip having been put together by Kenji Summers, the founder of Passport Life, which he set up to make it easier for Third

World kids to get travel documentation. The group, aside from MeLo-X and Summers himself, consisted of Moruf, Mara Hruby, Kwasi Kessie, Trae Harris, Jesse Boykins III, Jarrett Woo, GFC Saint and Street Étiquette, aka Travis Gumbs and Joshua Kissi. And the reportage of MeLo-X on the goings-on was first exhibited in March at the huge new Sean Kelly Gallery in Manhattan's currently white-hot nabe, Hudson Yards.

You can see the pictures here. Take another look. They are kind of radical, I think.

Photography is not generally a medium for metaphor. Forget A plus B equals C. It delivers a message. You want to tell us about people in need, show us people in need. Think Dorothea Lange, Now Let Us Praise Famous Men. Or there was another available strategy: Black Americans encounter Africa. I was out here many decades ago when Stokely Carmichael, a marquee name amongst activists, arrived and it was a rich situation.

None of this seems to have interested MeLo-X. Yes, there's an infant in one of the pictures. But squatting on a sidewalk, looking content. Hello shows a guy from the back. He is walking down what looks like a corridor in an air terminal. Like a tourist snap. A group of guys are on a sandy beach, chucking stones into the sea. A jar on (the same?) beach is filled with pink shells. There's a black-and-

white of a prayer meeting. One curious shot – an accident perhaps? – shows a man whose head and arm are mostly dissolved into trees but whose white shirt is a vivid presence. A young woman backgrounded by bush leans against a rope bridge which could just pass as a boxing ring. That pic is titled Humble in the Jungle. Get it? Some of the individuals in the shots are ignoring MeLo-X. A few seem unfriendly, if anything. One shot has no people, just two mighty trees.

The pictures seem ego-less, not imprinted with a style but are definitely not infected with anemic. It's more like a relaxed aesthetic that strips photographs of their propaganda, their tendency to poke you in the eye. There is some likeness to the otherwise very different work of William Eggleston and Jurgen Teller here. As I said, radical. And also it's as if MeLo-X has found in the art world an interesting new way to channel his broader energies. Indeed the last thing he told me indicated just that. "I may have my next project repped by an art gallery," he said. It did not seem an off-hand remark.

Left: Portrait by King Texas

Following Page:
A Movement in Africa: Images by MeLo-X.
Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery.



