## **Mardi Gras Indian suit**

## rather than Confederate statute

RAY FUNK

n 1911, a statute was put up in New Orleans of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy.
A century later, the New Orleans City Council
ordered removal of the statute and it was torn
down. Ever since, all that remains is a bare platform until Carnival Tuesday.

Mardi Gras was cancelled, no one was in the streets. But suddenly that morning in place of a statute symbolising slavery, a magnificent nine-feet tall Mardi Gras Indian suit appeared. Big chief Demond Melancon of the Young Seminole Hunters placed Jah Defender on that spot. The suit was the one Melan-con had worn the year before for Mardi Gras, Jah De-fender featured panels focusing on Rastafarian and Ethiopian traditions.

The media was stunned. A Carnival artist had done The media was stunned. A Carnival artist had done something unique and before anyone knew a new monument was in place. "We did that at 3 am." It remained up all day. All the TV stations came by and lots of people heard and stopped to look including former mayor Mitch Landrieu. Melancon told reporters he wanted to celebrate those lost and those living. He believed that this Carnival we need to note those lost with the pandemic. "It represents lowe and hardlost with the pandemic. "It represents love and hap-

lost with the pandemic. "It represents love and happiness on a Mardi Gras Day!"
Melancon came up with the idea a month before
and worked with his friends in the Krewe of Red Beans
and their leader Devin DeWulf, getting the plexiglass
case bullt and the sult transported. Melancon has
close ties with that group and serves on the board
of the Red Beans' charity Feed the Second Line,
a project "mytting vounger musicians to work a project "putting younger musicians to work driving our elders and at-risk culture-bearers door-to-clinic to get their COVID-19 vac-cines." They took it down that evening but who knows when it might appear again.

Mardi Gras Indians are the strongest African American masking tradition in New Orleans. The tradition goes back to before the statue was erected. While originally appearing in the black community, in recent decades Mardi Gras Indians have be come an iconic symbol for New Orleans itself. For Carnival this year, Melancon took it upon himself to make a statement by putting his art where long stood a symbol of slavery.

Melancon masked for over 15 years as the spy boy for the Seminole Hunters and he gained so much re-spect in the whole Mardi Gras Indian community that he was give the title of Spy Boy of the Nation. Spy Boys are the lead scouts who venture out in front on the band as they look for other masking tribes. In 2012, he became head of his own group as the big chief for the young Seminole Hunters.

the young Seminole Hunters.

For Melancon, becoming a Mardi Gras Indian changed his life and saved him. "I used to do drugs. I used to sell drugs." His father was not around but when things were dire, he sought out the local Indian chief who had become a father figure in the neighbourhood. "I met Ferdinand Bigard of the Cheyenne Warriors two and he taught me beading." Melancon got involved in all aspects of their traditions. "I went to all the precises. I stered learning the services of the services are the services and the services are the services are the services and the services are the ser

got involved in an aspects of inter traditions. "I went to all the practices. I started singing. I started learning from the elders about the culture."

For him, each suit must tell a story. He is interested in the history of the African diaspora with his family coming to Louisiana from Haiti. "I study where we are coming from to know where we are going." His 2016 suit Bras-Coupé focused on an escaped slave from the New Orleans area. Since it is featured on the cover of Bryan Wagner's fascinating book, The Life and Leg-Bryan Wagner's Iaschiating Dook, The Life and Leg-end of Bras-Coupie: The fugitive slave who fought the law, ruled the swamp, danced at Congo Square, In-vented jazz, and died for love. In the last few years, Melancon's work has started to catch ever wider attention. He appeared the con-temporary craft area of the New Orleans jazz and

Demond Melancon in Bras Coupe Suit

Heritage Festival with a series of beaded portraits. This caught the eye of Arthur Roger who runs a leading contemporary art gallery in New Orleans and things seem to explode. "Immediately I asked him if he would do a show and I would help him. We hit it off from the first moment." From then, he was able just to focus on his art and the exhibits at Arthur Roger Callery led to so much more. Gallery led to so much more.

Gallery led to so much more. In 2017, one of his suits was in an exhibit in Chicago. The next year he was at Princeton University and the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Art in Brooklyn. In 2019, he was in an exhibit in Manhattan, Art Miami and part of Black-masking culture exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. He just ended a prestigious residency from the Joan Mitchell Foundation. In a sense, he has also become a movie tar. All on a Mardi Grae Day (2019) a sport film polar for the part of the sense of the sens star. All on a Mardi Gras Day (2019) a short film about his artistry has been shown at numerous film festivals all over the world and was nominated for an Academy Award. He is featured in this year's virtual Mardi Gras for All Y'all video series.

Now his life is dedicated to making his suits and his beaded portraits. Everyday, he sews beads on to canvas, he makes a new suit every year and each suit takes months, hundreds of hours of sewing, from morning until night, "sewing and conjuring up the spirits." These suits are only worn on Mardi Gras, St. Joseph's night, Super Sunday and a few select events. Sadly, the pandemic has shut down his masking the sadiy, the pandemic has shut down his masking the last year but he can't wait to return. Committed to continue this tradition, he has also been teaching beading classes in the community at the Material In-stitute, an experimental fashion school, for the last few years and will continue in the future.

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He continues to work on beaded portraits
for his next exhibition and is starting his
suit for 2022, Amistad Takeover, on
the revolt on the slave ship in 1836.

The Arthur Roger Gallery has
scheduled his next exhibition for
October, the month that postponed
French quarter fest, jazz fest,
and prospect five (citywide art and prospect five (citywide art triennial) are now scheduled. Big chief Demond Melancon stands ready to bring his suits to Trinidad and share these Carnival traditions from the big easy.

