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Beauty queen with an edge

As a self-appointed ambassador of her adopted land, visual artist Camille Turner's Miss Canadiana questions the lip service her countrymen pay to multiculturalism -- while having a fabulously faux time of it, GUY DIXON writes

By GUY DIXON
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In Ottawa, she was a vision of loveliness at the Canada Day festivities proudly wearing her sash. In London, she drew such a crowd in Trafalgar Square that the police had to ask her to leave. Back in Canada, she showed up at a rally in Hamilton with such local dignitaries as MP Tony Valeri, and has toured Toronto's Chinatown, Little India and Church Street neighbourhoods.

Wherever she goes, Miss Canadiana exudes poise and optimism, forever handing out little Maple Leaf flags and looking resplendent in red.

"For me, I feel like she's another person," says Camille Turner, Miss Canadiana herself. "She's not cynical and jaded like I am. She's very sweet, and she really believes in people. She believes people are just wonderful!" she adds, laughing.

Turner's apparent split personality is due to the fact that Miss Canadiana is after all an act or, more precisely, an ongoing performance-art piece.

When not appearing as a figure of blithe national pride and beauty, the Toronto-based artist works in a variety of media, from textiles to digital arts. She struck on the idea of Miss Canadiana while walking through a mall in North Bay, Ont., a few years ago. Originally from Jamaica (she moved to Canada when she was 9), Turner noticed that people were staring at her. Tall and maybe more urbane than some in the mall, there was otherwise little to mark her as an outsider -- other than her black skin.

Receiving the stares immediately made her come up with the idea of Miss Canadiana. Turner then mulled the idea for a few years, trying to decide how to approach arts-funding agencies with what

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Then, on Canada Day, 2002, she simply donned a red dress, sash and kitschy Canadian-themed hat (she now favours tiaras) and showed up in Ottawa in her new role.

Although the winner of a fictitious contest, Miss Canadiana nonetheless looks stunning with her braided hair falling lightly around her face, even if she lacks that pinched look and type-A personality of most beauty-pageant winners. If anything, it's that tiny flash of doubt that lies at the core of her performance: Why, despite her obvious appeal, is she still vaguely outside the standard-issue beauty-contestant mould? Is it because she's black? Is it because she seems older and more *there* than a typical teen queen? (Turner won't divulge her age, saying she wants to maintain at least some of the mystery of Miss Canadiana.)

Whatever the basis of her mystique, no one has ever challenged Turner whenever she has simply appeared on the street or at events -- and no one questions whether Miss Canadiana is a real contest, she says. Turner will tell them if they ask, and her alter ego should not be confused with the anything having to do with the Miss Canada contest, which ended several years back, only to be replaced by various other pageants, including Miss Canada International.

"Whenever I go places, people ask to take my photo. People have asked me for my autograph. It's like being larger than life," she says. "Complete strangers come up to me and hug me, just weird things like that. It's really a bizarre thing. I'm realizing how identity is something you construct and you put on."

In her appearances, Turner subtly plays up the flag-waving humour and kitsch. But even when handing out paper flags to street vendors in Chinatown, who vigorously wave back to a video camera, there's no sense of exploitation, or echoes of the art intelligentsia. It all comes off as a happy, if slightly skewed, salute to New Canada as opposed to the pseudo-British Old Canada.

It's only when she discusses the work in art forums that she hears more unusual opinions. A French woman in Senegal told her that when Turner becomes Miss Canadiana, she no longer thinks of her as being black. Another time, a Latino man from South America told Turner she was acting white.

As Turner says, Miss Canadiana raises more questions than she answers: Underneath the humour, the artist is interested in questioning the lip-service paid to Canada as a multicultural, inclusive society, even as Miss Canadiana seems to be celebrating it. "There's something that I'm really trying to get at here. I feel there's this veneer of niceness, this really smooth skin, where everything's fine. Meanwhile, all the dirt is swept under the rug, and I'm really interested in ripping that off and looking underneath."

Turner says she doesn't buy such niceties as Canada described as a mosaic, or the way multiculturalism is fetishized, she says, to the point where Canada is automatically called inclusive, even though many citizens don't feel included in mainstream culture.

When it comes to displays of Canadian national identity, says Turner, non-white groups will be told, "You go here and do your little dances." It's kind of a side act -- and then there is the main course. There's a lot of tokenism. It's not inclusive."

Part of her thinking, she suggests, stems from the notion of home. When Turner emigrated to Canada, first arriving in Sarnia, Ont., and then Hamilton, she grew up with other kids' usual racial taunts, and the feeling at times that she didn't belong.

At the same time, Canada was for her the place where her family would be reunited, after her father left Jamaica to search for a better place for them to live. "For me, my father was always somewhere else. And so home was always this mythical place that was going to happen when he would get settled. Then he would send for us, and we would be a family together. That's why a lot of the work that I do is about belonging and home, because it has always been this *thing* that was out there," Turner says, adding that she plans to make appearances as Miss Canadiana in Mexico and various small towns throughout Canada this summer.

But there's more to Miss Canadiana than questions about multiculturalism -- something evident in Turner's laugh as she watches a video of her appearances: It's in the way the bellhops at London's Savoy Hotel hop-to for her, as she coos innocently at the attention. It's in the way deliverymen excitedly look back in her direction, while someone off-camera says how lovely she is. And it's in the way Canadians beam and wave their paper flags in her direction.

For all of the issues she raises, Miss Canadiana is also simply about fun and breaking down boundaries with her faux fabulousness. "If I walk down the street," says Turner, laughing at the video, "it's different than when *she* walks down the street."

A Miss Canadiana installation, including a video of her appearances and a display of kitschy Canadiana collected by Turner, is showing at Toronto's WARC Gallery, 401 Richmond St. W., suite 122, until Feb. 12 (416-977-0097).

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