

Global Hip Hop Studies  
Volume 2 Number 1

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## SHOW & PROVE

**JACOB KIMVALL**

Konstfack: University of Arts, Crafts and Design

**CARLOS MARE**

Independent Artist and Educator

### ***B-Boy Abstracts***<sup>1</sup>

#### **ABSTRACT**

*B-Boy Abstracts is an artistic project started in 2005 by artist and scholar Carlos Mare (alias Mare139). The project connects the graffiti/style writing tradition with high-end modernist art history as well as the art of breaking, and where the artist is rethinking breaking as a form of abstract art, as sculpture, drawing, painting and graphic prints. The text is an artistic statement by Mare139 on the background of B-Boy Abstracts, and on how he has looked to modernist art history in his quest of finding a language to visualize hip hop's dance elements.*

Carlos Mare (alias Mare139) is a pioneering hip hop artist who started out as a classic style writer in the 1970s, working with writers such as his brother Kel139/Kel1st, Dondi (1961–98) and Crash One. In the early 1980s, he started experimenting with various mediums and formats, and partly moved his artistic practice into more conventional and institutional contemporary art contexts. Today, Mare139 is an accomplished sculptor and painter but also a scholar, designer and educator. He designed the statuette for the annual BET Awards, was a founding member of the Museum of Graffiti in Miami and recently (April 2022) released '12 Levels of Graffiti: Easy to Complex' in collaboration with the magazine *Wired*.

#### **KEYWORDS**

b-boy  
graffiti  
hip hop  
style writing  
art history  
contemporary  
sculpture  
media studies

1. The *GHHS* editors are honoured to feature this collection of Mare139's work on the cover and here, in the 'Show & Prove' section of *GHHS* 2.1.

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2. This is a lightly edited version of a text previously published on 25 January 2019 at the artist's website: <https://m139design.com/>. Accessed 8 August 2022.

Mare139 is clearly rooted in graffiti and his artistic practice is in dialogue with the past as well as the present and looking into the future. But his artistic dialogue goes beyond the stricter realms of graffiti.

His ongoing project *B-Boy Abstracts* (since 2005) connects the graffiti tradition with high-end modernist art history as well as the art of breaking, and where he is 'reimagining breaking as abstract art' (@b\_boyabstracts) (Mare n.d.). The following are Mare139's thoughts about this specific artistic endeavour that is primarily about sculptures, but also drawings, paintings and graphic prints, as evident in the cover image for this issue of *Global Hip Hop Studies*.<sup>2</sup>

**Carlos Mare:** The History of the *B-Boy Abstracts* lies in my formative years as a kid when I was involved with the world-famous b-boy (break dance) Rock Steady Crew, this was around 1980, many of the members lived in my neighbourhood, Doze Green, Ken Swift, Frosty Freeze, Kippy Dee and others (Crazy Legs the President, lived in Upper Manhattan at the time but



Figure 1: The 'elegance and simplicity' of Mare139's simple lines and circular shapes in the B-Boy Abstracts project.

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was always present). We all used to congregate at what we then called Rock Steady Park where they would practice new dance moves and routines on the bare concrete or on cardboard boxes, linoleum and playground mats. Being a visual artist, I was always on the outside looking in because I did not have the dance skills. I did, however, learn how to critique the dancers and analyse their effectiveness in battle. I developed a keen eye and sensitivity to this because of my intimate relationship with the crew. In later years, I also spent a lot of time with Mr Wiggles and Pop Master Fabel, both pioneers of the Electric Boogaloo style who had a great effect on me creatively and critically.

While well informed, I had yet to explore these ideas fully for some time. The passion for the dance would persist over many years and one day while at Socrates Sculpture Park around 2005 I found the answer in a Mark di Suvero sculpture. It was a huge I beam sculpture with very simple lines with a circular shape attached, it moved me and connected me back to the concepts of the modernists I admired. Its elegance and simplicity made the shapes so human to me.

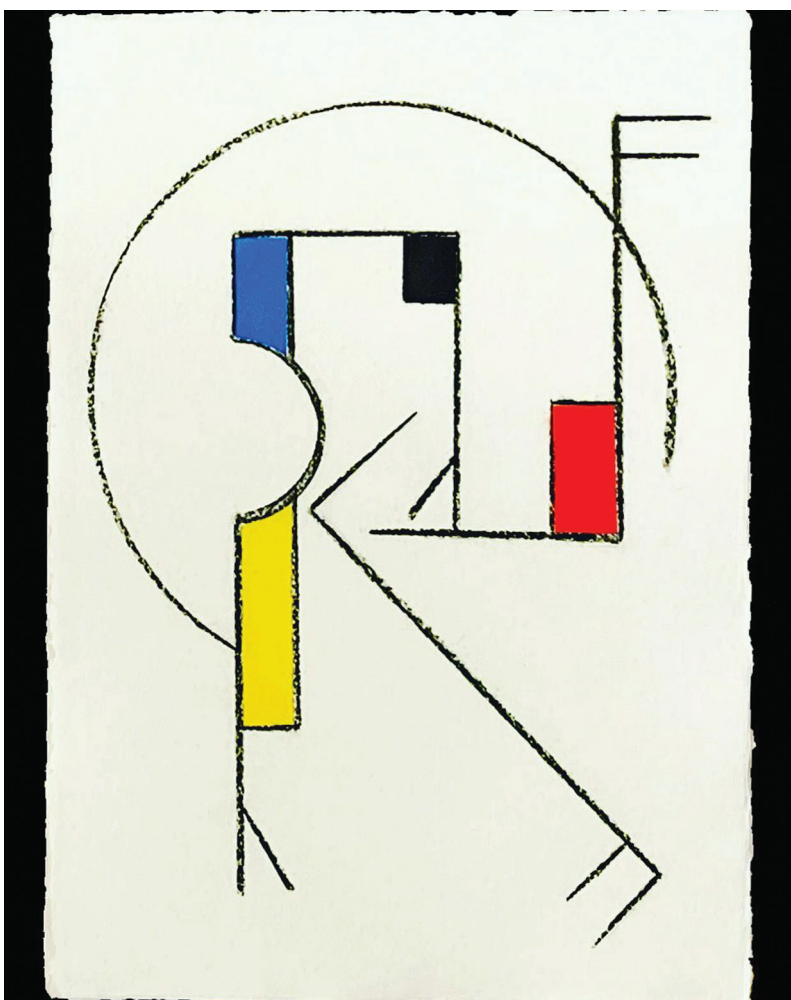


Figure 2: B-Boy Mondrian, *the modernist reimagining of 'simplicity, tension, geometry, and movement'* in Mare139's B-Boy Abstracts.

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I then began making the b-boys with a very rudimentary line and arc technique, I did not have the precise language yet, but I was close. It was in these formative works that I was able to distil the physical form and movement implied by the dancers. Soon after the first series, I made a concrete breakthrough: I would employ several identifiable traits to the work – a circle or open circle for the head, the hands would be one line, the feet two lines and an arc to represent the back and/or movement.

Years later, I would come across a book on Wassily Kandinsky's work with dancer Gret Paluca. It was exactly what I was trying to achieve, it had everything I was implying – simplicity, tension, geometry and movement. This assured me that both creatively and intellectually I was on point with my *B-Boy Abstracts*; that these were not merely stick figures that they were fully realized abstractions of real dancers.

In 2000, I made a b-boy sculpture in response to Umberto Boccioni's sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, which I visited and studied at the Metropolitan Museum since I was a kid. It is a masterpiece! My response

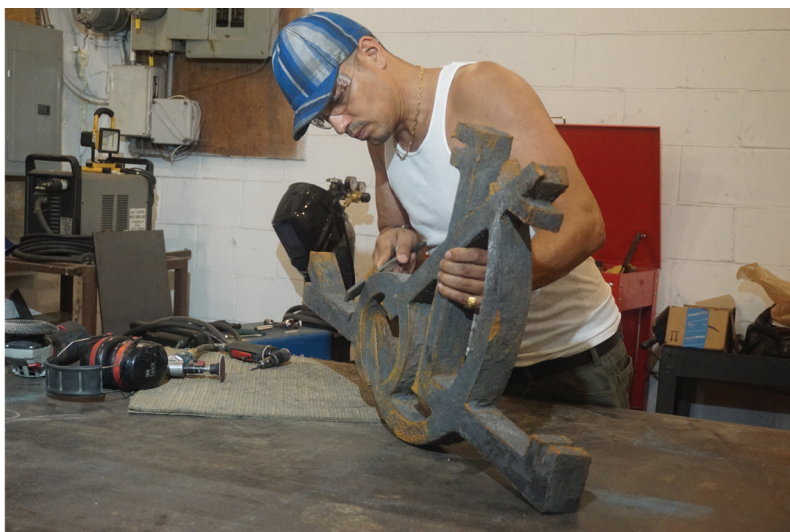


Figure 3: Mare139's Spy Award.



was to make a dynamic sculpture of Prince Ken Swift, a work that was as dynamic and aggressive in space as Boccioni's. This work would prove to be an important milestone for me. While *Prince Ken Swift* was an ambitious sculpture I would not return to that style for the b-boys. It was when Crazy Legs commissioned the Spy Award in 2007 that I was able to make the signature sculpture work we see today.

The series for breaking/abstraction could not be possible without the support and tutelage of sculptor Michael Walsh, a friend, and former graffiti writer who is a sculptor out of Pittsburgh. His deep ties to the writing



Figures 4 and 5: Mare139's metal fabrication work – in the workshop and outside the steel mill.

# Funky Drummer

Words and Music By James Brown  
B-Boy Arrangements by Carlos Mare



Figure 6: GHHS 2.1 cover art: Funky Drummer from Mare139's B-Boy Abstracts, combining hip hop's four elements on a single page through visual art, dance and music.

community and street culture as well interest in contemporary art and sculpture bonded us through the process. As a former skateboarder, he understood the dynamic movement in my work, which he would connect back to his skateboarding days. This connection to street culture and metal fabrication made it a good fit for us to explore casting at the Carrie Furnace Steel Mill in Pittsburgh.

Walsh was able to teach me mould making and introduced me to various casting processes and how I could consider making b-boys through other mediums and techniques. Having this space to explore alongside him helped me develop the series in cast iron, a first, and important provenance for my work and history.

Mare139 has released a soundtrack accompanying his *B-Boy Abstracts* in collaboration with DJ Marlon B.<sup>2</sup> To learn more about *B-Boy Abstracts*, see: [https://www.instagram.com/b\\_boyabstracts/](https://www.instagram.com/b_boyabstracts/) and <https://www.instagram.com/carlosmare/>.

3. *B-Boy Abstracts: The Breaks Vol.1* can be listened to and downloaded at: [https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/djmarlonb/episodes/2019-03-14T11\\_30\\_48-07\\_00](https://www.podomatic.com/podcasts/djmarlonb/episodes/2019-03-14T11_30_48-07_00). Accessed 8 August 2022.

## REFERENCE

Mare, Carlos (@b\_boyabstracts) (n.d.), [https://www.instagram.com/b\\_boyabstracts](https://www.instagram.com/b_boyabstracts). Accessed 24 April 2021.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Jacob Kimvall is an art historian and art critic, and a former graffiti writer from Stockholm, Sweden. He was co-founder the international graffiti magazine *Underground Productions (UP)*, and worked as one of the magazine's editors throughout the 1990s. He has been involved in research projects regarding musealization and conservation of graffiti art, well as the cultural heritage of early European hip hop culture. He is a board member of the Swedish Art Critics Association, the Swedish section of Association Internationale des Critiques d'Art (AICA).

Contact: Konstfack, LM Ericssons väg 14, 126 26 Stockholm, Sweden.

E-mail: [jacob.kimvall@konstfack.se](mailto:jacob.kimvall@konstfack.se)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8448-3588>

Carlos Mare is a New York-based artist born in 1965 in Spanish Harlem, New York City. He was best known as the subway graffiti writer Mare139 and has since adapted the graffiti lettering styles to metal sculpture in the fine art context.

E-mail: [mare139@gmail.com](mailto:mare139@gmail.com)

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