



# Whitney-Ann Patrick

## The Watched Self

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### Abstract

The Watched Self captures the claustrophobic, surrealist nature of living in a world where surveillance has become the norm. This art piece is part of a broader project entitled, *The Two-Edged Power of Community-Based Surveillance: How the Culture of “Maccoing” and Gossip Can Act as a Deterrent for Devious Behaviour while Perpetuating Paranoia*, which examined the physical and technological forms of surveillance within the Caribbean context.

“The Watched Self” captures the claustrophobic, surrealist nature of living in a world where surveillance has become the norm. The striking visual centre, the woman whose headwrap is stacked with colourful houses, is a nod to the painter’s home country, Trinidad and Tobago. Gazing out from the dark windows are glaring detached eyes. With no human face present, these eyes present no differently from the clunky surveillance cameras contrasting them. These symbols are meant to evoke an eerie feeling, a nod to the cultural practice of “maccoing,” (minding people’s business), but not quite as human.

At the forefront, the woman wears a fairly neutral facial expression and is depicted wearing headphones. The intention behind this artistic choice was to depict the notion that the subject is tasked with bearing the weight of surveillance. She is trying to block it out, as surveillance, with all its positive and negative properties, has begun to feel suffocating. The social media logos, and chat bubbles below, and around her, are also jumbled and overbearing. These icons, like the houses, are a constant reminder of her existence as a perpetually surveilled being, only this time, within the digital sphere.

Overall, the artist chose to use a variety of loud and bright colours, defying the notion that surveillance must be conveyed in cold detached tones. Joyous and sunny warm tones are meant to provide a contrast to the subject matter and delineate the discussion as intricate and multi-dimensional. The colours are also a cultural nod, acknowledging gossip and surveillance’s rich cultural position within many spaces. Ultimately, the painting invites viewers to engage critically and draw their own conclusions. The piece also asks that the viewer reflect on their feelings regarding their positionality in an increasingly surveilled world.

The decision to portray the subject as Black was intentional based on the artist's own lived experiences. Blackness and surveillance studies intersect with broader conversations surrounding power, visibility, and control—all themes I wanted to touch on in the piece. I drew from the work of Simone Browne, "Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness," as a key lens through which to view Black resistance against oppressive surveillance. It is important to acknowledge the hyper-visibility of Black people and how bias seeps into surveillance practices. Black peoples are surveilled and often engage in self-surveillance for the protection of self and one's image, as well as to manage societal expectations and stereotypes.

I wanted this piece to fully encapsulate the way surveillance has been adapting and changing within the social landscape. It speaks to communal or lateral surveillance, which is the practice of individuals monitoring their peers or within a social group. Unlike traditional forms of surveillance that involve top-down monitoring by authorities, lateral surveillance occurs horizontally among equals or within a community. This concept emphasizes the idea that individuals are actively engaged in watching and regulating the behaviours of others who are part of the same social network. I positioned communal surveillance or lateral surveillance at the centre, to communicate that everyday actions and speech such as rumours and gossip can have a larger impact than individuals may think.

The advancement of technology and security systems in the Caribbean has occasioned seen a shift in communal surveillance practices. Many residents of Trinidad and Tobago are increasingly using surveillance technologies, such as camera systems and social media platforms, to monitor their communities. The art piece explores the use of home security systems, particularly camera security systems like CCTV, as a means to deter petty crime and antisocial behaviour. It delves into the idea that the illusion of being watched through these systems creates a sense of safety in communities. Yet, despite this, crime still occurs at a high rate and the population seems generally even more paranoid at the prospect of being watched. The technological gaze of our devices presents a seemingly more invasive threat to people's everyday lives. The art piece also speaks to a form of anonymous surveillance where observers are able to remain hidden behind screens, exerting influence without a direct human presence. This form of surveillance is linked to both protective and destructive consequences, including self-management and paranoia.