The Making of a Caribbean Avant-Garde

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Published by Purdue University Press


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For the first ten years of the millennium I had a gallery in Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados. Though located on a traffic artery between the city centre and the port, it was rarely very busy. Every month had its sprinkle of artists, collectors, students, professionals, expats, tourists and curious pedestrians, who would come in to peruse exhibitions, seek out works of interest or engage in longer discussions about the art scene at large, but the Zemicon Gallery never amounted to much of an art dealership. It did, however, host more than a hundred small exhibitions and, from 2000 to 2010, I found myself in the privileged intersection between the production and the reception of Caribbean art. The material, aesthetic and often personal concerns of the artists I worked with—their hopes, visions, disappointments, self-doubts and, thankfully, perseverance, made the field real in ways that my previous studies in art history and modern culture never could have. I came to share their frustrations with the political and scholarly indifference to their work, with the glaring contrast between its public scope and limited reach, and with the common perception of the field as Eurocentric and elitist, especially when measured against the modest living and working conditions many Caribbean artists endure for the love of their discipline.

Early in that decade, it became evident that the critical change of guard, which had long smoldered under the region’s art world, was in full effect. Many artists sensed that the physical and conceptual center of the regional art scene had shifted, and that their own bid for a Caribbean contemporary had been displaced by new aesthetic codes and curatorial briefs: oeuvres that had previously been considered important or promising were suddenly regarded as anachronistic or even conservative. Naturally, this schism instilled a sense of confusion and weariness in one segment of the arts community and spawned new energy and confidence in another. While some artists were able to reinvent themselves and adapt to the methods and social dynamics of the new contemporary scene, others entered into a form of internal exile.

When I eventually closed the gallery, my longing to understand what I had witnessed (and participated in)—especially what seemed to me a peculiar and, at first, incomprehensible convergence between the moment’s political and critical
re-orientations—drove me back to academia. This undertaking morphed into a PhD dissertation, which attempted to describe the formation of a post-nationalist hegemony around the visual arts in the Anglophone Caribbean, and which is the basis for this book. It has been a labor of moving targets, and it is with trepidation that I have applied myself—not to the investigation of what is easily identifiable as reactionary, but to the contradictions of what is now widely considered progressive.

Prior to this undertaking and along the way, I have benefited from brief or extensive exchanges with numerous people. Reaching back in time, I have written under the imagined scrutiny of Professor Peter Madsen, who inspired a generation of modernity scholars at Copenhagen University. I am, however, more immediately indebted to the lecturers in the Cultural Studies Programme at The University of the West Indies (Cave Hill), in particular the supervisors of my dissertation, Dr. Yanique Hume and Dr. Aaron Kamugisha for their wisdom, support and unfailing kindness; to its external examiners, Professor Neil Lazarus and Professor Timothy Brennan, for their inspiration and encouragement, and to the peer reviewers of my manuscript for their helpful suggestions. Yet the book is above all reflective of my interactions and discussions with artists and art-students from Barbados and the wider Caribbean, including Alicia Alleyne, Dean Arlen, Simone Asia, Arthur Atkinson, Ewan Atkinson, Walter Bailey, Eric Belgrave, Ernest Breleur, Mark Brown, Ras Ishi Butcher, Holly Bynoe, Charles Campbell, Alison Chapman-Andrews, Joshua Clarke, Yanita Comissiong, Christopher Cozier, Kenwyn Crichlow, William Cummins, Blue Curry, Annalee Davis, Dennis de Caires, Joscelyn Gardner, the late Bill Grace, Stanley Greaves, Versia Harris, Winston Kellman, Katherine Kennedy, Mark King, Denyse Menard-Greenidge, Jeriko, Nadia Huggins, Ian Moore, Petrona Morrison, Adam Patterson, Ras Akyem Ramsay, Sheena Rose, Corrie Scott, Heather-Dawn Scott, Aurelia Walcott, Russell Watson, Alberta Whittle, Nick Whittle, Kraig Yearwood and numerous others. I have likewise learnt much from critics, writers, curators and collectors, including Mervyn Awon, Natalie Batson, Dominique Brebion, Jane Bryce, Trevor Carmichael, Clyde Cave, Amanda Coulson, Khalil Goodman, Alissandra Cummins, Gabrielle Hezekiah, Rodney Ifill, Kate Keohane, Philip Nanton, Veerle Poupeye, Ark Ramsay, Adrian Richards, Rupert Roopnaraine, Nicole Smythe-Jonhson, Lilian Sten, Allison Thompson, Estelle Thompson, Leon Wainwright, Harclyde Walcott, Anne Walmsley, Andrea Wells, Janice Whittle and Kathy Yearwood. My gratitude to Christopher, Anna, Nicolai, and to my mother and father, at whose dinner table my passion for debate began, can never be adequately expressed. The consideration, patience and unfailingly rapid email
responses I have received from the director, editors and staff at Purdue University Press has made the last leg of this long journey a remarkably enjoyable one.

As a part-time lecturer at the Barbados Community College and UWI (Cave Hill), I often wonder how my students will one day—as practicing artists, critics, policy makers and curators—see themselves in relation to art’s local and global trajectories. This book represents an attempt at identifying and questioning some of the processes that shape the creative space *they* will inhabit and is therefore dedicated to them.