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Meeting History With Art: "The Myriad of Myself"

Annie Paul

This was the catalogue essay from Lips, Sticks and Marks, curated by Annalee Davis, Alida Martinez & Irénée Shaw, shown at The Art Foundry, The Heritage Park, Foursquare, St Phillip, Barbados. August 23- October 25 1998 and Carribean Contemporary Arts, Museum of Port of Spain, Fort San Andres, South Quay, Port of Spain, Trinidad November 24th-December 5th 1998.

"Where you going" they said, "This road not yours to walk. Go home to yuh big yard. That's where yuh belong"

"Tell History for me," I said, "I not playing his game."

They pulled off my disguise then, laughing so hard they could hardly stand up. But they only scratched my throat with the ratchet blade. Blood dulled the knife's silver-edged glint.

'History say yuh can take yuh chances, but yuh can't hide," one said. "Your skin glitters bright in the dark. We can sight yuh anyweh huh go."

"I'll zip out of it," I said. "There's an opening between my legs." They only laughed more.

Well I did. Unzipped, I rose up flapping high and cool as a kite. But I had no form. Unnamed, nameless, invisible, I floated over the landscape of burnt cane, over the all-inclusives and their swimming pools, over the markets and the stalls of jerk chicken. I looked down on everything. I was hungry but I couldn't eat. I was tired but I couldn't sleep. I was vulgar abstract. No context at all. It was like being trapped in a dreaded dream. "History," I thought, "you win this first round." "History's Posse" from My Mother's Last Dance by Honor Ford-Smith

For someone from the peripheral quote unquote old world - India to be precise - where modernity is often in pitched battle with tradition, one of the great advantages

of the Caribbean would appear to be its lack of suffocating "tradition". A profoundly modern enterprise such as visual art could thus be free to take root and flourish in new and unexpected ways or so I thought (Irénée puts it particularly well: 'People deprived of their history can make up their own and what better job can there be for an artist?'). But in the absence of agonistic tradition there appears the vexed issue of identity and race. Who is entitled to make history in this 'unique contemporary space'? To re-present it? To be the subject of it? Benitez-Rojo is right in saying that in the Caribbean skin colour 'is a colour neither of the self nor of the Other, but rather a kind of no man's land where the permanent battle for the Caribbean Self's fragmented identity is fought.' As this show makes its debut in Barbados where only recently there was tension about who was eligible to be national hero, I have no doubt that similar questions will be raised again.

Lips, Sticks and Marks is a representation of Caribbean realities by 'seven women working individually but thinking collectively' to quote Susie Dayal's tidy phrase. The distinction made by Chris Cozier is important here. These women are not claiming to represent Caribbeanness but to re-present facets of it emerging from their own highly personal examinations of their inner and outer realities. Moreover this is a show whose scant regard for boundaries, borders, rules and other people's traditions or innovations craft and the craft of art. Some of these women immerse themselves in "female culture" and produce in and out of it, others like Roberta Stoddart and Irénée Shaw seem to occupy their gender without being preoccupied by it. Annalee Davis's *Work* energetically explores the consequences of forms of Womanhood-- mother, wife, individual - while Susie Dayal interrogates and challenges notions of fashion, beauty and "art". On a more exclusively spiritual level Osaira Muyae talks of "feeling clean" while Alida Martinez speaks of 'searching in knowing clean water, Eternal transparency'. Joscelyn Gardner's complex installation evokes Nina Simone's powerful song about identity, *Four Women*, with its plaintive line 'Whose little girl am I?'

Joscelyn's *In the Chamber of My Birth* is an artful re-production of the rape of the Caribbean Basin. It is hard not to think of Benitez-Rojo's 'repeating island'... 'the painfully delivered child of the Caribbean, whose vagina was stretched between continental clamps'... 'because Europe in its mercantilist laboratory conceived the project of inseminating the Caribbean womb with the blood of Africa.' Roberta's *Black Pearls* is part of the same history 'crisscrossing waters of rage blackened seeds shackled in suffocating tomb' as Joscelyn puts it adrift in the sea amputated black penis, torn vaginal lips - the strange fruit of slavery. *The Middle Passage* as still life, a portrait of the beginning of modernity which is synonymous with the birth of the Caribbean archipelago.

Roberta Stoddart's work is remorselessly and unrepentantly descriptive but what is she describing? Is this landscape or mindscape? Or treacherous land-mined scape? What we do know is that this is Roberta's reality/realism. A realism that is embodied



Right: Joscelyn Gardner *In the Chamber of My Birth* (a repeating voyage to my Self) (1998) Multi-media installation, dimensions variable.

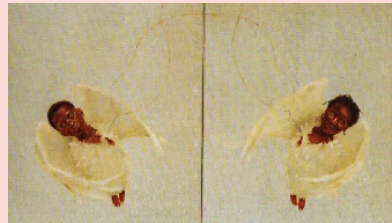
Photo: Ronnie Carrington

in anthropomorphic anthropological detail in which vulnerability and metamorphosis are personified and look you in the eye. Her work subjectifies emotion. The recurring black subject in her paintings has exposed her to criticism for she is racially speaking by and large, white. The intensely human faces in her mindscapes are the kind of face you would encounter in the streets of Kingston. Roberta is a true painter in the old style! her heroes are Caravaggio, Velazquez, and the more contemporary Lucian Freud.

Her lyrically epigrammatic "It must be a duppy or a gunman" foregrounds the church and its graveyard first encountered in "God's Bride" a few years ago. The decrepit grillwork fencing the graveyard also fences the painting. Stray animals, dogs, goats, rats and bats encroach. The gravestones are dominos--a link to the popular-- with pendant teardrops of blood oozing from the black holes which suggest bullet wounds. No one paints blood as exquisitely as Roberta and the bejewelled church and gravestones seem to emit an unholy glow. In the very centre of the graveyard and painting is a coffin with a small male body in it. "This is it this is it this is it I've been hit" he seems to be saying, immediately creating a hyperlink to David Rudder's Madman's Rant and its visual version exhibited by Chris Cozier in early '98 in Port-of Spain. As in other parts of the Caribbean gun violence has become a central figure stalking the Jamaican landscape. Blacks dominate this nightscape and the inside of the coffin/cradle encasing the dead man is a rich warm uterine red suggesting pulsating life and rebirth rather than death. An allegorical story about the nation states of the Caribbean?

Taken all together; Joscelyn's and Roberta's work in this show represents a visual anthem, linking the past which haunts the Caribbean into its violent present. Wholeness and completion is to be attained by a repeating voyage to myself. In a way this is the thread that unites the work of these seven women. One senses the care and deliberate self-love with which they examine their interior spaces and turn these inside out for us, inviting us to participate in their explorations.

Osaira's *Chance and Change* is a deep meditation on the power of water to cleanse and purify. On one level her work seems to be very personal, dealing with self knowledge and conscious amendment of the self after ritual cleansing. But her body



Roberta Stoddart *Learning How to Glide* (1998) Ten Panels, each panel 10" H x 12" W. Photo: Donette Zacca.

is also a metaphor for the body politic and there is more than a suggestion that her 'letter to myself' so reminiscent of Joscelyn's repeated 'voyage to myself' is a message to wider society to purify and remake itself to heal to opt for health over sickness.

Alida's cocoon-like image and the repeated wax-images of her face are intriguing as is the title of her piece *Beyond the Image*. Is there a flirtation here with the notion of "Imago", the "final and perfect form of an insect after it has been through its metamorphoses"? The perfect insect that emerges from chrysalis goes through a stage of being cocooned. What is being hatched in the securely bound cocoon of Alida's body? Warmed by human heat and secured by nourishing fluid this seems to be another rift on the theme of rebirth and new life in a new world. As Alida says this work is all about identity and invites viewers to enter "in our own inner body that screams for understanding".



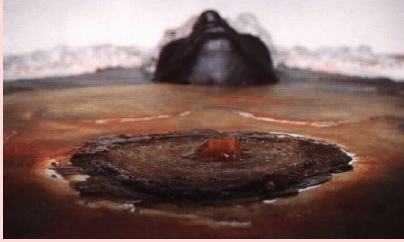
Left: Osaira Muyale *Chance & Change* (1998) Multi-media installation, dimensions variable. Photo: Jose M. Fernandez



Right: Irénée Shaw *Queen of Grande Riviere* (1998) oil on board 3'H x 6'W. Photo: Abigail Hadeed

Irénée Shaw's "visual dramas" resonate with vigour and excitement. Her depiction of the 104-year old subject of the Queen of Grand Riviere as a commanding figure in the colours of life rather than death, threatening to "disrupt her supporting architecture" as she asserts her presence is a good example of an artist choosing to invest an ordinary subject with great significance in the same way that some years ago she painted the great Eric Williams as she saw him - a diminutive brown figure. It is exciting to encounter intuitive vibrations and echoes between work by Caribbean artists writers and singers across generations national boundaries and aesthetic practices. In his celebrated *History of the Voice* Kamau Brathwaite says 'I shall end with the violet and red extremes of the spectrum' and goes on to describe 'the beauty and power of Miss Queenie's language: she is after all, priestess, prophet and symbolist'. Miss Queenie. a kumina queen is imaged in remarkably similar terms to Irénée's Grand Riviere, though one is a verbal portrait and the other visual.

Irénée's creations refuse to tamely occupy a wall space and Adam and Eve thrust themselves into our midst life-size figures challenging us to recognise them, members of 'the community of the painted'. Adam astride an island hillscape, his



Alida Martinez *Beyond The Image* (1998) Mixed Media Installation Photo: Jose M.Fernandez

own (forbidden?) fruit flanked by snake and scythe against an undergrowth of banana leaves is a welcome re-vision of the species' dominant creation myth. The unexpected tilts and angles signal Irénée's presence and you can almost see her peering back out of her Work at you caught in the act of manipulation, arms stretching out towards the viewer, pushing you, pulling you--now she's in your face, now she isn't.

Annalee Davis' extraordinary installation is a raw and visceral depiction of the wounds of modernity from the point of view of the female of the species. It is clear that what we are invited to partake of is a woman's attempt to come to terms with the "splikity-splakity-split" with her mate; the realisation that her "spiralling separateness" toward her "singular self" and their son's resulting "split sense of self" is a "screaming sacrilege". Modernity has meant a kind of liberation for many women, but it is a bittersweet freeing far it entails seemingly sacrilegious disruptions and distortions with blame for- this "unholy" state of affairs often laid at the feet of women. The exhibition of the couple's wedding clothes, their son's baby clothes and the suspended 'houses', thrusts before our eyes these symbols of domestic harmony while at the same time inviting us to sit down and listen to the circumstances of their disintegration and violation. For the many of us who have been confronted with the consequences of modernity this could be a catharsis, an invitation to "suture the shame and select the survival game" to paraphrase Annalee. Once again Annalee's smoking alliterative text recalls Brathwaite and his lamentations during HIS "time of salt", "that time of alarm" when he lost his wife, Zea Mexican. She displays the same "nakedness of soul that is at once startling and illuminating." The difference is that as Gordon Rohlehr so perceptively noted Brathwaite was writing from "within the silent howl and scream of the straitened man".

The difference is that as Gordon Rohlehr so perceptively noted Brathwaite was writing from "within the silent howl and scream of the straitened man". Annalee however is not silent, although she too is articulating the howl and scream of the wounded. Whereas Irénée's constructions seem on the very verge of speech, Annalee's installations wilfully breach the realm of the visual to convey the "Antillean drama of anguish" which Rohlehr talked about in reference to Brathwaite's Work.

It is only appropriate that the youngest artist in this show should introduce the theme of playful sexuality. Susie Dayal's tantalizingly titled "She Web" posits woman as aggressive temptress. Her use of wire as she says is cultural meaning that being firm Trinidad she is naturally drawn to the methodology of carnival costume, and she doesn't give a damn about a prevalent obsession with avoiding being mistaken for "kitsch". My personal view on this is that one woman's "kitsch" is another woman's



Annalee Davis *An Alliteration, A Soliloquy and a Sonnet* (1998) Multi-Media Installation, Dimensions Variable, Photo: Walter Bailey

la- di-da ‘quiche’ in other words these are questions of taste, not art. Susie makes “body masks” in which the wearer can pose and play different roles and discover heretofore hidden personas. This is another way of making acquaintance with oneself in the sense that Osaira Muyale talks of. Isn't this the essence of playing Mas?

‘In an ocean of veiling, wailing words’ as Joscelyn's text goes. The move to accompany the show with texts by the artists is one I genuinely welcome. This is what art can be in the Caribbean. What is remarkable about

this show is the reaching out of these artists to one another and to a Caribbean audience. It is not at all surprising to me that it's a group of women artists that has decided to overcome the “separatist situation” seemingly imposed on us by our colonial histories to give us a visual feast of the kind one would expect to find from a region with a culture of carnival. In literature one talks of the West Indian novel rather than the Barbadian novel, or the Grenadian novel or the St. Lucian novel, but in art one is confronted with Jamaican art for instance or Trinidadian art. At what point does an island become too small a dot to have an art of its own? It is profoundly odd that while something like the Faber Carribean Series is trying to break down the linguistic barriers that separate our literatures, art can still be corralled by language and nation.

What makes this work Caribbean is not that it conforms to any stereotypes about how art from this region should or should not look. These women are not willing to play History's game and they refuse to be trapped in a dream. I keep quoting Braithwaite in relation to their work because he is the supreme practitioner of history as art (history as art is ART not art history) and has largely been responsible for ‘the relocation of the archipelago in history; the redefinition of New World identities through the recognition and clarification of the seminal images and rhythms through which Carribean peoples may now revision themselves, beyond the limitations of received stereotypes.’ Just like Braithwaites work, *Lips, Sticks and Marks* offers ‘corridors through which stereotypes are revisited and experiences anew, modes of descent into self and into the formative historical experiences of a *n.paradoxa* online issue no.8 and 9 Nov 1998 and Feb 99



Susan Dayal *She-Web* (1998) Photo: Susan Dayal

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civilisation' (Rohlehr). And what's best, it scorns the uptight severity and reticence of high modern abstraction.

This is work fashioned in and by the Carribean, work that offers 'viable options for viewing ourselves'. This work is not meant for viewing, or hanging on the wall; these are not semi-religious objects for visual contemplation but carefully orchestrated "experiences". Some playful, some contemplative, some more urgent and some cathartic. But they are all, thank goddess as Annalee would say, expressions of the "myriad of myself".

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