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Desperately Seeking Africa within Jamaican Art

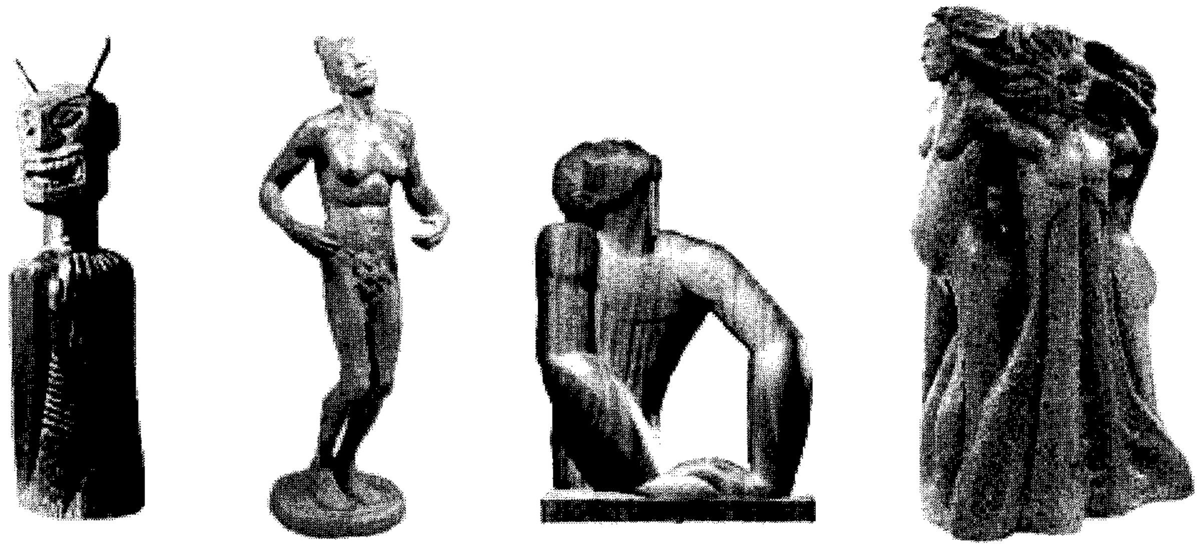
PETRINE ARCHER-STRAW

I am always intrigued by the peculiar qualities of Jamaican art. I wonder why, as islanders, our artists do not romanticise the sea, or why they burden images of the past with sombre tones. Why are landscapes, trees and tangled roots important motifs in our art and why is our African heritage and blackness such an important feature of our portraiture? Using a range of images from the self-taught sculptor David Miller to the sophisticated photographer Albert Chong, I want to explore how perceptions of Africa have influenced Jamaican art, and the way in which our visual representations of diaspora identity are shaped by imagery not just from Africa but also Europe.[1] I want to show that Jamaican art's iconography is truly distinctive – a reflection of our complex cultural perceptions.

We can begin by looking at how Africa's artistic heritage was undermined by the New World experience, then examine how retentions from African art survived through self-taught artists whose work we now call 'intuitive'. We can also look at how a stylish primitivism, as an aspect of European modernism, has influenced our expression as artists and definers of Caribbean culture. In telling this story, I will refer to a range of artists, including vanguard pioneers such as Edna Manley, Albert Huie and Osmond Watson, but I will also include younger contemporary artists who grapple with ideas and images that are shaping an understanding of slavery and colonialism and creating a visual language to articulate our presence in the New World. This article may be too short to thoroughly cover so many artists and ideas, but its handful of images may help to give a visual sense of the multi-layered quality of our art.

Diaspora blacks share a strong artistic heritage rooted in Africa, but slavery stymied their skills in carving, mask-making, ceramics and textiles inherited from West Africa. Strong traditions survived the Middle Passage, only to be suppressed in the New World. Europeans were suspicious of certain practices carried over from Africa. They considered African carvings magical fetishes because they suspected that the ritual practices in the art-making empowered the slaves and made them hostile to New World assimilation. Colonial authorities banned the use of these carvings under slavery and severely punished their makers. Those who knew how to create such objects and had the spiritual knowledge that empowered them went underground or disguised their art in Christian forms now recognised in Jamaican obeah, Cuban santeria and Haitian vodou.

Freedom brought a gradual reawakening of the arts. Sculptures by two of Jamaica's earliest self-taught artists, David Miller and his son, show that African ideas and imagery remained strong. David Miller Sr's *Obi* (1920), with its prominent head, aggressive posture and compact chest, is a unique example of how the skill of making power objects or fetishes was retained, though the knowledge of rendering the form was lost. This work and David Miller Jr's similarly carved *Heads* were developed for a fledgling tourist market and represented an exotic 'native' tradition



LEFT TO RIGHT:
David Miller Sr, Obi, *c.1920, National Gallery of Jamaica*
Richmond Barthe, Nude, *c.1933, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York*
Edna Manley, Negro Aroused, *1935, National Gallery of Jamaica*
Christopher Gonzalez, Tree of Life, *1971*

linked to Africa but considered 'local'. They anticipated a self-taught tradition that flourishes today, particularly in the north coast resort areas.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Jamaica was not short of tourists, many of them artists, as the larger Caribbean region became a vogue muse to Europe. Europeans came in search of the exotic and sought out the work of local artists such as the Millers. Like the avant-garde artist Paul Gauguin, their aim was renewal and regeneration, and a simpler idyllic lifestyle, but their perceptions of black culture were based on atavistic stereotypes.

In addition to European itinerants, Jamaica also attracted diaspora artists such as Edna Manley in Jamaica, Richmond Barthe in Jamaica and in Haiti, and Wifredo Lam in Cuba. They too sought identity in the region, where they believed they had some cultural connection, and they also brought their preconceptions inspired by Picasso's primitivism and modernism's Africanised masks. Their art provoked racial awareness and promoted black imagery. It also expressed antipathy towards colonialism and concern for the non-white world's independence.

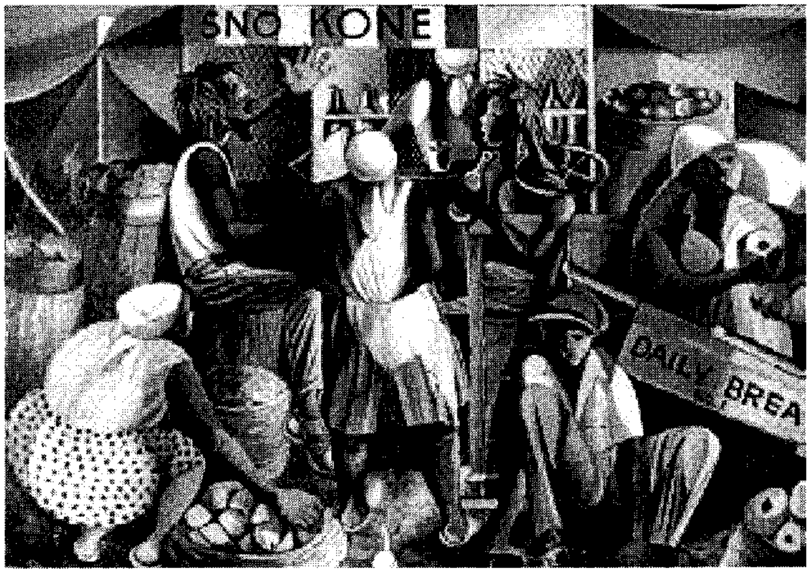
Edna Manley's *Negro Aroused* (1935) aptly reflects this interest. Hewn intentionally from dark mahogany, its naked black torso supports a head thrust upwards in search of a new dawn. It has become the iconic image of that era and its nationalistic thinking.

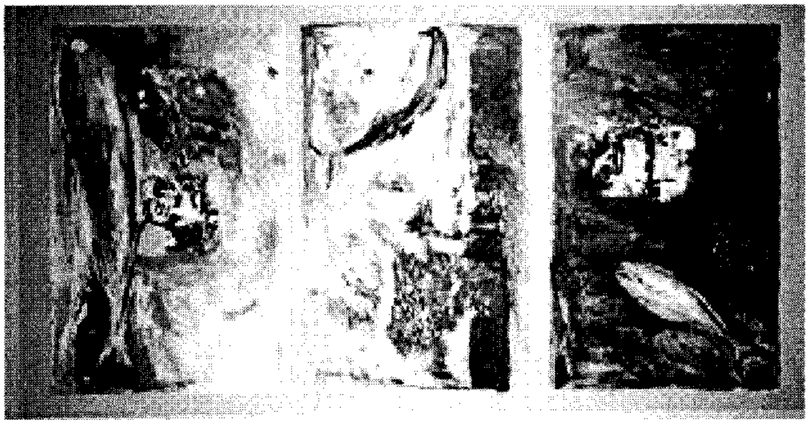
Cultural nationalism remained the main philosophical sentiment behind the Caribbean's artistic movements and their artistic products up to and beyond independence. As a result, Jamaican viewers still warm to such reflections of themselves, their portraits, market scenes and landscapes, because they relate them to their history and to their daily realities. It is no accident that mainstream artists such as Barrington Watson enjoy such popularity because of the overt race consciousness and nationalism of their work. This type of genre painting mixes, sometimes too easily, with a more 'kitsch' tourist art which plays out the stereotypes of our island existence. Palm-strewn beaches, bustling markets and rural areas populated with sturdy black men and sinewy women are part of the Jamaica's iconography in both high and low art forms.

Jamaica's self-taught art has been more visible since the nationalist 1970s. Labelled 'intuitive', it maintains links with African forms of expression. It shows tendencies to overall patterning, a varied and integrated use of colour, flatness of forms reminiscent of textile design and decoration. The sophistication of imagery and ideas in intuitive art are remarkable given their development outside mainstream thinking.

Intuitive artists such as Everald Brown, William "Woody" Josephs, Leonard Daley and Ras Dizzy are becoming more popular as Jamaicans learn to accept their history. The National Gallery of Jamaica's role in nurturing, promoting and exhibiting the works of intuitives has been crucial to their appreciation. Their 'insider' status has been controversial, however, because many of Jamaica's middle-class patrons of the arts are ambivalent about Africa, blackness, Rastafarianism and other syncretic religions, which inspire the imagery in intuitive art. An example of this ambivalence can be seen with respect to the enigmatic sculptures of Woody Josephs keenly purchased during his lifetime, yet relatively neglected after his death.

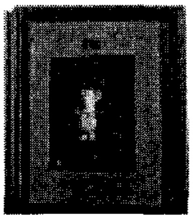
Rastafarianism dominated Jamaican subculture in the 1960s and 1970s, parallelling and reinterpreting the African-American Black Power movement. The wearing of red, green and gold and characteristic dreadlocks identified Rastafarians uniquely. Black Power and Rastafarian imagery had a



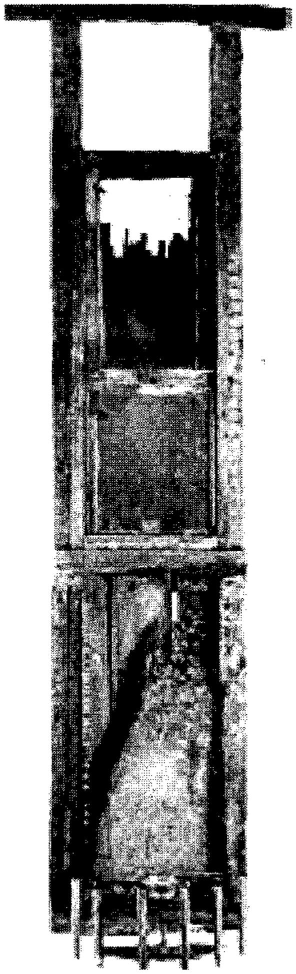


Top and Bottom:
Osmond Watson, City Life, *1968, National Gallery of Jamaica*
Omari Ra, Estranged Dick, *1993*

significant impact on mainstream artists during the politically turbulent 1970s and 1980s. Artists such as Osmond Watson, Eric Cadien and Christopher Gonzalez were consistent in their use of icons that referenced Africa and its culture. There was a moment when mainstream intuitive and street artists seemed to work with the same sources and there was a consistency of imagery referencing the past that even the public understood. Who can forget the Rastafarian posters by the popular artist Ras Daniel Hartman in the living rooms of intellectuals who wanted to prize an image of race and cultural consciousness? For those of us with more sophisticated pretensions, Gene Pearson's ceramic heads referencing Baule, Fang and Egyptian art were, and still are, prized collectibles.



Pseudo-African masks, locks, tangled roots, lions' heads, snakes and a much-used shape of the continent in shades of red, green and gold stamped this strain of Jamaican art as diasporic. It was consistent with other works by artists in the black diaspora anxious to make visual links with the past. This type of art wore a self-consciousness alien to art from Africa. But there was a logic to this imagery, often painfully simplistic and narrative: roots stood for roots, chains represented enslavement, red was the blood of our forebears shed during slavery, green stood for the land and gold for the riches pirated by Europeans in colonial Africa.



While many of us might still long for this clarity, the Jamaican artists' references to the past and slavery have become more obscure, but just as relevant. Feeding off this black art tradition is a group of young artists committed to a philosophy of pan-Africanism. Forerunners in the group are Nettifnet Maat, Stanford Watson, Kalfani Ra and Omari Ra. Their imagery reflects an eclectic mix of stylistic and conceptual sources. Their local art school training is subverted by gutsy, raw responses to art-making, sympathetic to intuitive or self-taught practices.

Omari Ra is acknowledged as the chief instigator and philosopher in the group. His peculiar brand of black separatism is stridently communicated in such works as the *Dambala* series, where blackness is viewed as an inspiration rather than a perversion. Another taboo that Omari Ra confronts is that of black male sexuality and impotence in the face of white oppression. In his *Moby Dick* series (1993) flaccid penises and dead whales predominate. The sea is the source of that impotence, and black men flounder as a result of the white man's pursuit.

Omari Ra takes us backwards to recover a lost heritage. He employs occult practices and imagery found in regional and syncretic spiritual groups such as obeah, santeria and vodou. He also draws on imagery from ritual practices that connote the sadistic and cannibalistic: blood, faces, hair all drip, sweat and protrude, bringing drama and a visual impact that leaves some viewers perplexed.

Like surrealism's fascination with the occult and alchemy, the imagery of Omari Ra and his clan is shrouded and layered with mystery. From their obscure naming of themselves and their work, their punning and secret society symbolism, they suggest that an understanding of the mystery they create is a remedy and transformative process of renewal for black souls.

Of course, there is danger in this fetishising of our Afrocentric identities. It can lead to a fixity that celebrates and romanticises the past, and produces a kind of separatism akin to fascism. In this sense, the New World experience has been a blessing. It provides an accommodation of other cultures even within the advocacy of pan-Africanism.

In Jamaica, multiculturalism fashions our identities. Our history of forced and voluntary migration brings an acute sense of being part of a diaspora, in our relationship to Africa, Asia and Europe, or more recently in our relationship to England, Canada and the United States. We are constantly refining and defining our relationship to the world. Our *identities are liminal, fluid and negotiable.*

In the thirty years since independence, the cultural nationalism of the pre-independence era has mutated into a more palatable discourse that represents the region's plurality. Globalisation and its attendant postmodern sentiments have encouraged the search for a new language that better suits the region's diversity and cultural complexity. This New Worldism is evidenced in an interest in the region's indigenous cultures, a more clearly defined sentiment for Africa, an idealisation of the Caribbean environment, and an equally significant acceptance on the part of its white and brown classes to call themselves creole, and to identify with the Americas as home. This cross-fertilisation is pronounced in the work of Anna Henriques: her *Isabella Boxes* (1995) evoke a sense of nostalgia for Jamaica's decimated Taino culture and beg a renewed understanding of her Portuguese Jewish ancestry.

Recently, I have worked with a number of artists whose works reflect this diversity and explore the complex ways that identities are formed out of hybridity and a sense of 'in-betweenness'. The artists' varied attitudes and backgrounds provide a rich source of visual exploration. Each has a unique visual response to identity, and although they all lay claim to Jamaica, their sense of Jamaicanness differs. Omari Ra's stark political imagery, Petrona Morrison's sculptures that provoke ancestral memory, Milton George's satirical renditions and Leonard Daley's hysterical

THIS PAGE, TOP AND BOTTOM:
Anna Henriques, From the Isabella Boxes *series*
Petrona Morrison, Assemblage, *1993*

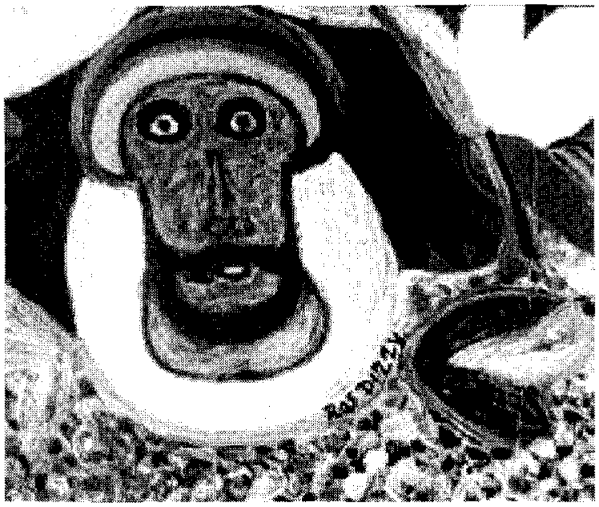
OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP AND BOTTOM:
Ras Dizzy, The Rasta Says, *1987*
Albert Chong, Bound Claw, Lock and Tacks, *1989*

outpourings are all unique responses coming 'out of Africa' but now relating to Jamaica. All are Jamaican but, typical of the Caribbean, their genealogies stem from the five continents. Their work reflects these differences while still making reference to Africa, slavery, and the impact of colonialism and migration.

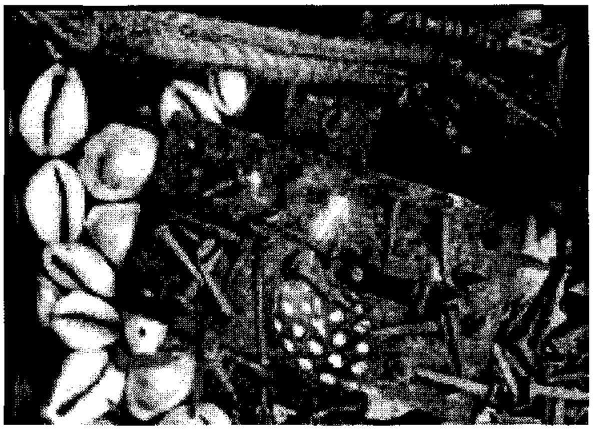
The routes artists take to give their work ethnocentric identities is a central theme of Jamaica's contemporary art scene. For some, such as Omari Ra, Leonard Daley and Ras Dizzy, the links with Africa are direct and present. For others, the routes they take are more circuitous.

The collages in David Boxer's *Memories of Colonisation* are more self-conscious. Fragmented and gauzed human forms, Tchi Wara masks, renaissance images and musical notations are spliced and collaged with personal and cultural imagery into a European setting. *Memories of Colonisation* forms part of a larger body of work that he calls the "Middle Passage Series", where the notion of holocaust is a constant and reference to slavery's Atlantic Middle Passage is more specific. In his most recent work, fragmented forms are submerged then resurface in washes of blue, white froth and bloody tissue, which represent the violence of slavery's Atlantic crossing. Boxer is one of few artists, along with Charles Campbell and more recently Christopher Clare, to deal with the Middle Passage theme, but it is his way of dealing with pains of the past.

Alfred Chong's work is similar. Using photomontage, he seamlessly inserts, superimposes, juxtaposes and integrates images from his past into his present-day reckoning of personal identity, but now framed within the context of black migration in the 1960s. Family photographs and memorabilia are fetishised to enhance the past and offer interpretations to his identity as a black man with Chinese ancestry.



Jamaica's contemporary imagery shows how the past is a constant touchstone that provides a sense of place and identity in the consciousness of many Jamaican artists. It also stresses the dynamic nature of that identity in that it is always in the making, always in the choosing, rooted in the past but nevertheless forward-looking. These artists offer a vision of their world that is fluid, shifting and peculiarly postmodern. They provide another chapter in the black diaspora saga set in motion by slavery.



In all this, Africa remains an important touchstone for our artists, as a source not of mimicry but of inspiration. Look carefully, and you will see how artists fill the voids in our history and our understanding by ritualising our culture, mythologising the past and packaging the horror of our history in the language and style of modernism. No doubt much of this imagery serves to tell a story that can never be fully known, and artists can only intuit the savagery of their past through an exploration of their own scarred remembrances, dull aches and contemporary anxieties. ❖

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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