

## **The Caribbean Pavilion at Liverpool –some thoughts.**

Let me begin with a short digression. In her memoir entitled “Volcano”, author Yvonne Weekes describes her disillusionment as a young black child in Britain, informing her skeptical English teacher that she and her parents are about to return ‘home’ to Montserrat. “In front of a sea of white children [the teacher] says; ‘There is no such place.’ And triumphantly brings out a globe to prove it. And amidst laughter and the tears welling in my throat, I see indeed ‘there is no such place!’.”

In case you think things have changed in the intervening four decades, a **New York Times** review of the recent **Rockstone & Bootheel** exhibition of West Indian art in Hartford, Connecticut suggested that for many viewers the Caribbean region was “a blank slate”(Benjamin Genocchio, December 4 2009). This despite the fact that, as the author himself points out, Hartford has the third-largest West Indian population in the U.S.!

And although on Facebook Bahamian artist, **Blue Curry** can boast that his “swanky electric blue cement-mixer” headed off Adrian Searle’s review of the Liverpool Biennial in the **Guardian** (September 20, 2010), it’s the **ONLY** work of art in this dismissive review for which the artist is unnamed. What’s up with that?

Curator David A. Bailey is out to put the Caribbean ‘on the map’...or at least on the programme at the **2010 Liverpool Biennial**. And while I feel you cringe at the over-wrought cliché, the weight of symbolism is felt throughout this exhibition. And I can’t help but feel that some ‘mapping’ of its formation and structure are necessary as part of assessing its manifestation which, frankly, was a confluence of relationships and happenstance as well as long-overdue necessity.

Through his ongoing work with the **International Curators Forum** and the **Black Diaspora Visual Arts** exhibitions and symposiums, Bailey has focused his attention on creating a platform for Caribbean and black diaspora arts at major international events, as well as bringing curators and cultural theorists to the Caribbean. He combines disguised guerilla tactics with a core philosophy of collegial working relations to infiltrate the rigid art establishment and inhabit a shared and expanding forum to showcase Caribbean art and encourage dialogue and networking.

Bailey is currently director of the National Gallery of the Bahamas. He also collaborates with the National Art Gallery Committee in Barbados, and more recently with colleagues in Martinique on a ten-year developmental project entitled **Black Diaspora Visual Arts**. Thus the working relationship with these three spaces provided the platform for organizing – and financing - the submission to Liverpool. Featuring the work of ten artists from Barbados, Martinique and the Bahamas, the **Caribbean Pavilion** seems an ambitious designation but also pointedly asserts its intention to establish a presence within the contemporary international biennial circuit, with particular reference to the grand Venice Biennale organized around national and regional pavilions. It also highlights work from some of the smaller islands in the region where typically cultural production from the Greater Antilles – Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti etc – gets more attention.

Here in Liverpool the exhibition is staged as part of the **City-States** project, sited at the Contemporary Urban Centre in collaboration with the **Liverpool Biennial**. **City States** comprises six self-funded international exhibitions that focus on the cultural dynamics of life in cities around the world. According to the **Liverpool Biennial Guide**, **City States** presents the work of 74 artists from 23 different countries, comparable in size to the approximately 60 artists that make up the core Biennial itself.

Titled “**Three Moments**”, the **Caribbean Pavilion** takes as its inspiration the Stuart Hall essay “Modernity and its Others: Three Moments in the Post-war History of the Black Diaspora Arts.” Hall, in a feature video-presentation at the 2009 Black Diaspora Visual Arts Symposium in Barbados, expanded on this essay to consider a parallel or possible successive ‘moment’ within the Caribbean which simultaneously acknowledges and critiques its precedents and parallels. It calls for a mapping of modernist developments to better describe and understand the present contemporary moment.

Contemporary art from the Caribbean has been receiving unprecedented exposure in recent years with major exhibitions organized by the Brooklyn Museum (**Infinite Islands**) and le Parc de la Villette in Paris (**Kreyol Factory**) as well as the much-anticipated but postponed **Caribbean Crossroads** organized jointly by three New York museums (Museo El Barrio, Queen’s Museum and the Studio Museum). The recent **GlobalCaribbean** exhibition curated by Haitian artist Edouard Duval Carrie in conjunction with Art Basel in Miami, as well as **Rockstone & Bootheel** at Real Art Ways in Hartford presented arguably more focused examinations. **Afro modernism**, staged at Tate Liverpool itself earlier in the year examined the wider black diaspora.

With their varying formats and mandates there is an acknowledged expanding exposure that the artists and their works receive, but there is also wide-spread dissatisfaction within the region that the organizers just haven’t quite got it right. And although all of these have been accompanied by catalogues, websites and / or public forums, the most common point of dissatisfaction is the lack of adequate critical discourse about the work, particularly from the region itself.

The **Caribbean Pavilion** is a smaller project, and more hastily organized. But the question remains : What exactly is an exhibition of ‘Caribbean Art’ supposed to achieve? For the **Caribbean Pavilion: Three Moments**, Bailey invited the artists to take up residence in Liverpool and several of the participants acknowledged that the opportunity to interact and collaborate was one of the most meaningful outcomes of the event. Bailey also instructed the artists that work should respond to the city. Liverpool is one of Britain’s largest cities whose growth was due to its importance as a port; at one point in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century 40% of the world’s trade passed through Liverpool’s docks. This history and growth are indelibly linked to trade with the West Indies and the Atlantic Slave Trade and this story is extensively narrated in the recently opened International Slavery Museum, located at the Albert Dock right next to the Tate Liverpool. The city is also home to the oldest Black African community in the country. So while many of the artists participating in the **Liverpool Biennial** created site-specific work in response to the location, its relevance for Caribbean artists is particular and I wonder why work by Caribbean artists was not more central to the construction of the Biennial as a whole.

The relationship between local and global, geography and history, ownership and entitlement, authenticity and relevance are dialogues that recur in much of the work in the **Caribbean Pavilion**. Simultaneously there is the weight of the traditions of representation and symbolisation.

Martiniquan artist **Christian Bertin** presents **Sinobole a Vendre**, a bicycle-pulled cart offering “snowballs” or snow cones for sale. It is an assemblage of popular culture and post-colonial theory displaying packets of sugar and cans of corned beef along with the writings of Césaire, Fanon and Naipaul bolted to the cart. My initial ‘mis-reading’ of the sign advertising the syrupy sweet treats was ‘Symbols for Sale’ which seemed somehow appropriate: the multiple mis-interpretations and mis-readings – both intentional deceptions and unintentional ignorance – that underlay descriptions of the region from the earliest writings; and the idea that symbols, the visual signifiers that represent experience, are readily and cheaply available. The itinerant artist, like an itinerant vendor, is engaged in production and exchange. Like all commodities, the meaning and value of these symbols fluctuate, undergoing constant transformation as a process that hopefully enables us to communicate meaningfully in an unstable world. **David Damoison**, also representing Martinique, speaks of his own work as a process of “collecting symbols,” both as a way of exploring identity as well as establishing links.

Various modes of transportation appear throughout the exhibition as metaphors for displacement, diaspora, transience and improvisation. Ships that literally link these two trans-Atlantic regions – the Caribbean and Liverpool – are depicted or are alluded to in several of the works. But often too they are disabled or distorted or mutated in the same way that Bertin’s cart with stacks of books bolted to the wheels is immobile. The most dramatic expression of this is Bahamian artist **John Beadle’s** monumental sculpture, **Live Load**. A large rudder, balletically poised on the tip of an iron spike is both stabilized and restrained by series of ropes tied off to the wooden planks of the gallery floor, creating a palpable tension between opposing forces. The sense of monumentality is not only the scale of the object itself but rather its metonymical function referencing the ghostly absence of the ship as well as its human cargo. It also isolates its function as a navigational instrument and the moral and ethical considerations that guide it.

There are a number of interesting parallels with the video by **Heino Schmid** (Bahamas) entitled “<” (‘less than’). This also is a work about balance and tension. In a very minimalist setting the artist attempts to demonstrate how the base of one beer bottle can stand on the neck of another. After some fine adjustments the artist steps out of the frame, leaving only the two precariously balanced bottles. The viewer is attracted by the ‘cool’ factor of this bar trick, and indeed the artist practiced for several months to perfect it. And Schmid is attracted by the social engagement aspect of his work – both the idea of the local bar / rum shop as a gathering point; as well as the link to earlier works where the artist would put drawings or notes in beer bottles left at various locations to be ‘discovered’ .....another kind-of ship metaphor. The acute angle formed by the two bottles inspires the title, “less than” suggesting inequitable relationships and the impossibility of sustained balance. The ‘trick’ to achieving the balance is a small amount of water in the vertical bottle which fortuitously creates a little horizon line within the bottle itself. The tension here is measured in breathless milliseconds as the viewer waits for the inevitable collapse of the structure, followed by the bottles rolling off screen. The viewer is caught watching the looped and endless repetition of success and collapse in anticipation, as if perhaps

the outcome might change.

In **Em-pyre (Business as Usual)**, one of two constructed altars by **Ras Akyem-i Ramsay** (Barbados), the slave ship plan is simultaneously church door and guillotine. This frustrated architect possesses a craftsman's sensibility to materials so that this faux- derelict portal looks to be stained by an equally false former grandeur, suggesting the manipulation, machinations and travesties of history. Akyem extended this relief sculpture out into the gallery space with the addition of a seat fastened to the floor at the supposedly optimal viewing range. In the same way that the profuse number of videos throughout the biennial often included seating because viewers were expected to focus their attention for anywhere from 1 to 30 minutes, Akyem seems to demand equal time, inviting the viewer to engage in contemplation or meditation before this 'altar'. I'm not sure if anyone took up Akyem's invitation. But a number of the artists in this exhibition construct works that play at overtly engaging the participation of the viewer (Bertin did eventually make – and sell – snowcones) and / or challenge the audience's expectations and reception of Caribbean art.

**Blue Curry's** untitled work is smart and ironic in its intent to confound traditional expectations of Caribbean culture. His pimped-out cement mixer hypnotically churns a viscous, paint-like vat of suntan cream, its distinct Hawaiian Tropic scent wafting through the space. What does it mean to be a cultural producer in a region dependent on marketing itself as a generic paradise for the carefree enjoyment of others? The Caribbean itself becomes a cliché where images of Bob Marley and fruit-laden Haitian markets become ubiquitous for a region made up of multiple languages, ethnicities and geographies. Curry's response is minimalist and industrial, only creolized.....Marcel Duchamp on vacation.

Following his recent solo-exhibitions in Barbados (*Secret Diaries*) and the Bahamas, (*Diaries Unlocked*), **Ras Ishi Butcher** continues his explorations of subtly textured panels of black and white. The 64 squares that make up **The Game** are arranged in a large chess board pattern on Velcro strips. But the constantly changing surface patterns introduce underlying possibilities for relations of symmetry and asymmetry. The game Ishi is alluding to is the playing out of power relations, particularly within the art world and particularly with regard to race. For all of the artists agreeing to participate in this exhibition of 'Caribbean' art, there is a balancing act or a compromise between grabbing visibility when it is offered but also accepting a certain marginalization or compartmentalization. And I've heard it said that success for a Caribbean artist means being able to leave the Caribbean. But an aspect of Ishi's work, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, is that the individual units are not fixed and there is always the potential for different combinations and arrangements – either by the artist or the viewer – it is, after all called 'The Game'. (And Ishi, like his brother-in-arms Akyem, includes a rum-shop style crate in front of the work, inviting the viewer to sit down and play along.) So there is a certain underlying contingency in what appears as a very rigid grid. And the ability to manipulate the system is not always immediately visible.

Ok – I want to digress here again momentarily, although it relates back to my earlier discussion of the traumatizing effects of the education system. On my daughter's first day at primary school in Barbados, the teacher explained to all the boys and girls in their brand new blue uniforms that they must learn to sit quietly on the floor, with their legs crossed and hands folded in their laps,

with their heads facing the front of the room, and with absolutely no talking while they listened attentively to the teacher read them a story. My daughter turned to all the new impressionable students sitting around her and said, "Let's not."

I imagine that's what Fidel Castro was like in preschool. It was a long year.

**Ewan Atkinson** (Barbados) focuses on childhood experiences, and more specifically the formative nature of the British colonial school system, and the values it (insidiously) inculcates beneath the enchanting veneer of storytelling. He chooses sites that are traditional, quotidian and mundane – the suburb, the family, the school - from which to launch his own quiet revolution. With **Pages 18 to 27 of The Nelsons' New Neighbourhood Reader, Morality Tales for the Discerning Neighbourhood (Under Glass)** the artist displays his surreptitiously adulterated take on the "Nelson's West Indian Reader." Introduced in the 1930s (and apparently still used in schools up until the 1990s) the Nelsons' Reader was intended to teach young members of the colonies how to read, with a healthy dose of morality lessons. Atkinson's version is naughty but nice. He presents ten pages framed as museum artifacts for closer inspection. The short poems, narratives and accompanying exercises are re-written with Atkinson himself role-playing a range of characters in the accompanying illustrations. In the two-part "Planning a trip" Uncle travels to Liverpool, "that big-ass place" which is linked to Barbados through their respective statues of Lord Nelson, their Empire Theatres, British cars, and gay cyber-sex.

For the Liverpool installation Atkinson included school chairs, a work table and exercise books, encouraging viewers to complete the accompanying tasks to be posted on the wall. Some viewers apparently familiar with the often gratuitous activity rooms at the end of exhibitions did not appear to decipher that these exercises – for example : "Describe the last time you got lucky." - were not really intended for children. Viewers however can still complete the lessons – and see this really great work online at [http://www.ewanatkinson.com/ewanatkinson.com/Neighbourhood\\_Reader.html](http://www.ewanatkinson.com/ewanatkinson.com/Neighbourhood_Reader.html)

While Atkinson's book is meticulously preserved behind glass, Bahamian artist **Lavar Munro's** graphic fantasy, **This Is My Account**, is splattered across the opposing wall. Munro, a young Bahamian artist who works primarily in illustration, was inspired by the graffiti he saw around Liverpool to work directly on the gallery itself. Incorporating paper cutouts and 'tagging' the wall with blasts of spray paint, Munro creates a flowing fantasy of sexual confrontation, domination and mutilation that combines intricate art nouveau imagery with shot-gun blasts of dripping paint. The delicacy of the drawing contrasts with the violence of the imagery, exposing the vulgarity that seeps out from beneath a veneer of propriety.

**Lynn Parotti** (Bahamas), as has been pointed out elsewhere, is the sole female artist in this exhibition (Bahamian Kendra Frorup was initially invited but was not able to participate). Parotti constructs a tight maze of large paintings collectively titled **The Space Between Want** with two distinct and yet interdependent bodies of work. Three oil on canvas paintings depict Bahamian scenes representing sex, worship and money, major themes that, for the artist "define who we are." In the centre of the space, two paintings on glass depict British ports - the West India Docks at Canary Warf in London and the Seaforth Docks in Liverpool. Large cranes and surrounding commercial buildings are represented as inverted and ephemeral reflections in the

surrounding water. The various images – both in opposition to one another and interdependent - start to merge and repeat as they are seen through the two opaque glass paintings or reflected and distorted by the mirror that hangs between them. The inconsistent and competing modes of representation reference the constructed and skewed nature of history, while the superimposed views reference the interdependence of these parallel experience, but the driving force at the centre of all of this is desire.

In addition to the potent photo-assemblage **Serie Parole**, previously exhibited in the **Kreyol Factory** exhibition of 2009, **David Damoison** exhibits a new work, **Two and a Half Weeks**, compiled during the artist's residency in Liverpool. Damoison was particularly drawn to the harshness and the vulgarity of urban life in the social margins of this industrial city, but his representations of these experiences often present an unusual juxtaposition or a moment of acting out, and frequently in momentary fragments or abbreviations. The arrangement of the images into a grid of horizontal and vertical rows creates an interesting formal complement to Ishi's multi-panel black and white paintings; relationships between images create asymmetrical linkages suggesting continually shifting narratives of contemporary experience.

At the end of the **Three Moments** essay, Stuart Hall writes that “the art world itself, like everything else, has been obliged to become more ‘global’: though some parts of the globe remain, in this respect, radically more ‘global’ than others.”

And this is my third digression.....

Alfredo Jaar who has two works in the Liverpool Biennial visited the **Caribbean Pavilion** on the day it opened and told me quietly on his way out that he thought the work was ‘world class’. I agree. Jaar is an artist who early in his career took a very deliberate position not to exhibit his work as a Latin American artist, not to be ‘ghettoized’ in that way. What is little known is that Jaar lived for many years of his youth in Martinique and has recently identified that experience as playing a formative part in his mature ‘world view’. Half of the artists exhibiting in the Caribbean Pavilion live primarily outside the Caribbean. This is for some a point of contention but the Caribbean has been recognized as the first globalized site. And the dynamic and complex process of diaspora is seminal to an understanding of the Caribbean and what it means to be Caribbean.

Despite some organizational challenges, the **Caribbean Pavilion** is a success. The next challenge is to ensure the sustainability of this initiative generated from within the region- an initiative which is as much about creating new meaning as it is about creating history. And claiming visibility in a globalized world.

By Allison Thompson

Allison Thompson is an art historian based in Barbados and assisted with the organization of the Caribbean Pavilion.