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Caribbean Art in Dialogue: Connecting Narratives in *Wrestling with the Image*

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Christopher Cozier and Tatiana Flores, curators.

Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions.

Washington, D.C., Art Museum of the Americas; January 21 – March 10, 2011.



Marcel Pinas. Fragment from *Kbi Wi Kani*, 2007. Bottles and cloth, variable dimensions.

Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions, hosted at the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington, D.C., conveys an outstanding variety of artwork by thirty-six contemporary artists from twelve Caribbean nations, both living in the region and abroad. The body of work suggests a myriad of ways to look at issues like collective memory, history and erasure, access and restrictions to transnational mobility, the complexities of cultures, and colonial remnants today, to name a few. The art form ranges from photography, canvas, lithography and mixed media to installation video and sculpture. Diversity fills the rooms across the two floors of the museum, and it does so in nuanced ways, for despite any differences in

medium, tone or style, the artwork as a whole shares cadences, conceptual frameworks, and an artistic vision unlikely to leave viewers indifferent.

By communicating the rich diversity, creativity and complexity shaping the work of many Caribbean artists, *Wrestling with the Image* makes an important contribution to situating contemporary Caribbean visual arts as very much engaged in personal, bold, and political interventions, a contextualizing task already initiated by *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art*, curated by Tumelo Mosaka and exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007. The curatorial effort of artist and independent curator Christopher Cozier and art historian Tatiana Flores emphasizes the investigative concerns prevalent throughout the exhibit. The assembling and arrangement of the artwork does not adhere to a single thematic criterion, but follows rather an aesthetics that investigates visual and critical vocabularies around a multitude of issues that inform Caribbean societies present and past, locally and globally. The exhibition gathers the work of artists from the Anglophone, Francophone, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean, featuring work from the Bahamas, Barbados, St. Kitts and Nevis, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago. However, within these locations other languages are also spoken, and this multilingualism is incorporated in the show where a wide range of visual languages also coexist and interact.

Every piece is wrestling with images and fraught or imposed representational demands, complicating and challenging the notion of a straightforward and transparent readability of experience. *Wrestling with the Image* often reveals an aesthetics that, although varying from piece to piece, always strategically resists categorizations and cultural reductionism. As viewers, our ability to interpret or “read” the artwork is constantly being challenged, that is, we are challenged to (re)consider our own preconceptions, mostly although not exclusively, in regard to the Caribbean and its imagery. Wrestling against essentialist definitions becomes a common factor in the exhibition. This is one of its most enticing aspects: the refusal to provide a fixed impression of the region. As Christopher Cozier explains, a definition of the Caribbean, or who the Caribbean artist represents, “often feels illogical or ill-fated, perhaps because it cannot fully describe the expanse of ocean and the archipelago of islands, nation-states, colonial territories, departments, and unions with diverse populations, languages, geography, cultures and histories.” (7).

The online catalog of the exhibition, published by Artzpub/Draconian Switch and designed by Richard Rawlins offers an innovative graphic design, high quality pictures of the artwork, and two essays by Cozier and Flores that situate the artwork and suggest interesting reflections around it (<http://www.artzpub.com/content/special-publications/wrestling-image>). Also, the fact that anyone with Internet access can read the catalog speaks of the reach and transnational conversation that the project welcomes. After visiting *Wrestling with the Image* it becomes clear that its critical space is one shaped by playful constructions of different “ways of seeing.” It demonstrates the resonance today of George Lamming’s (1960) claim that a “way of seeing” entails a way of engaging critically with the world around us. The idea of “seeing” as critical perspective and practice is also embedded in the notion of “wrestling,” which the artwork re-defines in interesting and productive ways.

Rather than founded solely upon experiences of anxiety and conflict, *wrestling* is presented as an act of investigation, and is therefore in this sense cathartic, for it opens a space of expressive and interpretive possibilities. This premise allows the exhibit to take on a new level by demonstrating that in order to engage with the artwork, the viewer also needs to confront questions and establish connections between the various narratives that the exhibition foregrounds. Through a detailed viewing of all the rooms in the exhibition, dialogical relations between works start to take form. Critical conversations exist within and across different rooms and viewers are invited to appreciate each artwork on its own and to simultaneously make connections between the different pieces.

One of the first artworks encountered when stepping into the exhibition is the painting *I am not afraid to fight a perfect stranger* (2009) by Bahamian artist John Cox which epitomizes the idea of “wrestling” mentioned earlier. Cozier explains in the catalog how Cox’s painting and conceptual framework inspired the title of the exhibition (7). This diptych self-portrait shows an image of Cox standing next to his double; an image that, read in conjunction with the title of the painting, reveals the irony of considering oneself a stranger. This canvas challenges the viewer by suggesting a series of questions that encourage us to “wrestle” with, and interrogate, both the familiar and the unfamiliar. Who is the stranger in oneself? Is this stranger sometimes formed by the identities socially imposed on us?



John Cox. *I am Not Afraid to Fight a Perfect Stranger*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas 167.6 x 274.3 cm.

Sharing the room with Cox's painting is Charles Campbell's *Bagasse Cycle 1* (2009). Its rectangular shape and lines are reminiscent of Jackson Pollock. Campbell's painting, through the image of the bagasse (crushed remains of the sugar cane) points to the history of oppression during slavery and afterward. Also, the ironic resemblance between Pollock's abstract work and the literal image of the bagasse in Campbell's painting confronts the viewer with how, historically, figurative art has been privileged in the region over abstract or conceptual artwork. This also puts the history of both art styles, figurative and abstract, in relation to Caribbean art in conversation. The bagasse ultimately brings in the notion and reality of what remains, further pointing to issues of inequality in the contemporary Caribbean and in this way connecting the past to the present.

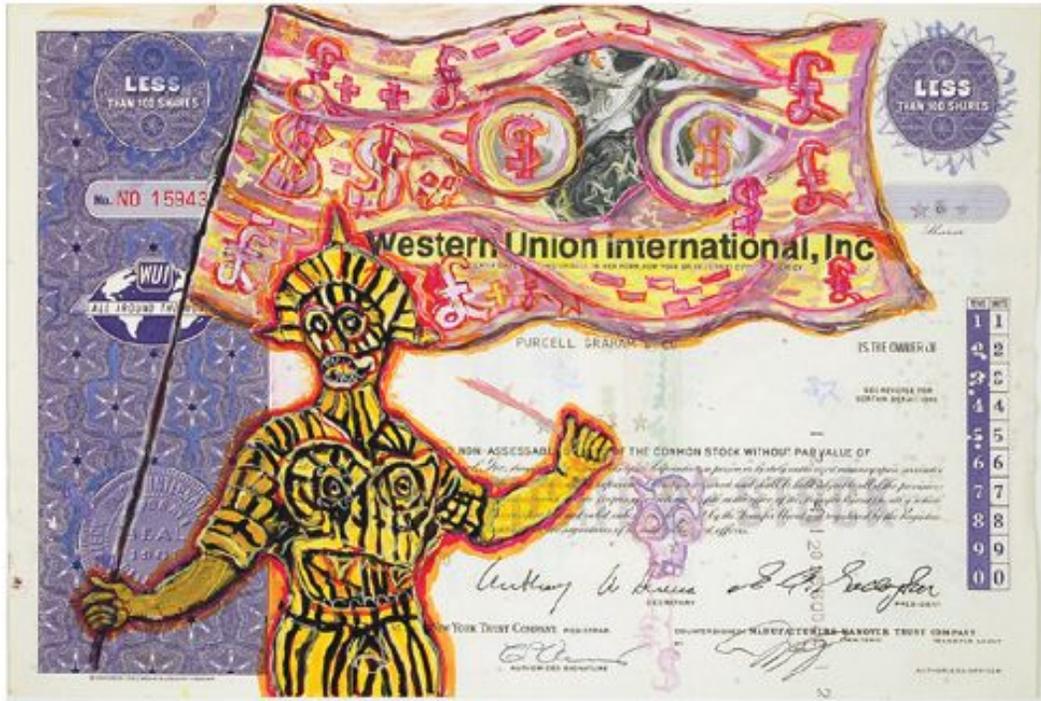


Charles Campbell. *Bagasse Cycle 1 (Bagasse)*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 550 x 220 cm. Photo by Rafa Hierro.

Like Cox's painting, Nicole Awai's *Specimen from Local Ephemera: Mix More Media!* (2009), also offers the image of a doubling self that points at the experience of being simultaneously linked to two locations: Trinidad and the United States. The artist's statement in the exhibition catalog reveals a comfortable negotiation of her identity in both places and playfully dares the viewer to avoid "quick readings" of her experience (31). This purpose seems humorously depicted in a map legend of bright nail polish located in the bottom left corner of the piece that obstructs a straightforward "navigation" of the work, encouraging us to share the sense of suspense.

This feeling of suspense and expectation is also conveyed in *Temporary Horizons* (2010), Heino Schmid's installation video shows the repeated balance and fall of two bottles after the artist arranges them on top of each other in a supportive, yet fragile equilibrium. The sound of the fall every five minutes reminds the viewer of the dizzying repetition suggested in Philip Thomas' painting *Carousel* (2008), and adds to the notion of a paradoxical coexistence of stasis and mobility, embedded in repetition, that relates both to Caribbean societies across the archipelago as well as geographies worldwide.

The combination and predominance of vivid colors in many of the works provokes a powerful effect on the retina that is never superfluous. Often color highlights multilayered ways to access the artwork. Hew Locke's colorful drawings of Carnavalesque characters (on documents from old and new commercial companies) illustrate the articulation of political resistance embedded in Carnival and indigenous mythic imagery across the Americas. This juxtaposition of markers of colonial oppression and symbols of its resistance enables contrapuntal readings, an analytical approach that, as Edward Said suggests in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), entails an incorporation of what was silenced, marginalized and excluded so that new narratives can emerge.



Hew Locke. *Western Union International*, 2009. Acrylic paint and felt pen on paper 30.4 x 24.4 cm.

Similarly, the bright colors and patterns in Marcel Pinas' installation, an extract from *Kwi Wi Kani* (2007), expresses more than what is first suggested to the eye. The thousand bottles covered by colorful pieces of cloth, repeat and alternate throughout the piece. As Tatiana Flores notes, "[t]he patterns identify specific Maroon villages—historically, the communities of runaway slaves in Suriname—and thereby celebrate local traditions," establishing an intimate reflection on collective memory and the heritage of maroon communities in Surinam and the wider Caribbean (23). Form and languages of remembrance are equally present in Sri Irodikromo's *Frekti Kon Na Wan* (2010), a multi-media batik piece. Through the Indonesian technique of "batik" (which also incorporates Irodikromo's Indonesian heritage) Winti symbols from an Afro-Surinamese maroon culture are printed on a large piece of red cloth, creating interplay between both legacies.

Visual and audio stimuli are very much present throughout the exhibition. These stimuli overwhelm the senses and the intellect, but their effect fits a purpose since it provides a sense of the multidimensionality of the artwork. Ebony Patterson's mesmeric photograph *Entourage* reflects the carefully negotiated self-fashioning around dancehall culture in Jamaica, where elements of (hyper) masculinity are questioned and interrogated. The use of light in the photograph *The Quiet Fight* (2006) by Nadia Huggins creates a powerful image and chiaroscuro

effect where boundaries between fight and intimacy seem blurred. In the same room as *Entourage* is Oneika Rusell's *Porthole* (2008), a video of striking lyrical qualities. On the screen, two parallel portholes show an image of the sea in Japan, where Rusell currently resides. A drawing of a whale resembling Moby Dick is submerged into the sea before a colorful illustration of the artist, dancing dancehall style. In the meantime, a blend of siren-like drumming fills the space. The sound of this video, constantly playing, can be heard from most rooms, setting up an intriguing tone and adding to the bridging of spaces in the show.



Nadia Huggins. *The Quiet Fight*, 2006. Digital print, 29.8 x 39.4 cm.



Ebony G. Patterson. *Entourage*, 2010. Digital print, 204.5 x 306 cm.

Some of the artwork in the exhibition highlights the expectations created by the rhetoric of tourism and its construction of the Caribbean as a space for (self)discovery, thus reproducing the epistemic violence of (neo)colonialist discourses. Blue Curry's *Discovery of the Palm tree: Phone Mast* (2008) unveils the tourist industry's disguise of the Caribbean, and the subsequent commodification of landscape and cultures marketed as "tropical playground." Curry's installation video shows a natural landscape of palms located somewhere in the Bahamas. The focal point of the camera is a palm tree; however when the camera zooms in, the viewer gradually discovers that what initially looked like a palm tree is really a phone mast that has been disguised in order to conform to the demands of the touristic eye/I.

Opposite Curry's video is Richard Fung's *Islands* (2000), which also problematizes notions of visibility, the readability of locations as constructed by images and associations, and how these can become dangerously naturalized in one's mind. Fung's installation video is based on John Huston's film *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, which, although set in the Pacific during the Second World War, was actually shot in Tobago in 1957. This disguising of a Caribbean island as another in the South Pacific renders both locations interchangeable as tropical landscapes (Flores 19). Fung's video embarks on a search for his uncle Clive who worked as an extra in the film alongside a number of other Chinese Trinidadians whose role was to portray Japanese

soldiers in the Pacific. *Islands* brings the background of cinematic representations of exoticized places to the forefront in an attempt to un/(ad)dress what Krista Thompson (2008) identifies as a commodification of experience through the configuration of picturesque narratives.

Other artists like Roshini Kempadoo and Holly Bynoe question the representational nature originally associated to photography (especially ethnographic photography), and its history and role within the imperial project as a means to simultaneously document and erase the individual. Bynoe calls attention to this through the use of collage. In the four collages exhibited, the superposition of images from official and family archives, and the painting and scraping of their surface by obstructing the sight of the actual photographs, suggest the malleability of identity within visual representation. *Imperial* (2010) is perhaps the collage that most poignantly illustrates this; the superposed image of the British passport insignia over a person's face evokes the ways in which self and collectivity sometimes merge, obstruct or define each other.

Similarly, Kempadoo uses the superposition of archival material from official and family archives and landscape pictures taken in Guyana in an attempt to explore her own relationship to the Caribbean and England. The four photographs exhibited are part of the series *Virtual Exiles* where the artist re-figures the colonial archive through the inclusion of personal visual narratives. The artwork's composition evokes the intersection of the individual and the collective, the past and the present in the formation of collective memory. It demonstrates how the ways in which society interprets and re-imagines the past is informed by history and memory at the individual level. Both Kempadoo and Bynoe create counter-archives that respond to the gaps and absences of colonial archiving by re-inserting other memories and gazes in which an autobiographical practice plays an important part.



Holly Bynoe. *Imperial*, 2010. Collage on archival durotone newsprint aged, 84 x 106 cm.



Roshini Kempadoo. *Virtual Exiles: Frontline, Backyards*, 2000. Giclée print, 47.4 x 72 cm.

Kempadoo and Bynoe's concern with the archive and the practice of archiving is shared by Joscelyn Gardner, whose stone lithographs bring to light archival images of instruments for the torture of female slaves. In the artwork these instruments are entangled with beautifully braided hairstyles and colorful poisonous flowers. Botanical knowledge regarding plants used to

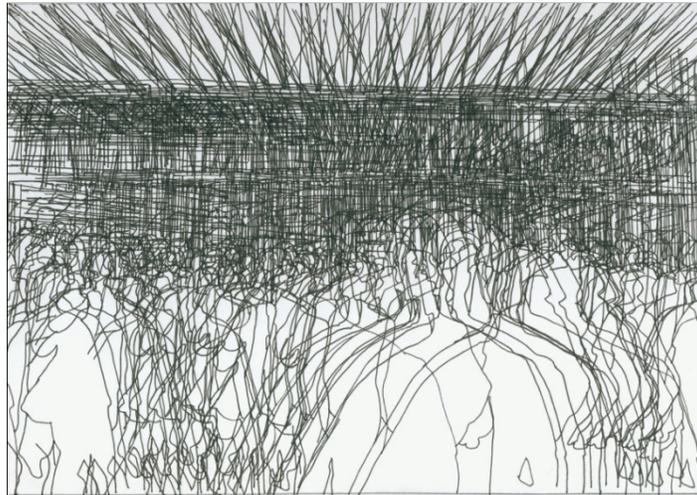
induce abortions was passed on from generation to generation of slave women. Its inclusion in the artwork, as well as the reproduction of the braided hair, point towards a female tradition of (counter)memory and resistance strongly rooted in kinship.



Joscelyn Gardner. *Convolvulus Jalapa (Yara)*, 2010.
Hand painted stone lithograph on frosted mylar, 91.4 x 61 cm.

Wrestling with the Image combines art from both established and emerging artists in the region. Inclusive exhibitions like *Wrestling* facilitate in this way the kind of dialogue between artists that is central to creative exchange, intellectual stimulation and to consolidating networks that often play an important role in launching the work of artists. Since the opening of *Wrestling with the Image* in 2011, the work of emerging artists like Sheena Rose and Marlon James has been showcased in important art shows and pioneering art publications like *ARC (Art. Reconciliation. Culture)*. Through digital video and digital photography, respectively, Rose and James incorporate a nuanced attention to the everyday, and the ways in which we engage with those around us, in local and global contexts. Their personal engagement with the image creates a contact zone between viewers and the people portrayed in the work that enriches reflections on the issues of subjectivity and subject position. When looking at the visual story that narrates Sheena Rose's experiences in South Africa, or looking at the protagonists of Marlon James' portraits, viewers are sharing a space in which, not only do they become engrossed in the visual

narratives and acts of gazing, but they also become aware of their degree of participation in engaging with the artwork. The daily routines deployed in Rose's video evoke our own diurnal routines, unveiling a sophisticated interplay between awareness and mechanization. In James' photography the gaze of its models into the photographic lens creates a powerful effect that renders viewers susceptible to an act of viewing in reverse.



Sheena Rose. *Town*, 2008. Digital Video, variable dimensions. 00:02:44.



Marlon James. *Mark and Gisele*, 2007. Digital Print.

Drawing on rich visual vocabularies, *Wrestling with the Image* makes an emphasis on the cultural and creative diversity in contemporary Caribbean art that renders fixed definitions of national, or even regional, art futile. It also demonstrates the resonance of Krista Thompson's (2007) critique of "a widespread popular contention throughout many parts of the Anglophone Caribbean: that representational art more transparently pictures the islands and wider region, while conceptual work is an obstruction to viewing, to really seeing, the Caribbean." (120). *Wrestling with the Image* shows how conceptual art can in fact offer insightful perspectives on many socio-political, cultural and historical issues related to the region, as well as many other locations elsewhere. In this respect, viewers are called to interrogate and think alongside the artists, sharing the importance of formulating poignant questions for the creation of flexible epistemologies.

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