

Caribbean Queer Visualities

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One of the most remarkable developments in the Caribbean and its diaspora over the past two decades or so is the emergence of a generation of young visual artists working in various media (paint, film, performance) who have been transforming Caribbean visual practice, perhaps even something larger like Caribbean visual culture. A significant part of the veritable explosion of contemporary Caribbean art is owed to this generation. Undoubtedly, the increasing visibility of Caribbean art is also connected to other significant developments—for example, the fracturing of modernity’s hierarchies, the transformation of mobilities (the literal and digital movement of ideas and people in new ways across the globe), and a decentering of the evaluative and temporal assumptions of modernism that secured the privilege of a certain aesthetic norm. The significance of this generation is their attunement to these shifts and their capacity to translate them through a local visual idiom.

Therefore, part of what is important to note is the *location* of this younger generation in a new *conjuncture* of Caribbean life. This is a generation that is not shaped by the cultural-political questions—or by the ethos that framed and animated the cultural-political questions—of earlier generations of the postcolonial Caribbean. This younger generation came of age in a context of world-transforming dislocations at national, regional, and global levels. They did not grow up in the “aftermaths of sovereignty” so much as in the aftermaths of sovereignty’s aftermaths—in the context, in other words, of the exhaustion of the great narratives of collective social and political change of the latter half of the twentieth century, the great collective narratives of decolonization, postcolonial nationhood, black power, and socialism, that gave point to their parents’ lives.

Or to put this more precisely, this generation grew up in a context in which these narratives, once oppositional, once open to the adventure of a future-to-come, have congealed and ossified, and as a consequence the narratives have become rationalizations for modes of exclusion, marginalization, repression, and intolerance directed at their own citizens. Almost as soon as the old antisystemic movements for social and political change were installed in institutionalized power in the new sovereign states of the region, they began to stultify into new modes of orthodoxy, into their own terrified normativities, anxiously policing the boundaries of identity and community, seeking to contain expressions of personhood and belonging, and of sex and pleasure.

Not surprisingly, then, the artistic preoccupations of this younger generation are not organized by the same ethos of artistic value as their nationalist elders; their visual aesthetic of dissent does not gravitate, for example, toward class or race or nation, or anyway not in the same modernist, centered, earnest, aspirational way of older generations. Take Jamaica, for instance, and think of Barrington Watson's evocation of the maternal dignity of familial black womanhood in a work such as *Mother and Child* (1959); and think of the dread displacements of this sentimental ethos of nationalist self-respect performed by Karl Parboosingh in a work such as *Jamaican Gothic* (1968), darker, grittier, more unforgiving; and then think of the displacements of this cultural nationalist aesthetic performed by Dawn Scott's social realist critique of the structural violence embodied in the Jamaican political rationality in *A Cultural Object* (1985). For all their profound differences, these artists nevertheless share the horizon of a progressive collective futurity in whose name they can enact their quarrel with the terms *nationhood* and *collective belonging*. Now, true, it's not exactly that the symbolic universe inhabited by this older generation of Jamaican artists doesn't persist in the work of a younger generation, born from around 1980 onward. Think of Khary Darby's sublime meditations on the intimacies of subjugation in *The Birth of Tragedy* (2002) or the figurative minimalism of Oneika Russell's *A Natural History* series (2012) or the mannered voluptuousness—even *jouissance*—of Phillip Thomas's *Carousel* (2009). None of these artists disavows the demand for an engaged intelligence. But none of them sees this in relation to modernist categories of social change enacted by previous generations.

What has opened here in the contemporary Caribbean, I believe, is a space (undoubtedly a very embattled, uneven, and conflicted space) in which new questions about subjectivity and identity, powers and subjugations, have emerged, questions that are less about ideologies than about *embodiments*, less about representations than about *performativities*, less about utopias than about *instantiations*, less about belongings than about *lovings*, less about stabilities than about *displacements*, less about sexualities than about *desires*. Powers of conformity are now as much inside as outside—inside the nation, inside the community, inside the family, inside the self. This adds dimensions to subjugations that are *affective* as much as cognitive, *unconscious* as much as conscious, *invisible* as much as visible. And, therefore, questions of dissidence—and indeed the very *languages* of dissidence—have to be learned all over again.

This is the aesthetic-political space in which our Small Axe project “Caribbean Queer Visualities” emerges. We aim to inquire into the relation between queer sensibilities and visual art practice in the Caribbean and among artists of Caribbean descent in the Caribbean diaspora. How have Caribbean artists responded to the ideological and sometimes legal constraints around sexual identity and sexual practice? How have they responded to the conformist state and to community practices concerning modes of family, kinship, and belonging? Can one read dissenting engagements with sexual identity in the practice of Caribbean visual practitioners? In what ways? Indeed, can one speak broadly of a “queer visuality” in the Caribbean? What, in short, are the dimensions of Caribbean queer aesthetics, and

what might some of the implications be for a queer perspective on Caribbean contemporary art practice?

Our aim in this initiative has been to construct a discursive context—a forum—in which to engage these questions in an open, thought-provoking way. We do not expect final answers. We are happy if we can redescribe the problem-space in productive ways that make possible further dialogue. We are hoping for a polysemic dialogue that both redescribes our political and aesthetic pasts (giving us a different set of starting and transition points for the narrative of what we are and how we became who we are) and reorients our concerns with the political and aesthetic present by offering us a different concatenation of possibilities.

“Caribbean Queer Visualities” is the third in a series of *Small Axe* visual projects—all of them supported by the generosity of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, New York. It may be helpful, therefore, to say a little about what it is we are after here in our engagement with visual art, which is long-standing, even inaugural. What is art doing in a journal of criticism? For us, simply put, art is a mode of engaged intelligence with a potential to be a mode of *dissenting* intelligence, a way of resisting conformity, of making us see in ways we hadn’t before the subjugations and outrages that define our worlds. Though we have been interested in showing the existing and emerging work of artists, we have become more and more interested in constructing thematically driven projects and to invite the participation of artists. For us artists are—or should be—part of the larger critical conversation. But needless to say, these projects are also aimed at stimulating and encouraging an art critical and an art historical sensibility among young scholars. We want to encourage posing questions such as the following: What kinds of critical tools are important for thinking through Caribbean art practices? What is the idea of the visual and visuality? What dimensions of history and what approaches to the past are important to the exploration of traditions of Caribbean art practice and art appreciation? What are the key conjunctures in the making of Caribbean art practice? How are we to think about the relation between the colonial and the modern, the modern and the national, the national-modern and the contemporary, the high and the popular, questions of politics and identity and ethnicity, and so on, in these practices of making visual work and in the practices of thinking about them?

The first project we initiated was called “Caribbean Visual Memory” (2009). As ever we were animated by questions we didn’t know exactly how to answer. We sought

to ask, How does Caribbean art remember? Or again, what is the memory-politics of Caribbean visual practice? How does the past figure in the present of Caribbean visual work? What are the objects, thematics, figurations, technologies, textures, gestures—what, in effect, is the aesthetic grammar—through which the past is constituted as a site of incitement and engagement for various generations of Caribbean colonial and postcolonial artists? How is the notion of memory figured and refigured through visual representation? In the wake of this first project, it soon became clear that the question of memory had not been exhausted and needed perhaps to be re-posed. The idea for the second project, “The Visual Life of Catastrophic History” (2011–13), emerged in the immediate aftermath of the terrible earthquake in Haiti in January 2010. Catastrophe—natural, political—is a major theme in the creative Caribbean imagination. Again we posed a number of questions: How has visual practice in the Caribbean sought to engage our catastrophic history? Might the visual enable a distinctive hermeneutic register for evoking and interpreting catastrophe? Is there something distinctly hypervisual about catastrophe?

“Caribbean Queer Visualities” aims to push the envelope established by these projects, both in terms of *theme* as well as in terms of *programmatic* concerns. Thematically, in some sense, the earlier projects were conceived within a conventional (or anyway familiar) framework. Here, however, we conceived a break, an attempt to pry open fresh cognitive-aesthetic space, less to deepen or

expand, perhaps, than to *change* our lenses of perception and appreciation. Programmatically, we sought to construct a dialogue between artists and writers. To realize this, we organized two meetings: the first at Yale University, 14–15 November 2014; and the second at Columbia University, 2–3 April 2015. These dialogues turned out to be enormously fruitful inasmuch as they generated a surprisingly open and frank discussion about personal identity and art making in Caribbean cultural-political spaces. Note that what we aimed at was an engagement between visual artists and art writers. Given our preoccupations in *Small Axe*, this is a relation we aim to cultivate and shelter. True, we are driven by the visual work, but we do not mean to suggest a merely derivative role for writers. The artist extracts that accompany the artwork in this catalogue—snippets of intimate conversations—grow out of this dialogue.

“Caribbean Queer Visualities” exemplifies something at the heart of the Small Axe Project, namely, the commitment to an experimental platform for reflexively thinking aloud about the cultural, political, sexual, aesthetic worlds in and through which we live and work. It’s what we’ve been about for twenty years.

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