

# Chandra Frank

ON BLUE CURRY

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## Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead: On Tourism, Leisure, and Aesthetic Traps

Tourism as social affliction—it's a proposition that Bahamian artist Blue Curry explores through a white wall and twelve showerheads with colorful bathing suits hanging from them. Curry, who is based in London, takes everyday scenarios from tourist culture and places them into a contemporary art space. While the twelve bathing suits are presented as one installation, Curry stresses that each has its own sculptural quality. These qualities are pronounced through focusing on the materials; a slight fold might highlight the frills

and motives of the swimsuit. In the presentation of the bathing suits in a conceptual arts space, Curry invites viewers to think beyond the garment and to start imagining its sculptural value.

Initially, Curry had envisioned a slow drip of water coming from the swimsuits, but in my conversation with him, it quickly became clear that he tends to stay away from inserting elements that might come across as too staged or performed.<sup>1</sup> The showerheads are thus hung without a water drip. For Curry, who grew up in The Bahamas, the bathing suits remind him of his childhood; his mother's or sister's dripping swimsuit, after a visit to the beach. The bathing suits in this installation, carefully selected by Curry and sourced from different shops in London during the sales, are used in reference of the dominance of tourist culture in The Bahamas and in response to the overarching theme of social affliction of this exhibition. In this sense, the bathing suits are used as a means to explore how the visual lives of social affliction are bound up within tourist culture. Yet Curry stressed to me several times that he does not want to insert a



Figure 1. Blue Curry, *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead*, 2018; installation, twelve bathing suits on showerheads.

heavy-handed identity politics narrative with displaying the swimsuits; rather, he is interested in engaging questions of the visual lives of social affliction from a somewhat playful perspective. Positioning the swimsuits as a found visual of tourist culture, Curry converses with their form and sculptural potential.



Figure 2. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead* (detail).

The Bahamas have long been portrayed as a generic “tropical island,” complete with notions of “unspoiled” land and references to paradise.<sup>2</sup> The Bahamas are a former British colony and, after gaining independence in 1973, remain part of the British Commonwealth. The creation of this tropical paradise lends itself for critical questions on leisure culture. The bathing suit seems to fit right in with the making of a tropical paradise—particularly in the context of the tourist economy. Early tourist advertisements for The Bahama’s often portrayed white women in white bathing suits on a boat or beach, surrounded by blue waters and palm trees. Within the Caribbean context, The Bahamas is often understood as one of the most successful forms of tourist destinations. The myth of paradise comes from colonial rule, slavery, and travel narratives. Further, Caribbean tourism is understood to be a direct offshoot of the

plantation system. This directly informs why tourist culture and its economies can indeed be read as a social affliction. Tourism continues to have a violent capitalist and racialized history that relies on the maintenance of the myth of untouched paradise.

The recent Netflix documentary *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened*, about the failed 2017 Fyre music festival in The Bahamas, shows how the region was used as a tropical backdrop to sell exuberantly expensive tickets for a luxury experience. The promotional videos for the festival show deserted islands in blue waters and women (the majority are white) jumping off boats. Apparently the location of the festival would be a private island previously owned by Pablo Escobar. While the documentary is mostly focused on what went wrong in terms of the mismanagement of money, construction, and planning, there is an important behind-the-scenes story that reveals the racial and social inequalities embedded in tourist culture: Fyre Festival founders had hired hundreds of Bahamian contract workers who were abandoned without any pay. This is where tourism and ideas of social affliction become visible.

The tourist industry, Curry explained to me, was everywhere on the island he grew up on. In his work, Curry thus incorporates these sentiments and contradictions of being sur-

rounded by tourism as the islands’ main economy. He is committed to unpacking the bubble that tourism creates through taking a certain cliché from that culture and placing in within a different framework. In doing so, a new relationality with a particular object might emerge. Curry is intrigued by the traces that tourist culture leaves behind and poses questions on how these traces become part of a constructed national identity. The dominant and encompassing nature of tourist culture within the Caribbean make it hard to determine what is “real” and what comes forth out of the need for capitalist commodification. For Curry, within this configuration, clichés from leisure culture start to trouble what is perceived as “real” in terms of visual culture: “I look at the exotic quite intensely: what is considered exotic, how we got there, through colonialism, and, you know, discoveries and exploring and all that stuff. But then the exotic . . . There can be a temporal exotic.”

In writing about *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead*, I’m most invested in grappling with the complexities that the work brings about. How do we think about the social affliction of tourism and what are the tensions that come with bringing this work into a contemporary arts space? In exploring these tensions, it is important to think about tourism beyond questions of mere representation. In other words, this discussion is not merely about how the Bahama’s is portrayed and how artists such as Curry play with the visual imagery coming from tourist culture. Tourist culture is about the embodied experience of social affliction as well. The way that bodies are read within the tourism landscape is inherently gendered and racialized.

In Curry’s work there is play with caps, tasseled T-shirts, customized beach towels, combs, plated golden jewelry, sand, and sunscreen lotion. These are objects that exist within tourist culture and bring up questions about embodiment, objects that take on specific meaning when they appear within tourist culture *and* when they are deliberately taken out of that context. For Curry, these objects are also inherently of interest because of their playful character. This makes me curious, since Curry has emphasized his work being “light” vis-à-vis other artists in the exhibition. What makes these specific objects light? Is it the objects themselves or how Curry uses them?



Figure 3. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead (detail).*



Figure 4. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead (detail).*

The swimsuit, as an object, might be understood as a light commentary on the clichés of leisure culture, but also it directly feeds into the production and consumption of the exotic. In this sense, the bathing suit is a somewhat expected object, from a Western point of view. There is already a certain expectation of what a “Caribbean aesthetic” woven into the object would look like. This idea of what is expected makes it useful to further mediate on how the visual lives of social affliction become permeated within the Caribbean context. Social affliction becomes part of the everyday and the mundane. It is this tension that Curry enjoys wrestling with in his work.

The bathing suit operates, as do other objects and practices that are placed within the framework of tourism, within a cultural arena beyond tourism as a business industry. Curry’s twelve dangling swimsuits are thus a response to a particular type of visual culture, one that is built out of a conglomeration of the exotic that tourism thrives on, as Curry explains. Needless to say, the maintenance of paradise aesthetics becomes a social affliction in everyday life for Bahamians.

### “It’s Better in The Bahamas”



Figures 5 and 6. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead (detail).*

“Frills, giant sequins—I find that . . . the things that we wear to the beach become a uniform of leisure,” Curry explains. He proposes the bathing suits as sculptural objects, placing emphasis in the work on the materiality of the bathing suit. While his initial interest in the swimsuit stems from its aesthetic potential, it is inevitably a gendered object. Hanging on the showerheads, emptied of ownership, they leave us to imagine the bodies that once fit into them.

CF: “Why women’s bathing suits?”

BC: “That aspect of fantasy . . . that is always layered onto the Caribbean is so visible in women’s swimming costumes.”

“It comes from a found visual, from tourist culture, that I think that everyone is familiar with,” Curry says of the swimsuit, “and what happens if that shifts into a really clean conceptual space? The bathing suit becomes . . . very sculptural. I identified that a long time ago.” In the conceptualizing the bathing suit as a sculptural object, Curry plays with the notions of fantasy attached to the garment. This fantasy itself is of course already

gendered and racialized. Curry thinks of Western women in England getting ready for their holidays and the swimsuit as a must-have item. For Curry, the swimsuit is not just about beach culture but about the very making of visual tourist culture and its aesthetics. The creation and upholding of the fantasy is not geographically bound to The Bahamas, but exists within the wider framework of tourist culture in the Caribbean.

Curry states of *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead*, “I don’t want this to be a piece about what I think about tourism.” One of Curry’s trademarks is that he likes to leave the viewer with lots of ways into the work, as he describes it. There is purposely little information provided with this installation, leaving the viewer to make sense of how the swimsuits fit into the larger theme of the visual culture of social affliction in the Caribbean. What stories are attached to these green-panther-print and pink-pelican swimsuits? Curry decidedly stays on the margins of how his work might be read. Yet in conversing with him about The Bahamas, the contradictions of the meaning of the work become clear. On the one hand, Curry is not interested in making a work about what he thinks about tourism, but on the other hand, this *is* a work on what he thinks about tourist culture in The Bahamas.



Figures 7 and 8. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead* (detail).

Curry has produced, perhaps unintentionally, an installation that reveals how he engages tourist culture as a white Bahamian. About 90 percent of the island is black, leaving about 4.7 percent white Bahamians. In locating the impact of tourist culture on Curry’s own life, it becomes clear that his experiences contour the direction he takes with the swimsuits. Not being read as Bahamian, and having the choice to blend in with tourist culture, has provided Curry with particular access: “As long as I didn’t use local dialect, me and white friends could go to the hotel swimming pools; we could go and watch a show; we could do almost anything because we could pass in that way.”

For fun in his younger years, Curry would pretend he was on a holiday and see firsthand what it meant to enter the tourist bubble in The Bahamas. Slipping into and out of these spaces shaped Curry’s artistic practice. He acknowledges that black Bahamians wouldn’t be able to enter the premises of casinos, which are off limits for Bahamians, and did not have the privilege of accessing these spaces. This further informs the stark processes of racialization that underlies the making of visual culture. With a majority black population, there is an immediate expectation of “authenticity” linked to the tourist experience on the islands. This too is something Curry reflects on, since he is not the one that embodies this “authenticity” or the “exotic.” In this sense, when we grapple with social affliction in Curry’s art, we also have to question how social affliction might become embodied. As alluded to earlier, tracing the visual lives of social affliction within tourism goes beyond representation. The tourism industry relies on the imagery attached to it but that also affects bodies differently. This becomes clear in the documentary on the Fyre Festival: it is black Bahamians who end up doing the majority of the manual labor for the organizers without pay. In the presentation of the tropical paradise imaginary, there are fixed roles.

The visual culture of social affliction is therefore bound up with the question of object/subject. Curry’s work and our conversations show that the bathing suits within his understanding of The Bahamas reference the objectification of leisure culture. Looking at Curry’s oeuvre, it could very well read as an assemblage of what is made into the exotic. Notions of objectification are tied to the promotion of consumption culture, which within the Bahamian context also speaks to the visual presence of violence that remains. What stands out in Curry’s work is how he tends to meaning-making processes of the exotic. Yet as he does so, I wonder about the presence and absence of blackness in his work. Tourist culture relies on the commodification of blackness, and within its visual culture it also renders black Bahamians as sculptural objects in the paradise imaginary. This is, one could argue, the embodied afterlife of colonial plantation slavery.

A lot of the imagery in Bahamian tourist advertisements shows white women walking on a beach, sometimes in wedding attire,

or sipping cocktails. Black Bahamian women are seen massaging white men on a beach or as generally ready to serve tourists. White women are able to have romantic getaways, don sunhats, ride horses on the beach, and “relax and pamper themselves,” while black Bahamians are actively not portrayed as participants in leisure culture. The gendered and racialized dynamics of tourism in The Bahamas reveal how white womanhood is constructed as the main aesthetic worth preserving and serving. Black Bahamians are typically incorporated into music, dance, and carnival advertisements—the “authentic” experience of “local culture” is another asset for the tourist industry. Advertisements for The Bahamas will often include the promise of taking tourists back in time, fixing black people into a static timeframe in which nothing ever changes for them, while tourists come and go. Overall, The Bahamas are portrayed as a happy and diverse place that will take care of all your needs. The very geography of the islands, according to tourist advertisements, is “just waiting to be explored.” This becomes part of the tourist sale and an extension of colonial exploration.

Curry approaches the questions of authenticity that inform Bahamian tourist culture through grappling with the visual aesthetics of irony in his work. The use of irony in the conceptual art world is by no means new, but it poses interesting questions in relationship to the theme of social affliction. Can social affliction ever be understood through irony? In which ways does irony illuminate or negate the visual life of social affliction? Curry explains that in art making you can’t avoid the making of the exotic. There is always something foreign to bringing objects into a space, outside the environment: “If I’m choosing these bathing suits, and they have tiger print on them and frills and all of these sort of indicators of the exotic, and they are in a white gallery space, then it just adds up.”

For Curry, the irony of the work is tied to bringing the swimsuits into a setting where they are out of place. I am interested in the irony that Curry insists on as creative practice, and I question how we might read irony and in which ways irony gets (un)read within the imaginary of the Caribbean. In other words, I am curious about for whom the irony within the artwork is intended. Perhaps the use of irony also relates to the embodied experience of social affliction. While this might be unintended, I wonder whether the irony used in the work might actually be about the embodied position of the artist within The Bahamas. The question of authenticity—and

what gets read as authentically Bahamian—also becomes bound up in Curry’s presence.

In some ways, Curry pokes fun at the bathing suits by propping and staging them as the main point of attention. In other ways, Curry, as discussed earlier, does tend to the deeper layers of the work. It’s the deliberate ambiguity that Curry enjoys playing around with. This ambiguity also comes forth out of his frustration with more traditional Bahamian art forms. He recalls how he grew up with an emphasis on storytelling,

wooden sculptures, and long hours of labor that went into painting. So-called folk culture often becomes a commodity that is packaged as Caribbean or Bahamian culture. These aesthetics become a trap—how does one move out of the commodification of a single aesthetic when its directly tied to the making of wealth? In other words, this mode of art making becomes a mode of survival as it feeds directly into dealing with the violence that comes with being trapped into the precarity of being dependent on tourist culture.

Curry’s critique of local art forms thus has to contend with the question of access and



Figures 9 and 10. *Untitled, Swimsuits, Showerhead* (detail).

privilege. It is his intention to break with the dominance of storytelling and traditional forms of art making, such as the perpetual aesthetic of the hibiscus flower, that according to Curry, is portrayed with a lack of irony. This makes the use of irony complicated—what is ironic to whom? Who picks up on the use of irony? Does irony only come out within a conceptual art space? Curry’s work invites the viewer to think through these questions that inevitably come up when looking at his art: “And then, in an odd way, when I produce this stuff in a contemporary art world, they think I am producing what contemporary art in The Bahamas is. They think that this must be what contemporary art is. It’s funny because nobody at home is entertaining this work.”

Curry is interested in completely disrupting the narrative *and* using a contemporary conceptual art space to do so. The simplicity of his constructions goes against the idea of having to work to produce an artwork, Curry explains. In doing so, he moves away from the notion that labor equals quality artwork. This might be part of an ironic gesture—another take on what gets read as authentic Bahamian art. While Curry offers lots of twists and turns in conceptualizing the work, he does state that he is serious about it: “I am not making fun of anyone.” Curry sees his artistic practice as somewhat of a trick—open for interpretation but without a clear framework. Purposely vague. How the installation of the swimsuits might be read outside the context of The Bahamas is therefore entirely up to the viewer. The bathing suit might just remain a familiar object that is merely out of place in the gallery or seen as the next London hipster rage. Or it might evoke a set of questions on locality, geography, territory, spectacle, and tourism. The histories tied to the bathing suits might fill the room—some speaking louder than others. Other histories might keep haunting.

This haunting is inherently produced by the presence and absence of blackness that is intertwined within Curry’s work. The presence of something quite mundane such as a bathing suit brings up histories of exploitation, segregation, and commodification that shaped The Bahamas. Perhaps there are limitations to capturing social affliction through the use of irony. Social affliction here becomes a much more complex narrative about who is rendered visible and invisible and how violence becomes inscribed in the making of geography and political economy. It is the presence of this violence that calls for a deeper interrogation of the abjection of black Bahamians that is present in the wider discussion on tourist culture and authenticity. The commodification and consumption of blackness occurs within the contemporary art world in similar ways to tourist culture. Seeing the bathing suits as sculptural objects within the context of a haunted colonial presence in the form of tourism also stages whiteness in this encounter.

While Blue Curry as an artist remains in the background, unwilling to give too much of himself away in the work, he does (want to) participate in, and frequently is invited into, conversations on the direction and future of Caribbean art, and he absolutely feels a proud stake of ownership in what becomes read as Bahamian art. In response to the potential hesitance of the art world to include a white Bahamian artist to represent questions of home, locality, leisure, and tourism (in reference to the UK context), Curry says, “It takes a particular type of ‘woke’ curator to include me in a show, who can see beyond that.”

## ENDNOTES

- 1 This conversation took place 18 September 2018 at Curry’s London studio and is quoted throughout.
- 2 See Mimi Sheller, “Natural Hedonism: The Invention of Caribbean Islands as Tropical Playgrounds,” in David Timothy Duval, ed., *Tourism in the Caribbean: Trends, Developments, Prospects* (London: Routledge, 2004), 23–38.