

Book Review

Art in the Caribbean: An Introduction

by Anne Walmsley and Stanley Greaves

New Beacon Books Ltd, 2010, 184 pp., £20, ISBN 978-1-873201-220



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ON THE EVENING OF 15 OCTOBER 2010, *Art in the Caribbean*, a slim, colourful and informative book by Anne Walmsley and Stanley Greaves, was launched, appropriately enough, in the October Gallery. This intimate, elegant and lofty space in the heart of Bloomsbury was a fitting place to launch the book in more ways than one. *Art in the Caribbean* charts the artistic voyage of an archipelago which holds few permanent exhibitions and where (with the exception of Haiti and Cuba) artists and their works are little known even on home turf. As such, it is a work that is harmonious with the intentions of the creators of the October Gallery, which 'opened in 1979 to exhibit the *Transvanguard* – the trans-cultural avant-garde – and to promote artists developing new creative strategies around the world'.¹

The Transvanguard exhibition of 2010 included El Anatsui's *In the World But Don't Know the World?* an aluminium and metal structure recently premiered at the 2009 Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. The Ghanaian artist is famed for having wrapped the facade of the Palazzo Fortuni in a shimmering metal cloth woven from myriads of bottle caps during the 52nd Venice biennale. Transvanguard 2010 also included works by Aubrey Williams who like Anatsui, the gallery has taken under its wing. This patronage was demonstrated, in partnership with The Walker Gallery in Liverpool, by two overlapping solo exhibitions of Williams' works². On the cover of the joint catalogue, the

Guyanese artist (1926-1990) is presented as having gained iconic status as ‘a colossus, bestriding the Atlantic, with feet firmly planted in two different worlds’³, thus resisting classification on the basis of ethnicity. He is referred to variously as a pioneer of Black Arts Movement, a member of the Caribbean Artists Movement, or as a British artist often associated with Frank Bowling RA, his younger compatriot, also a fierce opponent to ethnic labelling, with whom he exhibited at the Hayward Gallery’s seminal event ‘*The Other Story*’ in 1989.

That takes us back to Walmsley, the author of *Art in the Caribbean*, whose previous publications included *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972: A Literary and Cultural History*⁴ and *Guyana Dreaming: Art of Aubrey Williams*⁵. This latter was comprised of a compilation of interviews with, and articles about, the artist, who naturally is also profiled in the new book with *Supernova*, a painting in the *Cosmos* series.

The contribution of two leading Caribbean artists to the book adds to its credentials. Collaborator Christopher Cozier (Trinidadian, artist and writer), whose installation *Tropical Night* was shown in the *Afro Modern* exhibition at Tate Modern Liverpool (January-April 2010), also recently (with art historian, Tatiana Flores) co-curated the exhibition *Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions*, which featured the work of thirty-six contemporary artists from twelve Caribbean countries (though most of them do not reside in their country of origin) at the Art Museum of the Americas. For Cozier, the inherently transnational aspect of Caribbean life, as reflected in its art is essential:

In viewing this work, we are asked to understand the Caribbean as a space rather than a place: a space that is shaped by wherever Caribbean people find themselves, whether in the Americas at large, Europe, Africa or Asia. It is a conversation about movement in the Atlantic world – a dialogue about dispersal rather than displacement.⁶

In his address, co-author Stanley Greaves stressed that a principle of their joint-venture was a deliberate avoidance of theorising jargon, used by some, he argued, to construct an imaginary ‘Caribbean aesthetics’ in a formulaic response to scholarly post-colonialist debates. His wariness echoes Homi Bhabha’s urgency on ‘returning the gaze’, and Édouard Glissant’s demand for ‘the right to opacity’. Greaves also hinted at the underpinning conundrum in these debates, which is whether or not ‘the Caribbean’ is a meaningful entity. Despite the obvious common features of their past and geography, the countries contained in that deceptively simplistic blanket appellation of ‘the Caribbean’ are in fact a mosaic of small worlds demonstrating as much, or possibly more, acute individuality and difference than the ‘Europe’ which forged their history. Hence Greaves, the Guyanese-born artist, educator, poet and musician dismissed the presumption made by various chroniclers of constructing a coherent Caribbean aesthetics. The fragmentation of the archipelago in geographical, political, cultural, ethnic and linguistic terms meant, he believed, that each Caribbean artist is ‘rowing his/her own canoe’. Of course, that intrinsic diversity is further complicated by the fact that a significant

proportion of Caribbean artists do not reside in their place of birth and that the Caribbean locale transcends geographic boundaries. The authors avoided that difficulty, in the case of living artists, by focusing only on individuals residing in the Caribbean.

Greaves and Walmsley responded to what they considered a compelling mission: to publish an authoritative introduction – and the *introductory* intent is stressed – to visual arts in the Caribbean (the islands and Guyana on the continent) from the 1940s to 2000s. That 'anthology of visual arts' fulfils a need, since it aims to reach a wide readership, from the general public to school and college educators, as both a teaching tool and a reference text for scholars. Half of the 180-page book is dedicated to 'The Gallery of Art Works', the *raison d'être* of the venture; each art work is reproduced full page with a critical text about the work and the artist on the facing page. A historical background, with a potted narrative of Amerindian pre-history, the colonial past and the multi-faceted present followed by a timeline, provide the backcloth for a pedagogical and attractively packaged artistic induction. In an elegant and sober style they unravel for the uninitiated the rich, complex and 'Other' contribution of the Caribbean space to world art.

Naturally, as stated by the authors, the English language text implies an inevitably restricted potential readership in its main target market, less than fifteen percent of an overall Caribbean population of around 45 million. That Anglophone focus is evident in the rich illustration of works primarily by artists based in the erstwhile 'British West Indies'. However the representative artists of the non-English-speaking world have been carefully selected.

Cuban art has two contrasting entries. First, with *La Silla*, is Wilfredo Lam, whose credentials as both a leading surrealist artist in Paris, and on his return to his native island in the 1940s, a champion of Afro-Cuban artistic heritage, made him a cult figure for many Caribbean artists in Cuba and other islands. It was in 1941 that Lam, a friend of Picasso, together with André Breton and André Masson, met Aimé Césaire in Martinique. This *rencontre* is now considered an iconic event in Caribbean artistic and literary lore and was commemorated in the exhibition '*Aimé Césaire, Lam, Picasso*' at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in Paris, 16 March - 6 June 2011.

Second, with *Cuba*, is Raul Martinez, one of the artists who led the celebrated Cuban poster design and contributed to its high aesthetic qualities. *Cuba* celebrates the island's independence and its message is readily conveyed to all classes of society. The portraits of the revolutionary heroes Fidel Castro, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos are in a central column, surrounded by a spectrum of Cuban workers, including an artist (a self-portrait), scattered with stars, in honour of Jose Marti (reminiscent of the portrait, *Marti and the Star*, also by Martinez) founding father of *Cuba Libre*. For the French Antilles, the representative is Hervé Beuze, a contemporary artist from Martinique, whose troubling, heavily symbolic 'ephemeral' installation *Machinique*, represents *Les Antilles françaises*. A map of Martinique, made of *bagasse* (sugar cane waste left after extraction of the juice) is suspended in limbo, held by innumerable filigree threads from the structure of a former sugar plantation building. The messages conveyed are just as numerous as these threads, the most potent and obvious being that Martinique, a French

département d'outre mer, among so many free nations, is still attached to the colonial power/Mother country by a twisted web of umbilical cords and restraining leads.

In time, of course, this book – which has sold over 500 copies in the first six months, a reasonable success for a niche interest – might be translated to reach a bigger readership. The authors' decision to ignore artists not presently residing in the Caribbean represents, however, another limitation particularly as the 'staying-put' status is liable to change (among the grandees of yesteryear, like so many of their contemporary compatriots, Lam and Williams, profiled in the book, spent much of their lives outside the Caribbean of their birth). Thus, considering the innate migratory traits of the Caribbean tribes, through economic or other reasons, some inclusion of the Diaspora, albeit modest, might have provided a more accurate tableau of Caribbean Art. Jerry Philogene gives a peculiarly perceptive description of these 'dispersed artists':

Drawing upon this visual multilingualism, these artists create a polycultural visuality that illuminates the multiplicity of their identities formed and informed by memories of the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago – as well as contemporary formulations of each Caribbean island in North America, Europe and Asia. Using culturally loaded images and materials to evoke this visual dialect, their work are reactions to the complexities of living in the Caribbean Diaspora, living in *endezo* - a Haitian Creole word, meaning "to live between two waters" – that "in-between" space, the hyphen, the space of negotiation.⁷

Finally, the 'school-book' mission of the publication (as endorsed by the authors), its reluctance to theorise on 'artistic movements/schools', its mixing of the genres and its focus on the Anglophone states might disappoint some scholars. The cognoscenti might feel that the ambitious goals of *Art in the Caribbean: An Introduction*, have not always been achieved. Nevertheless, in my view, this reasonably priced 184-page book fulfils its authors' claims as a reference book, albeit with the caveats that implies. Not only well-written but amply illustrated, it features 155 illustrations and is aptly described by Greaves as 'a mobile/portable gallery'. What is more, the publication of *Art in the Caribbean: An Introduction*, in London, arguably the most 'multi-cultural' capital of Art in the world, should signal at long last, the recognition onto the international scene, of 'Caribbean Art' as a product of both a discrete region and the sum of multiple different parts. The separate stories of each individual part, and that of the 'in-between space' (*endezo*), remain to be told.

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¹ *Transvanguard Now*, exh. cat. (London: October Gallery Trust, 2009)

² 'Aubrey Williams: Atlantic Fire', January-April 2010, Walker Gallery, Liverpool; 'Aubrey Williams: Now and Coming Time', February-April 2010, October Gallery, London.

³ Reyahn King, ed. *Aubrey Williams* (Liverpool: Printfine, 2009)

⁴ Anne Walmsley, *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966-1972: A Literary and Cultural History* (London: New Beacon Books, 1992)

⁵ Anne Walmsley, *Guyana Dreaming: Art of Aubrey Williams* (Coventry: Dangaroo Press, 1990)

⁶ Christopher Cozier, 'Notes on Wrestling with the Image', *Wrestling with Image: Caribbean Interventions*, January 6, 2011

<<http://www.artzpub.com/content/special-publications/wrestling-image>> [accessed 20 August 2011] (p. 11)

⁷ Jerry Philogene, 'Belonging to in-between', *The Caribbean Review of books*, 25.1 (2011) <<http://caribbeanreviewofbooks.com/crb-archive/>> (accessed 17 August 2011)