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ARTISTS IN AND OUT OF THE CARIBBEAN

Caribbean Art. VEERLE POUPEYE. London: Thames and Hudson, 1998. 224 pp. (Paper US\$ 14.95)

Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain, 1966-1996. MORA J. BEAUCHAMP-BYRD & M. FRANKLIN SIRMANS (eds.). New York: Caribbean Cultural Center, 1998. 177 pp. (Paper US\$ 39.95, £31.95)

“Caribbean” (like “Black British”) culture is (as a Dutch colleague once said of postmodernism) a bit of a slippery fish. One of the books under review here presents the eclectic artistic productions of professional artists with Caribbean identities of varying sorts – some of them lifelong residents of the region (defined broadly to stretch from Belize and the Bahamas to Curaçao and Cayenne), some born in the Caribbean but living elsewhere, and others from far-away parts of the world who have lingered or settled in the Caribbean. The other focuses on artists who trace their cultural heritage variously to Lebanon, France, Malaysia, Spain, China, England, Guyana, India, the Caribbean, the Netherlands, the Philippines, and the whole range of societies in West, East, and Central Africa, all of whom meet under a single ethnic label in galleries in New York and London. Clearly, the principles that vertebrate *Caribbean Art* and *Transforming the Crown* are built on the backs of ambiguities, misperceptions, ironies, and ethnocentric logics (not to mention their stronger variants, such as racism). Yet far from invalidating the enterprise, they offer an enlightening inroad to the social, cultural, economic, and political workings of artworlds that reflect globally orchestrated pasts of enormous complexity.

Veerle Poupeye starts right out, on her first page, by acknowledging the irrationality that colors her subject. She notes that curators of a “Caribbean art” exhibition would be unlikely to select for inclusion a minimalist metal and fluorescent light sculpture by Bismarck Victoria, who is from the

Dominican Republic – not because he (like most other artists from the region) has spent time away from his homeland, but rather because it would fail to fit “what they feel art from the Caribbean should be.” Other disunifying aspects of art from the Caribbean are also placed up front and set in the context of the region’s fragmentation, “balkanization,” and linguistic diversity. Yet balanced against these considerations, she goes on, are the commonalities of colonial and decolonizing experiences, animated debates about authenticity and “Westernization,” and struggles with the threats of cultural imperialism and racial stereotyping – reasons enough for an attempt to capture their main lines between two Thames and Hudson covers.

Poupeye, born in Belgium and based in Jamaica, offers a comprehensive, balanced, and consistently interesting tour through the creative expression of this dispersed array of artists, focusing throughout on traditional forms (painting, sculpture) and on individuals who are (as the book’s opening sentence puts it) “acknowledged in the West as [important figures] in modern art history.” The pace is snappy (we’re constantly aware that the author can’t afford to dwell indulgently on any one piece of the job if she is to cover her assigned task within the “World of Art” series page limit), and the tone is appropriately authoritative.

Poupeye’s introduction broaches two themes that thread through the whole volume – displacement (foreign-born artists coming into the region, locally-born ones traveling out) and “the complexity and dialectic nature of the relationship between Caribbean and metropolitan Western culture” (p. 10). She underscores the importance of geography (including the iconographic use of maps) and language for an understanding of the history of Caribbean art and then moves into opening observations about creolization, racism, questions of cultural identity, and the relationship between art and tourism.

Chapter 1, “Prehispanic and Colonial Art,” covers just that, illustrating its historical narrative with Taino *zemis*, the portrait of a colonial governor, the depiction of a Black Carib chief, and a European-style landscape painting, before introducing early themes in Haitian, Puerto Rican, and Cuban art, mentioning the region’s influence on foreign artists such as Paul Gauguin and Winslow Homer, and ending with a look at the art of Francisco Oller (b. 1833), who “spent most of his life travelling restlessly between Puerto Rico and Europe” (p. 46).

The ground covered in Chapter 2, “Modernism and Cultural Nationalism,” ranges from the influences of *négritude*, the Harlem Renaissance, and Mexican muralism to Brazilian and Spanish modernism, the Cuban *vanguardia*, and the arrival of Haitian art on the international scene, as well as contemporary developments in Jamaica, Trinidad, and

elsewhere. In this chapter, art history is recognized as an aspect of History, and elegantly woven into discussion of wars, occupations, independence movements, and literary and political figures – Aimé Césaire, Alejo Carpentier, Lydia Cabrera, Jean Price-Mars, Rafael Trujillo, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, and Norman Manley (who enters the story as sculptor Edna Manley’s husband).

The third chapter focuses on arts related to popular religions, festivals, and visionary inspiration. Poupeye picks up the story of Haitian art again, sorting out the styles and materials of individual contributors, refuting certain misperceptions (e.g., that all “primitive” Haitian art is tied in to *vaudou*), and chronicling key developments such as the 1968 founding of the Poto-Mitan school and the 1970s experiments of the Saint-Soleil group. She then moves on to Jamaican Revivalism, Cuban Santería (whose “traditionalism” is credited to local colonial policies, though one might also cite the continuing importation of Africans well into the mid-nineteenth century), Trinidad Carnival, Protestant festivals such as the Jonkonnu masquerade, and diasporic offshoots of festival traditions in Brooklyn, Toronto, and London. As in the previous chapter (and indeed, the whole book), political figures and events are an integral part of the picture, and art historical description alternates with commentary on “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s enlistment of *vaudou* imagery, Edward Seaga’s active patronage of the arts, the use of images of José Martí for political statement, and the eruption of race riots during the 1976 Notting Hill Carnival in London.

Chapter 4, “Revolution, Anti-Imperialism and Race Consciousness,” continues to recognize the embeddedness of the region’s art history in political developments – the Cuban Revolution, the short-lived West Indies Federation, independence movements, the creation of in-between statuses for Puerto Rico and the French Antilles, and the efforts of nationalist leaders and intellectuals to combat imperialist threats to their political and cultural sovereignty. Poupeye lays out the logic, in this context, of a turn toward abstractionism and the graphic arts; Cuba and Puerto Rico are in the forefront here, with discussion of the Cuban group *Las Once* and the related journal *Noticias de Arte*, various connections between the University of Puerto Rico and that island’s art world, and parallel discussions of developments in Haiti, Jamaica, and elsewhere. She then follows Caribbean artists to various settings in Europe and North America, reflecting on the influence of their “minority” status, following their activist involvements, and watching the growth of cultural and racial awareness and its effect on artistic expression. To tell the story of this chapter, Poupeye punctuates her prose with isms both political and art historical – nationalism, racism, activism, regionalism, exoticism, modernism, abstractionism, materialism, minimalism, social realism, concretism, constructivism, and the like.

Chapter 5, “Nature in Caribbean Art,” begins, like the book as a whole, with Wilfredo Lam, quickly moving on to other by-now-familiar figures (Aimé Césaire’s evocations of volcanoes, storms in the work of Winslow Homer and Rafael Tufiño, etc.), and introducing some new ones. All of this is orchestrated thematically – personal identification with nature, the degradation of the environment, escapist representations, and abstract representations of different sorts. Cuban exile Ana Mendieta, mentioned frequently in the book, is given special attention here; Poupeye’s quiet *éloge* to this innovative feminist artist, who died in a tragic fall at the age of 37, echoes the dedication page of Lucy Lippard’s 1990 book on multicultural art in the United States: “For TropicAna.”

Chapter 6 explores subjectivity, identity, and existential concerns in the work of Caribbean artists. This essay, like the others, island-hops on every page, pulling the diversity of themes, visions, techniques, and media into a coherent narrative. The interpretation of African and Amerindian heritages is explored, and the story of art in each society of the region is picked up again, with new names, descriptions, and critical commentary.

The final chapter reflects on art produced by a “new generation of Caribbean artists [who has] come of age in an era characterized by disillusionment with the social and political ideals of the previous generation” (pp. 183-84). Returning periodically to names that have come up earlier in the book, Poupeye probes connections between New Cuban Art and political developments of the 1980s and 1990s, looks at the influence of sociopolitical consciousness elsewhere in the region, touches on Rastafarian imagery, graffiti, and street murals, devotes several paragraphs to “constructed photography,” and returns to a number of earlier themes – the expression of identity in art, the use of flags as political statement, the place of race, and emigrant experience.

Poupeye’s decision to close the book with Marc Latamie, a Martiniquan artist based in New York who uses sugar and neon-lighting to produce artistic allusions to the slave trade, the plantation experience, and the region’s economic dependence, is in keeping with the eclectic treatment that she has given, throughout, to the eclectic arts of the Caribbean.

The format of Thames and Hudson’s extensive “World of Art” series has been honed with care: something over 200 pages, printed (in Singapore) on glossy paper that allows vivid color plates and close text/image matches, clear cross-referencing of illustrations, authoritative coverage of a well-defined domain, supplemental bibliography for each chapter (and in Poupeye’s book a glossary of specialized terms), notes, information on illustrations (artist, title, year, medium, dimensions in centimeters and inches, museum or collector, photographic credit) and index. Plus a trim size (6”x8¹/₄”) and price that invite course adoption in an academic discipline

handicapped by books both exorbitant and unwieldy. Readers with less than perfect vision may find a magnifying glass handy for the back matter, where the print has been miniaturized in order to make the whole undertaking possible.

Transforming the Crown has not benefited from such a rational format. This catalogue for an exhibition co-sponsored by the Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Cultural Center and the African Diaspora Institute, which appeared in three New York museums (the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and the Caribbean Cultural Center), has all the earmarks of a publication rushed into print by an over-busy set of curators with fast-approaching deadlines. The considerable value derived from having many contributors (eight essayists and a long list of editors, curators, consultants, project advisors, and interns) is paid for by the absence of a coordinating voice; the essays are uneven in length, format, and interest, and illustrations are handled in a noticeably inconsistent fashion. The figures in two of the chapters are numbered (each as a separate series, resulting in duplicated figure numbers) and in others not. Some of the close descriptions are backed up by images of the works in question, but others are not, and still others are illustrated redundantly, with the same figure appearing in both the text and a later section called "Exhibition Color Plates." Some of the exhibition pieces are discussed as wholes, but illustrated only via details. And for the majority of works discussed in the essays there is no indication of whether they are illustrated anywhere in the book, so that readers will sometimes be rewarded by turning pages and locating particular works in the Color Plates section (alphabetically arranged by artists' names), but often they will come up dry and have to try to imagine what the art looks like. Within the Color Plates section, a standardized format (one artist/one work of art/one illustration) operates to the disadvantage of the several artists who produce installation or video art, in that each is represented by a single static still, when a more flexible design could have better evoked the spirit and form of their work; the innovative design of books by Trinh Minh-Ha and Jean-Paul Bourdier shows how imaginatively this challenge can be met.

The alphabetized, standardized sections of artworks and artists' biographical data (accompanied by photo-portraits that are conscientiously individualized in pose, framing, cropping, and background props, as if they were seniors in a high school yearbook) mask an uneven coverage in the rest of the book. Once I had read the longest, and meatiest, essay (by Mora Beauchamp-Byrd, the exhibition curator), I felt familiar with many of the artists whose work was represented, but I had no way of checking out those whose names I didn't recognize. I cannot, for example, remember any men-

tion at all of Said Adrus, whose mixed media installation appears in the exhibit; an index would have told me whether this oversight was the essayist's or my own.

The first substantive chapter is by Beauchamp-Byrd, who begins with reflections on a painting by the London-based Pre-Raphaelite, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in which an androgynous black child was explicitly intended to offer "jewel-like" decoration for the "passively sensual" white figures at the center. This close artistic reading serves as a springboard for discussion of the image of blacks in British art and the scientific racism that promoted and framed it, and leads into an overview of the role of Africa, India, and the Caribbean in British immigration history, as well as representations of these new presences in art and literature. Moving quickly on to post-World War II realities, Beauchamp-Byrd chronicles the arrival in Britain of artists such as Ronald Moody (from Jamaica via Paris), Uzo Egonu (from Nigeria), Aubrey Williams (from Guyana), David Medalla (from the Philippines), and others. Her reflections on immigrant artists' responses to the complexities and ambiguities of cultural identity and national allegiance introduce us to the photographic art of Ingrid Pollard and the mixed-media compositions of Sonia Boyce, explore reactions (including political movements) to being labeled "Black British," and consider themes of dislocation, dispersal, boundaries, and political unrest in the work of such artists as Veronica Ryan, Nina Edge, Allan deSouza, Marcia Bennett, and others. The capacity of "Black British" artists to put an ironic spin on notions of "Englishness" through the conventional idiom of portraiture is illustrated with oil paintings and photographs by Eugene Palmer, Ajamu, and Rotimi Fani-Kayode, which also allow discussion of imagery focused on gender and sexuality. In like fashion, History (colonial and imperial, represented and evoked, solemn and witty) is illustrated via the screen prints of Gavin Jantjes, acrylic paintings by Lubaina Himid, gold-plated masks by George Kelly, and computer-generated animations by Keith Piper. The essay then returns to the theme of (self-)portraiture, passes on to a loose amalgam of social and ecological issues (child abuse, race riots, crime, toxic waste ...), and considers imagery involving religion and spirituality, memory, and visions of the future, all with reference to art works either in the exhibit or not. As it moves into its final pages, the organization of the essay becomes increasingly difficult to discern, and while readers will have been exposed to a great many wonderful artists, they may legitimately entertain doubts about the logic that has made its various parts show up in the order that they have.

Anne Walmsley's chapter is a concise synopsis of her longer history of the Caribbean Artists Movement (1992), which lasted from 1966 to 1972. Direct, authoritative, and consistently interesting, this essay successfully

portrays CAM members as real individuals, conveys the surge of intellectual commitment that characterized their short-lived experiment, and captures a sense of continuing solidarity and mutual stimulation of the participants even after the group officially disbanded. A brief essay by Kobena Mercer follows, with art-leaning reflections on the black body, the post-colonial body, the eroticized body, the emancipated body, the politicized body. "Looking at the various ways in which the erotic has been embraced – and avoided – across three decades of black British art," he writes, "we find not a linear progression that uncovers timeless truths but the twists and turns of diasporic rhizomes that unearth unexpected seams of insight into the buried layers of historical sediment from which the postcolonial body has emerged" (p. 54). The next chapter, by Gilane Tawadros, Director of the Institute of International Visual Arts in London, devotes special attention to blacks born in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, thus taking on the baton passed to her by Anne Walmsley, whose essay dealt with artists arriving in Britain as young adults in the 1960s. Assessing dilemmas inherent in the potentially double identity of "artist" and "black artist," Tawadros enlists the help of C.L.R. James, who once commented that "life presents you with strange difficulties and, at times, you have to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds" (p. 58).

Deborah Willis, a curator of African American history and culture based at the Smithsonian, offers an essay on black women as both subjects and image-makers in photoart. Her presentation of five black women based in Britain (Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Joy Gregory, Roshini Kempadoo, and Ingrid Pollard – all represented in the exhibition) places their art in the context of parallel work by black women across the Atlantic, such as Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems. Especially striking in these materials is the integration of written texts, much along the lines of the narratives that U.S. African American artist Faith Ringgold uses in her acrylic-and-patchwork compositions.

Judith Wilson, an assistant professor at Yale, then raises questions about the possibility of revising, breaking, circumventing, or otherwise challenging the traditional art historical canon, and contrasts the richness of art produced by diaspora artists with the virtual erasure of their contributions in standard "comprehensive" histories of world art. Her well-grounded point could have been bolstered by stronger references than she offers; the standard introductory texts used for college courses either ignore or pass lightly over such prolific artists as Wifredo Lam and Romare Bearden, and even the Macmillan/Grove's dictionary of art (Turner 1996), whose 34 volumes take up several meters of library shelving at a cost of US\$ 8,800, doesn't do much better.

A three-page chapter by artist Eddie Chambers (whose Rastafarian Union Jack provided a colorful *coup d'envoi* to Poupeye's book) discusses "the emergence of the black British artist" with special attention to gallery exhibitions of the 1980s, relating the struggle of black artists for recognition to the broader social challenges of people negatively stereotyped in terms of intellectual, moral, and social values. And the catalogue's final essay, by curator/publisher Okwui Enwezor, invokes a fashionable set of writers (Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and more), but declines to address Anthony Kwame Appiah's reflections on Africanity and the diasporic experience – an unfortunately missed opportunity, to my mind.

If this review article reads like an endless string of names, there's a reason. Both of the books under consideration ultimately play a role very much like that of the University of Chicago Press's *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*, Lucy R. Lippard's *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America*, Richard J. Powell's *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (another in the Thames and Hudson series), and Samella Lewis et al., *Caribbean Visions: Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* – all published within the past ten years. Their function is in a sense to expand the cast of known characters in the contemporary artworld, to offer a kind of *Who's Who* of artists previously excluded from mainstream recognition. The great majority of introductory college courses claiming to cover "the" history of art still follow the Eurocentric narrative laid out in textbooks by Helen Gardner, E.H. Gombrich, and H.W. Janson, relegating the artists and commentators mentioned in this essay to courses offered by cultural studies programs. But as I read the current climate, change (excruciatingly slow, but change nonetheless) may well be in the air. More and more anthropologists are engaging art historical literature and vice versa, and a mounting chorus of voices from previously underrepresented groups is making itself heard.

Even as the artists featured in these books gradually become part of everyday art historical discourse, however, there remains the related challenge of correcting a severe imbalance in art criticism. As bell hooks argued in her 1995 collection of essays, coverage of the U.S. art world has begun to recognize African-American artists, but has largely failed to engage the ideas and perspectives of African-American scholars who write about the visual arts.

Each of the books under review here makes a strong positive contribution in that direction, as do a rising number of more locally distributed publications (for Martinique and Puerto Rico, for example, see *La Voie du Fwomajé* [Association Fwomajé, 1994] and *Puerto Rico: Arte e Identidad* [Editorial de la Universidad de Puerto Rico, 1998], as well as the new quar-

terly journal *Arthème*, published in Martinique [B.P. 3018, Fort-de-France 97257 Cedex], with contributions [in French and some English] from the entire region) which provide less cramped spaces for the presentation of the art, aesthetic reflections, and life experiences of artists in particular parts of the Caribbean.

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