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Patchwork

Essays & Interviews on
Caribbean Visual Culture

Introduction

To begin a discussion of how this volume came about, I have to speak about my own intimate influences as a visual artist. It is clear to me now that the interviews that I was conducting and publishing with practitioners and scholars of Caribbean art and the platform afforded me at the *Huffington Post* for close to five years, where I shone a spotlight on women in the visual arts, whether as artists, curators, or academics, was following in a long family tradition of piece work—utilizing the patchwork aesthetic of my foremothers—in trying to create a whole out of bits and pieces. Consequently, in order to understand a volume like this—one in which a practicing visual artist systematically sets out to be an art writer, critic, and interviewer—this volume has to be placed within the context of the vernacular creative tradition of my family.

My strongest influences as a visual artist came from family members—my great-grandmother, my grandmother, my mother—all of whom hail from a tiny district called Nonsuch, hidden deep in the massive undulating purple/blue Portland mountains on the island of Jamaica. To this day when you speak to the people in Nonsuch in Portland, in deep rural Jamaica, who knew my great-grandmother, they describe her as a work of art unto herself, a woman who never wore matching socks, and who patchworked even her husband's work clothes and filled their home with hand-made collages culled from magazines and newspapers. Nothing ever went to waste with Celeste. Bits and pieces of leftover cloths from dressmakers became patchworks that found their way onto beds. These patchworks that she made were NOT FOR EVERYDAY USE. Rather, the everyday-use bedspreads were precisely the ones that were bought at the store. The patchwork bedspreads that she sat up and made by lamplight (before electricity came to Nonsuch) were the Christmas Day bed linen; the ones invited guests got to see when they came over; the ones that were put on the bed when people from abroad were coming. They were works of art. It saddens me that when she died at home her work was considered of so little importance to those around her that the two biggest and best patchworks she made were used to wrap her body in



Figure I.1: Photograph of Celeste Walker. © Georgia Blair-Mangat, n.d.

and take to the morgue, where they were of course discarded as nothing of value. The few pieces of her work that I eventually got, would go on to form the basis of my own work. I am, like my great grandmother and my grandmother, a patchworker. Someone who is always piecing things together to form a larger whole. This book too is a patchwork.

My great grandmother and later my grandmother used patchwork as memory devices. Many pieces of cloth used in their work bore traces from former lives and for my great grandmother specific colors were assigned to family members, more so the ones who had migrated. Both my great grandmother and my grandmother were using patchwork and a patchwork aesthetic to tell a larger non-linear story, which is precisely what I found myself doing as I read through the essays and interviews in this collection. In so doing, themes started arising organically, themes that reflect the history of the Caribbean and having to do with such charged



Figure I.2: Patchwork. © Celeste Walker, n.d. Image by Jacqueline Bishop.

and contested issues as the importance of place in Caribbean art, the questioning of women's role in Caribbean art, in addition to looking at how artists in the Caribbean are challenging boundaries and defying easy categorizations. This volume lays out some of the broad trends in Caribbean visual culture and calls into question some of the notable absences.

Patchwork as metaphor, the seeking to create order and make whole out of bits and pieces and the left over, is an apt metaphor for the Caribbean a whole—a region formed out of a history of colonization and conquest, a region which saw various groups of individuals brought in to work the land. It should be no surprise then that the land and colonization remain baseline issues for several Caribbean artists who stage and restage the history of conquest and empire in varying ways invoking the land. La Vaugh Belle, and Alicia Brown, for example, offer counter narratives to the colonial narratives handed down to them. In so doing they seek to challenge and refute a history that for too long was based on the Empire's view of the Caribbean and of the land. The metaphor of



Figure 1.3: Patchwork. © Emma Chin-See, n.d. Image by Jacqueline Bishop.

the patchwork can also be seen in the various processes that artists in the region amalgamate as part of their practice. Garfield Morgan sums it up best when he states that artists seem to prefer an open-endedness to art making and very few artists, except for maybe painters, express fidelity for a particular medium in creating their works of art. The work being made dictates the medium. Meanwhile, artists and scholars alike take up the mantle of dismantling long-held perceptions of what Caribbean art is thought to be and who is it that makes that art. Llanor Alleyne, as an openly queer artist, presents work and a voice not often heard from in Caribbean art discourses and she is among those who are challenging boundaries in Caribbean art.

An especially contested and often overlooked issue that comes to the forefront in the collection is the place of popular traditions, specifically popular needlework traditions, that are often excluded from any discussion of Caribbean visual cultures. It is here that the image of the patchwork becomes especially relevant.



Figure I.4: Patchwork. © Theresa Walker, 2018. Image by Jacqueline Bishop.

The work of Sane Mae Dunkley, who died right at the moment when her hand-made large kaleidoscopic mats were becoming known, tracks the impact of race, color, gender, and class on creative works produced within Jamaica. While several of the interviews and essays here speaks to the societal pressures that female artists face as wives, mothers, and caretakers, which in turn affects women's artistic trajectories, Dunkley's work falls outside conventional definitions of art and who is considered an artist and forefronts the fact that there has been a general lack of scholarly attention on creators like her. Dunkley's work exemplifies the often voiceless and wordless experience of textile and other vernacular fiber-makers who more often than not are classified as "craft" artisans where sharp and pointed distinctions between crafts and fine arts are usually drawn and reinforced. As Dr. Steeve Buckridge points out in his interview "needle workers in Jamaica [...] have been marginalized, silenced, forgotten, or absent from the history books." As such, a somewhat contradictory experience of women as visual art producers can be seen in the volume mediated through the lens of race, color, and class. The women who had attained formal secondary and tertiary education and training as visual artists speak for themselves and often negate the role

of gender as having any impact on their reception as artists in the volume; while Sane Mae Dunkley, encumbered by not having formal education or training as a visual artist, is spoken of and for and perhaps would not be fully accorded the title of “visual artist” even by trained female artists.

In plain terms, this volume asks, where are artists like Sane Mae Dunkley in the patchwork of Caribbean visual art and culture, especially in recent major exhibitions staged on Caribbean art? Her exclusion and the exclusion of all artists like her speak volumes. Dunkley’s work draws solidly upon the Creole esthetic of the Caribbean and references the sub-Saharan African narrow weave strip loom tradition with its emphasis on vivid displays and clashing colors. When interviewed she noted that it was a male member of the family who she grew up seeing doing embroidery and needlework referencing men as the prestige textile makers in sub-Saharan African culture, a tradition that often got re-scrambled with colonial contact under slavery. Dunkley engaged with icons of Jamaican nationalism by at times working in the Jamaican flag colors. Her work is at once markedly African-derived and highly Creolized. It is a key representation of the plurality of the region and opens up many fascinating areas of inquiry.

As artists and scholars take up the mantle of disrupting facile and exotic images of the Caribbean, one of the main challenges will be to make sure that creators such as Sane Mae Dunkley become more than descriptive markers in the work of “fine artists” in and from the region but are in fact woven into the tapestry of Caribbean art and visual culture and seen as visual artists in their own right. As such, the volume showcases many of the contemporary and yet longstanding issues that visual artists are tackling in new and fascinating ways. Olivia McGilchrist, whose biography situates her both in the old and the new world mines the floor of the Atlantic ocean as an archive to create Caribbean Futures largely absent in Virtual Reality Technologies. Her beautiful mesmeric immersive environment is an amalgamation of images, a piecing together, a patchwork. McGilchrist’s work is in direct conversation with those of Dunkleys and those of my grandmother and my great grandmother’s all of whom utilized patchwork to tackle and advance very complex ideas and realities. Woven throughout all the essays and interviews in this book and within Caribbean space is the leitmotif of the patchwork.