

New World Imagery

Contemporary Jamaican Art

David Boxer

Margaret Chen

Albert Chong

Leonard Daley

Ras Dizzy

Milton George

Anna Henriques

Omari Ra

National Touring Exhibitions



Jamaica's powerful visual art movement is little known in the UK. In the 33 years since Independence, Jamaican artists have moved towards a sense of identity firmly rooted in the Caribbean experience. Taking inspiration from Rastafari and Africa, dance hall and black separatism, cable TV and island politics, their work has been called 'New World Imagery'.

This book was published to accompany an exhibition of the same name, organised by National Touring Exhibitions from the Hayward Gallery, London, and selected by art historian Petrine Archer-Straw in collaboration with the National Gallery of Jamaica.

The focus is on eight contemporary artists - David Boxer, Margaret Chen, Albert Chong, Leonard Daley, Ras Dizzy, Milton George, Anna Henriques, Omari Ra - whose work ranges from self-taught 'intuitive' and neo-expressionist painting to sculpture, photography and video.

A National Touring Exhibition organised by the Hayward Gallery, London

Exhibition tour

Arnolfini, Bristol	23 September - 12 November 1995
City Art Gallery, Southampton	24 November 1995 - 7 January 1996
Royal Festival Hall, London	January - February 1996
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery	22 February - 5 April 1996
Angel Row Gallery, Nottingham	12 April - 11 May 1996

Exhibition devised and selected by Petrine Archer-Straw
Exhibition organised by Roger Malbert, assisted by Julia Risness
Education material for the exhibition prepared by Eddie Chambers

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An exhibition of Jamaican art was first suggested to National Touring Exhibitions by the critic and curator, Eddie Chambers, who also recommended the Jamaican art-historian Dr Petrine Archer-Straw as its selector. The initial idea was for an historical survey exhibition. Early in our discussions, however, it was agreed that, although such an exhibition certainly deserved to be seen in Britain, it would need to be large enough to do justice to the subject by allowing for in-depth examination of important historical figures such as John Dunkley, Edna Manley, Albert Huie and Kapo, and that it would therefore be beyond the scope of the present medium-scale exhibition. Instead we have chosen here to concentrate on eight of the most vivid and interesting contemporary artists, David Boxer, Margaret Chen, Albert Chong, Leonard Daley, Ras Dizzy, Milton George, Anna Henriques and Omari Ra 'African', giving sufficient space to each for their individuality to be clearly felt. The selection in no way represents an exhaustive view of contemporary art in Jamaica. We should like to acknowledge the many artists who gave us the opportunity to view their work, but whom we have been unable, on this occasion, to include.

We are grateful to Dr Archer-Straw for the commitment with which she has approached the project and the care she has given to its selection. She has also contributed a valuable essay to this book. The exhibition has been organised in association with the National Gallery of Jamaica and we would especially like to thank its Director, Dr David Boxer, for his generous help and encouragement and for allowing us to borrow freely from the National Gallery's collection. We are delighted too that, as an artist of distinction himself, he accepted our invitation to participate in the exhibition. Veerle Poupeye-Rammelaere has co-ordinated all arrangements in Jamaica with great efficiency, and has also contributed a useful chronology to this book. We thank the lenders, and others, who have made the exhibition possible, in particular Lodric Atkinson, Hope Brooks, Wallace Campbell, Wilton Dyer at the Jamaican High Commission in London, Guy McIntosh, Derek Milton, Brian Morgan,

Introduction

Relations between Britain and Jamaica are intimate and complex. The place-names on the Caribbean island recalls historical links: Manchester, Falmouth, Bath, Portland and Kingston (coexisting with Spanish Town and Port Antonio). And a twist of the radio dial in London can bring the voice of Jamaica resounding into the living room. The unmistakable rhythms of Jamaican music are heard across the world, as popular and influential in Lagos as in Toronto. The nation's culture continues to be associated primarily with its musical traditions: achievements in the visual arts are less easily broadcast.

Despite the special relationship, opportunities for the British public to see art from Jamaica and elsewhere in the Caribbean are rare. Jamaican artists are more likely to exhibit in North America today. Since the old colonial networks of cultural exchange have diminished, the British have perhaps too readily turned their backs on the people they once presumed to rule. As a result, a dialogue which could have been enlightening, between two communities sharing a common history, the (ex-) colonisers and colonised, has been abandoned.

In the absence of such dialogue, it is easy for Old World assumptions and attitudes to persist in Britain undisturbed: sentimentality about British traditions and history, combined with nostalgia for the certainties of Empire, reinforce the myth of quintessential 'Englishness' – a homogeneous national culture, self-generative and sealed against external influences. The anachronism of these ideas does not lessen their pernicious effect, especially upon black British citizens who are implicitly excluded from that essential story. A version of events that does not treat the history of the English-speaking Caribbean and black settlement in Britain as an integral part of British history is intellectually dishonest as well as socially divisive. Moreover, that complex history cannot be reduced to a simple division between those who 'act' and those 'acted upon'. Britain's reconstruction in the post-war years relied heavily upon the

black contribution, and this should not be forgotten. Neither can the place of Caribbean thinkers and writers in British intellectual life, from C.L.R. James and Stuart Hall to Derek Walcott and V.S. Naipaul, be ignored. Yet these, and countless other examples of the interweaving of black and white culture, are not enough to dispel the illusions of superiority that still linger, like ghosts from the imperial past, in the hearts of many British whites.

Meanwhile, a key issue in post-colonial discourse, the struggle to shift the balance from 'centre' to 'periphery', has surfaced as a critical theme in international contemporary art. As the official history of modernism is reassessed, cultural multiplicity is no longer denied as irrelevant to mainstream concerns, but recognised – even by the dominant institutions of the West – as a crucial source of creative energy and enrichment. The arts of the Caribbean stand as a model of cultural interchange, dissolving hierarchical categories of nation and ethnicity. It would make no sense to discuss Jamaican art in terms of 'authentic' cultural traditions; like Jamaican music, the art can be authentically Jamaican, African and North American at the same time.

For the visitor to Jamaica, the work of the 'intuitive' artists (represented here by Leonard Daley and Ras Dizzy) has immediate appeal. The intuitives occupy a special place in the art of the island, where they are clearly held in respect by fellow artists, curators and collectors. Visionaries without formal training, they frequently speak the impassioned, apocalyptic language of Rastafarianism, and their images, like their words, appear to spring unadulterated from lived experience; they are fired with conviction – both painterly and philosophical. A similar certainty, a belief in the 'rightness' of their materials and their power to deliver the necessary message, can be sensed in the work of Milton George, Margaret Chen and Albert Chong – whether the medium is paint, wood or photography. In each case it is handled with intimate assurance and adapted to strongly personal ends. Autobiography is a central concern. In Omari Ra's masks and phalluses, and in the serial imagery of David Boxer and Anna Henriques, the personal and mythical-historical are fused; the self is revealed through an imaginative excavation of the layers of Jamaican culture, or through an outright declaration of allegiance.

The stress, in Petrine Archer-Straw's essay, on the artists' racial background may seem problematic to some readers. It should not be taken to mean that questions of 'identity' are resolvable in – or reducible to – racial terms: except perhaps for the essentialist pan-Africanist Omari Ra. Nor need it imply a deterministic connection between present consciousness and 'heritage'. An artist may reflect on his or her cultural heritage and draw inspiration from it. It is not hard to imagine, for example, why an introspective artist with parents of Chinese and African ancestry should seek to invoke the influence of the two great cultures with which he or she is linked. The heterogeneous societies of the New World offer fascinating mixes of peoples, and this is part of their spiritual wealth. Jamaica's national slogan, 'Out of many, one people', expresses a political aspiration, unity in diversity – a slogan that could well be adopted by the new, multicultural Britain: that would be a mark of its maturity.

Roger Malbert

LONDON

truce between them. Thirty-three years on from Independence, the ruling classes are completely creolised, severed from England, the 'mother-country', and keen to identify themselves as Jamaicans³.

The mixed-media works of Anna Henriques address many of these themes. Certainly her perspective of being what is called 'Jamaican white', reflecting her Jewish Portuguese Jamaican heritage, provides an interesting counter to Omari Ra's 'blackness'. Henriques' work attempts to relocate her ancestors on the 'right' side of history in a way which is not antagonistic to either Jamaica's original Taíno population, or the larger group of Africans later transported there. Her work is important to an understanding of 'Caribbeaness' which is a *mélange* of cultures, and often a *mélange* where whites have also had to redefine themselves in relation to an increasingly dominant black culture.

Part of the equalising process is Henriques' identification with the refugee status of her ancestors who first arrived in Jamaica during the sixteenth century. She sees their persecution as being similar, if not equivalent, to the suffering of the dislocated African slaves who began to arrive on the island a century later. The concept of a 'new world', for Henriques, represents freedom in much the same way as it does to Omari Ra.

But Henriques' real debt is not to the African population but to the indigenous Taíno Indian population which was annihilated after the arrival of the earliest Hispanic communities. Much of her current work is about setting to rights the historical relationship between the Europeans and the Arawaks in this period. Consistent in her imagery is the recovery of fragments from this lost culture, whether in the form of artefacts and fragments acquired from her own excavations, or the incorporation of Taíno Indian mythical and spiritual symbols, such as the Zemi statues used in Taíno religious rituals, or the pelican, a mythical spirit image within Taíno culture but also a Christian symbol, which might refer here, too, to her own Catholic education.



A Zemi stone carving, inspiration for Anna Henriques

Carving of a bird, possibly a pelican, with a platform for use in the Cohoba Ritual
Wood, possibly *Lignum Vitae*
Height: 63 cm
Collection: The Jamaica National Heritage Trust (on permanent loan to the National Gallery of Jamaica)

Henriques writes:

The speaking silence of a passing life beckons. I hear, and I answer. Not by the spoken word, but by the act. The act of making a memorial to what was or will have been. The process is as follows. In the ritual of remembrance, I write. Language . . . like the photograph of a long forgotten moment, retrieves the past, stimulates sentiment, but restricts it to the imprint of fading ink. Language launches me into another world, a world assembled out of fragments of its whole, its missing portions pieced together in the imaginary. A world seen through the eyes in the front and the back of my head, the mind's eye and the soul's eye.⁴

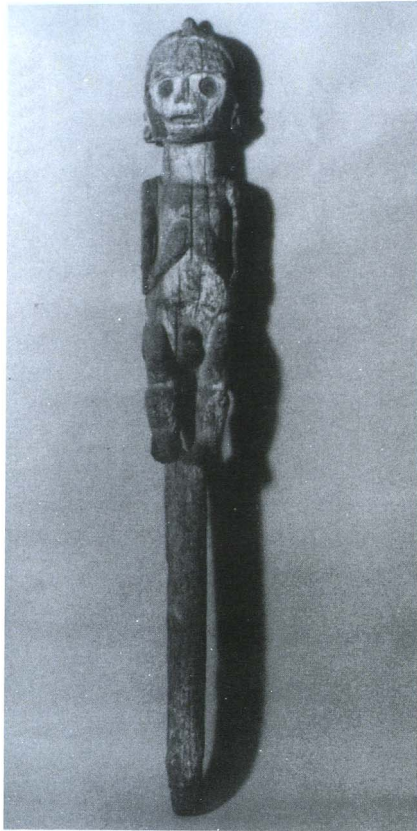
This rewriting of the past is as much literal as figurative; an attendant scrawl constantly documenting an emotional turmoil. Works are to be read like epitaphs: inscribed memorials to a dead culture. In the series of *Isabella Boxes*, 1995 (cat. 62), literary effort deteriorates into a form of primal mark-making, suggesting the lost expressions of Jamaican Taíno culture⁵.

The boxes are also souvenirs, re-worked trinket boxes more often bought in tourist locations in Jamaica. To Jamaicans, these boxes, whose lids carry reproductions of local painters, are known as 'Anabella boxes', named after the woman who first designed them. Punning on their contemporary usage, Henriques creates another historical status for them as repositories for ancient memories. She explains:

The name Isabella [boxes] refers of course to Queen Isabella who endorsed Columbus' travels to the Caribbean. When one travels abroad, one usually brings back gifts to those . . . left behind – trinkets, crafts, unusual items. Aside from the failure of Columbus and his men to fulfil Isabella's express instructions to bring back riches (gold, etc.) from the Indies, since there was none, I believe that these early tourists to the islands would have gathered



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Anna Henriques
Postcards from the Midden, 1994



Carving of a Zemi, possibly Youcahuna, surmounted on a staff. One of the Taino artefacts recently found in Jamaica

Wood, possibly mahogany
Height: 150 cm
Collection: The Jamaica National Heritage Trust (on permanent loan to the National Gallery of Jamaica)

exotic objects in order to interest, perhaps appease, the Queen and her court. Well here is her latter-day collection!⁶

Jamaica experienced a revival of interest in Taíno culture in the wake of the five hundred year anniversary celebrations of the New World ⁷. In keeping with the notion of recovery, the National Gallery of Jamaica mounted the exhibition *Arawak Vibrations: Homage to the Jamaican Taíno*, from 5 May to 30 June 1994. This exhibition was the occasion for the first showing of recently excavated Taíno artefacts including four striking Arawak Zemís⁸. Their timely discovery, combined with the celebrations, evinced a wave of nostalgia for the lost peoples, not least within the artistic community. In a section of the exhibition entitled *The Modern Response*, artists were invited to show works which had been ‘inspired, or influenced by the “memory” of the lost Taínos’ (Boxer, 1994).

For the most part, the works of the nineteen artists who participated were arcadian, ritualistic and idealised, attempting to reconstruct this community from the fragments of history and imagination which remained. Such nostalgia suggested a way of circumventing the harsher realities of slavery and colonial rule by harking back to the ‘golden age’ of Jamaica’s indigenous peoples.

Anna Henriques’ *Isabella Boxes*, 1995 (cat. 62) and *Postcards from the Midden*, 1994 (cat. 61) evoke a similar sense of nostalgia, a sentiment which stems from a naive necessity to make some form of recompense as well as to reiterate Jamaica’s motto ‘Out of many, one people’.

David Boxer’s works are not so innocent. The touchstones of his work are pain and decimation, without the same motivations for resolution. His *Violin d’Ingres*, 1986 (cat. 2) and *Memories of Colonisation*, 1983 (cat. 1) series ‘fit into a broader iconological statement about the death of civilisation and the supplanting of cultures by other cultures’ (Boxer, 1994, p. 8). These works form part of a larger schema, which he calls the ‘passages series’, in which the general notion of holocaust is a constant, and the reference to