

ANNA RUTH HENRIQUES

The old world feeling of the *Song of Songs* owes much to the mixed racial ancestry of Anna Ruth Henriques. With familial roots in medieval Spain, Africa and Asia, Henriques reflects the mélange of cultural influences that make up Jamaican society. Her work speaks to these various ancestral influences and evokes the ornate yet primitive tempera paintings of the medieval Mediterranean. With *Song of Songs*, Henriques links her various cultural identities in pictograph form. The formal arrangement of these works also prompts imagery of African-designed cloths with their emphasis on grids, and even African-American quilting traditions. The series of eight *Song of Songs* (based on the eight verses of love in the Old Testament) works like woven tapestries interweaving both personal and national iconography to tell a familiar story of migration, Diaspora and “rootedness.”

Henriques has exhibited in numerous shows in Jamaica and internationally. Recently she participated in the major contemporary art show, *New World Imagery: Contemporary Jamaican Art*, at the Royal Festival Hall in London. Henriques lives in New York City with her daughter Ise.

Song of Songs –
Verse 3
1993 – 1994
acrylic and mixed media on wood
48” x 48”

“I make memorials to this past,
to what had or will have been.
My memorials emerge from this world,
born from the eulogies of language,
the evocations of objects that come to me with meaning.
In my presence, my possession, they become familiar.
At least for a moment they find a home.”





NEW POSSESSIONS: Jamaican Artists in the US

An Exhibition in Celebration of the 44th Anniversary of Jamaican Independence

by SARAH ANITA CLUNIS, PHD

New Possessions celebrates the 44th anniversary of Jamaican independence by exhibiting the works of 15 contemporary Jamaican artists working in the United States. The exhibition focuses on works by artists that, although Jamaican, choose to live and work outside of the island. The exhibition's aim is to offer an international audience a look at Jamaican art that has been profoundly influenced by the experience of Diaspora.

Diaspora has become a loaded term. In the last ten years of scholarship, in both the humanities and social sciences, the term Diaspora has received a lot of airtime. The origin of the word is Greek and means dispersal (specifically, seed dispersal). The word, in almost every dictionary, is connected to the historical dispersal of the Jews because of countless violent expulsions and attempts at ethnic cleansings. The term Diaspora eventually became very important in describing the slave trade and dispersal of peoples of African descent in studies of the "Black Atlantic."¹

I think today when it is used in scholarship, the African Diaspora is most commonly evoked, although the term is used in numerous texts, to describe all different kinds of Diasporas of people. But the word itself can be a contentious and provocative one. It evokes images of forced migrations and violent displacements of groups of

people. Diaspora scenarios of this sort include not only the African slave trade and the numerous expulsions of Jews from various homelands, but also the forced migrations of Indian and Chinese laborers because of economic limitations in their homelands. All of these Diasporas are part of the Jamaican experience. In fact, the history of the Caribbean is characterized by forced migrations, involuntary expulsions and eventual exiles, making the Caribbean a literal space of Diaspora. It is a region defined, created, and functioning by and because of Diaspora. The lives of all the people born into this space – the Creoles, if you will – are scripted by Diaspora.

Having said this, it is also my feeling that the term Diaspora is expansive enough to be used in a variety of different ways. In most cases it is the most appropriate term to describe a number of physical, psychological and historical conditions that are characterized by displacement and a "longing" for home. The Diaspora experience of the artists in this exhibition is not one of violent expulsions or forced migrations. As is their privilege, they move back and forth from homeland to western metropolises with relative ease. They do, however, experience personal feelings of "uprootedness" and displacement, in all of the places that they roam and rest, including all of the places they call home. So, it could be argued that Diaspora might also be an appropriate term to describe their rootless meanderings in the world.

No art occurs in a vacuum and the influence of an increasingly globalized culture is evident in the work of contemporary artists in the Caribbean. New media and technology, the internet, art biennials and emerging theoretical publications, have encouraged Caribbean artists to explore what is "outside" as well as what is

“inside” their culture, creating a region that continues to be shaped by the intersection of different cultures. But what is the artistic direction of Jamaican artists working outside of the Caribbean? How are they expressing ideas about nation, identity and the direction of Jamaican art? What does independence mean to these artists? And how are they contributing as individuals to the cultural development of the nation-homeland?

New Possessions investigates issues such as these by featuring a select group of Jamaican artists and their works that directly or indirectly relate to these questions. The concept of independence is explored, in this exhibition, as it relates to independence of the nation and to a more abstract concept, one that includes artistic expressions of personal independence. The title, *New Possessions*, refers to Jamaica's move away from being an English possession to being an independent nation. This exhibition explores “new possessions,” ways in which, as a continuously emerging nation, Jamaicans investigate new ways of acquiring, belonging to and inhabiting the space we occupy in the world.

The area of fine arts is an essential way that Jamaicans contribute to world culture. It is through the fine arts and the arts in general that Jamaicans relate the history, psychology and symbols of an island's independence. Exploring the art of the Jamaican Diaspora allows for an exhibition that explores the added dimension of negotiating difference and independence, while still feeling connected to the nation.

The artists in this exhibition come from a number of different ethnic backgrounds that include Indian,

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African, European, Middle Eastern, Chinese and Sephardic (Spanish Jewish). The influences of their diverse cultural backgrounds contribute to the artists' analysis of the world they occupy. This investigation is expressed through the artistic medium; in this exhibition, primarily through two dimensional, abstract or abstracted works.

Although the personal and autobiographical play a part in the readings of these artists' works, this exhibition is about presenting examples of contemporary Caribbean art works that exhibit a continuous tradition of art practice in the Caribbean. This persistent iconography that has come to define the art production of Jamaican artists, whether living at home or abroad, tends to focus on land and people, souvenirs and possessions and objects and properties that are signifiers of a wide range of historical assumptions, but inevitably demarcate a space of Diaspora coloured by imperialistic concerns.

The artists in this exhibition explore these traditional forms of art expression in new and innovative ways with equally ground-breaking techniques and media. Helen Elliott explores painting on fired enamel mounted on a steel canvas. The tin shack that are ubiquitous to the Jamaican landscape inspire Elliott's work. Eglon Daley's large-scale paintings of traditional Jamaican scenes are abstracted by his technique of obscuring the image so that it is reminiscent of a photo negative or a reverse transparency. Donnette Cooper investigates the pictorial space of her quilts creating tapestries that offer the illusion of three-

dimensional space. Cooper's work with textile arts offers us a painterly space in an unlikely medium.

In terms of context, the artists in this exhibition also explore their independence as individuals, not completely aligned with the nation but still inextricably tied to it. Their various cultural backgrounds are very much apparent in their work. Both Bryan McFarlane and Eglon Daley indicate the importance of their Maroon ancestry in their life experiences and art making.

Anna Ruth Henriques' *Song of Songs* series is a lyrical tribute to love; offering us symbols from the artists' mixed ancestry. Henriques' art tells a story, both personal and national, about Jewish roots in medieval Spain, joined with African and Chinese ancestry. Her symbols co-exist on each canvas like oddly situated pictographs that seem to find a rhythm and connection despite their difference.

A common theme throughout the exhibition is the use of African or African Diasporic iconography or techniques to discuss ideas of “rootedness” and connectivity to Africa, still contentious issues in the visual and intellectual culture of the Caribbean. These iconographic tactics establish a narrative of origins for the artists who use them, and in some way establish them as “authentic,” in the Caribbean context. One can only imagine that the racial mixture of Caribbean artists at times feels like ambivalence in a space that was increasingly marked as first a European possession and then an African Diaspora. Add to this the project of negotiating identity in the United States, a country with radically different racial politics than Jamaica, and the ambiguity and quest for a resolute expression is intensified.

It is this particular issue of identity politics that connects some of the outstanding issues of this exhibition – that of globalization, possessions and habitat – to the urgent project of cultural development in Jamaica. Globalization is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the back and forth worldwide movement of people and ideas was encouraged and assisted by colonialism (that

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ugly word that kept us from our independence as a nation, but that brought us together in the first place). Our colonial heritage helped to maintain the ebb and flow of ideas, people and culture that is still very much a part of what makes the Caribbean a truly modern site – an ever-changing, evolving whirlpool of cultural explosions. But it is this same colonialism that called us possessions. In fact, it is my discovery of an old map of Jamaica with the heading “British West Indian Possessions,” that influenced my choice for the title of this show.

Before our independence in 1962, Jamaica – the land, the agriculture and the people – were considered to be British possessions. That is what colonialism is – something owns you and you belong to it. That is how it is documented anyway. Jamaican art historian and artist, David Boxer, comments on some persistent colonial iconography and its impact on the present-day Jamaican psyche. He states,

*The fact that we can still keep these colonial symbols as a part of modern so-called post-colonial Jamaica mystifies me totally. How can our people be truly free and we can't even cast off the symbolism of descendants of Victoria who supposedly "Set Us Free."*ⁱⁱ

But as the artist, Donnette Cooper, states in response to a question about her memories of Jamaica's independence from Britain,

*Flag independence only came to Jamaica 44 years ago, but people felt pretty independent before that. It's a sense of your freedom and so I think in my work my personal choices and cultural expressions really embody the spirit of independence.*ⁱⁱⁱ

It is precisely this “spirit of independence,” that is evident in the works of the 15 artists in this exhibition. This independence is expressed through a renaissance of ancestral iconography alluding to a creolized cultural space, a freedom of style or brushstroke, a rebellious medium. Many of the artists also allude to the fact that although they identify as Jamaican, they identify first as “citizens of the world.”

These “citizens of the world” travel extensively and yet return often to the homeland. In the process of organizing this exhibition there was the constant movement of the artists involved traveling back and forth between the United States and Jamaica. Additionally, during this time artists traveled to China, France and various other international locales. Almost all of these artists have either already established programs in Jamaica where they are educating and mentoring young Jamaican artists or are in the process of laying the groundwork for even more ambitious programs such as graduate degree programs, residencies and visiting scholar programs in the arts.

It seems that the added dimension of their state of Diaspora has enabled these artists to feel less threatened by limited opportunities or space and allowed them to expand outward into the world at large and to occupy a more illusionary idea of space and therefore home. Home becomes the habitat of the “new,” a place to store, to stockpile our “possessions.”

And what are these “new possessions”? In a sense, in 1962 we took possession of the island of Jamaica. But in truth and fact it was never really ours to begin with – we all came from other places – all initially citizens of a Diaspora. So into our arms came our “new possession.” But as radical anti-colonialists (for the

most part), Jamaicans could not really consider things like land and people their possessions in good faith. We had fought so hard for our spiritual, political and social independence. Instead we chose to own an ideal – the new thing to be possessed was independence. And we embraced this ideal. We now possessed a pride and patriotism that could go anywhere with us and we would still be home.

Jamaican artist, Anna Ruth Henriques, writes:

My memorials emerge from this world, born from the eulogies of language, the evocations of objects that come to me with meaning. In my presence, my possession, they become familiar. At least for a moment they find a home.

It is within this space called “home” that the artists in this exhibition may still feel, for one reason or another, that they defy classification, whether artistic, social or racial. And it is for this very reason that they maintain and describe a state of metaphorical abstraction, a displacement of sorts, in their lives and their work. They insist on a state of independence and this makes urgent their need to inscribe on space with memory and longing that which is personal and familiar.

SARAH ANITA CLUNIS IS THE CURATOR OF THIS EXHIBITION.

i Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

ii Correspondence with David Boxer, March 2003.

iii Interview with Donnette Cooper, May 2006.

THE ARTS AND THE JAMAICAN (CARIBBEAN) DIASPORA

by PROFESSOR REX NETTLEFORD

The artists here represented in this exhibition are from the Jamaican (Caribbean) Diaspora in the United States. They and their work are the representations of a heritage that has marked off their land of origin as the living laboratory of the exercise of intellect and imagination in circumstances of dynamic interplay between cultures and civilizations, encountering each other over a protracted period of time. These have been now in contestation, now in collaboration, now in rejection, now in mutual appropriation, now in resistance, now in mutual acceptance to forge something new, lasting and exciting as part of the history and contemporary life of the Americas, of which Jamaica and the wider Caribbean are an integral part.

The internal migration within the Americas have only served to enrich what can be termed an *American*

civilization; and the “Jamaicans,” along with all their other Caribbean compatriots are significant contributors to the intertextual, diverse and textured life which is characteristic of the hemisphere. The Jamaican painters here exhibited belong to that process of cross-fertilization in the quest for identity and certitude.

The enrichment therefore becomes the legacy, not only of the Jamaican/Caribbean Diaspora, but of the host country and eventually of all of humankind. For the retreat to creative intellect and creative imagination is not escapist, but a form of action that serves to endow self and society with the tools of “demarginalization” and a zone of comfort beyond the reach of the sort of obscurities endured by forebears over a span of centuries, that revealed in the humiliation and dehumanization of millions of souls deemed to be creatures of a lesser god.

This exhibition, coming in the 44th year of Jamaica’s independence and mounted in a country that is host to hundreds of thousands of Diasporic Jamaicans, therefore, speaks to the triumph of the human spirit against all odds and the assertion of decency in the face of misguided, though persistent, notions that people of certain origins are incapable of thought and artistic imagination.

But the influence of Caribbean music on world popular music for over a century can by no means be disregarded in the quest for self and certitude which self-government and independence have inspired among those engaged in nation-building and the shaping of new societies. The Cuban rhumba and mambo, the Haitian merengue, the Brazilian samba, Trinidad’s calypso, Jamaica’s reggae and the Francophone Caribbean’s zouk are the most

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renowned artistic inventions deriving from the dialectic of cultural diversity in praxis.

The wider world has been fascinated and enriched by such diversity. The phenomenon is nothing new, despite the fact that the world since 1492 has refused to acknowledge the key contributions to human development by so-called lesser races. For the world has been the beneficiary of encounters such as the meeting of Africa and southern Europe in the Iberian peninsula when Moors, Jews and Europeans worked and lived together, giving Spain a Golden Age of great artistic achievements of which it can still be proud. The fall of Granada all but put an end to this particular possibility of continuing cultural creolization.

The creative imagination, then, has long been an instrument of empowerment both to individuals

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and societies. It has also served as an antidote to the poison of cultural and spiritual intolerance. The arts, which are mediated by social reality, can offer persons in multicultural situations the opportunity for self-definition and action. An early self-government leader in Jamaica, Norman Manley, implicitly understood this. He and his artist wife, Edna, took to the center of the struggle for self-determination the exercise of the creative imagination. The practising artist became a symbol of the new national consciousness in the struggle, whether he/she was involved in painting or sculpture, literature, drama, dance or music. A cultural policy was seen as part of development strategy. Institutions of growth in the field of culture were established. Classes in painting were to evolve into a School of Art. Those who sought to celebrate and give expression to the new national reality were publicly acknowledged. And many were the painters among them. Manley, the nation-builder, saw the politician himself as an artist molding the clay of the old order into new forms that could have new purpose. What popular artists were saying in their music and lyrics carried weight with those who sought accreditation through the ballot-box from the mass of the population.

Artistic display and production were further guaranteed sustainability by the setting up of arts-training institutions integrated into a College of Visual and Performing Arts and the facilitating of individual efforts without government usurping the prerogative of artists to pursue their own goals. Even in setting up the artistic-cultural institutions due regard was paid to the reality of the inherent tensions that characterize creative activity. A system of network management was preferred to monolithic, czar-like, command-type, top-down arrangements. Yet even in the Caribbean (including Jamaica), artistic output emanating from below struggled for status in the received cultural hierarchy which places things European at the apex. Modernizing elites are in constant danger of remaining tenaciously Eurocentric, and, in this respect, the post-Independent Caribbean is not likely to be different.

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This challenges the new political order to act in consonance with the wider society, something crucially important in the building of a new post-independent Caribbean. But such building makes no sense without the shaping of a new society. This in itself speaks of process. It is long-distance running, not sprinting, and here the creativity of artistic activity can be of tremendous help in finding one's way. Flags, anthems, national symbols bringing recognition and status to the country in the world's family of nations are relatively easy to come by. Freedom, as the unlocking of the citizen's creative potential *within* a nation, is something altogether different and not always easy to attain. The experience of the Americas, of which the Caribbean is an iconic part, points not to linear progress but to varied, contradictory stages along the way, in which the shaping of the society takes logical priority over the setting up of the nation-state.

The culture of black Africa, while centrally located in the task of Jamaican nation-building, cannot be seen to be merely changing places with white culture, which once held it in colonial subjugation. Nor can the

culture of Asians, as a bridge factor, refuse to enter or be refused entry into the process of Caribbean becoming.

It is undeniable that the *sine qua non* of a healthy nation includes healthcare, housing and education that can lead to employment with tolerable wages, as well as freedom from the fear of oppression by state authorities or by criminal elements among civilians. But none of this will make sense without the guarantees of a *cultural certitude* shared by the mass of the population. It is asking for trouble if a numerical majority is forced to function as a cultural minority according to which everything emanating from the exercise of their creative imagination – language, religion, ethnic origin or the arts – is regarded as less than good by those who are custodians of the “mainstream culture.” The whole process of nation-building is skewed if this is not taken into consideration: something Caribbean nations have learned and are still learning to understand.

Equally, the contributions by large minorities in the building of a nation – if deliberately excluded from the socio-cultural complex – will result in resistance, even violence. The experience of the United States is a case in point: that is, if one takes into account the history of the civil rights struggle and the continuing perception of a society that speaks of “minorities” as if they are tribes apart in a multicultural dispensation where people live side by side rather than together one with the other.

The arts send out signals in the subtlest of ways to the effect that nothing short of a partnership in which officialdom (e.g. the Jamaican government through its embassy in Washington, DC, in collaboration with the OAS) acts as facilitator, will be adequate. Freedom is the very essence of creative artistic action which must be permitted to occur in unfettered ways within civil society. As the conscience of the free society, the arts provide an excellent means of self-cleansing, self-reflection and self-criticism, uncomfortable though this, at times, may be to the government, private sector

moguls and to the wider society. Above all, the arts provide an effective strategy of “demarginalization” for those who will have grown up in societies which have made them “outsiders” in the very land they are expected to call home. The arts in turn provide avenues for the harmony of inner and outer space: the surest guarantee to psychic and social stability which are critical to national stability.

The arts function to best effect when, as Norman Manley – a Founding Father of Independent Jamaica – felt, they are allowed the freedom of diversity and difference to find form and purpose in the contradictions and complexities of human existence. Accordingly, they could benefit nation-building, which Manley saw not only as an act of intelligence, but also as the work of artists giving form to substance and grappling with the reality of human experience in its myriad, contradictory, multi-sourced character. The aim was to elevate everyday individual existence to higher levels of civilized expression in the concepts of the nation, democracy and civilization.

The vision clearly continues to exist in the Jamaican Diaspora among its painters. Those who are charged with building or with helping to determine a new world order in these times of *globalization* (and we are all so charged) should see themselves as artists molding a new world order; a new Jamaica/Caribbean, a new United States and therefore engaged in awesome and often contradictory processes. The hope is to craft out of the chaos, marked by intolerance and lack of understanding, as well as out of the refusal to cope with the dilemma of difference and the reality of a complex diversity, a society fit for human habitation as the groping twenty-first century will increasingly demand. This exhibition could well be seen as a worthwhile contribution to the fulfillment of that hope.

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Adapted from Rex N:
Selected Speeches of Rex
Nettleford. Ian Randle
Publishers, Kingston,
Jamaica. 2006.