

Women's Art In Jamaica

Jamaica is in many ways a matriarchal society – something that was pointed out and thoroughly analyzed in My Mother Who Fathered Me, Edith Clarke's pioneering study of Jamaican families, first published in 1957, and reprinted several times since.

The most important Jamaican artist of the immediate post-colonial period was Edna Manley (1900-1987), wife of Norman Manley, one of the pioneers of Jamaican independence, and a major political figure in her own right.

Given these facts, it is surprising how far the emphasis has shifted from Jamaican women artists and their achievements.

The first thing to be said is that Jamaica, a small Caribbean island, has a large number of artists in proportion to the size of its population. These artists enjoy a good deal of local support. Visit almost any middle-class household in the suburbs of Kingston, and you are likely to find the place crammed with paintings by local artists.

What has been missing is the international interest aroused by artists in two nearby countries – Cuba and Haiti. Cuban art belongs to the larger community of Latin American art, mostly, but not entirely, Spanish speaking. Latin American art established early links with the European Modern Movement. This was due in part to the Latin American custom of sending promising young artists to Europe to study. One of the beneficiaries of this system was the best known artist that Cuba has so far produced, Wifredo Lam. Lam, of Chinese-African descent, studied first at the Academia de San Alejandro in Havana, founded in 1818, the oldest art academy in the Americas. He was given a scholarship for further studies in Madrid, became involved in the Spanish Civil War, subsequently moving to Paris, where he was befriended by Picasso, and also by a number of leading Parisian Surrealists. After the outbreak of World War II, he returned to Havana, where he painted some of his most significant works, but maintained contact with Surrealist colleagues who had departed en masse to New York.

Latin America produced a number of important female Modernists, prominent among them Frida Kahlo in Mexico and Tarsila do Amaral in Brazil. Cuba's contribution to this aspect of the Latin American cultural story was the work of Amelia Pelayez, who was inspired by details of Cuban architecture to paint pictures that owe something to Matisse.

The story in Haiti was very different. Here the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince was run largely by Americans, among them the poet and critic Selden Rodman (1909-2002). Rodman, who called the Abstract Expressionists "the cerebral put-ons of the avant-garde", believed that the artists in Haiti should be sheltered from any contact with the European and Modern Movement, and must be encouraged instead to find their own way. The result was a large output of naïve art using a mixture of Voodoo and Christian themes, in accord with the religious practices of the country. These paintings acquired a substantial commercial success, but did not put Haiti on the international map – the paintings, which continue to be made today in much the same style as formerly, are a niche cultural product.

Art in Jamaica has tended to hover between these two extremes. On the one hand there are artists such as Albert Huie (1920-2010), sometimes described as 'the father of Jamaican painting'. Born poor, Huie was originally helped by Edna Manley. A British Council scholarship took him to Canada, where he was influenced by the artists of the Group of Seven, and later he studied in London. Huie never was, nor wished to be, part of the radically Modernist mainstream. His concern was to record Jamaica, and especially the Jamaican landscape, as he saw it.

In contrast to Huie and others who followed the same path, are the so-called 'Jamaican Intuitives', untutored artists, very much on the Haitian model, who draw much of their imagery from Rastafarianism. They have attracted official approval and support because they symbolize a rejection of the colonial era, and also because they seem to represent a more purely African

element in Jamaican culture - though in fact nothing very much like their work exists in the contemporary art now being made in Africa. One perhaps striking feature of this Intuitive group is that the leading artists are all men. The few females associated with it tend to be known chiefly as the consorts or relatives of better established male artists.

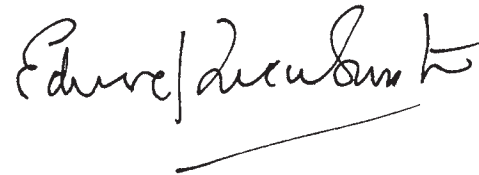
The works presented here call into question the simplified history of Jamaican contemporary art outlined above. Edna Manley, Laura Facey and Judy Ann Macmillan show where women's art is rooted in contemporary Jamaican culture. They are not apparently interested in the clash of cultures that has too often preoccupied those who write about Jamaican art. The contrast between them is not one between Europe and (a largely imaginary) Africa but between the public and the private. Macmillan offers an intense concentration on Jamaican nature; Manley and Facey are not afraid to make broad statements about the human condition, which puts them in direct relationship to the Latin American tradition of Diego Rivera in Mexico and Antonio Berni in Argentina.

These preoccupations continue, but in a different guise, in the work of younger Jamaican women artists. They have obviously been affected by the worldwide feminist movement, with a particular, often very specific, interest in women's bodies. It is easy, in this respect, to trace a line of descent from Edith Clarke's pioneering study of Jamaican mores. They are as comfortable with the mythology of the Graeco-Roman tradition - the goddess Ceres, for example - as they are with the idea of an ancestral Africa. They sometimes seem to see the production of art as a juncture of opposites - on the one hand as an exploration of the self, often influenced by the doctrines of Jung, and on the other hand as the expression of a collective consciousness where African elements still have a fundamental role to play. They explore a very wide range of materials and techniques.

Anyone familiar with the wider contemporary art world will see in these works the influence of the art now being made in the United States, both by African American artists and by a new generation of women artists coming from a wide variety of different ethnicities - Asian American and Latino as well as

African American. This is not surprising, given the fact that so many Jamaican artists now complete their artistic education in America. Jamaica is not an enclosed, isolated art world, as the promoters of the Intuitives have tended to assume. In fact an important part of the recent Jamaican story has been emigration to Britain and to America - countries particularly accessible to Jamaicans because of a shared language.

Both British and American society are now in a state of rapid evolution. A large part in this process has been an accelerating breakdown of assumptions about both race and gender. Art by young Jamaican women artists offers an accurate, though perhaps sometimes involuntary, reflection of this. The artists whose work is shown in this exhibition have had to think hard about who they really are. Africa may still be a dream for some, but the widespread new art world, so much larger and more various than it was only thirty years ago, is the reality they all inhabit. Most of all, this is a show that asks questions: not only "Who am I?", but "What is art?" and "What is my relationship to its contemporary manifestations?" To these questions they endeavour to give answers that are both relevant to their own personal circumstances and to the circumstances of the island from which they come.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Edward Lucie-Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. Below the signature is a single horizontal line.

Edward Lucie-Smith



Monique Lofters

Untitled



Laura Hamilton

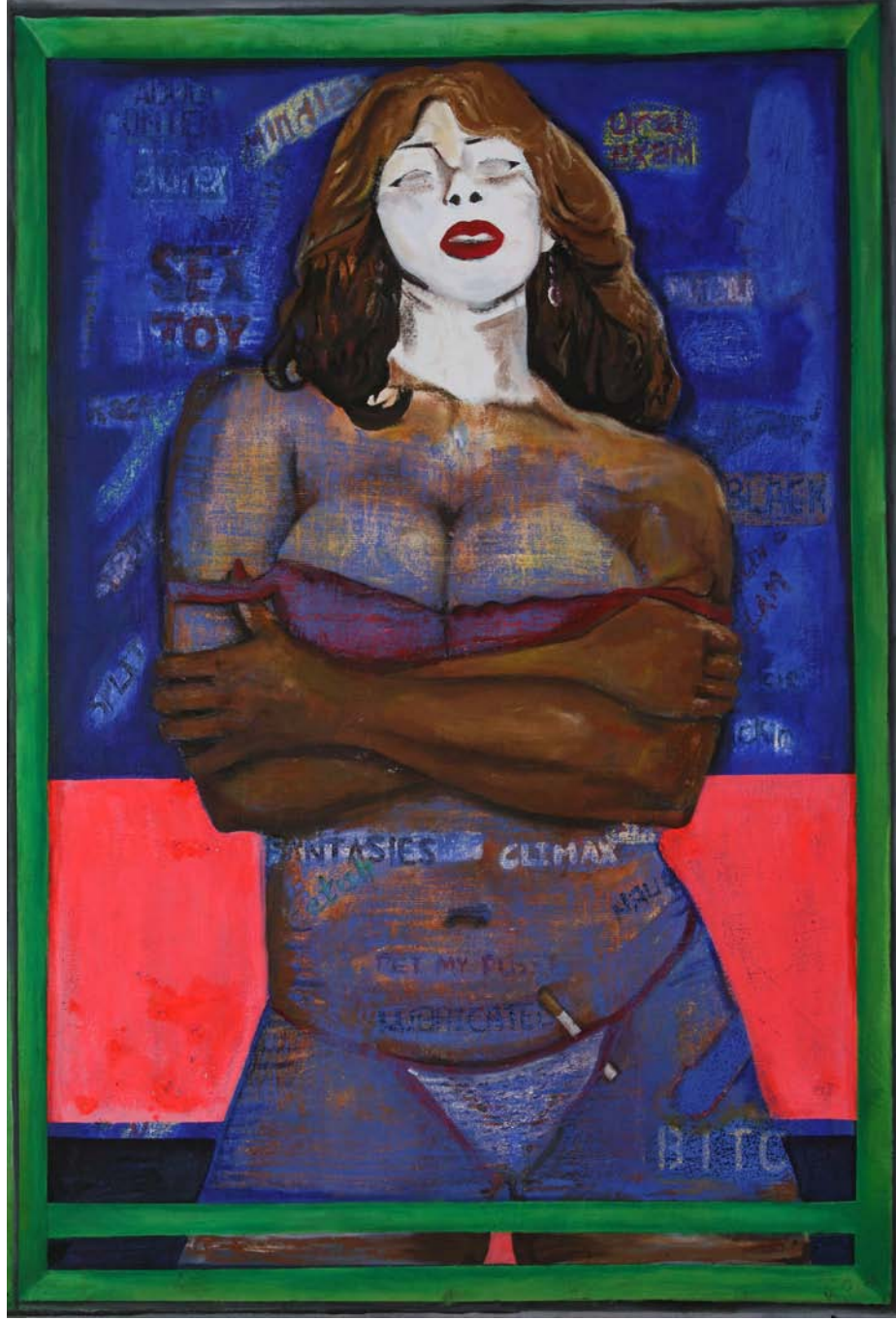
Put It De (top) and **Pin Pon She 2** (bottom)

3



Kristina Rowe

The Assets



Judy Ann Macmillan

Cashew Meat



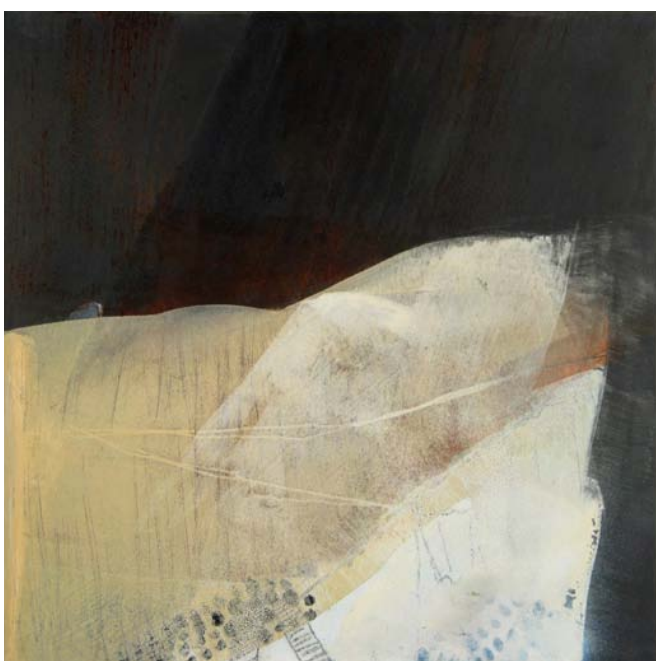
Ebony Patterson

Hybrids



Helen Elliott

Journal 7 (top) and (bottom) Untitled



Laura Facey-Cooper

Prayer (top) and **Comb** (bottom)



Keisha Castello

Chair



Edna Manley

Orpheus



Anna Henriques

Blue, Orange



Trudy-Ann Barrett

Unearthing

12



Margaret Chen

Subterrene I



Khepera

seeking title

