

Jamaica's Been Framed

Well known as a global powerhouse when it comes to music, the Caribbean island has another huge, untapped well of creative talent. *Janelle Oswald* meets Theresa Roberts, who is promoting the new wave of visual artists internationally

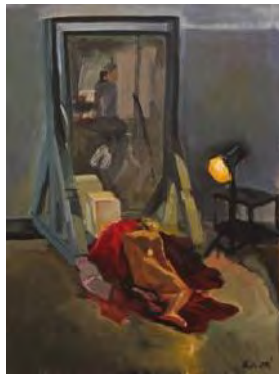
By Janelle Oswald

In the 50 years since gaining independence Jamaica has become world-famous for its music, food and more recently its athletic prowess. But while it is lesser known for its art, for such a small nation, it possesses an astonishingly large number of artists, as well as a supportive community of collectors.

The growing popularity of this creative discipline owes much of its success to its links with tourism. This is due to Jamaica being the number-one holiday destination in the Caribbean, which has resulted in visitors becoming more familiar with the island's indigenous artists.

The triumph of Jamaican art has persuaded the government to move the responsibility for culture from the Ministry of Education & Youth to the Ministry of Tourism & Entertainment, which means the National Gallery of Jamaica is now receiving more financial support, not only from its new home ministry, but from the Institute of Jamaica and other private-sector companies.

The National Gallery is also making



Work by Kai Watson, Michael 'Flynn' Elliott and Phillip Thomas

efforts to attract international interest. To date, the Gallery has been successful in getting foreign institutions such as the Brooklyn Museum and the Yale Centre for Contemporary Art, interested in exhibiting Jamaican art. Such partnerships have subsequently caught the eye of numerous art collectors around the world dispelling the myth that respected art can only come from the West or Far East.

One such collector is Jamaican-born businesswoman and socialite Theresa Roberts, whose online gallery at www.artjamaica.org

and virtual gallery space, Black Circle, gives exposure to Jamaican artists who are underrepresented in Europe.

London-based Roberts says: "I love to wake up with beautiful things on the wall. The wall is naked if there's no art. Furniture is fine, but art really makes the home feel special."

Returning to her homeland regularly over the years, Roberts was always amazed and proud to discover the quality and sophistication of the Jamaican visual arts scene, and she became convinced that she

Some artists to watch out for

1. Kristina M. Rowe

Kristina was born in Jamaica in 1986 and attended the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts. Her amazing artwork starts from £2000. Describing her artwork as therapeutic, Rowe says: "the paintings I do are often of what I feel, how I feel, what I see or want to recreate, or even translate through my artistic energy."

2. Phillip Thomas

Born in Kingston Jamaica in 1980 and a graduate of the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts and New York Academy of Art, Phillip Thomas's art creations start from £5000 upwards. He has been awarded several prizes over the years including the Albert Huie Prize and Aaron Matalon Award.

3. Kai Watson

Born into the famous Jamaican Watson family - an artistic dynasty that spans three generations - Kai Watson descriptive art pieces start from £3,500. He is a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University and Art Institute of Chicago.

4. Michael 'Flynn' Elliott

Born in Manchester, Jamaica in 1971, Michael 'Flynn' Elliott's artistic canvases start from £3000. He attended the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts in 1998.

5. Khary Darby

Born in Jamaica, he lives and works in Stony Hill. Darby's work starts from £3000. His work is renowned for its psychological intensity, darkness and a certain dreamlike quality.



Pic: Paul Soso

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wanted to promote it internationally.

Roberts is seen as the ultimate ambassador for the scene, having launched Art Jamaica – a fine art collection of Jamaican artists and sculptures – in a bid to promote and develop a level playing field for her compatriots to showcase their work.

“As a Jamaican, I am proud,” she says. “For a country with 2.9 million people they have a great art community and the quality of the work is very high.”

Seen as the definitive mentor for Jamaican

art in Jamaica and the UK, Roberts has played a pivotal role in the careers of countless artists ranging from painters, sculptors, to mixed-media and textile artists. She is also a true supporter of the future generation.

“In terms of young people, I think art encourages them to be creative and they can then discover something about themselves,” she says. “When their artwork is finished they can then take a step back and feel confident about their accomplishments.”

Kai Watson, Khary Darby, Kristina Rowe,

Michael ‘Flynn’ Elliott and Phillip Thomas have all been beneficiaries of Roberts’ nurturing, experience and advice as they seek recognition for their work on the global stage.

Away from supporting Jamaican artists, Roberts is involved in various UK arts projects including Drift – a visual art installation on the River Thames, the New Hall Cambridge art collection – the largest collection of women’s art in Europe and the establishment of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool.