

Kevin Clark Power



## Cruising:

CONTEMPORARY ART OF THE ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN

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*We will perhaps be the ones to teach others a new poetic and, leaving behind the poetics of not knowing, will initiate others into a new chapter in the history of mankind.*

—EDOUARD GLISSANT

*The main obstacle to any global study of the Caribbean's societies, insular or continental, are exactly those things that scholars usually adduce to define the area : its fragmentation; its instability; its reciprocal isolation; its uprootedness; its cultural heterogeneity; its lack of historiography and historical continuity; its contingency and impermanence; its syncretism etc.*

— ANTONIO BENITEZ-ROJO

*Inglan is a bitch*

—LINTON KWESI JOHNSON

THE 90S IN THE CARIBBEAN — WITH THE EXCEPTION OF CUBA WHICH HAS ITS own well established modernist and postmodernist tradition — have been marked by certain radical changes where the young artists, a fatherless generation in many respects, have challenged, or perhaps merely bypassed as exhausted and irrelevant, the dominant cultural platform and chosen to construct their own system of contacts and exchanges. They tend to see much of the work of the sixties and seventies (and in some instances eighties) as a static ingrown version of a predominantly middle-class culture anxious to keep its power and exclusivity, producing excessively polished modernist artifacts that dangerously postulate the last dregs of false myths for a national market. They have consequently both launched themselves into and been pulled into a broader international arena, where they are working with the signs, languages and behavioural patterns that mark the rhythms of their own lives: affirming presence, exchanging, yet asserting difference. Their work is critical, ironically inclined in its stance towards reality, and socially rather than ideologically committed. On the one hand, this can be understood as the natural consequence of the impact of globalization, of a common sharing of information, and of an increasingly common present, and

on the other hand, it has amounted to a prickly but effective strategy for inclusion. Some of the work centres on typical postcolonial issues of identity, history, and memory, but the most substantial work is “post-issue”, concerned with the complexities that have emerged from new life-styles, and often from the consequences of physical and intellectual Diaspora (not new in itself, but there have been unquestionable changes in the focusing of this experience). Its agenda is dialogic communication and a critique of the systems of power and representation.

The very nature of the experience of writers and artists in the 90s is increasingly cosmopolitan and may oblige us to rethink Caribbean culture as a distinct body. It may well be that much of the work is being produced for outside consumption and that there is an urgent need to counter the Western metropolitan re-absorption and reconstruction of Caribbean art; just as it is inevitable that some young artists have been appropriated or absorbed into the international canon on account of their blackness, their otherness, that serves as one of the main focuses of their constructed image for a white audience. Yet there are other factors at play whose consequences have been substantial. It is precisely through the work of the artists who are living or have lived outside the Caribbean that the essential postcolonial articulation of Diaspora, displacement, and ambivalence has found its most critical voice. Their work is imbued with a transnational and transcontinental edge that paradoxically makes it central, not peripheral, to contemporary experience. For example, Femi Dawkins, the Jamaican artist who is living and working in Amsterdam and Los Angeles, notes about his work that: “it focuses on cultural memory. For the past couple of years, I have been making altars in and around my studio home. My intellectual obsessions are mainly to do with the Diaspora of Africa and the Caribbean. ... I use found objects such as old Dutch wooden ironing boards to create masks, thus playing with the idea of domesticity as oppression and of freedom. There are, as we all know, many domestic servants all over the world toiling away ironing shirts, pants, and dresses. So the idea of masks made from discarded ironing boards serves as a potent reminder of the post-colonial era of oppression and of the silent patterns of faces that emerge from the toil, steam, and sweat. My work is about autobiographical tales of alienation, of diasporal despair calling for a change in direction. I live in a world filled with signs and ciphers that I manipulate to form symbolic trophies of my own making.”<sup>1</sup>

Having said that, it is also equally true that many of the artists who are working within national cultures are uncomfortably aware of the restrictions this places upon them. Christopher Cozier notes ironically that there has been an obsession, in the 80s in Trinidad and in the 90s all over the Caribbean, with defining “d culture.” And as a result, other forms of response to the Caribbean space have been viewed as suspicious: “the shift to process and method opens up the idea that the boundary between what is defined as local and what is supposed to be foreign (alien to us) has become unapologetically permeable and that the thematic and conceptual concerns of the artist are not already fixed. So the contemporary space can be interpreted as an ongoing evaluative or

investigative look at the local, as well as the broader domain of artistic activity globally.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, Cozier is arguing that the parameters of the work have gone beyond the criteria now being applied to validate them. He thus asks: “Is artistic activity here just a shift within the same configuration, that is, impressing the elite at home while claiming to represent them abroad and waiting to be discovered, redeemed and validated? How do we define its function?”<sup>3</sup> The question is intensely pertinent.

Che Lovelace moves directly to some equally central issues, arguing that the obligations of citizenship are becoming increasingly defined through the imperatives of consumption and the demands of the marketplace: “World economy in some regions is defined by a proliferation of super-consumerist tendencies. Yet those same regions also see that very abundance of product and capital barely trickle into particular communities, the survival strategies of low income communities become part of the structure of modern civilization.”<sup>4</sup> The Caribbean tourist boom creates an upward mobile economy for those associated with it and increasing poverty for the majority who have no access to the bonanza. It leases the island for the abysmal pleasures of the tourist, who has little time or inclination to understand what his presence actually produces. To what point, asks Lovelace, does the artist, “along with the educated middle class in general, see and address these realities, both on a moral humanitarian level and as participants in an appreciation of the aesthetic that these realities engender?”<sup>5</sup> Again and again we have seen works — ironic, parodic, playful, — dealing with the clichés of the contamination of the dominant Western or American culture on the national. We are now witnessing a turn away from the general to the particular and the growing recognition for both an increased complexity and increased specificity in the referential field.

Lovelace continues, fully aware of the way in which the language of social responsibility has become a major casualty of the dire conditions of contemporary life: “More and more we are witnessing the gaps between what is accessible/affordable/consumable. What is the construct of our desires and ideals, and what are the means by which we have to achieve them? Our general fondness for objects which are associated to status and material wealth has become very much the accepted halo which guides our day-to-day existence. Economically and culturally, we have had to negotiate our existence under a hegemony of larger states (even in the present independence that most Caribbean states have now attained). What has marked the participation of these developing countries within the global economic/cultural structure has been the dynamics of trade. Participation in a survival game means consuming and being consumable.” It is an observation that raises many questions concerning the loss of traditional values, the social costs of the marked drift towards consumerism, the vulnerability to the impact of the multi-nationals, the lack of any alternative regional project, and implicitly the nature of the relationship of art to such a problematics. Tourism, beach-life, night-life, airports, tour operators, international shopping centres, land speculation, nouveau riche classes, consumerism, together with unemployment, the dramas of an increasing poverty gap, survival economies, and drugs

are the unavoidable and overwhelming references of this period.

His own answer to these problems has been to take into consideration the changing face of urban living, the small chances it offers for the development of minimal ethical principles, and the whole thorny issue of the representation of the Caribbean: "It is with some of these thoughts that I started to construct these repositories and emblems of our age which suggest that we are consumerist beings. I had always looked at street vendors selling simple goods like sweets or a few spices etc. and wondered how they managed to make a profit from such inexpensive products. It certainly affected my own perception of what survival entails in a developing semi-urban context as is present in many Caribbean islands. These works, in both form and content, mirror the boxes used by street vendors. By embedding the sale items in transparent resin, I intend to create a capsulated object that suspends in time images built from the simplest consumer objects from this era. Also, I explore and utilize the very aesthetic presented by the vendors' arrangements and sense of design. By connecting their method of presentation to my own aesthetic decisions, I in some way seek to subvert and critique the modes that have been applied when representing working and labour class people traditionally in Caribbean art. The market woman (basket on head), the fisherman (glistening with sweat pulling in his net on a beach), the shack on a hill with coconut trees, etc. have all been popular themes in images from and about the Caribbean. These images now verge on being the clichés that are in use the world over. As representations, they have been part of an external gaze, a highly exoticised and distanced version of Caribbean reality. From that particular vantage point, there is little trace of economic tensions, of the impact of tourism, or of the general dynamic of transformation. It does not present this region and its inhabitants as part and participants in the growth and eventuality of modern civilization, but as subjects viewed from a safe distance, voiceless. Unfortunately, many artists in this region, especially in the visual arts, have adopted a language of limitations in which they themselves have always been located in an imposed otherness."<sup>7</sup> Lovelace thus reasserts the precariousness of living and the inadequacy of a system that equates freedom with consumerism.

The solution he proposes is to juxtapose empty status-symbols and basic commodities: "Superimposed in the foreground of these arrangements, I have placed luxury car logos constructed from beans, rice, spices, and other edible foodstuffs. They make reference to a perceived ideal of success and stature. Juxtaposing these emblems of wealth with the simple products sold on small scale, I want to allude to the seemingly improbable gap between achieving material wealth and the means we may have available to arrive at that ideal. By making the logos with food I seek to create tension between the notions of consuming (food) to survive, saving to purchase, and purchasing to become. Besides some of the conceptual concerns, the work also acknowledges an aesthetic that permeates much of global popular culture. These forms and systems of design are created as much by our need to express some mode of creative sensibility within the space around us, as by consumerism and all its functional necessities of seduction/presentation as we buy, as we sell. It is

important to me that the work contributes and enriches two different languages. It creates an exchange or meeting point for two situations, one which comes from a sense of immediacy and survival, and the other which acknowledges the former and thereby starts to utilize a whole range of signs and rituals in an act of artistic reflection. The resulting object accommodates some of the dualities we find in modern existence. The objects adorn and question simultaneously. The moment in which the viewer's reflection is caught in the mirror, which comprises the background of the boxes, he/she becomes framed by objects that may have some utilitarian value to them, but from a world of the low-tech retailer (in an increasingly hi-tech world). The work metaphorically places the viewer into the box of the vendor and into his view of reality. Both a simple beauty and an intense urgency."<sup>8</sup> In other words, for young people in the Caribbean, local and global images exist side by side; they interact and produce new dreams. Consumption can lead, on both an individual and national level, to expansion, but also to negative psychological dependencies. The need is to develop a new vision of what we want society to be and to realize that the culture industry is now a major force in shaping consciousness and legitimating dominant social practices. The artist has to unlearn and relearn what it means to challenge these systems.

Much of the work in the nineties stresses its links with the popular, with music, dance, craft, & street speech, whose vitality forms and informs mind, eye, and body. I am thinking of Steve Oudett's installations that delve into the subtleties of language in Jamaica and of Cozier's proximity to popular forms: "I felt that I lived in a space outside of a clear narrative with a clear point of origin & destination & point of arrival. So, as an artist, I began to wonder whether my work was defining its own point of view and the means to articulate it, or whether the work was merely an illustration, an interpretation of a given viewpoint. The work became symptomatic of my condition and circumstances and bewilderment and questioning. Like most artists of my generation living in Trinidad, the popular forms captured my attention, the music, and the way people do things: the way, for instance, we put things together — such as a kiosk on the street, a carnival costume or a Mas as we say."<sup>9</sup> Yet, Cozier correctly signals the incumbent danger of a topical ethnological illustrating of other as opposed to an individual creative freedom: "However, a history of art was coming into being that attempted to align my work to 19th-century anthropological paintings of property and native types. There seemed to be some comfort with aligning oneself to those who render or display an 'us' rather than allowing an 'us' to express what, in an individual sense, one of the 'us' might be thinking."<sup>10</sup> Cozier's point applies to both his own work and to the subtly poetic world of Eddie Bowen, about whom he has also written. Bowen's work emerges from the particularities of and movements within his own experience. It is meditative and apart: pitched musically on a romantic minor but deeply modulated key. And it is through the immediacy of drawing that serves as an intimate and economic register for the speed and changes of thought that he best traces it. Bowen notes: "its formations can be multi-dimensional in character, but for me drawing is more of an exercise in writing, and my

study for many years has been a sustained action of concentration in many attitudes and styles. I have made paintings for the same reasons, as a method or a vehicle for the expression and interpretation/transformation of how I see my particular existence. In recent times, I have been drawn to outsider art, which has had the effect of refreshing my approaches. The changes in scale from the very detailed smaller drawing series, 'The architect of impossible physics', to the larger 'Arenas' is a continuous effort to maintain an internal diversity and challenge necessary for continued experimentation, expansion and entropy. The incorporation and study of yoga since 1993 has had a profound effect on the nature of my work and life, whilst not immediately apparent it forms a substratum of reference and experience that has affected my thought processes about my entire activity as an artist and person."<sup>11</sup> The problem is to find the ways of effectively penetrating contemporary experience without necessarily having recourse to fashionable codes or dominant models, yet at the same time, recognizing their inevitability.

Critique can, of course, also take place from inside, at the social, ethical, or spiritual levels, as when Annalee Davis brings up the problem from her plantation background in Barbados of being too white, or when Roberta Stoddard, in a highly accomplished pictorial language, opens an area of human exchange between herself and the poor in Trinidad by literally establishing relationships with her subjects (although one would have to look at what this relationship means from both sides of the fence). In centering the poor, the outcast, the derailed, the destitute, the mad, she seeks not only to underline the socio-economic problems, but also infuse into the work a transcendental push towards the spiritual. These figures come from life around her and are the consequences of life around her. Yet they are awash in their frantically constructed worlds and speak of the larger failures of our society to create models based on care and love. The empty white space around the image is a meditative space where emotions move and gell. Stoddard challenges given ideas of normalcy, the ideas of vagrancy within ourselves, of rejection of self and of others, the recognition that "many of us experience our condition as painful, confusing and restricting."<sup>12</sup> One thinks of Foucault's *Histoire de la Folie*, of the incorporation or rejection of atypical mental conditions inside or outside the community.



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1. Femi Dawkins, letter to the author, 2000
  2. Christopher Cozier, "Between Narrative & Other Spaces," *Small Axe* 6 (1999):22
  3. Ibid.
  4. Che Lovelace, letter to the author, 2000.
  5. Ibid.
  6. Id.
  7. Id.
  8. Id.
  9. Christopher Cozier, "Between Narrative & Other Spaces," *Small Axe* 6 (1999):21
  10. Ibid.
  11. Eddie Bowen, letter to the author, 2000
  12. Roberta Stoddard, "Seamless Spaces", Caribbean Contemporary Arts, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 2000.