

Earl McKenzie:

A PHILOSOPHER WHO ALSO WRITES AND PAINTS



As a schoolboy I once climbed a coconut tree at night with a flashlight to see if the blossoms corresponded with the drawing of them I had just done in my biology exam. I was gratified that I was not too far off the mark, and slept well that night. I also passed the exam! Some ten years later, while contemplating a dry coconut I had placed in a still-life composition, it occurred to me that there was so much I did not know about this plant. I was seeing so many shapes and patterns I had not observed before. I resolved to do an artistic study of the plant to learn more about it. To put it in philosophical terminology: my motivation was part epistemological and part aesthetic.

At the time, I was also reading Hermann Hesse's book on the life of the Buddha – he was also a great philosopher – and my painting project soon became a spiritual exercise.

This was deepened when I found myself writing poems about the coconut plant as well. I had written poetry and drawn and painted since childhood, but this was the first time the two had come together. I realize now, for the first time, that philosophy, in a Buddhist form, was also there, but I was only vaguely aware of the subject then. Sometimes poems began where paintings ended, and vice versa. Some poems were versions of paintings. Others were reflections on the painting process. The following lines from one of the poems is an indication of what was going on:

*Then with a brush I tried to find
What with a machete I did not discover*

And soon coconut shapes began to say

*Uncoconut things to me
And I found innumerable letters
locked within a coconut alphabet.*

The paintings and poems were exhibited together at the Manchester Parish Library in Mandeville, Jamaica, in 1970. The poems were later condensed into a single long poem titled “A Coconut Alphabet”, and it is in my first collection of poems, *Against Linearity* (Peepal Tree Press, 1992).

One of these paintings, titled “Interior”, was selected for the cover of my second collection of poems, *A Poet’s House* (Mango Publishing, 2005). It was the final painting in the series, and I saw it as a summation of what went before. I introduced this book in my address at my 2006 art show, and told the audience that many years ago a friend of mine, an American philosopher, had prophesied that one day my philosophy, writing and painting would come together in a single praxis. With my painting on the cover of my often philosophical Book of poems, this I felt, was the nearest I had come to the fulfillment of his prophecy. In a later newspaper interview, I told the reporter, who pressed me for a comment on the relation between the three, that I regarded philosophy as the hub and writing, painting and teaching as spokes that radiated from it. Shortly after, in the biobdata to accompany an article in an edited book, I described myself as a philosopher who regards writing and painting as ways of philosophizing. My evolution from being an art teacher, to being an English teacher and then a philosophy teacher, is a story of self-discovery which led me to philosophy – my intellectual home.

Between “A Coconut Alphabet” and *A Poet’s House* are two stories: one about a painting that became a short story, and the other about a painting that became a poem.

As a painter I am interested in Jamaican visual culture, and in the 1970s I did a painting inspired by my memory of bamboo wattling, a form of building construction used in rural Jamaica. This painting, which is titled “Graffiti”, portrays the graffiti: proverbs, song lyrics, exclamations, drawings, etc., - which an unseen protagonist scrawls on the wall of a building made of bamboo wattling. Many years later, I decided to write a short story about this character, by constructing a narrative out of the graffiti items.

The story, also titled “Graffiti”, was published in the special Commonwealth issue of *The Malahat Review* (Summer 1994).

In the 1980s, after a journey through the Junction Road in Jamaica, I returned to Mandeville with images of the place very vivid in my mind. It was close to the place where I was born and raised, and seeing them again, after an absence in Canada, had a profound influence on me. I began putting the images down on canvas. I took the painting with me when I moved to teach at the University of the West Indies, Mona. There I wrote a poem about the painting which I called “Untitled Painting” (*The Sunday Gleaner*. January 14, 2007). I completed the painting before the poem appeared in the newspaper, and titled it “Country View”. I found it interesting that it was bought by a poet who knew nothing of the poem.

Since then, I have continued the practice of doing paintings with unseen protagonists, in which the paintings are ways of characterizing them. I think this type of characterization is very literary, and very similar to what I do in my fiction. I shall mention two. “The Re-Writer” is about an unseen writer of very modest circumstances, which we deduce by seeing his notebook and pencil on a tablecloth in the light of a kitchen-bitch, a kerosene lamp used mainly by the rural poor. “Artefact” is about an unseen handcart man who writes things on his cart. I have noticed that these paintings seem to be popular with literary people.

This exercise is mostly about writing and painting, but it is important to add that these interests also inform my philosophical work, as is evident in the following titles:

“C.L.R. James on Cricket as Art” *Caribbean Quarterly* Vol. 41, Nos. 3 & 4, September – December 1995.

“The Cultural Importance of Edna Manley’s Art.” *Caribbean Quarterly*. Vol. 52, No. 14, December 2006.

“Spirituality in Contemporary Caribbean Literature.” *The Supplement*. 1994/81.

“Philosophy in the West Indian Novel.” (unpublished book).

I think at least two conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing. The first is that, in my case, writing is mainly a way of completing the artistic process that begins with painting (although I am now thinking, of reversing this process). The second is that

writing and painting cannot be detached from my philosophical interests. I am well aware, of course, that I am more than a philosopher, writer, artist and educator, and that these other ways of being are the tributaries that flow into the rivers to which we attach these labels.

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