

# Calabash

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*Unearthing Memories: St. Martin Artist Deborah Jack*

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*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* is an international literary journal dedicated to publishing works encompassing, but not limited to, the Anglophone, Francophone, Hispanophone and Dutch-speaking Caribbean. The Journal is especially dedicated to presenting the arts and letters of those communities that have long been under-represented within the creative discourse of the region, among them: Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, Maroon societies, and the Asian and Amerindian societies of the region. Calabash has a strong visual arts component.

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*Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*

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*Jacqueline Bishop*

**UNEARTHING MEMORIES:  
A CONVERSATION WITH ST. MARTIN ARTIST  
DEBORAH JACK**

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**J.B.:** Tell me your process of becoming an artist? Why for example did you feel it necessary to get an MFA?

**D.J.:** Around 1998 I started thinking that it was time for me to go back to school to study film, and, perhaps, art. I had been painting and having shows and that kind of thing in St. Martin and always I thought of going back to school. Then I had my daughter and I basically gave up on the idea of getting my MFA, but my mother and my aunt insisted that I still do it. Together they said they would help with my daughter and so I was able to come back to the States to do my MFA.

**J.B.:** So let's bring some chronology to the conversation --- where were you born, grew up, that kind of thing?

**D.J.:** I was born in Rotterdam, Holland, which does not matter to me, because I have no recollections or memories of my time in Holland. I ended up being born in Holland only because of the migratory practices common to many of us in the Dutch Caribbean. My mom, to further her education as a nurse, had to go to Holland to do this and my dad went along with her and that's how basically my brother and I ended up being born there. As soon as my mother completed her studies the family moved back to St. Martin. On the island there is a generation of people like me who were born in Holland, just like we have many people, like my parents, who were born in the oil refineries of Aruba where people went to work. My dad's parents came from St. Vincent and Barbados, my mom's from St. Martin, but both my parents were born in Aruba and grew up there. My dad came with my mom back to St. Martin because she had her family in St. Martin and she also

had a job. So, our family has moved around a bit. As for myself, I celebrated my first birthday in St. Martin and I grew up in St. Martin.

As a young adult I then came to the States, to Marist College, for my bachelor's degree in communications, which I got in 1993. During my last year of Marist College I took some art classes: photography and painting. I had made art before, but it was basically for myself, flowers and that kind of thing, but I wanted to take it further. I still remember to this day the first day of painting class, standing in front of the door and being afraid to go in. I was concerned about everything, wondering if I would be able to "get it right" in this introductory painting class. I stood outside, fretting, incredibly uptight about going into this class, until I had this idea that I was going to go in and learn stuff, yes, but knowing that I was going to paint what I wanted to paint. What I wanted was for somebody to help me to do what I wanted to do well. I lucked out and I got an instructor, who, to this day I still e-mail and keep abreast of what I am doing, all my shows, because he gave me the leeway to do what I wanted to do: when we had these color studies of gray, I swore I heard him say that you could put in red and umber! And by the time it was done and all the paintings were up, everybody's painting was black and white and gray and there was mine: orange! I remember being distraught because I thought I hadn't been paying attention! Then, when I looked at the other students work the thought occurred to me: Good God, nobody else took this opportunity to use some color? He explained to the class that the reason I am not giving Deborah an "F" is because sometimes people come from a background or culture and they have just a different color scheme. She tried to make this gray, (because the big kettle was gray), but everything else was red. Deborah needed me to hear me tell her to put in red! And he was that way with me throughout. I came to love it so much, painting, that that I would always be in the studio painting.

**J.B.:** So what you are saying to me is that art was like a hobby and that's why you got your degree in communications?

**D.J.:** Well, no, I was always interested in art as a social instrument, especially in filmmaking, but in those days the St. Martin government would not give you a scholarship to go study “art.” So even though I wanted to do film and I wanted to do art I knew I would never get a scholarship to do that. So I took the courses closest to what I wanted to do: television courses, video production, journalism and writing. There was still this idea that you needed to have “practical skills” to get a job.

**J.B.:** How did you end up though in the States going to school, as opposed to say Holland?

**D.J.:** Well, the truth of the matter is that St. Martin has a better cultural relationship with the United States than we do with Holland. Holland is our official colonial power, but in terms of culture and the Caribbean region, America is much closer. I had been coming to America every year since I was six years old on vacation. So I had more of an affinity with America than Holland. Why you do not find more people from St. Martin studying in the States is that the government of St. Martin can send five people to study in Holland on what it costs for one person to study in the United States. So, if you are going for a government scholarship it is a little more difficult to get one for America. I did end up getting a government scholarship in my second year of study --- my parents paid for the first year. Because of what I was studying in terms of communications & television production, people felt it was more feasible to study this in America.

**J.B.:** What did you end up doing after you got your degree in the States?

**D.J.:** After I graduated from Marist College I went back to St. Martin working for a private production company that ended up going under since there is really no market for this in St. Martin. Clients did not understand that even a thirty-second ad needed two-three days to shoot and a required production budget that many people were not willing to pay. So the company went under. After that I went to work for the government in the information department for the next six years doing a bit of everything, but mainly I ended up revitalizing the internal newsletter, being the editor and writer for that, creating

a framework for the corporate newsletter. Then I worked on policy planning, developing a five-year policy action plan that was adopted by the director, moving up to acting head of the department.

**J.B.:** But you were also doing other things while you were in St. Martin, art related things...

**D.J.:** Yes, I was co-owner of an art café/alternative art space called AXUM., which was like an art café but we organized the first “open mic” on the island and out of that grew a monthly forum where people came and discussed social issues/political issues, also a vibrant jazz scene. All these musicians who had only played “touristy” stuff where now given a venue where they could play whatever they wanted, which, of course led to a lot of fusion work, musicians were free to create whatever they wanted without sticking to the tourist idea of what Caribbean music is all about. It was really a vibrant scene, art openings as well.

**J.B.:** Tell me a little bit about what the art scene is like in St. Martin ... the artists there ... the galleries, that kind of thing.

**D.J.:** The art scene in St. Martin is growing. There are a lot of artists, more than I realized until I started to pay attention. We also have a large “expat” community, American and European artists, who come to the island to live and work. Also, there are local artists who have shows and show work and sell work as well. But the bent is “traditional”, “representational”, “Modern”, that is the kind of work that you tend to see. We have the elder artists who I think deserve respect for what they have been able to achieve, people like Mr. Cynric Griffiths and Roland Richardson. Ruby Bute is sort of the grand dame of the arts, and in addition to being an artist she is also a poet and sometimes performs readings with a band. For me, this group constitutes an “old school” in a way. Then we have Mosera who has his art gallery, and, actually, I worked as Media relations coordinator at the Mosera Fine Arts Gallery for a while. We opened up the only contemporary art gallery that was specifically dedicated to contemporary work.

Mosera's work is mainly figurative, but also abstracted and he creates these allegories; of late it has become more overtly political. There are a lot of tourist-based art galleries that sell prints from artists from all over the region. What is really exciting for me, however, is that in the last few years we have artists like Joe Dominique who have come to the forefront. His work is often abstract, very contemporary in that sense, he has a lot of buzz around him right now. He lives on the island, has lived there for years, and is showing in the region and internationally. Artists from other Caribbean islands are also coming to St. Martin and making a change. More and more there is the idea of a community being built. The last time I was on the island the artists were putting together an organization, something like a union of artists to get grants for education and training. Now the major artists are giving classes to high school children as an organized effort, and so, in that sense the art scene is progressing.

**J.B.:** What are the structures in place to help one become an artist in St. Martin?

**D.J.:** At first there were no structures in place to help one become an artist on the island. One just got up and did it. Now you have art classes by Ruby Bute. Some people go abroad and study graphic design and end up getting into computer art, doing a lot of digital art. But there are no art schools on the island, no formal art academy and, yes, I think that this is needed. However I don't know how well it would be supported. I don't know how many people want to study art on a serious/critical level. My problem with the St. Martin arts scene is that there has never really been any serious art criticism done. I think in the literary field it is growing, but not with the visual. When serious art criticism is given to an artist's work, an island's work, a region's work, then suddenly the work becomes much more credible, as opposed to it being anyone with a brush painting and calling themselves an artist. When people are looking in from the outside who understand that dynamic, then they realize that you are serious about what you are doing. That you are organized, that you are critical, that when you bring someone in and give them a show it is because you believe that this person is ready to make a valuable contribution to the arts. There needs to be some notion on the island of curating and a curatorial practice and, yes, there are levels that people have to attain.

**J.B.:** How would you characterize the work that you do? Are you a photographer, a painter?

**D.J.:** I stay away from categories. My compromise is to say that I am a visual artist, but my installations incorporate music. I write music, write poetry, I have had a collection of poems, The Rainy Season, published by the House of Nehesi Press, so categories are very hard for me. I guess I would best describe myself as an artist working through various media's. For me its more like I have an idea, I have a concept, there is something I want to say, and I start thinking what's the best way to say this. Sometimes I have started drawing and come to the realization that this series could really develop into a series of painting. Sometimes, the work begins to metamorphise when I start working with the materials --- I realize then that this is a kind of sculptural/ installation kind of thing. But I think if I approach my work with this idea that I am a painter and all I do is paint then a lot of things fall by the wayside and I am limiting my expression.

**J.B.:** It seems to me like you were pretty active, doing quite well in St. Martin, so why the MFA?

**D.J.:** After I had my solo show in St. Martin I was selling work and had, yes, a fairly successful career in art, in terms of reception and everything. But it wasn't enough for me. I guess I like punishment! (*laughter*) I am kidding: what I missed was critical feed back. I wanted to know if my work could fly somewhere other than St. Martin. I did not want to loll myself into the sense that this is really great what I am doing. I wanted my work to be relevant beyond St. Martin and I figured that to get this I had to leave and go to a school/place where nobody knew me, and I wouldn't tell anyone about my career at home. I wanted a neutral critical ground with people who knew the art world and how

the contemporary art market worked. My question always of myself, and my art on the island was: Would this be good somewhere else?

**J.B.:** And so you left and you went to...

**D.J.:** I went to Rochester at the Visual Studies Workshop there, which was mainly photography and video. I ended up leaving Rochester after a year because there were no individual studios at the school, which I really needed. Buffalo was right next door and when I visited the University of Buffalo I found out that as an MFA student I could get a studio, and so I applied, got in and transferred to Buffalo. At Buffalo I did my best work. Buffalo has a thriving art scene. There are lots of alternative art spaces that have international recognition, which are willing to give regional artists --- artists based in Buffalo & Western New York state --- a chance to show, which is rare. Also because real estate is so cheap and given the post-industrial state of Buffalo, people get together and open art spaces and show work and have performances. With this dynamic art scene combined with the feedback I was getting from the faculty, my work really thrived. Where as before I was mostly concerned about the material and working with certain paints, these exercises in form and color, I started to infuse my work with a lot of content: personal, cultural, critical, political. I really began to explore what it is that I was trying to say and what was relevant to me. I started to go more into video, incorporated my own sound instead of using somebody else's sound, and I moved into photography. In St. Martin I mainly painted and am known on the island as a painter while in Buffalo I am known as a video/photographer.

**J.B.:** Do you have themes in your work that you work around? Groups of work?

**D.J.:** Most of my work has to do with cultural memory and cultural space. I have extended into my personal history. In one series "Foremothers" I use images of my grandmother, my dad's mom, who I never knew, using her as an iconic figure to form a personal/familial history that is lost. I am all about constructing these mythologies of my own. St. Martin is not like the other Caribbean islands like Haiti or Jamaica where



people know their folklore and traditional stories, this is not as widespread in St. Martin. My counter to this absence is to create these mythologies/this mythology that has been lost. Some would say that, well, “you are making this up”, to which my reply is that most of history is a construct anyway. History is a story. If this story is in the back of my mind I take the prerogative to say that this is a cultural/ ancestral memory. Toni Morrison’s idea of the “rememory” that is triggered for a reason, usually when there is danger, is an idea that I subscribe to. And I think the danger is that here we have an island that is trying to form an identity but it doesn’t have much to look back to because of St. Martin’s “particular” colonial position and this is a dangerous position to be in. So I have these memories and I construct my world out of this.

**J.B.:** What do you mean by St. Martin’s “particular” colonial position?

**D.J.:** St. Martin is still a Dutch colony. We have a certain autonomy by being in the Netherlands Antilles, but a colony is a colony is a colony --- that’s just what you are. What makes St. Martin even more unique is that we share a part of this tiny island --- 36 square miles --- with the French, so one side of the island is a French “department”. This is the colonial framework that we work in. Of course the people, ourselves, we operate as one and we are really moving away from talking about the “French side” and the “Dutch side” of the island, but these divisions are still there. It is all so ludicrous: there are borders on this 36 square miles island saying, “Welcome to the French side – Welcome to the Dutch side”. At one time the Spanish controlled the island, but when the Dutch and the French settled on the island they signed the Treaty of Concordia, which divided the island into two parts. The divisions are uneven: the Dutch side is smaller than the French side. The people on the French side, their education is in French, while for the people on the Dutch side, up until recently, it was in Dutch and Dutch/English. When you go over on the French side the signs, post office, schools etc. are all in French and on our side they are all in Dutch/English, but mostly English which is our “mother tongue”.

And, in the center of the island sits “the Great Salt Pond” which is a geographic symbol that recurs often in my work. In “Foremothers”, for example, I work with photographic images of my paternal grandmother, the one who I did not know. These photographic images are placed in shadow boxes covered by salt and text --- note the use of salt in my work. My second set of work is called “Blowing Season” which is six projection videos of: (1) Three separate reverse black and white projected images that all have to do with “salt”/corrosion and; (2) three vivid color images that had to do with renewal. This work is basically a video, in an environment with 8’x10’ projections. “Blowing Season” dealt with hurricanes, saltwater from the sea, and the ancestral notion of this as a seasonal event. For me hurricanes are a kind of seasonal remembrance, all the souls that were lost in the middle passage coming back for a reckoning every season, because there have been no monuments to them on the island, no sort of remembrance for them, a denial of however many millions perished. This idea came out of looking at one of those satellite maps of a hurricane and seeing how it travels from Africa and across the Atlantic to the Caribbean and seeing how it goes to America, just like slaveships, I thought, so I wanted to infuse all of this on the hurricane. But more than that, this piece had to do, for me, with memory and the unearthing of memories --- always, for me, it is about the unearthing of memories --- this eating away, and that is why I like salt because salt is corrosive, it will rust, and it will strip layers away, and you will get to what’s underneath something, and sometimes it is not always pretty. So, for me, salt is a strong metaphor to use.

So St. Martin has this “Great Salt Pond” where slaves were brought to work. This pond has since become a landfill for garbage in the middle of the island, something that is a source of much embarrassment, sewage is dumped there, that kind of thing. I am very taken with the idea that this pond was our colonial currency and why we were colonized, salt for gold. Salt as money. This idea of the dirtying/the sullyng of the pond can be linked to the suppression/oppression of memory. The idea that there was slavery on the island is not something that is really openly discussed on the island, yet, that’s how most of us got there! But nobody wants to talk about this --- why go dig up these things is the feeling. This is why I use salt as a strategic metaphor. Salt strips through all these ideas.

There were moments when the pond would stink ... God oh it would reek ... the entire place ... and I would think that the pond is rebelling. In the summer of 2002 I had an exhibit at the Bearden Gallery in St. Martin where I actually applied salt to the canvas, and then painted in grids --- these works were called the “A/Salting Series” --- and these grid-like structures have a direct connection to the salt pond that was also gridded, aerial photographs show that the pond is divided up into squares and rectangles. I use similar divisions as a way to divide up the canvas and then had areas of the canvas that were just chunks of salt. After the show I was part of a radio interview where the discussion veered off into this idea of why didn’t we reclaim this pond? This pond then became a metaphor for our culture --- it is hidden, but not hidden; it is dirty; it is depressed, but underneath all this muck there is really this “pure-white” sand in a sense. And I was so glad the discussion went there, because that was what I was trying to get at, that was what it was all about for me. People started calling in wanting to know, “well, why is the pond dirty like this?” “Can we start fixing the pond up and cleaning it up?” This, of course, is why I really love art, and why I believe in the power of art as a tool for social contribution. St. Martin was called “Souligia” at one point, which was the old Carib name for the island, and this meant island of salt. So salt was really strong for even the indigenous people.

**J.B.:** What is your latest project?

**D.J.:** My latest project is called “Here nor There” and is my first portraiture series and my first truly purely photographic work in the sense that the images come from a camera and I print them out. It is based on cultural theorist, Hommi Bhabba’s, idea of the “third space”. I interpret this space as having to do with the “home-ground”, which I am outside of now, and the Diaspora, where I am now living, and the constant negotiation between the two. When I go back to St. Martin I always ask myself, “how do things shift there”; and when I come back to the States I ask, “How do things shift here?” And there are people who do not have to make this negotiation, who never have to make any kind of “cultural shifts”, especially when they stay inside “safe zones.” So there are images of me in Buffalo, private spaces of my home and the area where I live, and of some of the

surroundings, none of this ever overtly --- no, I don't put in City Hall in Buffalo --- I shoot them in fragmented ways because this is kind of a fragmented experience.

**J.B.:** What I find so interesting is your use of that word "Diaspora". What does that word mean to you?


**D.J.:** The concept of Diaspora has been used in many ways. There are numerous Diasporas. However, for my work, the word Diaspora is very specific to St. Martin and the people from St. Martin and the notion of a St. Martin Diaspora. So there is a St. Martin Diaspora in the Caribbean, America, and Holland. But this connection to Holland is a misguided one in a sense, because I believe that people on the island look to the United States, because the U.S. is so close. The cultural penetration is mostly from the Caribbean and the U.S. Well ... thinking about it, I think the word Diaspora has really to do with St. Martin and the larger Caribbean culture here in the United States and the large community in the Netherlands.

**J.B.:** Not to the "Black" community in the United States?

**D.J.:** No, I do not want to connect the word Diaspora to either color or race. I think this is a mistake, especially from the Caribbean point of view where you have people coming from East India, from China, from Indonesia. I think that what Black Americans and I share, what we have in common, is the shared experience and history of slavery, but this is only one aspect of a connection. For me "Diaspora" means me not living in St. Martin, but living outside of St. Martin, Deborah abroad. Right now I happen to be living in America, but I could easily well be living in Holland. Perhaps I feel that the Diaspora is me and wherever I am. Diaspora is a very individual kind of thing ... it connotes scattering ... dispersal. It is a cultural phenomenon but an inherently personal experience. It's about how you negotiate between spaces.

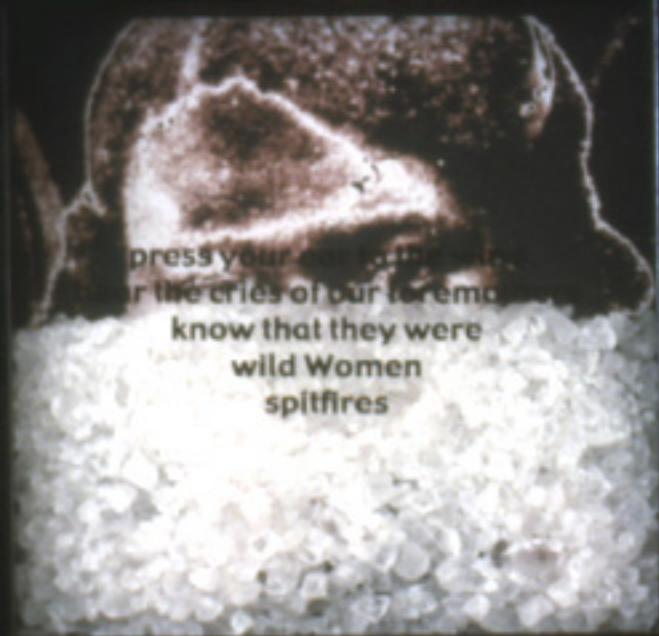
**J.B.:** Where do you envision your work ending up?

**D.J.:** Well, I am not one who believes that all art is made to be sold, although I very much want to sell my work. My paintings and photographs have been sold, but of course the video piece, “The Blowing season”, has not been sold. I am working on the DVD version! (LAUGHTER) The video piece is something that has to almost only live in a gallery setting and there are some places that can buy a projection piece like the one I have made, put it on, and I would just LOVE to see this piece exhibited in a really big way. In St. Martin they have not been able to put on this piece that calls for a minimum of three video projectors. My dream is still to put it on there some day. Still, it is important for me to make work like that, for I believe that sometimes it is vital to a work that it be solely expressive, that it is solely about getting your message across, and not to worry about whether it will sell or not. I guess what I oftentimes strive for in my work is to have an ephemeral yet political quality to my work that extends beyond the purely aesthetic.



come  
let us kneel  
daughters of Lok-hay  
grasp in our hands  
the soil  
of our land  
breathe it in

Deborah Jack, "Series Panel #1"  
Exhibit: Foremother a/salted  
Media: salt, digital print, wood, glass  
Size: 9" x 9"  
Date: 2002



Deborah Jack, "Series Panel #3"

Exhibit: Foremother a/salted

Media: salt, digital print, wood, glass

Size: 9" x 9"



Deborah Jack, "Untitled"  
Exhibit: Here Nor There





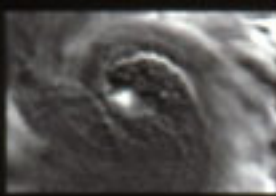
Deborah Jack, "Untitled"  
Exhibit: Here Nor There



Deborah Jack, "Blood Memory #1"  
Exhibit: Blood Memories; Media: Color Print; Size: 16" x 20"  
Date: 2002



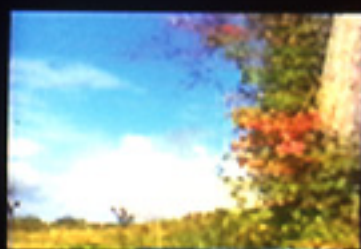
Deborah Jack, "Tree #2" Exhibit: Blood Memories  
Media: Color Print; Date: 2002



Deborah Jack, "Remembrance"; Exhibit: The Blowing Season  
Simulated Installation View; Date: 2002



Deborah Jack, "Detail Here"  
Exhibit: The Blowing Season  
Simulated Installation View  
Date: 2002



Deborah Jack, "Renewal"

Exhibit: The Blowing Season

Simulated Installation View

Date: 2002