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Caribbean Aesthetic in Trinidadian Paintings: Fact or Fiction?



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A Caribbean aesthetic suggests a unique cultural understanding that takes into consideration local histories, languages, ethnicities and identities, and execution of techniques and practice. The primary question here is: does a Caribbean aesthetic exist and, if it does, what is that aesthetic with specific regard to Trinidadian paintings? Secondary questions include: is there an agenda behind the concept and what does it hope to accomplish? Is there a relationship between a Caribbean aesthetic and decolonization, and how would the trained/untrained artist play a role? The aim is to locate and identify a common thread, if there is one.

Definitions of aesthetics, according to theorists, interviewed artists and survey results from visitors to the exhibition of watercolours, varied from “a receptive experience”, to “a judgment of taste”, “a metaphysical or spiritual connection” and “pleasing to the eye”, among others. Yet, aesthetics can apply to cultural and artistic products as objects of beauty which can be subjected to negative judgments applied from a place of power. These negative judgments can demean or subordinate those products. Themes suggested by the research included: visual components of a Caribbean aesthetic such as traditional imagery including land/seascapes, flora and fauna, cultural events and



Figure 1: *Macqueripe*, 2012, watercolour on paper, 16 x 20 in.

historical buildings; issues of copying/repetition; use of symbols within a Trinidadian context; as well as 'ways of working' among trained and untrained artists.

Possible agendas included political influences during pre-independence times, as well as the kind of work galleries do or do not exhibit in their spaces. The result has been a continuation of traditional imagery since the 1950s, with a sense of romanticism attached, and the difficulty that artists who do not paint those images can have in exhibiting their work. There are suggestions that a Caribbean aesthetic was guided via colonization, and a belief that non-Europeans were not capable of possessing an aesthetic. The paintings produced in my research project explored these themes using watercolour, a medium reminiscent of the minimized importance of the Caribbean in the modern world as a Third World region, and reflective of identity described as fluid and changing. In composition, by combining themes

with symbols or copying/borrowing from artists and repetition of format, a hybrid was created. Hybridity can be seen as a trait of Caribbean identity that implies taking from everywhere else and infusing it into a local context.



Figure 2: *Waiting*, 2013, watercolour on paper, 22 x 30 in.

The use of traditional imagery within the portraits makes individual connections and can suggest ideas of beauty. *Macqueripe* makes a personal connection to individual and place, and the format is repeated with other portraits (see Figure 1).

Waiting, is an unexpected look at beauty where the woman is neither Afro- nor Indo-Trinidadian, but from a minority ethnicity in Trinidad, and her environment is not a lush garden or “old house”, defying typical expectations (see Figure 2).



Figure 3: *Roots and Wings*, 2013, watercolour on paper, 8 x 26.75 in.

Roots and Wings borrows from Carlisle Chang's *Inherent Nobility of Man*, with the references being obvious. Yet it is not intended to be a replica of that work (see Figure 3). The attempt was to represent these suggested themes visually and ask the audience if the body of work reflects what they consider to be a Caribbean aesthetic, as aesthetic is also about the receptive experience, usually that of the audience, not necessarily of the artist.