The paintings and drawings in this reflection are part of a series I explored over a four year period. The social and cultural life of Trinidad and Tobago seemed to be suffering a steady degeneration of its spiritual self. This understanding of spirit was devoid of any religious alignment; it was a view of a national self that was consumed with a materialism which was both native and imported. The three paintings chosen for this reflection are emblematic of the three phases of the wider series: a depiction of the present societal condition; the individual recognition of the society’s degeneration and realisation of one’s own capacity for personal change; and the resolve to pursue a new mode of living. This was the conceptual scope of the work. Initially.

Fig. 1 *the new messiah*. Mixed media on canvas.
Fig. 1 “the new messiah” depicts a simultaneously physical and spectral figure risen over the constructions of an industrialised scape. It is faceless and without hands. This apparent spectrality suggests two dimensions to its presence: the anonymity of its identity and the metaphysical aspect of its dominion. Its sculpted body represents the perceived ideal of masculine physical beauty, symbolic of the reification of surface appearances and the contemporary cultural notions of beauty; it also represents conventional apprehensions of power and strength. This masculinized aggression is both terrifying and awe-inspiring to the figures below, who are lost in the midst and sometimes blended with the darkened industrial scape. They look toward the central figure in worship, in dependence, in surrender; the outstretched arm of one suggesting passivity, the relinquishing of individual and communal power and potential to this being. Even at the cost of blood, this figure’s arm remains upraised, hand open. There is a desperation in every upturned face, a bleakness, an economic, psychological and spiritual poverty. The buildings of this urban scape are not just physical structures but are themselves symbols of a way of life—one fuelled and driven by consumption, by money, by appearances of progress, an elaborate construction of a materialistic world; and the rigs between buildings and in the painting’s background show that this development is ever-in-progress.

At the time, when I conceived the idea for this painting, its purpose was defined as a portrayal of what was perceived as North American cultural imperialism and native acceptance and consumption. The vast inundation of hegemonic influences from film and music to local “summer” programmes to icicle-shaped lighting fixtures “dripping” from eaves of homes during the Christmas season—all were products of a grossly unbalanced assimilation that had become normalised. As such that half-human, half-spectral being in Fig. 1, at once recognisable and unrecognisable, was an embodiment of an ideology, a theology, a socio-cultural narrative, a political and economic regime; a force that subjugates native creative potentiality or at least weakens it by the sheer force and diversity of its influence. Its very facelessness and yet humanness, this half-obscurity of its identity, is significant because arguably, for many, the identity or source of this hegemonic presence is no longer important; its influence alone matters. And this obscurity coupled with indifference permit a subtler intrusion and more profound entrenchment of its authority in the collective psyche of the “lower” figures, neo-colonised “others” who look to and revere this neo-centre as the new model of existence, the new ideal. Even as one’s blood runs down one’s arm.
Fig. 2 *reflection*. Acrylic and ink on board.

Fig. 2 portrays the second phase: recognition. A figure stands, still in the midst of those very constructions that are depicted in “the new messiah”. Drawn in ink, the predominantly hard lines with sharp angles provide a clearer view of the physical as well as conceptual rigidity of these structures. The ink and paint blotches register an atmosphere of congestion and pollution, an atmosphere that also smothers half the figure’s body. However the figure is not focused on his surroundings or any overarching being; he is concentrating on his own hand, a symbol of activity.
and passivity, potentiality and impotence. These are the choices that this figure faces as he stares at himself. It is the beginning of a recognition of one’s capacity to confront and re-create the existing reality. Indeed, this act is first a confrontation, not of external powers or influences, but of self. Dark, dirtied clouds, though backgrounded, are on the same level with the eyes and forehead of the figure, suggesting the contamination of the primary places of the figure’s perception: his mind and eyes. Yet importantly, a luminary, wrestling its way into visibility from the darkness of the clouds, hints at the possible emergence of the figure from his own polluted space.

The final phase presented in Fig. 3 depicts a departure from this mode of life to a more fertile space, one more conducive to creative and spiritual evolution. Buildings in the background have now been constructed with words such as “anxiety”, “restriction”, “mechanisation”, “disease”. One word that was written beneath the drawing of the figure and can be seen partly extending from the top of the figure’s head is “fragmentary”. The word made sense; it was in keeping with the other words used to construct the buildings. But in the process of the working on the composition, there was a strong yet incomprehensible desire to have this word separated from the buildings themselves. This was coupled by an even stranger word insertion; it was not just the placement of the word but the word choice itself: it had nothing to do with the ideas the drawing was supposed to represent. My memory of this particular moment in the work is clear: writing this word and not understanding why. However a decision was made not to remove it. It is a single word seen between the buildings and the walking figure. The word is “indivisible”.

Fig. 3 in search of new beginnings. Mixed media on paper.
It is in the study of Wilson Harris’s novels and essays that these completed paintings and drawings have begun to unveil wider dimensions, more intrinsic dimensions. And this strange desire to insert a word like “indivisible”, an impulse that could not have been consciously understood at the time, has also begun to unmask itself. Harris’s unique mode of fictionalisation, where every element of his narrative can become diverse expressions of a single multidimensional self, provoked a re-viewing and re-reading of the series. The entirety of these visual compositions—from its characters, its scapes, even its monochromatic scheme—can and is now viewed as a single self-portrait. In each of these presented paintings and drawings as well as those of the wider body of work, one can more readily align oneself with any human figure, human-like figure, or even animal. However, Harris imbues landscape, cityscape, even an inanimate object with a profound life of its own, each can be directed and explored as an extended self of the novels’ human characters. Whether one does so consciously or not, the artist invests a life into even the most mundane elements of his/her work, for these painted or sculpted expressions are living extensions of his/her psyche.

With this widened vision, the buildings and rigs are not just representations of an external world or even symbols of a materialistic, mechanistic society’s deteriorating soul; they are also symbols of my own psychological self. And as a consequence, the paintings can no longer be viewed and experienced as a condescending judgment of a generalised society. Harris speaks often in his novels and essays of a self-confession and self-judgment. “We need today, it seems to me, an openness to the language of the Imagination simultaneous with a grasp of the sacred, which requires self-confessional and profound, self-judgmental art rooted in a spectrum of variable identity” (“Profiles” 199 emphasis mine). In the re-engagement of these visual works, a sense of guilt began to surface—guilt for an inadvertent othering of segments of the society, and the justifying of this stance with a perceived ascendency of personal values and priorities. In “Merlin and Parsifal”, Harris furthers this thought: “Self-confessional, self-judgmental art is perhaps as close as we may come to a fiction [emphasis his] of absolute knowledge which is redemptive in its insights into the interconnectedness of all species and beings and things [emphasis mine]” (60). Such a pursuit of redemption requires a profound humility. It demands to a certain degree, a voiding of self, a death or, to use a theological term, a crucifixion of self.

The dominant being in Fig. 1 which initially represented a materialistic and controlling force, a god-like entity, has now also become an emblem of my—one’s—potential self, for its meaning has changed. The being, painted in a cruciform shape that conveyed an overarching dominion, has become a crucified self, stretched to its death; its facelessness, the anonymity of any individual that chose to offer self as sacrifice; its handless-ness suggesting that this action, this offering or sacrifice, can take any form: the writer writes, the sculptor sculpts, the garbage man collects and disposes of a community’s refuse. The action itself is not as important as the intention; the offering of self for a wider community. Implicit in a painting depicting a societal problem was also a societal solution, and even more specifically, an individual solution. Harris’s words in The Mask of the Beggar have become clearer: “The artist loses his name, he becomes a god, a vulnerable god. Namelessness is founded on multiple names. Multiplicity is Spirit” (8). To make such an offering is to become vulnerable, to be open to an absorption of the needs,
struggles and hopes of a society, and engaging them as one’s own. In this light, there is no distinction between self and society: the individual becomes an embodiment of society; the society becomes a diverse expression of the individual. And the individual’s spiritual progress is simultaneously the society’s, whether this is immediately apparent or not. In this realm of spirit, it is limiting and deceiving to gauge progress with an empirical lens; it must be gleaned intuitively.

The painting’s title (Fig. 1) now bears new meaning: the messiah, in this context, is anyone willing to relinquish the ego, with its implicit divisiveness, as a requisite precipitant of a communal rebirth; this death of self, this selflessness, is society’s redemption. The “lower” beings of the painting have become not desperate impoverished consumers but other aspects of one’s lower selves that have yet to die, to enter the abyss, this difficult but necessary antecedent of a (re-)creative awakening. The blood dripping down that outstretched arm is not just the blood of the masses, not just the violence of desperate need, but also the flow of the crucified self’s lifeblood that has dripped onto the hands and arms of other weaker or more stubborn or more impoverished aspects of one’s psyche. The figure in “reflection” (Fig. 2) which was initially a representation of self-revelation, the apprehension of one’s condition in this industrialised,
mechanised space, and a meditation on one’s own capacity for change—this figure has become that crucified being of Fig. 1. His new awareness is the psychological fruit of his death; it is the beginning of his awakening, his resurrection. The mysterious word in Fig. 3, “indivisible”, situated between buildings and human figure, between background and foreground is now regarded as an unconscious discerning of the indivisibility of the various elements of the drawing, the indivisibility between one’s self and the very aspects of the society from which one may seek to distance oneself. It articulates in one word the notion that societal conflicts and frailties can be found residing in one’s own psyche and thus asks for a re-evaluation of one’s ethical positioning within the society. By dint of this suggestive, half-obscured word, intuitively included, the drawing points to a compassionate absorption of the challenges of the society from which one comes. This absorption engenders humility, forestalls externalised judgment, and facilitates a more meaningful change within the individual, even as the individual moves through and beyond the immediate cultural space.

Works Cited


