



freeze

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ART IN THE CARIBBEAN
Film & phantom labour AGNIESZKA KURANT
HENRY FLYNT *Interview*

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2154 W. Division, Chicago, IL 60622
p 773.252.0299 www.moniquemeloche.com

CHARLES CAMPBELL

It's both a blessing and a curse. As the English-speaking Caribbean's largest and oldest public art gallery, the National Gallery of Jamaica has been a dominant force in the art scene here for most of its 40 years of existence. Consequently, we have perhaps the most collected, documented and best articulated national art narrative in the region. But it is also the most contested. As the biggest kid on the playground, the gallery has largely been able to say who gets picked for the team, and what games are played.

Nevertheless, there is no telling how creative minds will negotiate both the pluses and minuses of a mature, but contentious art scene. The spectacular tapestries and mixed-media installations of rising international star Ebony G. Patterson can be seen both in terms of challenge and continuity, upending representations of class and gender on the island while drawing a direct line to some of Jamaica's artistic forerunners. The same can be said of Leasho Johnson who's domestic-scale ceramic figurines threaten to bring the lewdness of Jamaican dancehall into the tastefully decorated homes of Upper St. Andrew.

Increasingly, the institution is questioning its own carefully crafted narratives and welcoming challenges to its dominance. Permanent exhibitions that have changed little since they were first mounted in 1984 are being rehung, giving us the opportunity to revisit the more than 2,000 art works in the National Collection and allowing new stories to emerge. Recent temporary exhibitions have highlighted some of the most challenging artists working in Jamaica and, this year, the National Biennial will invite projects from major artists from the region and Caribbean Diaspora for the first time.

However, the push to break new ground is coming as much from outside as inside the institution. Locally, independent spaces such as New Local Space in Kingston, as well as artists' collectives such as New Jamaica and Dirty Crayons have been taking art beyond the gallery walls, to the street and online. However, it is perhaps the regional collaborations that are best helping to break the zero-sum game that has often plagued the art scene here. Spaces such as Alice Yard in Trinidad, Popopstudios in the Bahamas and Fresh Milk in Barbados, as well as the pages of *ARC* magazine, have become important incubators for the Jamaican artists now asserting their presence in a global network.

This all adds up to a time of expansion and change in the Jamaican art world. It is getting increasingly difficult to draw a border around what is Jamaican art – as is also the case in the rest of the Caribbean. Do we include the work produced in Kentucky or New York by Jamaican artists, and what about that produced by non-Jamaicans on our soil? On closer examination, the firm line between the confident contemporary players and more traditional artists also begins to blur. We're learning that it is, indeed, a much bigger playground and even the big kids have more fun when they share their toys.

Charles Campbell is an artist, writer and Chief Curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica.

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'The idea that anything intellectual happens in The Bahamas is anathema to the brand we have projected to the outside world.'

AMANDA COULSON



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