

Review of Caribbean Arts Symposium:
About Change: Wrestling with the Image
Written by Marielle Barrow April 2011

The Art Museum of the Americas and George Mason University, in conjunction with Caribbean in Transit Journal, invited graduate students and emerging scholars to participate in a symposium on Friday, March 4, 2011 at the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington, DC.

As part of the World Bank's project About Change, the exhibition Wrestling with the Image, on view at the Art Museum of the Americas from January 21 – March 10, 2011, investigated how the Caribbean region and its populations have been defined by conquest, colonialism, the tropical, narratives of struggle and national sovereignty, emigration, and recently, industrial tourism. Although the Caribbean provided essential migrant labor to much of the world as an important player in international trade treaties, and in the procurement, production, and distribution of raw materials, it remains as an exotic other in conversations about cultural production. It is a tense relationship in which the Caribbean is part of the cultural engine while remaining largely on the outside. This symposium will highlight U.S.-based scholarship on Caribbean artistic production in the 20th and 21st centuries, characterized by artists who are investigating and reconsidering how the region is understood. It is to be a conversation about movement in the Atlantic world – a dialogue about dispersal rather than displacement.

A gathering of about thirty scholars and arts activists responded to the call to “Stimulate and engage” at the Symposium on Caribbean art. Professor Michele Greet of GMU opened the proceedings noting the challenges of studying Caribbean art in the US academic context. These problems emerged in the process of organizing the symposium. She said that there is “extremely limited presence of Caribbean art historical studies in U.S. academic institutions. There are no art history graduate programs in the United States with a designated track in Caribbean art. Rather, if a student wishes to focus on Caribbean art or artists he or she usually have to do so under the rubric of Latin American art”.

The rubric of Latin American art for the study of Caribbean art poses significant issues Greet comments that “ The idea of “Latin America” as an unifying mechanism for the study of artistic production assumes—rightly or not—certain underlying cultural commonalities such as the dominance of Latin-based languages (Spanish or Portuguese), a history of colonialism, and the strong presence of the Catholic church. Within this construct, artists from Spanish speaking Caribbean regions—Cuba, and to a lesser degree the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico— still hold a place within the canon of Latin American modernism. But what happens to the English, Dutch, and French speaking countries in the Caribbean? Left out of Latin American art

history, the study of the art of these regions has no clear academic home. The Caribbean is therefore doubly marginalized in both its physical separation from American continents as well as in the discipline of Latin American art historical studies.”

Wrestling with the Image curated by Chirs Cozier and Tatiana Flores looks at the Caribbean as “space of visual inquiry”. Greet notes that “Rather than envisioning the Caribbean as a limited by static geographic parameters, the curators chose artists whose work interrogates existing constructs of Caribbeanness, examining notions of place, seeing, perceiving, identity, discovery, and the “Tropical.” The symposium presented essays that inquired of additional spaces- monuments, photography, other Caribbean exhibitions, issues of representation and reception, which involve issues of the practice of visibility. Essays focused on Cuba, Trinidad, Puerto Rico and Guadeloupe which are summarized in the booklet.

The symposium raised an important question: How do we begin to address the problem of a dearth of academic programs focused on the Caribbean arts? Concerns about the nature of the papers presented also surfaced. Why were there no papers on the artwork in the exhibition? Scholars offered responses worthy of note: these scholars had little initial access to the exhibition on which the symposium was based and viewed many of these emerging artists’ works for the first time when they were presenting. Research is often a lengthy process and contextualizing a work of art in the framework in which it exists should entail detailed research on the artist, the artistic environment in which he or she works, present day influences, use of media and the history of that island’s art which influences him or her. Syncing the production of academic papers on artworks in an exhibition therefore requires some foreknowledge of the exhibition and the particular art world of the artists. Of course one can critique the curatorial strength of the exhibition, which is significant but this too would involve viewing the show.

The symposium attracted a gathering of about thirty scholars and curators—many who practice in the field of African- American art and Latin-American art. It concluded on the recognition of a need for the proliferation of similar events for the discussion of the Caribbean arts.