

Art of Independence

Transformation of Image in 1970s Guyana

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Introduction



Figure 1. Denis Williams, *Memorabilia II* (1976). Mural.

A decade after Guyana's independence, Denis Williams painted the mural *Memorabilia II*, which stretches from the martyrdom of five sugar workers from Enmore Estate (on the left) and to the symbolic representation of healing, represented by a girl with a cochineal leaf (on the right).¹ Postcolonial Guyana is characterised by racial tensions between the Afro- and Indo-Guyanese; tensions constructed by their former coloniser, Britain, and the new imperial power, U.S. Thus, identity played a central role in Guyanese society, postcolonial politics, and particularly the arts.² The symbol of healing, depicted in the mural with the cochineal leaf and the combination of historical events, creates a space of unity where the shared struggles of the population — Indo- and Afro-Guyanese — are represented as one Guyana, encapsulating its hybrid nature. In its celebration of the struggle through the dancing colours of the palette, the work speaks of solidarity between every man, woman

¹ Denis Williams on *Memorabilia II*, in Andrew O. Lindsay (ed.), *Beacons of Excellence: The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures volume 3: 1986-2013* (Caribbean Press, 2014), 108.

² Richard Drayton, 'Anglo-American "Liberal" Imperialism: British Guiana, 1953 - 64 and the World Since September 11', in W. R. Louis (ed.), *Yet More Adventures with Britannia: Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain* (London, 2005), 321-342.

and child of the nation.³ The depiction of the martyrs, the flags of Guyana, the removal of the statue of Sir James Carmichael Smyth who governed in the years after Emancipation, the dancing Spirit of Agriculture, the laborious winning of timber and the Guyana National Service⁴ — all depict various facets of independence and of the land itself, rooting the present situation of Guyana firmly in its recent history.

Not all artists interacted with politics as outspokenly as Denis Williams — the institutionaliser of various cultural centres, including the Walter Roth Museum and the Burrowes School of Art. Nonetheless, other artists too were faced with an inevitable engagement with the politics of identity. While the degree of this engagement varied, it is undeniable that their art attempted to bridge the memory of the past with the present, and envision thereby a future. The 1970s was a period of transformation of the arts and a struggle for the creation of an artistic culture, but most strikingly, a time of incredible surge in artistic creativity. Denis Williams, Aubrey Williams, Stanley Greaves, Philip Moore, Donald Locke and Frank Bowling, to name a few, received international acclaim for their work. However, despite various efforts — creation of cultural institutions and organisation of art groups and classes — the postcolonial situation did not prove solid ground for an artistic tradition to root itself quite yet. This essay will explore this effort in creating an artistic tradition and how artists dealt with the problems of identity and cultural politics in the decade preceding independence. What artistic solutions did they employ? What were their responses to the de-cultured and trans-cultured postcolonial circumstances and to the politics of nation building?

³ Evelyn Williams, 'Thirteenth Series, 2009: Denis Williams: Art, Blood and Heritage', in Lindsay (ed.), *Mittelholzer*, 123.

⁴ Denis Williams on Memorabilia II, 108.

The direct sources of answers to these questions are the philosophies of the artists themselves, many of whom have written on the particular situation of artists in Guyana and in the Third World, perhaps most clearly in Denis Williams' *Mittelholzer Memorial lecture*⁵ and Aubrey Williams' *The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean*.⁶ With the exception of the artists themselves, Rupert Roopnaraine, Anne Walmsley and to some extent Evelyn Williams, there has been no historical work which encapsulates broadly the situation of the arts of post-independence Guyana. Of the non-artistic writers, Anne Walmsley stands alone in having written holistically on the particularities of Guyanese art. In part, this is due to how recent these artworks are, with many of the artists still being alive, and to the lack of funding and interest in the Caribbean arts as a whole, and in particular in the regions' less shaped cultures such as Guyana. As the Guyanese government has been creating little funding and possibilities for artists, many have migrated, and coupled with the deculturation of the colonial period, the creation of a 'national' culture has been slow. This has contributed to the further overlooking of the arts of Guyana, and the artists often rather being identified by art critics as either 'Caribbean', 'black', 'British', or 'American' — leading to a diffusion of their particularly Guyanese context. Lately, there has been a new surge of interest in the Caribbean arts, however, this interest focuses mainly on the contemporary art scene, rather than engaging with its roots. The transformative period directly preceding independence, however, remains underdeveloped, although there is a wealth of material for historians. Considering the transnational lives of these artists, a twin identity becomes apparent, one rooted within the hybrid and creole Caribbean homeland, and another which partly adopts the culture of the host land. However, to see them as 'Guyanese' opens up discussions of hybrid, fluid cultural identity in a time of nation-building, where various

⁵ Denis Williams, 'Second Series, 1969: Image and Idea in the Arts of Guyana', in Lindsay (ed.), *Beacons of Excellence: The Edgar Mittelholzer Memorial Lectures volume 1: 1967-1971* (Caribbean Press, 2014), 83-150.

⁶ Aubrey Williams, 'The Predicament of the Artist in the Caribbean', in Anne Walmsley (ed.), *Guyana Dreaming: The Art of Aubrey Williams* (Sydney, 1990), 15-20.

cultures have to struggle to co-exist and not be neglected. It can reveal the spectrum of identity and culture in a fuller, modern sense.

As the primary conception of the arts have been written by (or said in interviews with), either the artists themselves or Guyanese intellectuals surrounding them, that is the main source material of this essay. Due to the difficulty to find some of the material in London, as it is located in Georgetown, Guyana, the sources are rather limited. Different artists have acquired different perceptions of, and solutions to, the postcolonial situation and its problems. For this reason, combining their theories into one work can be questioned. An important aspect of the research has therefore been both to find common themes and differences in their approaches, and the essay strives to highlight them as they are discussed. On the other hand, the first-hand-knowledge of the artists when it comes to the problems they interact with, is a definite asset when charting the problems of identity and the artists' response to the latter. Other than writing, an important source of information are the artworks produced at the time. When it comes to interpreting art, especially those bordering on abstract as this art often is, it is inevitably a question of subjectivity. For this reason, writings by the artist has been employed when available, with my own interpretation being rooted therein. Essays by Rupert Roopnaraine, Anne Walmsley and Evelyn A. Williams have likewise been employed for a more grounded interpretation of the artworks.

In order to explore the artistic engagement with the politics of identity of the 1970s, the following chapters will be two fold: the first three dealing with the outspoken problems of identity, and the latter two with the effort of those outside the artistic culture to be included therein. Themes of humanity, inclusiveness and diversity ought thereby underpin all the sections, with the last two showing the struggle within the artistic community. By first

regarding the question of being a hybrid, transcultural nation, of having many ancestors and the artistic responses thereto, the problem of identity is rooted in the demographics and history of Guyana. Further, in the second chapter, the particular cultural problems of Anglophone Caribbean nations, having experienced the most severe suppression of the arts, will show how the experience of deculturation in Guyana created particular obstacles for the artists, ultimately rendering the European tradition of canvas painting as the artists' preferred medium. Thereafter, the nature of the postcolonial state, its employment of arts for the regime, and the artists' wish for a cultural movement, will be juxtaposed to the artists' inevitable vision to create for humanity, rather than for the nation. Hopefully, the complexity of the problems of cultural identity, and the complexity of the responses to them, will then be clear. The last two sections deal with inclusion and respect within the artistic community: the 'spirit-taught' Philip Moore stands both in background (rural) and in his philosophy as a contrast to the intellectualised artists of Georgetown; the abstract tendencies of artists argued to have been isolating them from the people; and finally the role of women artists, having organised themselves in a group of Women Artists first in 1986 and still having very little written on their work. Thereby, the approaches to identity from the borderlines of the early Guyanese artistic culture will be encapsulated to clearest show the diverse nature of the politics of culture and identity in Guyana.

Ancestors

‘This lack of witness, this lack of the indwelling of a common ancestor, this lack of any charter whatsoever for a destiny seems to me to establish an entirely unique basis for such a view of man, for the conduct of affairs, and for the realisations of culture; for the human in such a continually changing present, the human as himself a function of the process of catalysis establishes the possibility of a new relationship — individual to individual, individual to society; the possibility of a truly human experiment ...; an experiment in human consciousness if not in human responsibility.’⁷

— Denis Williams (1969).

There is a vast literature on the hybrid, transnational, ‘mongrel’ as Denis Williams puts it, nature of the Caribbean. It is a region based in Old World cultures — Indian, African, Chinese and European; a region of fluid, ever-changing identities, with no common ancestral unity but their shared living on the Amerindian land. In Williams’ view ‘all art is born of a sense of history, of individual and particular responses to ancestral imperatives’,⁸ whilst the particular state of Caribbean culture is such that the one common culture is in fact, the hybrid. Artistic responses to this vary from a backwards glance — to the ‘almost lost’ culture of the Old World ancestors — a disregard of ancestry, and the use of a hybrid ancestor. Denis Williams, the Guyanese artist who has the most elaborate idea on ancestry, belongs to the latter belief, and as his view is the predominant one among common artists let us explore it further. He identifies in the Caribbean the possibilities of a ‘truly human experiment’, because in the lack of a singular ancestor, in the plurality and hybridity of ancestors, what can be created is unique to the Caribbean; it is of *man*, rather than of an ancestral god. Through this theory Williams partakes in a Caribbean intellectual

⁷ Denis Williams, ‘Image and Idea’, 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

tradition. A tradition of thinkers, writers and artists from Fernando Ortiz and Aimé Césaire to Kamau Brathwaite and Wilson Harris, who have worked towards turning the idea of the mixed cultures of the Caribbean from being thereby degenerate, to the unique ability of the Caribbean cross-cultural society to give birth to a modern man, a modern culture. Regarding the politics of identity from this perspective, it is the very transnationality and transculturation, that informs the works of the artists. Therefrom stems the ease with which the artists either varied from one ancestral symbol to another — drawing on the total of human history — or escaped into the symbols of the everyday, the human, that which transcends all ancestral cultures. The Guyanese perception of ancestors is unique in the Anglophone Caribbean in the focus it lends the Amerindian ancestry, due in part to the significant Amerindian presence in the interior of the country. It is in this transcultural society, under rapid transformation in the 60s and 70s, that the question of identity has its root, and it is commonly resolved through a combination of ancestral imagery from the primary ethnicity of the artist and the imagery of Amerindian cultures.

A prime example of the combining symbols of various ancestors is Philip Moore's *1763 Monument*. It is a depiction of Cuffy, a slave from West Africa who led a short-lived revolt of 2,500 slaves on February 23rd, 1764.⁹ Cuffy is shown bearing an Amerindian helmet as protection and an African breastplate. His position and face show a resolution to fight, yet his pose is one of defence, rather than aggression. In its primary design, rejected by the state who commissioned it, there was a wheel of eternal revolution, made of the



Figure 2. Philip Moore, *1763 Monument* (1976).

⁹ 'Philip Moore, sculptor of 1763 "Cuffy" monument, dies at 90', *The Daily Observer*, 13 May 2012.

cup, the coconut tree and the sun — symbols of the main political parties of the period.¹⁰ Due to the total symbolism, it would at once have represented the anti-colonial struggle of the African slaves and an Amerindian protection of the fighters as the way towards the democracy of the new republic. Although omitting the Indo-Guyanese population, the sculpture would thereby have been a combination of two ancestors and the present. It is important that the ancestors Moore chooses to draw on, is the African — i.e. his own as an Afro-Guyanese man as well as the primary supporters of the leading political party; and the Amerindian — the ancestors of the land. By omitting the wheel, the government made the sculpture representative only of the Afro-Guyanese PNC and the Amerindians; the latter in an almost metaphorical sense. Further, despite Moore's wish for the sculpture to be on earth-level, it was put on a 'security-conscious plinth', with god-*Cuffy* regarding his spectators as subjects. The situation was worsened by Forbes Burnham's self-identification, and in the end the people deeply rejected the monument.¹¹ What was intended by Moore to be a symbol of national reconciliation, resulted in almost exclusively representing the Afro-Guyanese, and being despised by all.

Despite Denis Williams' wish that one should interact with *all* the ancestors of the people, when not engaging with their 'own' ancestors, artists would often focus on the Amerindian. Although Stanley Greaves used ancestral figures and the history of the world, whether Caribbean or not; Philip Moore focused on Caribbean folkloric hybrid histories (often the Indo-Guyanese); and Frank Bowling tended to avoid all ancestral imagery. Nonetheless, it remained up to the common Amerindian ancestor to permeate into the artists work. The reason is perhaps that the Amerindian peoples are 'the spiritual cushion, shall we call

¹⁰ Rupert Roopnaraine, 'Philip Moore of Guyana and the Universe', *The Sky's Wild Noise. Selected Essays* (Leeds, 2012), 299 (289-301).

¹¹ Roopnaraine, 'Not in Our Stars: Thoughts on the Republican Idea', *The Sky's Wild Noise*, 29-30.

them, of our country'.¹² Aubrey Williams' too argued that works with Amerindian 'roots' should be automatically appreciated in Guyana as 'they share the same environment.'¹³ In fact, Amerindian imagery is evoked by various artists for various reasons. Sometimes, it is as in *Cuffy*, a symbol of protection of the land, and at other times a reflection of the world in its current state. This latter idea is the thought behind Aubrey Williams' *Olmec Maya* series of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Its tragic, threatening note is a prophecy of self-destruction by industrial modernity, and the mental violence, both stemming from the colonial experience and posing as a threat to life.¹⁴ See for example *Maya Confrontation*,

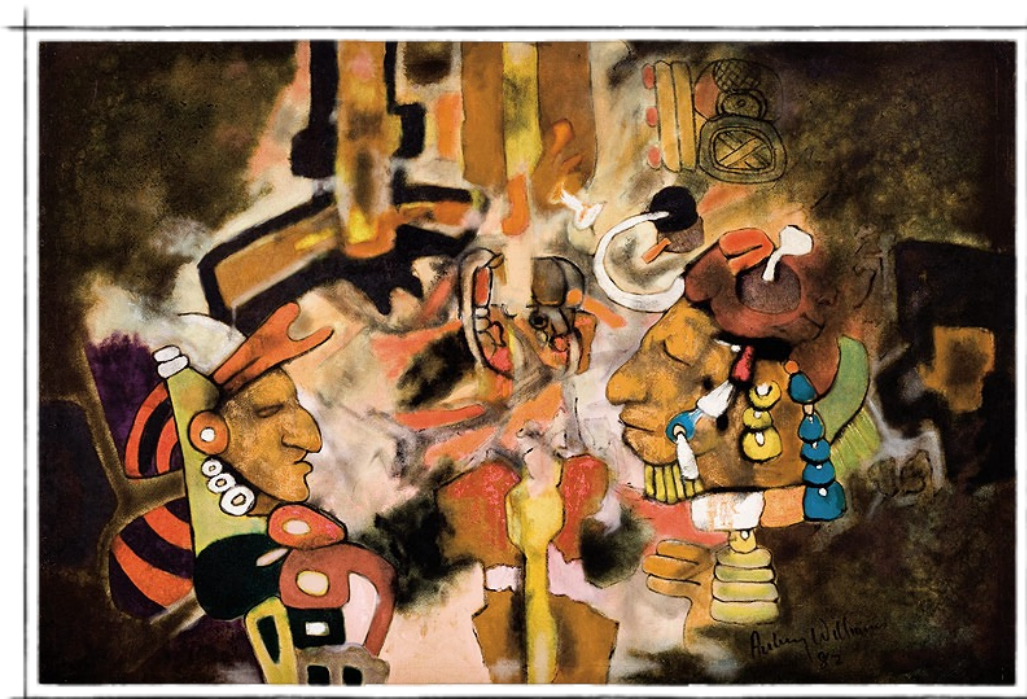


Figure 3. Aubrey Williams, *Maya Confrontation* (1982).
Oils, 120 x 178 cm. From *Olmec Maya* series.

in which the heads of the warriors are the only calm in the painting. The rest is lava, fire, bones, and darkness: a chaos of destruction in which only the Maya chiefs are composed either because they are unknowing or because of their pride. If the Amerindians are the spiritual ancestors of Guyana, and we would see the Caribbean as a whole as the point of

¹² Denis Williams, 'Image and Idea', 113.

¹³ Aubrey Williams, 'Predicament', 19.

¹⁴ Stephanie Harvie, 'Aubrey Williams' cosmos series', *Third Text*, 10:34 (1996), 83-6.

catalysis of the modern man and of humanity as whole, then Aubrey Williams tells us of the darkness and destruction that modern man brings with him.¹⁵



Figure 4. Aubrey Williams, *Night and the Olmec* (1983).
Oils, 126 x 185 cm. From *Olmec Maya* series.

Aubrey Williams' *Olmec Maya* series are however not only an apocalyptic prophecy using the past as a parallel to the present, but also ancestral in a more direct sense. The paintings consist of three layers: an abstract, 'lyrical', atmosphere, which 'evoke[s] the opulent vegetation of the Guyanese rainforests';¹⁶ a layer of symbols in thick, bold layers of paint which tell the story; and finally the layer painted in thinner, delicate lines showing the Amerindian warriors. Most impressive is *Night and the Olmec*, where the paint, the night, and the Olmec, acquire a rhythm of their own which follow the patterns of reds, blues and greens, halted only by the yellow triangular shape in the bottom. Here, the vegetation itself, supposedly Guyanese, is in fact shown to be Amerindian land. The land is Amerindian, just as the population in the bush remains predominately Amerindian to this

¹⁵ Rasheed Aareen, 'Conversation with Aubrey Williams', *Third Text*, 1:2 (1987), 25-52.

¹⁶ Veerle Poupeye, *Caribbean Art* (London, 1998), 152.

day. As Wilson Harris writes regarding *Night and the Olmec*: 'Olmec's head is ancient but alive, it becomes a living presence ... Not only Olmec but tree-gods from which we fashion tools and become insensible to the silent rhythms with which they still address us'.¹⁷ It is not an ancestor of the past, it is the soil itself, it is alive, in the present, in the Amerindian population, and thus in the Guyanese population who inhabit this very soil.

Fundamentally, for the artist the question of identity is rooted not only in the demographics and the history of Guyana, but in the soil itself, in the nature of its climate and vegetation. Art is considered with the visual, and thus it is the visual of the land which ultimately represents the nation to the artist. Ancestry, particularly racial ancestry, is a question which post-independence Caribbean states have been striving to overcome in their artistic and intellectual tradition. In the end, however, the ancestors on which the artists in Guyana drew in the 1970s — although this would change in the decade following, with increasing space within visual arts for Indo-Guyanese artists and symbols — were the spiritual ancestors, the Amerindians.

¹⁷ Wilson Harris, 'Aubrey Williams', *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, 2:1/2/3 (Spring 2000), 29 (26-30).

The Colonial Past

‘The power I say, of colonial conditioning can be clearly seen in Caribbean art today. ... A people without visual art is a people without identity.’¹⁸

— Aubrey Williams (1970).

The Caribbean problem of ancestry is unquestionably rooted in the colonial past, just as the Guyanese ‘spiritual ancestry’ of the Amerindians is in the Amerindian presence in the country’s interior. The colonial process of deculturation, especially in the Anglophone Caribbean where artistic culture was most suppressed and the colonising power imported the least of their own artistic craft, meant that hardly any visual cultural practices of the ancestral cultures were retained.¹⁹ The only visual tradition that persevered in the slightest was the Amerindian, whose presence can be seen particularly in Guyana both in the drawing on symbols of folklore and, to a lesser extent, in techniques.²⁰ The deculturation of the colonial period created a condition of inferiority due to the ‘being “late” to history, to science, to art’, and stands as a major obstacle to the formation of a cultural identity.²¹ As seen in Aubrey Williams words above, the need to create a tradition of visual art was very much felt by the artists, and their artistic efforts have to therefore be seen in the context of this strive for an identity as well as in the slow and painful emergence out of the colonial condition. This predicament of the arts at once creates a vacuum of heritage to draw upon, and simultaneously gives an opportunity for Guyanese artists to develop their own style, free of the traditions of the Old World.²² Despite this opportunity, it is easel painting — a

¹⁸ Aubrey Williams, ‘Caribbean Visual Art: A Framework for Further Inquiry’, *The Literary Half-Yearly*, 40 (Mysore, India; July 1970), 146-47.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 141-48.

²⁰ Anne Walmsley, ‘Bridges of Sleep: Continental and Island Inheritance in the Visual Arts of Guyana’, in Hena Maes-Jelink, Gordon Collier and Geoffrey V. Davis, *A Talent(ed) Digger: Creations, Cameos and Essays in honour of Anna Rutherford* (Amsterdam, 1994), 261-270.

²¹ Drayton, ‘After (Colonial) Domination: Intellectuals, Artists, and the Challenge of Independence in the Caribbean, 1960-1984’ (unpublished).

²² D. L. Bourne, ‘The Guianese Art Group’s Secretary on... Painting in British Guiana’, *Kyk-over-AI*, 2 (June 1946), 123.

European tradition — that has become the preferred form of visual arts of Guyana's most prominent artists.²³ In part, this ought to be seen as a 'the power ... of the colonial conditioning',²⁴ especially considering the slow movement away from easel painting over time. Through the perspective of creolisation, easel painting and the Caribbean visual arts ought not be seen as a mimicry of European tradition, despite their continued dominance in technique. Instead, employment of this tradition inevitably underwent a transcultural process, making the canvas paintings of Guyana uniquely Guyanese coloured by African, Indian and Amerindian traditions.

The conditions of the visual art culture differs throughout the Caribbean, to a large extent depending on the cultural politics of the colonial power. These conditions would in turn have a significant effect on the problems of cultural identity in the age of independence, as well as on the new artistic tradition that was being formed. In the French colonies the governors were fairly sensitive and liberal towards art, and brought in their own craftsmanship — which nonetheless remained restricted to the settler population until the 20th century and was in itself an attempt to assert French cultural dominance. Regarding Spanish colonies, their interest in art was primarily gold-oriented, which at times indirectly fostered ornamental art forms of the Amerindians, but its own craftsmanship was next to nonexistent in the visual arts. Similarly with the Portuguese, whose indifference towards art led to a 'passive' deculturation of the visual culture.²⁵ In the British Caribbean colonies, the position of the visual arts was quite different. Instead of being either indifferent or liberal towards art, the British colonial power not only found art a nuisance, but 'a dangerous weapon to contend with in the hands of the new captive peoples they

²³ Walmsley, 'Bridges of Sleep'.

²⁴ Aubrey Williams, 'Visual Art'.

²⁵ Ibid.

controlled. Character-destruction was synonymous with art-eradication.²⁶ Visual arts being the most obvious, were continuously attacked, and discovered artists faced the same penalty as for crimes such as necromancy, theft, rebellion or attempted escape. Nor did the impermanent settler population hold any elitist visual culture of its own that could permeate through the society after emancipation.²⁷ Visual arts in the British Caribbean suffered a great blow during colonialism, which remains the main reason why Anglophone Caribbean artists in the age of independence to have been slower to develop a visual culture in comparison to the rest of the Caribbean.

Even in comparison to the literary culture, the visual has been slow to develop due to the literary using the colonial tongue, and being bound to the European tradition more directly than the visual arts are necessarily seen to be. The colonial education moreover favoured literacy at least to some degree, whilst any practice in painting or sculpture was seen as criminal. As Stanley Greaves writes, this is most unfortunate, as 'seeing came before writing', and in a society where the majority of the population was not too long ago illiterate, and the culture of reading is still inadequate, there is a need for postcolonial artists to create a cultural identity through the visual.²⁸ Even further, the change in the political system did not directly bring about a change in cultural values: what is seen as inconsistent with old colonial values of 'Christian English decency', including Steel Drum Bands or African woodcarving, is considered not only culturally wrong but, in Aubrey Williams' words, 'pernicious and evil'.²⁹

²⁶ Aubrey Williams, 'Visual Art', 143.

²⁷ Ibid., 141-48. Evelyn A. Williams, *The Art of Denis Williams* (Leeds, 2012).

²⁸ Anne Walmsley and Stanley Greaves, 'Interview with Stanley Greaves', *BOMB*, 86 The Americas Issue (Winter 2003/2004), 38-45.

²⁹ Aubrey Williams, 'Visual Art', 144-45.

In these ways, the British Caribbean's deculturation prevailed through independence and to this day embodies a major obstacle to the formation of cultural identity. The Amerindians whose craftsmanship and traditions remained throughout the colonial period, seem in Guyana not to have had any serious influence on painting.³⁰ In the 1980s and 90s however, as Amerindian artists would emerge into the cultural scene, the prevailing Amerindian tradition emerged, although even that to a significant degree would have to be rediscovered anew. In the 70s, at the very beginning of the formation of a cultural identity, the reach into Amerindian symbolism and folklore remained on the same footing as that into other Old World cultures — new, rather than pertained through tradition. In fact, it was rather a reach into the folk culture of the population than a continuation of an artistic visual culture.

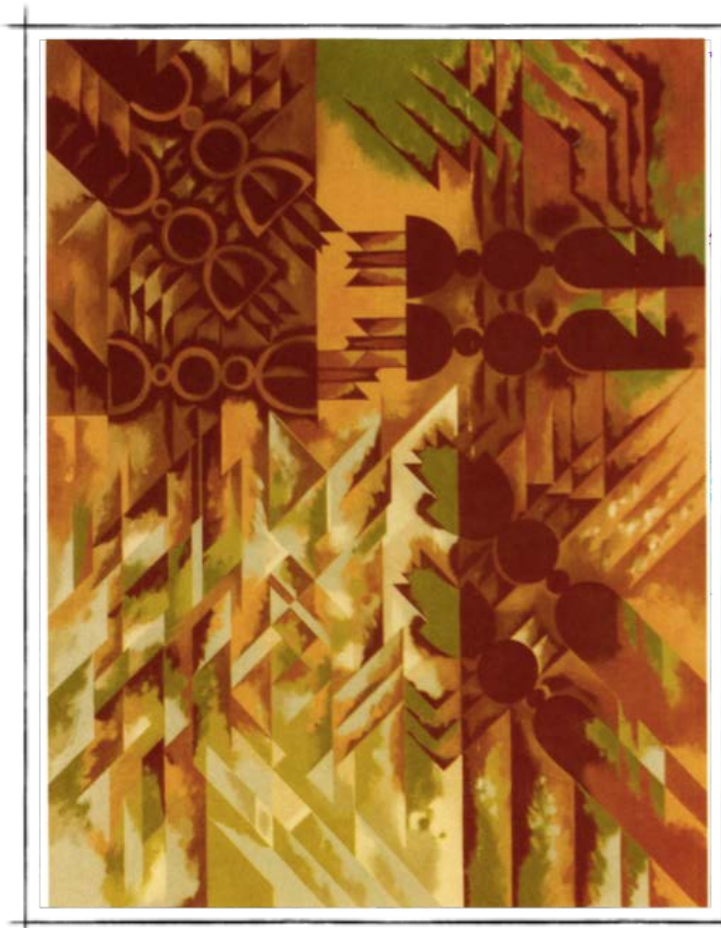


Figure 5. Stanley Greaves, *Black Ants and Diamonds* (1978). Part of *Mazzaruni* series.

³⁰ Bourne, 'Painting'.

The Amerindian presence in the South American rainforest landscape was a source of inspiration for Guyanese artists. ‘That insistent vision of a vast, dense space, evoked by the merging of plant and human tones, is a non-Western visual archetype that persists as an *idée fixe*. It is the lifelong landscape of his memory and identity.’³¹ The landscape’s contribution for example to the lyrical atmospheric background in Aubrey Williams’ *Olmec Maya* series (see figures 3 and 4), prevails through the colonial past, as the interior remained untouched by colonisers. The same goes for Stanley Greaves’ *Mazzaruni* series (figure 5), which are experiments in geometry born in his experience during a journey into the bush. In a way, it is a remnant of what was brought out of the rainforest soil into the work of an artist, especially mentally, although it must be said that the degree of the influence in this case, just as in Williams’ *Olmec Maya* is at best vague for the viewer.

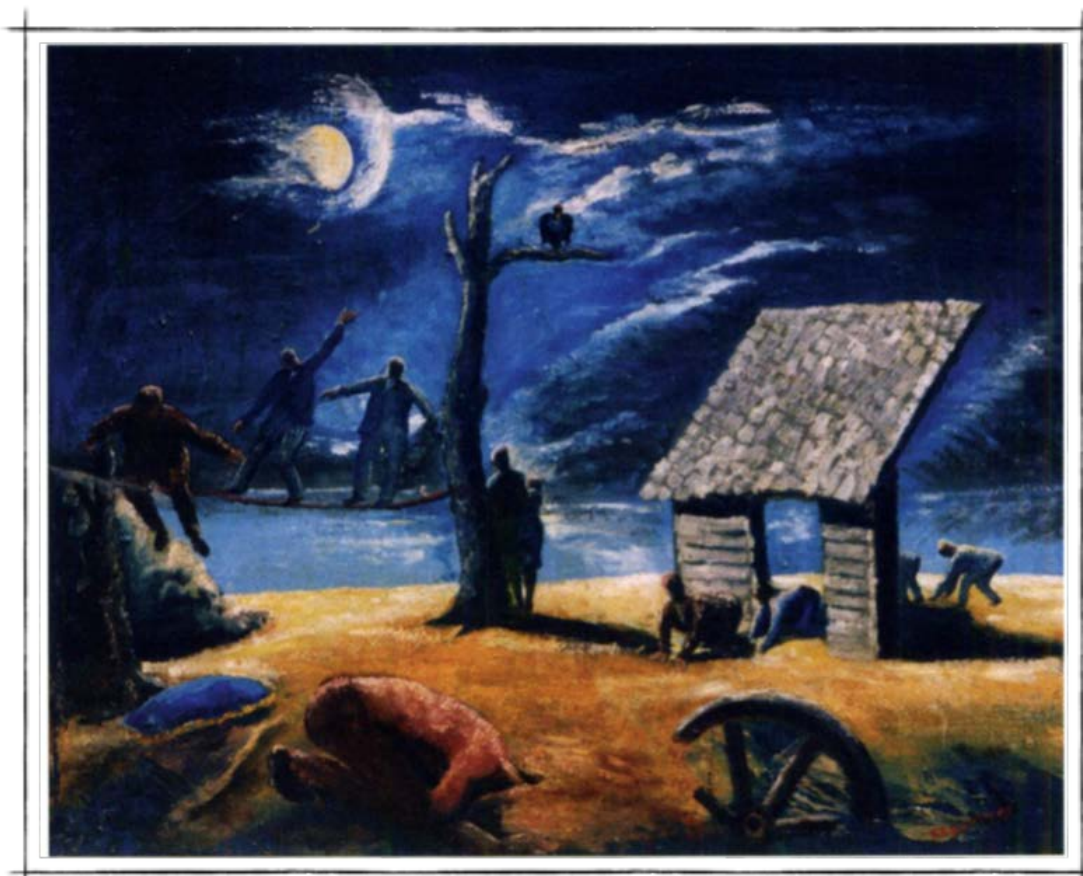


Figure 6. E. R. Burrowes, *Land of the Dolorous Guard* (1951). Oils.

³¹ Evelyn A. Williams, ‘The “Uncanny-Potency” of Art’, in Charlotte Williams and Evelyn A. Williams (eds.), *Denis Williams: A Life in Works. New and Selected Essays* (Amsterdam and New York, 2010), 8 (1-24).

Greaves' paintings in the 70s, just as other prominent works of his contemporaries in this time, are easel painting — thus of European tradition. In the visual arts, the techniques and craftsmanship employed must be seen as foundational for expression, and the domination of the European tradition is important. According to Anne Walmsley, it is in easel works that Guyanese artists 'have most fully expressed the complex, creole reality of Guyana,'³² and the existence of this technique even when used for African, Amerindian and later Indian symbols — or those of everyday life — unequivocally ground Guyanese art in the tradition of the coloniser. The European techniques of E. R. Burrowes' (figure 6 above is his most influential painting), the black Jamaican-born teacher of the *Working People's Art Class*, where the majority of mature artists active in the 70s had learned their craft,³³ prevailed as a dominant tradition even after independence.



Figure 7. Donald Locke, *Plantation Series: SS/1* (1972-3); *Plantation Series: Blairmont* (1972-4); *Plantation Piece* (1973).

Similarly as with language, where the creole upper-class way of speaking is dominating Caribbean literature and the vernacular forms of speech being experimented with much later, in the visual arts a move from oils and acrylics on canvas and easel to woodcarving, ceramics and modern mixed media works became prominent in the later decades. A

³² Walmsley, 'Bridges of Sleep', 261.

³³ Evelyn Williams, *Denis Williams*.

contrast is however the mixed media *Plantation Series* by Donald Locke, where carpentry and woodcarving were employed in the exploration of the history of plantation slavery and labour, as well as the Middle Passage. Likewise, Philip Moore's woodcarvings and Stanley Greaves' ceramics works show example of artists plunging into traditions of ancestors. Traditions that have not prevailed through the eradication of the arts in the British colonial past can yet be rediscovered, and the cataclysmic position of Guyana can both make use of its remaining Amerindian crafts and in the lack of its heritage give artists 'an opportunity to develop a style of their own and free themselves of the Old World traditions.'³⁴

³⁴ Bourne, 'Painting', 123.

The Postcolonial State



Figure 8. Stanley Greaves, *People of the Garden City* (1962).
Oils, 81 x 122 cm. Part of *People of the Pavement* series.

Stanley Greaves' *People of the Garden City*, painted in the decade prior to the period discussed here and four years before independence, is an ironic play on Georgetown (the capital of Guyana) frequently being called the Garden City of the Caribbean. The avenues shaded by trees and the flowering gardens of Georgetown that earned the city this nickname, is criticised by Greaves as the Garden City is painted as a place of isolation, disunity, poverty and despair.³⁵ The eyed leaves of the trees are a threatening presence, watching in silence over the man going through the garbage bin (centre-top) and the person to the right walking down the street. The message of the painting remains relevant in the decade after independence, as the notions of a multicultural unity in the nation-building of an independent Guyana remained an unfulfilled wish. Instead, ethnic cleavages between Indo-Guyanese and Afro-Guyanese were exploited by the British and American secret agencies, and the scarcity of education remained as a remnant from the colonial

³⁵ Roopnaraine, *Primacy of the Eye: The Art of Stanley Greaves* (Leeds, 2005), 28.

past creating a social stratification within the Guyanese society. The blow to social and racial unity was followed by a destruction of economic stability, in the wake of which the corrupt dictatorship of Forbes Burnham created a postcolonial state shaken not only by the slow trauma of the colonial experience, but also by a grave sociopolitical situation in the present.³⁶

The postcolonial situation naturally had an affect on the visual arts. Whilst wishing to employ culture and the arts for political purposes, which to an extent was the agenda of Burnham, politicians were wary of the critical potential of the artists³⁷ and often put ‘the economic cart before the cultural horse’, rendering the arts in a continuously precarious position.³⁸ Even the wish and effort of some artists including Denis Williams and Stanley Greaves to create a national artistic culture and movement became increasingly difficult with the continuous immigration of artists in search of a public and funding for their art, as well as to fulfil the transnational artistic dream to speak to humanity beyond Guyana. Exploring the efforts to create a Guyanese artistic movement and the governmental effort to employ the visual arts in nation-building, makes clear the multi-dimensional problems of identity and of conflicting artistic wishes hindering the creation of a body of visual culture so shortly after independence.

The importance of art in the creation of an identity carries a particular weight in times of transforming politics, especially so in Guyana at the age of independence. As Aubrey Williams recognised, ‘in the history of man ... the arts give the direction for the technology, the philosophy, the politics and the very life of the people.’³⁹ The arts also carry a

³⁶ Drayton, ‘“Liberal” Imperialism’.

³⁷ Drayton, ‘After (Colonial) Domination’.

³⁸ Aubrey Williams, ‘Visual Art’, 147.

³⁹ Aubrey Williams, ‘Predicament’, 15.

traditional African role as a process at the very core of social and religious practices of a society.⁴⁰ The problem of identity is even more complex in the postcolonial context of the Caribbean, both due to the enduring mental impact of colonisation and to the complex mix of ethnicities in the region. A problem of identity which is first and foremost solvable by artists and writers — the construction of art, of image, is also a construction of identity. The importance of ancestral figures in the works of artists, for example those considered in the first chapter, stem from this construction of identity: art serves as a method of connecting the past, the imagined and the present. This led to a wish for narrative art, for realist and politically ‘meaningful’ art, in particular nationally so, although the artistic scene of Guyana would increasingly revolt against this notion with its abstract and ‘human’ rather than national themes. Nonetheless, art holds the potential to create the identity and potential unity of peoples. Considering the increasing racial disunity of Guyana, exacerbated by Britain and the United States in order to create an unstable and thus easily exploited postcolonial state, the problem of identity and unity was particularly complex in the 1970s Guyana.

The arts’ potential effects on the politics of identity was recognised by the intellectual elite and the political leaders. A sign of this is the including of the Writers and Artists Conference, with a one-day art exhibition, in the celebration of independence in 1966.⁴¹ The Caribbean Festival of the Arts, the *Carifesta*, with Guyana as its first host-nation in 1972 was something of a signal event in which regional cultural cooperation was a way to create a foundation of a Caribbean unity when a political one had failed. In itself it is a declaration of the cultural riches and potential of the Caribbean, the creativity which it helped flourish would be as much a message to the world as to the Caribbean’s self-

⁴⁰ Louis James, ‘Overview’, in Evelyn Williams, *Denis Williams*, iii-v.

⁴¹ Anne Walmsley and Stanley Greaves, *Art in the Caribbean: An Introduction* (London, 2010), 169.

definition.⁴² The government's opening of the Guyana Cultural Centre in 1976⁴³, as well as the founding and re-founding of various cultural institutions, in which Denis Williams' efforts as Minister of Culture, were very much part of the same effort to create a regional as well as national cultural tradition. The *1976 Monument* (figure 2) ought to be seen as part of this nation-building focus of the government. With the uncovering of *Cuffy* and Burnham's self-identification that followed, politicians' efforts to use art as a political tool for their own benefit shows the other side of the cultural efforts in nation-building. This would mean that artistic creativity that would not be in accordance with the philosophy of the People's National Congress (the ruling political party of Burnham), would not be allowed to develop. Moreover, art works would often be re-shaped by the politics, with or without the wish of the artist and the action of the government, as creations would acquire new meanings with changing political situations.⁴⁴ For example *Cuffy*, by its lack of explicit reference regarding the Indo-Guyanese population, could be seen as a threat to the latter and a perpetuation of the Afro-Guyanese political domination with the PNC, despite Philip Moore not intending to do so. The efforts on the part of the government to employ art for their own ideologies would in fact pose a serious threat both to an organic creation of a cultural identity, and to the creation of an artistic movement and culture.

Political turbulence, a lack of funding except some private patronage and scholarships, as well as a lack of a public interest brought about by an existent national culture, led many artists to immigrate, searching for a more supportive domain for their works in the capitals of the colonial and neo-colonial powers: London and New York. Most artistic education was in fact undergone in Britain, too, this regards amongst others Aubrey Williams, Denis Williams, Stanley Greaves, Donald Locke and Frank Bowling. Decades after

⁴² Evelyn Williams, "Uncanny-Potency", 16-7.

⁴³ Walmsley and Greaves, *Art*, 169.

⁴⁴ M. Wallace, 'An "Intensely Guyanese" Sculptor', *Westindian World* (21.02-27.02.1975), 12-13.

independence, the best graduates of the Burrowes School of Art would quickly leave Guyana.⁴⁵ Paraphrasing Donald Locke, Nancy Graham writes of the art scene in Guyana that 'There is no real movement. Things are static, despite the intense interest a few individuals have in single aspect of art, ... there is ... a terrific hunger for art and cultural activities.' Artistic movements and projects remained too attached to their creators, thus failed to disseminate into society.⁴⁶ The first sign of an intellectual artistic movement 'complete with manifesto' was *Expressionova* of the mid 70s. It was the hopes and dreams of Denis Williams and Stanley Greaves, and was highly critical of the national artistic scene. However, the artists behind the movement soon left Guyana, and their 'concepts and observations did not get a chance to generate.'⁴⁷

Whether artists immigrated and formed a part in the Caribbean diaspora, itself having an affect both on the art scene at home and creating artistic movements such as the CAM — the Caribbean Artists Movement, there was a tendency to protest the straight-forwardness of art that was demanded by postcolonial politics. Instead of focusing on the creation of national art, artists would seek that which is *human*, that which goes beyond identities of nationhood. Similarly, the search in the past and in their ancestry would render artists to dwell into ancestries of ethnicities not connected to the Caribbean. Even Denis Williams, the institutionaliser of national cultural centres, would form part of this movement with his increasingly abstract paintings. 'Does Guiana really want this man', Williams asks, 'an artists who is not only Guianese but a prophet of the whole new world, a believer in the concept of Cosmic Man, of which Guiana with its diverse bloods could be such an apt birth-bed.'⁴⁸ The tendency of abstraction and of multiculturalism beyond the Guyanese was

⁴⁵ Stanley Greaves, 'Meeting Denis — A Mind Engaged: A Tribute to Denis Williams (1923-1998)', Williams and Williams (eds.), *A Life in Works*, 169-85.

⁴⁶ Nancy Graham, 'Portrait of an Artist', *New World* (18 January, 1965), 39-40 (36-42).

⁴⁷ Greaves, 'Denis', 184.

⁴⁸ Dennis Williams, 'Protest Against. Guyana Today', *Kyk-over-AI*, 9 (December 1949), 111.

a common theme in the works of the artists of the 70s, and in itself it is an indication both of the artistic wish to go beyond the national, and of the possibilities to do so which appeared in the postcolonial era. A national culture would not come about so swiftly in Guyana — the predicament of the Third World, the colonial past and the present political situation posed serious problems — but the creation of *art*, bound to the experience of ‘Cosmic Man’, flourished both in Guyana and in its diaspora.

The Spiritual versus the Intellectual and the 'Abstract' Artists

'If an artist doesn't educate the public, what will become of mankind?'⁴⁹

— Alfred Brendel, the pianist. Quoted in Stanley Greaves' journal.

Although the Guyanese art of the 1970s had not yet taken the form of a consistent, national movement or tradition, there are nonetheless some general themes that can be defined. Many artists would end up working in abstraction in one form or another, in step with the global art movements, although differing in their own way. A question that all artists would be confronted at one point or another, was the question posed by Alfred Brendel. What does this art mean for the people? Can they understand it? Naturally, abstraction could pose a hindrance thereto, as abstract art necessitates the viewer to have a linguistic key of symbols in order to penetrate it. Although this is not ultimate, as an anecdote recalled by Aubrey Williams tells. Whilst on brief stay in Georgetown, he met a man driving a cart from the village Buxton on the east coast of Demerara. One day each month, this man would drive people from the village to see the works of Aubrey Williams.

Aubrey Williams: 'They are abstract, people say they are abstract'

The man used a strong Guyanese cuss-word. 'Abstract, what is that? I don't understand abstract. When I look at your paintings I can think about my days in the bush.'⁵⁰

What might be seen as impenetrably abstract by art critics and scholars, is not necessarily so for the people. By drawing on ancestral symbols, folklore, objects from everyday life, and the environment itself, artists would create in their art a dialogue with the people, regardless of how much of an abstract form their works would employ. However, it is possible to identify two major approaches to the question of speaking to the people: the intellectual way, at the forefront of which was Denis Williams and Stanley Greaves, and the

⁴⁹ Roopnaraine, *Primacy*, 153.

⁵⁰ Aubrey Williams, 'Predicament', 16.

‘spiritual’, embodied by Philip Moore and of increasing interest for younger artists. An exploration of the approaches illuminates the diversity as well as homogeneity among the artists — one that is telling of the beginning of the creation of a national artistic movement.

In the postcolonial context, intellectualism in art was regarded as being Western, and therefore shunned,⁵¹ whilst simultaneously being the approach of the urban artists and thus necessarily belonging to a minority of somewhat higher class. The intellectual approach allowed however some progress away from Western traditions and in the creation of an independent nation. For example, Denis Williams’ institutionalising efforts, as well as his studies of African art and culture and the Amerindians, constituted a way to intellectually seek non-European ancestral origins and opened up for other foundations for national creativity. Likewise, Williams’ effort to renounce traditional painting that is meant to dominate the onlooker, and instead ‘free the onlooker, to extend him gloriously out beyond the confines of the canvas ... a liberation of the person’,⁵² as well as by making his painting increasingly mathematical (an effort that can clearly be seen in Greaves’ works, too) in order to avoid ‘any element of subjective coercion’ ought to be seen as made possible by the intellectual approach.⁵³ Greaves’ and Williams’ wishes for an intellectual art movement would however face difficulties in the younger generations, who, as Greaves complained, were often uninterested in improving technical methods and wished to base their works completely on feeling. ‘Philip Moore was the high priest where this was concerned.’⁵⁴ In other words, the two approaches would clash despite the intellectual artists reverence for Moore’s work.

⁵¹ Greaves, ‘Meeting Denis’, 178.

⁵² Wilson Harris, ‘Two Periods in the Work of a West Indian Artist’, in Williams and Williams (eds.), *A Life in Works*, 45 (41-47).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁴ Greaves, ‘Meeting Denis’, 178-9.

The fundamental split between the two lay in the urban nature of the intellectual artists, who based their work substantially on research and knowledge, and the rural, unlettered and self-taught Philip Moore. Both approaches wished to create public art, and speak to the people, with the people, although their approaches differed. Whilst intellectual artists would create exhibitions and focus on teaching, speaking to the public through works in museums and murals, Philip Moore would design his canvases to be threaded with cord and hung, making them moveable. As a young artist, he would carry his works from place to place, exhibiting them in schools and other public places; even later he meant his works to be exhibited in community centres, on village festivals and ceremonies.⁵⁵ Likewise, education was for him the ‘drawing out of what is inside, of what we have brought with us from the spirit world’; the final defence against the impact of British colonial domination. “What you have to understand is that apart from your environment and your educational qualifications, you have something within you that you have brought from the spirit world and that thing is a part of God.”⁵⁶ A part of doing so, is through art, especially art based on spiritual heroes and for Moore, the village folklores, the village being for him the core of Guyana itself. By drawing from the village tales, he is unique due to his interaction with the mixture of Indo- and Afro-Guyanese myths, which transformed in village legends and integrated with the Amerindian tales.

Jumbie Wedding is one of his works folkloric paintings, which is about a prophet that was said to have lived in the village Moore grew up in, Gulluh Alexander. The stories goes, that one night, he told the villagers to gather spoiled eggs from ducks and turkeys nests, for ‘de rain gon fall an de sun got shine underneat de tamarind tree. An de spirits from de fire, de hail, de earth an de water would all come meet up together’ because the Moongazer was

⁵⁵ Roopnaraine, ‘Philip Moore’, 300.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 291-2.

marrying his wife. 'All the people that did wrong to the community, their spirits have to come back to that Jumbie Wedding and ask for forgiveness, and make a pledge that they would do right,' as Moore describes it himself. As notorious criminals of the land came back for the wedding between the Corentyne jumbie boy and the Buxtonian girl, the two regions who had been in a war in the bush were united.⁵⁷



Figure 9. Philip Moore, *Jumbie Wedding* (1979-83). Acrylic, 211 x 443 cm.

In the imagery of what Roopnaraine called 'the primordial zone of forgiveness and reconciliation',⁵⁸ Moore creates a universal reconciliation of mankind. The enormous figures of the Corentyne boy and the Buxtonian girl, with their play of dark and light colours of all shades are painted as one with the jumbies, the spirits of the dead criminal and good, and the people of the village. Light and dark colours, good and bad spirits, are united under the tamarind tree in one feast. The village legend penetrates through time, and without knowing the story Moore's imagery and colours speaks of the unity of all — all Guyanese reconciled in marriage, as well as all peoples in the world. The jumbies come

⁵⁷ Roopnaraine, 'Philip Moore', 296-7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 297.

from the lore to reconcile the two regions, indicating the possibility of peace even the present turbulent times.

The folkloric symbolism in *Jumbie Wedding* is in fact as abstract as those of 'intellectual artists', and the drawing on symbols from the present village folklore is inevitably connected with imagined or discovered myths from ancestral traditions. Furthermore, Moore himself although seeing education in art as based on finding an inner, spiritual self, would end up teaching in the Department of Culture in the early 1960s, then as a resident tutor at the Borough School of Art⁵⁹ and in the 1970s as a resident artist and teacher of wood sculpting at Princeton University.⁶⁰ His journey as an artist began in 1955, after his conversion to Jordanite Christianity, with a dream of a hand reaching down from the heavens with a sculpting tool — the reason he began sculpting, and later on painting, too.⁶¹ Seen as somewhat of an oddity amongst the Georgetown artist, he was much praised by E. R. Burrowes and it his inner skill and understanding soon took him to become one of the most prominent Guyanese artist, in stark contrast to the intellectual, educated majority of the artistic elite.⁶² His work as an artist ended up bridging the gap between him and his contemporaries, not only in the conclusion of his own career in teaching next to the intellectual artists, but also in the very abstract tendency of his art.

Aubrey Williams claims that the very environment of the Caribbean, and the South American coast in particular, appears 'abstract' in comparison with more ordered environments of most of the rest of the world. It can also be suggested that in reversing process of deculturation, abstraction is needed in order for expressions beyond that which

⁵⁹ 'Philip Moore', *The Daily Observer*.

⁶⁰ Drayton, 'After (Colonial) Domination'.

⁶¹ 'Philip Moore', *The Daily Observer*.

⁶² Roopnaraine, 'Philip Moore', 293.

is the order of things, i.e. the colonial in one way or another, can be transmitted. Painting is abstract in its nature, but abstract painting is a revolution of the historical order. The predicament of the artist in the postcolonial context could, potentially, need to employ an abstract language in order to not get tied into the colonial order, the Western, or the nationalist one. By instead going back to what is fundamentally human, by employing ancestral and present folklore as well as everyday symbols, artists both intellectual and not created a visual language that has the power to penetrate cultural boundaries. A visual language was made possible by the transcultural momentum of the Caribbean, and of Guyana in particular, and prevails despite its abstraction, to speak to the people.

Women Artists

Throughout this essay, several different aspects of the transforming art culture in Guyana have been charted. However, there is an all too obvious exclusion of several groups in society: the Indo-Guyanese, the Amerindians, and women. Indo-Guyanese artists entered the art scene first in the later 80s and 90s, mainly due to their concentration in predominantly rural areas. Similarly, Amerindian artists became visible first after the 70s, with a leading movement being the *Lokono Group* and its exhibition in 1995.⁶³ Women artists on the other hand, played a key role in the formation of Guyanese artistic culture, both before independence and in the transformation of the visual arts in the decade preceding 1966. Interestingly, the ethnicity of women artists and female cross-cultural exhibitions were much more varied and mixed: for example the three most prominent women artists in the 70s — Stephanie Correia, Marjorie Broodhagen and Leila Locke — being Amerindian-Dutch, Afro-Guyanese and English respectively. When regarding the total body of women artists at the time, their ethnicities and work together across these went much further than for male artists. The invisibility of women in this essay is unfortunate, but the lack of source material available on Guyanese women artists — both in London and in general — is a serious limit. Retrospective women exhibitions, in 1987 and then in 2007, coupled with the publishing of *60 Years of Women Artists in Guyana 1928-1988: A Historical Perspective*, allows us to correct this invisibility to some degree.⁶⁴ This chapter will primarily consider itself with women's roles in the creation of an artistic movement, spanning beyond the 1970s into both the past and to some extent the future, in order to illuminate the importance of women artists in the early transformation and creation of a Guyanese artistic culture.

⁶³ Walmsley and Greaves, *Art in the Caribbean*, 169.

⁶⁴ Nesha Z. Haniff (ed.), *60 Years of Women Artists in Guyana, 1928-1988: A Historical Perspective* (Georgetown, 1988).

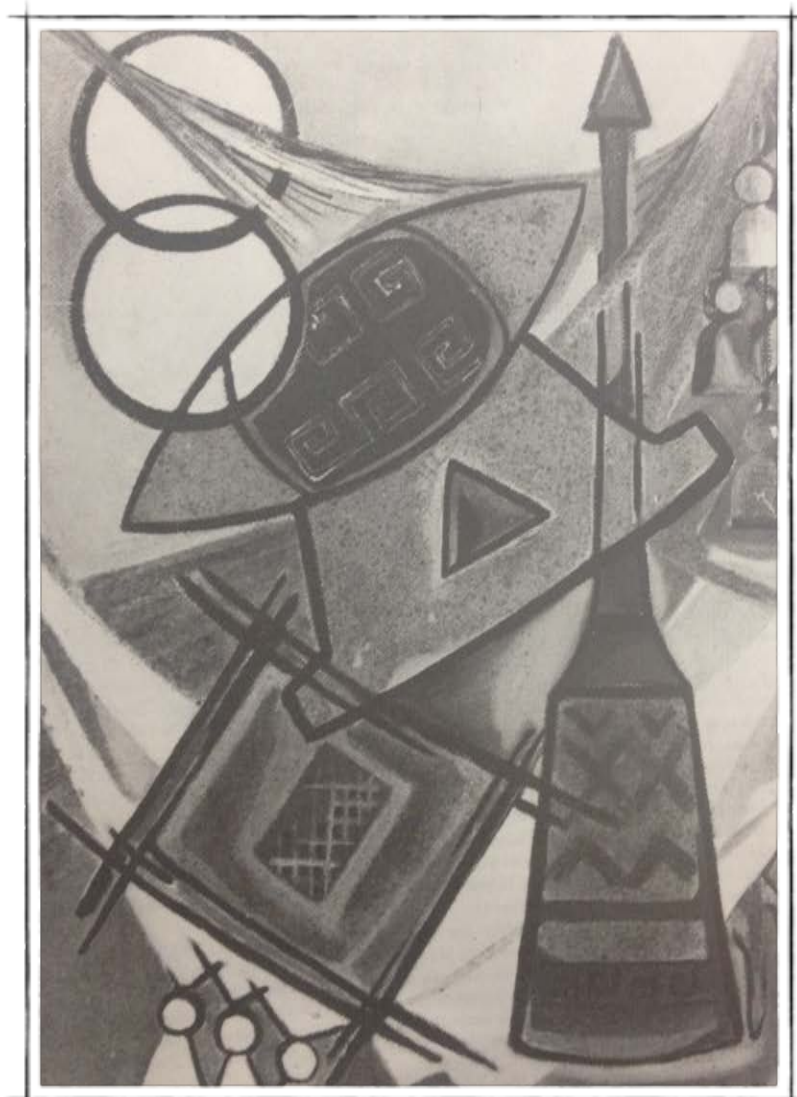


Figure 10. Marjorie Broodhagen, *Amerindian Interior*.

The lack of material on women artists was felt in the creation of the book and catalogue for the retrospective exhibition of 1987, explained by the editor, Nesha Z. Haniff as dependent on ‘the reality of women’s lives then and now. They married and changed names, they followed their husbands abroad or gave up their careers for family life.’⁶⁵ The hindrances to leading an artistic career that all Guyanese artists faced — the dictatorship of Burnham necessitating art in accordance with the political agenda, the grave economic situation both nationally and privately necessitating full-time work in addition to artistic work — made it even more difficult for women, traditionally having more responsibilities for their families, than for men to pursue a career in art. However, this did not mean there were no

⁶⁵ Nesha Z. Haniff, ‘Introduction’, in Haniff (ed.), *Women Artists*, 11.

women artists: quite the contrary, but most would only be able to spend a portion of their lives in the creation of art, abandoning it eventually due to circumstance. Key roles in institutions, creations of art groups and teaching of art were however often held by women artists. In fact, the very first exhibition in Guyana, in 1930, was organised by a women, the Barbadian artist Mrs Golde White. The artworks she exhibited were painted by women she had found in her search for local talent through the Women's Self Help Association in Georgetown. Her friends, Mrs Rowland and Mary Heron-Bruce, gave in the early 40s free drawing classes which E. R. Burrowes himself attended.⁶⁶

As yearly exhibitions were organised in then British Guiana, women played key organisation roles. In the exhibition of 1942, the entrance to which was judged by a jury of art critics and the most prominent artists, more than half the pieces were made by women, sharing the space with the best artist a generation older than those in the study: E. R. Burrowes, Basil Hinds, Denis Williams and Hubert Moshett. From 1961 to -71, Marjorie Broodhagen organised a series of women artists exhibitions, the *Five Women Shows*, stimulating younger female artists such as Leila Locke and Judy Drayton. These shows continued sporadically in the 70s and 80s. Together with Leila Locke and Stephanie Correia, Marjorie Broodhagen was dominant in the art scene of the 1970s. They are however tragically understudied compared to male artists, and are the only three names that still remain in the memory of the visual art scene today. Leila Locke came to Guyana from England to marry Donald Locke, staying in Guyana for a career in art and teaching art and crafts when he immigrated. Elfrieda Bissember, the artist and art critic whose works were part of the 70s women art scene as not more than a school girl (exhibiting e.g. in *Carifesta '72*) is from 1966, the curator of the Castellani House — the major art museum

⁶⁶ Haniff (ed.), *Women Artists*.

in Georgetown, formerly the residence of Forbes Burnham — and has been an important organiser and institutionaliser of visual art side by side with Denis Williams.⁶⁷



Figure 11. Stephanie Correia in her studio with some of her work in the background (1978).⁶⁸

Stephanie Correia, a ceramist, painter, sculptor and poet, who played an educational role in the ceramic works of Stanley Greaves, is perhaps the most-known ceramist of the 70s. Teaching at the Burrowes School of Art and exhibiting at the *Carifta* in 1972 and *Carifesta* of '76 and '81, she disseminated Amerindian pottery traditions into the arts and crafts of the newly independent society. Despite being introduced to some traditions by her Spanish Arawak father, the majority of her craft is based on research of Amerindian art and experimentation of technique in clay from the Guyanese soil⁶⁹ — an example of the importance of the intellectual approach and research in the re-discovering of ancestral artistic traditions. In contrast, Marjorie Broodhagen's theme of East Indian women, born

⁶⁷ Haniff (ed.), *Women Artists*.

⁶⁸ Photo from 1978. *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁹ Roopnaraine, *Primacy*, 86.

not out of research but out of the memories of women from the village where she grew up, shows the impact of the present rich cultural heritages of Guyana on the visual arts. Interestingly, the possibility to incorporate other traditions due to the multicultural society is seen in her works. Having studied Chinese brushwork in the United States, she produced paintings of Guyanese birds and flowers, painted with Chinese technique — a striking example is *Zola in the Garden*, displayed to the right.⁷⁰



Figure 12.
Marjorie Broodhagen,
Zola in the Garden.

Among the younger generation, whose place in the Guyanese art scene is becoming important today, graduating from the BSA in the 70s, many were women. One of them is Hazel Shury, who later collaborated with her class mate Ivon Thom on the Mausoleum of Burnham and the Damon statue commemorating the emancipation from slavery in 1988.⁷¹ Damon was, just as Cuffy, the leader of a slave revolt — although his was non-violent, and protested against the apprenticeship system that the British introduced simultaneously as they declared the emancipation of slavery. The statue and the square on which it was placed became an important location of commemoration, whilst the creation of the statue itself introduced the historically-neglected Damon into the country's collective memory.⁷² Another graduate from the 70s was Bernadette Persaude,

⁷⁰ Haniff (ed.), *Women Artists*.

⁷¹ Haniff (ed.), *Women Artists*.

⁷² Alvin O. Thompson, 'Symbolic Legacies of Slavery in Guyana', *New West Indian Guide*, 80, 3/4 (2008), 191-220.

who went on to become at the forefront of the emerging Indo-Guyanese artists and spoke for the need of exploring the Indian roots of Guyanese culture. For Persaude, 'Guyanese' was not a cultural identity, but rather a political dream, one especially foreign to Amerindians of the interior and the rural Indo-Guyanese population.⁷³

The younger generation of artists, men and women alike, would transform the ideas and responses of the 70s to the need and wish of a national cultural movement. It is important to understand, that despite the invisibility of women in this essay as well as in literature on Guyanese art, women artists held a significant role in the creation and transformation of Guyanese art — before independence, after it, and today. The limited resources available has made it impossible to more than hint at this involvement, yet the multi-ethnic societies of women artists as well as in the various ancestral traditions that their art drew on, makes it clear that women artists were responding to the same questions and part of the same Guyanese visual art tradition that were just beginning to take form.

⁷³ Walmsley, 'Bridges of Sleep', 262.

Conclusion

‘We come from this environment, we come out of this environment, and we produce the things that belong back to the environment.’⁷⁴

— Aubrey Williams.

Although the 1970s did not yet see a coherent Guyanese culture in the visual arts, the beginnings of it were unquestionably created. As the country emerged into independence, art went through a transformation connecting the history and traditions of ancestors, the colonial past with the postcolonial present. There were already common themes in the art scene: abstraction in step with the global art scene yet different in its expression and bound to the ‘abstract’ landscape, symbolism drawn from research into the ancestral cultures of the multi-ethnic population as well as from the folklore and everyday life in the present, and the strive for a dialogue with the people. An art culture that strives to create works that are in one way or another relatable with the experiences of the people, is nothing short of a beginning of a national art scene. All that was created can be traced into the history and the present of the environment — the sociopolitical, the historical and the visual — necessitating a national and cultural connection between the arts. However, any final conclusions of the art scene of the 70s needs further research into those artists who are less visible in the time: women artists, Amerindian artists in the interior, and the Indo-Guyanese artists who were not yet exhibiting to a larger degree.

The predicament of the Guyanese artists meant hindrances as well as a unique potential. Ancestral traditions, disunited and in a violent political conflict at the time due both to the demographic and the exploitation of conflict by imperial powers, were transformed in the arts. By the re-discovery of ancestral symbols, traditions and techniques, artists brought the ancestry into the present, creating a possibility to unite them as well as something of

⁷⁴ Aubrey Williams, ‘Predicament’, 20.

the Cosmic man, of the universal, reconciling all the people of the planet under the tamarind tree of the visual arts. Obstacles of the colonial past, with the deculturation and suppression of arts as well as the destruction of memories, were not easily overcome, but they created a possibility for the Guyanese artists to create something entirely new. Even when re-discovering ancestral traditions and employing their symbols, artists would in fact create their ancestors, making them not something of the past but of the present, and thus change-able through time and ultimately modern. Economic and political hindrances of the 70s were however a different matter: to create a culture from very little, to have the means needed for artists to flourish and not force them to immigrate or work full-time, was extremely difficult in the postcolonial situation. Even further, the politicians' wishes to employ art for their own agendas, rather than provide them only with a foundation, was very limiting for artists and infringed on the already limited public interest in the arts. It is nothing short of incredible that despite this, the creativity of the Guyanese artists flourished, and a multitude of great works of art created even in the turbulent, transforming decade of the 1970s.

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