CRITICALITY AND CONTEXT: MIGRATING MEANINGS OF ART FROM THE CARIBBEAN
Therese Hadchity

Abstract
Recent critical attention to art of the Caribbean has sought to render obsolete an older and pervasive interest in trying to define what is ‘Caribbean’ about the region’s art. Such attention has implied the limits of seeing the region as a bounded territorial entity, preferring to celebrate its transnational and diasporic character. Allegedly, the more familiar interconnections between art, identity and nationality have dissolved. Not without contradiction, however, such an emphasis on the need to transcend all boundaries of nation and language has seemed to trade on generalisations of the region’s similarities among its many countries and territories, as well as with the wider diasporic community of Caribbean people elsewhere in the Atlantic world.

Through a discussion of three contemporary Barbadian artists, this article argues that such notions of a borderless cultural zone are less open-ended than current criticism admits, and on occasion quite harmful. Drawing on the work of Leon Wainwright and Timothy Brennan (while differentiating between their contributions), Hadchity shows the complexities and contradictions of recent developments that have seen Caribbean artists of an ostensibly cosmopolitan disposition, enjoying access to metropolitan art spaces in the North Atlantic. The author examines the conditionality of this success and explains how certain artistic gestures may be received in different locations. In conclusion, Hadchity argues for a renewed interest in nation-based contextual art histories, as a premise for appreciating the significance of Caribbean art works before and after they make their way into the wider world.

Keywords: Caribbean, contemporaneity, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, post-nationalism, cultural resistance, Ewan Atkinson, Sheena Rose, Alicia Alleyne

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5456/issn.2050-3679/2016s02

Biographical note
Therese Hadchity is an independent art critic, curator and teacher of art history based in Barbados. She was the owner and lead-curatorial of the Zemicon Gallery in Bridgetown from 2000–2010. She has authored numerous essays for exhibition catalogues on Barbadian art and artists, including Ras Akyem Ramsay, Ras Ishi Butcher, Nick Whittle, Winston Kellman, Ewan Atkinson and Alison Chapman-Andrews. Her primary research interest is the generational dynamics of visual art in the Anglophone Caribbean, which forms the basis of her doctoral research in Cultural Studies at the University of the West Indies.
Related material to this article was presented at the two project conferences for ‘Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean’, held on 5–6 February 2013 (Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam; KIT, the Netherlands Royal Tropical Institute), and 3–4 December 2013 (Institute for International Visual Arts, Iniva, London, UK). Visit the project webpages here.


‘Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean’ is a Research Networking and Exchange Project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

Published by The Open University (UK), with additional support from The Leverhulme Trust.
CRITICALITY AND CONTEXT: MIGRATING MEANINGS OF ART FROM THE CARIBBEAN
Therese Hadchity

Three points about the history of art in Barbados
It is well established that, from the 1930s to the early 1980s, the dynamics of Barbadian art were effectively inseparable from those of race, class and gender. Beyond a few notable exceptions, this period’s practitioners were white, middle-class and female, or black, working-class and male (see, for example, Angel, 1994; Cummins, Thompson and Whittle, 1999). Formal training was almost exclusively a middle-class option, and given the lack of adequate educational facilities on the island, it was by necessity conducted overseas. A pattern developed in which white women artists, who had the necessary time, resources and social connections, took the lead in organising exhibitions and set up galleries and art classes.1 While these pioneers encouraged all forms of artistic endeavour, their own work often exemplified a ‘soft’ modernist aesthetic. Although the racial dichotomy began to dissolve in the early decades after Barbadian independence from the United Kingdom, the modernist expression was mainly associated with middle-class women artists who had trained abroad.

In the 1980s, the contribution of the visual arts to the nation-building project entered a more self-conscious phase with the emergence of black artists such as Ras Akyem Ramsay and Ras Ishi Butcher (trained in Jamaica and Barbados respectively). They were determined to show the Barbadian public that art could be culturally affirmative and critical at the same time. In order to divert the spotlight from the ‘politely modern’ women artists, Butcher and Ramsay introduced a bold and demonstratively virile modernism. Their medium was painting, their style edgy and semi-abstract, and their themes were related to social concerns and the teachings of Rastafari. Examples include Ras Ishi Butcher’s monumental synopsis of the transatlantic slave trade 400 Years New World Order (Figures 2.1a and 2.1b) and Ras Akyem Ramsay’s vision of black proliferation and redemption in Blakk King Ascending (Figure 2.2) – works which carried overt references to history as well as to former artistic taboos like sexuality and race.

Although their works were perhaps predestined to be seen by many in Barbados as offensive in both form and content, the two artists succeeded in generating exactly the small but influential following that it takes to project the image of an avant-garde. By

---

1 A variety of art courses were offered from the mid-1970s, when the Barbados Community College was established.

Figures 2.1a and 2.1b: Ras Ishi Butcher, 400 Years New World Order, 1994. Oil on canvas (diptych), 122 x 152cm and 152 x 152cm. Private collection. (Photos: William Cummins)
the late 1980s, the exemplification of the cutting-edge Barbadian artist had therefore become black, working-class and male.

This was the scenario to which young women artists Annalee Davis and Joscelyn Gardner returned in the late 1980s after attending art school in the US and Canada respectively. For Barbadian artists of a white minority, it was a difficult undertaking at this time to challenge a male and black monopoly on the contemporary. Even so, their bid was launched from a feminist perspective with significant success, as heirs apparent to a progressive tradition of female ‘arts activism’.

Davis and Gardner developed a sophisticated and more than occasionally provocative feminist aesthetic that differed from the art of their female predecessors and more obviously from that of their male contemporaries. Their two-dimensional work (Davis’ especially) presented a perceptible combination of crude and delicate elements. By also introducing
Barbadians to performance and installation art, they furthermore restored the former association on the island between women art and artistic innovation (Figures 2.3 and 2.4).

The cutting edge of the Barbadian art scene of the late 1990s thus seemed divided, if not over-determined, along historical and political lines. I suggest that this scene was distinguished by three closely related characteristics:

1. Despite their internal rivalries, artists of the Barbadian avant-garde of the 1990s were visibly invested in the so-called ‘nation-building’ project. They were also critical of that project, especially from perspectives associated with gender and race. Although the male artists predominantly worked in painting and the female artists mainly print, mixed media and installation, their works were — regardless of gender, race and social status — invariably narrative, serious and critically engaged in real-world issues, as well as in the politics of aesthetics. All these artists were, in short, committed to the development of Barbadian art, but never uncritical of the surrounding political establishment.

2. These artists worked in an environment with virtually no critical or institutional support. In the anglophone Caribbean, there has been very little academic engagement with visual art and, more than six decades after the first proposal for a national

Figure 2.3: Annalee Davis. Wounded Innocence. One panel of triptych, 1994. Mixed media, 244 x 122cm. Private collection. (Photo: Steve Cohn).

Figure 2.4: Joscelyn Gardner, Virtual Omphalos, 1996. Multimedia installation at the Sao Paolo Biennial, variable dimensions. Collection of the artist. (Photo: Pontus Kyander)
gallery, the national collection of Barbados has no permanent premises or display and remains inaccessible to the public. Much of the energy of these artists was channelled towards the call for infrastructure and cultural institutions.

Additionally, as Joscelyn Gardner (1999) has pointed out, there has been a historical tendency to interpret Barbadian art through the person of the artist. Rather than an attempt to overcome social divides, a work of art is automatically seen as the projection of a black or white, working- or middle-class experience. This may be related to small island dynamics, and a history fraught with racial and social tension, as well perhaps as an innate scepticism about the artwork’s transformative potential. Above all, the over-attention to the ethnic and social background of an artist may reflect an absence of institutions and art criticism. In these circumstances there is little to encourage a more nuanced perception of the artwork among its audiences, beyond the default assumption that it simply manifests a particular identity.

With this background in view, I will now demonstrate how works by three younger Barbadian artists may benefit from a dialectical approach that relates them to this particular ‘national situation’. I offer this to counter the denunciation of such attention to the ‘national’ as a continuing preoccupation for artists (i.e. as an art that remains invested in national development), and to show that interpreting their work without attention to its particular Barbadian context is to misconstrue their critical inflection and historical importance.

**Two stories of success**

Ewan Atkinson’s first solo show after his return from art school in the United States was entitled ‘Personality Disorder Machine’. It was held in 2002 and presented a body of poetically enigmatic works that discretely dealt with social education and gender conformity. In *The Olde Palmetto Royale* (Figure 2.5) Barbados is denoted by the Royal Palm, and the enclosure may thus signify the ‘nation’ and its conventional family structures. The artist, who is here suggested to be the literal ‘outsider’, is trying to connect and find a place within these structures.

The exhibition earned Atkinson equal acclaim with the Barbadian public and audiences in the wider Caribbean region. Unlike those of the earlier avant-garde, these works did not reflect the usual divisions of class and ethnicity. The artist had also replaced the previous generation’s forceful tone with a less confrontational aesthetic, and if his work had political ramifications, they were subtly framed. While his private references to gay sexuality might have alienated some audiences, my impression was that the...
oblique metaphors and careful character of the work gave way to a palpable sense of relief in the exhibition-going Barbadian public. I attribute this response to the perception that Atkinson transcended the deep divisions within the nation, seen among the former generation. Its particular emotional needs (and inhibitions) thus conditioned the viewing community to largely bypass the works’ potentially controversial issues. Instead, they were received as the much-needed synthesis between historically antagonistic positions across lines of race and gender. Within Barbados, and possibly in spite of himself, Atkinson thus became a catalyst for a less troubled national narrative.

In so far as it became known to wider Caribbean and diasporic audiences, what ostensibly came to matter was not Atkinson’s inadvertent ability to transcend a national quandary. On the contrary, it was an apparent departure from a focus on ‘the nation’ as an end in itself. Outside Barbados, his work signalled a transition from the Afro-Creole nationalist paradigm,2 which had framed the contentions of the preceding artistic generation, toward a more open-ended concept of identity as pluralised, hybrid and performative. Indeed, Atkinson’s emergence as a gay, mixed-race artist was conveniently matched with the post-colonialist succession from a contestation over the national space (in the aftermath of national independence) to various articulations of ‘difference’ that ran beyond older racial and ethnicised positions. This transition has offered a contextualisation for Caribbean art within a broader transnational or diaspora aesthetic as outlined, for instance, by Kobena Mercer (1988) in the United Kingdom, through his writing on Isaac Julien, or in the classic theorisations of Stuart Hall (1994; 2003) and Homi Bhabha (1994) – where articulations of difference, ambivalence and syncretism are celebrated as markers of an ostensibly shared postcolonial condition.

Due to their preoccupation with the constructed and performative character of identity – the process of self-identification as contingent, open-ended and

2 For further discussion, see the description of ‘creolization’ as a political commodity in Wainwright (2011, p.89), as well as the extensive critique of ‘hybridity’ in Puri (2004).
evolving – Atkinson’s works also exuded a playfulness that, in a sense, showed up and challenged the seriousness of the previous generation.

That Atkinson’s next major body of work was created for an exhibition in Miami, is symptomatic of the rising currency of artworks that can sustain these common tropes in cultural analysis. The new works were more overtly about gender and sexual identity, yet their air of ironic distance had become more pronounced. In a range of digital compositions, photographs of the artist in sexually charged scenarios were inserted into a variety of ‘doll’s house’ settings. In *Many boys and girls live in flats* (Figure 2.6), he appears as a juvenile cross-dresser in front of two doorways, each equally inapplicable to his gender (with a blue and a red chair denoting ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ respectively). The series on the whole thus portrayed the artist’s increasing degree of sexual assertiveness, which was at once enhanced and tempered by an aura of nostalgia for childhood innocence.

Such ambivalence became more pervasive still in the 2007 show ‘Fiction’, which was slated as a kind of visual arts soap opera. Although issues of queer sexuality were unmistakable in some of the works (for example, *A couple running blindly*, Figure 2.7), the ‘storytelling’ invoked by the title was of a distinctly non-linear and interrupted character. The work explored a fantasy world, whose geography and temporality was far from specific. Its message was further diffused by a multitude of fictional leads without an obvious master narrative. Since the potentially subversive political content was contained by a technique of opacity, it followed that viewers could not be altogether certain about the artist’s intentions. Once again, the exhibition’s overwhelmingly positive reception, I submit, was a testament to the artist’s ability to channel attention away from the emphatic focus on race and nation typical of the former artistic generation. It did much to consolidate Atkinson’s status as a contemporary artist of the ‘next generation’, whose work nevertheless enters into an important dialogue with that of the previous generation.

Considering the first artistic generation in post-colonial Trinidad, the Jamaican critic Annie Paul has suggested a relationship between artists’ choice of style (namely in painting and sculpture) and their expectations of success in the international art-world. She observes that in the years just after independence: ‘the work of modernists was considered suitable for export, (whereas) the traditionalists were favoured for internal consumption’ (2007, p.30). Taking license to apply Paul’s argument to the present day, there is evidence of a similar relationship between artists’ international prospects and their choice of medium. In recent decades and throughout the Caribbean, the new media of performance, installation and digital images now automatically connote ‘contemporaneity’ and an obvious rejection of ‘traditionalism’ (which in turn enfolds the once ‘exportable’ modernist aesthetic of the anti-colonial generation).

The ambiguity of Atkinson’s work and the obliqueness of his references to the Caribbean is doubled by his use of mixed media. That mixed quality in itself embodies a form of hybridity; to those predisposed for such a reading, his works have very likely registered as ‘intertextual’ and ‘discursive’. Altogether, I contend, their features have added up to an apparent cosmopolitanism, which has been immediately rewarded by interest in these works, also from abroad.

While the concept of cosmopolitanism can be traced back to Kant and the cross-cultural encounters of early modernity, it has recently been re-asserted as a means to capture a desirable ethos of openness and tolerance in an increasingly globalised world (Nussbaum, 1994; Anderson, 1998). Mignolo has further argued for a critical ‘subaltern cosmopolitanism’ (2002), and Byrne and Schoene propose a serial version, which ‘is about acknowledging and interacting with other cosmopolitanisms’ (2013, p.4). What is being proposed, in other words, is a global culture, to which each can contribute through the use of his ‘own language and cultural symbols’ (Beck cited in Byrne and Schoene, 2003, p.2).

In agreement with the more positive of these outlooks, the community of metropolitan curators can be taken to regard itself as inherently ‘cosmopolitan’ – open and tolerant towards the diversity of the world – and expecting to be met with an attitude of reciprocal openness from the non-metropolitan world. Contrary to these generally optimistic assumptions, however, Brennan (1997; 2001) maintains that cosmopolitanism in its present articulation is little more than a veil for American universalism, which he exposes as a sort of ‘velvet-imperialism’. As Brennan (1997; 2001) and Mignolo (2002) point out, cosmopolitanism’s desire to enjoy a ‘global community’ is contradictory in practice: it translates into a principled rejection of absolutes and yet advocates for the adoption of a shared language and conceptual framework issuing inevitably from its metropolitan base of experience.

Cosmopolitanism is of course marked by an objection to all forms of imperialism, but equally by
Figure 2.7: Ewan Atkinson, *A couple running blindly* (from the *Fiction*-series), 2007. Mixed media, 76.2 x 56cm. Collection of the artist. (Photo: Ewan Atkinson)
disillusionment with corrupted nation-building schemes across the post-colonial world. Rather than sweeping collective trajectories, cosmopolitanism promotes diverse subjectivities and calls for the greater visibility of ‘difference’ – particularly those identities that have been marginalised in post-colonial nation-states. In the visual arts, cosmopolitanism thus finds expression in a lexicon of hybridity, ambivalence and ‘in-betweenness’, and in the rejection of the anti-colonial generation’s didactic and often militant aesthetic. However, what appears to be a concession on the part of all involved, for the benefit of a new global hegemony, is effectively an elevation of values and languages that pose no threat whatsoever to Western sovereignty, to a universal matrix of ‘progressiveness’. Cosmopolitanism, Brennan argues, thus dismantles the weapons of cultural nationalism in subtle and unexpected ways.

I raise this discussion in part to underline that the efforts towards ‘differencing’ in Atkinson’s work are neither intentionally ‘cosmopolitan’, nor explicitly ‘post-nationalist’. This is where I see the need for a more careful consideration of certain art and artists from the Caribbean which would serve, on the one hand, as a contribution to the ongoing critique of globalisation, and, on the other, to an exploration of current tensions surrounding nationalism in the postcolonial world.

Atkinson’s enthusiastic reception abroad cannot be separated from the assumption that the tenor of his work is cosmopolitan. Yet, his equally warm reception at home is evidence that his art carries a distinctive meaning in a national context, where it speaks to a set of self-representations, tensions and anxieties. In Barbados, Atkinson’s work can therefore be seen as an attempt to reconcile divisions along markers of racial, gendered and social difference, and as part of ongoing nation-building efforts. And yet, in a metropolitan academic context, the very same art has been taken to signal a decidedly post-nationalist turn. It is significant that Atkinson’s aesthetic of ambiguity and hybridity simultaneously suffuses his positive reception among Caribbean critics of a post-colonial stripe. For this faction too, such manoeuvres are perceived to indicate a departure from the previous generation’s nationalist priorities and as an invitation to a global conversation. This points to the conclusion that, for the Caribbean post-colonial artist, such an overlap leaves no obvious visual strategies of differentiation between Brennan’s metropolitan and Mignolo’s subaltern cosmopolitanisms.

The crucial interplay between the critical function of artworks and their particular national contexts can be further exemplified through the work of recently-emergent Barbadian artists. When Atkinson’s successor as the nation’s ‘young hopeful’ finally emerged, she came in the figure of Sheena Rose. Within a year of completing the visual arts programme at the Barbados Community College, Rose was selected to participate in the 2009 BDVA symposium. For this event, she created an animation entitled ‘Town’, which described quotidian aspects of her daily life through images and text.

The symposium triggered a domino effect for Rose’s career, and in subsequent years she has exhibited and presented her work in countless locations on both sides of the Atlantic. Closing in on her declared ambition of becoming ‘a famous artist’, Rose has represented Barbados in several prestigious exhibitions; she has appeared on TedX, Bridgetown; often served as artist-in-residence; and her work continues to feature in books and magazines, on occasion as the cover image. In the course of her growing success, Rose’s art has taken a more performative turn than the graphic work that first attracted critical attention. In 2012, she paraded posters with images and bands of text through public spaces (a beach and a public market) in order to engage fellow citizens about the damaging effects of ‘gossip’ (Figure 2.8).

Increasingly, Rose has also become her own work-in-progress. A glance at her page on the website ‘tumblr’, brings up a multitude of images (Figure 2.9) of the artist as a fashionista embodying ‘modern blackness’. Here is Rose in various guises, suggesting multiple and interchangeable identities, and Rose as the ‘quintessential artist’. These efforts to maintain a public presence have become indistinguishable from Rose’s work per se, and while she seems to reach for individuality and agency, her declarations of purpose and public spaces (a beach and a public market) in order to engage fellow citizens about the damaging effects of ‘gossip’ (Figure 2.8).

For all her gains in securing such a brand of ‘visibility’, there is little consensus about the meaning of Rose’s art itself, and no way of knowing what audiences make of her at once assertive and vulnerable personality and precarious prominence. Presently, her main significance among Barbadian peers seems to be that of someone who has made it into the international arena. Looking
no further, however, than the first ‘Sustainable Arts Communities’ symposium held in Amsterdam; one UK-based artist referred to Rose as an artist who makes exciting ‘interventions into a localised space’, while at the second project symposium, a member of the London audience identified Rose as a ‘typical Barbadian artist, who portrays ordinary life’. She is, in other words, seen as emblematically ‘international’ at home, and quintessentially ‘local’ abroad. In any case, if Rose’s meteoric rise is related to the general practice of ‘putting the self in the frame’, it has not been asked whether further frames of reference – geographical, political, historical – are being assumed or, conversely, obscured.

Clearly we need to address the spatial and temporal circumstances under which Caribbean art is being produced, rather than rely on broad principles drawn from the politics of cultural representation from elsewhere, such as Britain (which was the focus of Hall’s attention). Without doing so, we are bound to overlook the very conditions that motivate and give meaning to the critical positioning of Caribbean art. As Wainwright (2006; 2011) has pointed out, there are compounded and decisive differences between black artistic practices in the Caribbean and the United States, as well as

---

5 See the introduction to this issue and the project website: http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/sac/.
the varieties of black identification that exist among artists in Britain. He further cautions that it is best to avoid the assumption (which nonetheless seems prevalent) that a ‘diffusion’ of concepts and practices is what we are witnessing: changes or currents that emanate from a perceived ‘centre’ of diaspora culture – namely the United States – and trickle down towards the geographical margins of the diasporic formation. Such a ‘metro-centric’ view of diaspora aesthetics is sustained by a view of the Caribbean as being in a stage of ‘belatedness’. The allegedly counter-hegemonic field of African diaspora representation, Wainwright points out, thus reproduces a ‘politics of time’, which is at play in the notionally ‘global’ art-world at large. The power to define ‘the contemporary’, which is vested in institutionally resourceful metropolitan centres, thus reveals its self-preserving tendency by conscripting less advantaged regions to the role of merely ‘catching up’. And while metropolitan artists of the Caribbean diaspora may have moved from margins to centre in their own national pecking-order (as persuasively described by Hall, 2004), ‘incoming’ artists from the post-colonial Caribbean find themselves needing to assimilate conceptualisations of diasporic difference that they had little or no role in producing.

To find favour in metropolitan art spaces, Caribbean artists from the global south are therefore left with fairly narrow options. They face the perception of being markers of ‘post-colonial difference’, yet may also be regarded as champions of cosmopolitan ‘progressiveness’. On this basis, it needs to be asked how any artistic impulse towards the portrayal of ‘ordinary Barbadian life’ (shopping, gossiping) may be construed as ‘progressive’, when so much of Caribbean visual culture – starting with photographic renditions of the colonial picturesque (see Thompson, 2006) – has depended on a constructed image of the ‘ordinary’ and ‘everyday’. With her contemporary snapshots of ‘Barbadian life’, Rose’s art may be interpreted as an effort to speak back to the ‘tropicalisation of the Caribbean that played out during an earlier historical period through the proliferation of touristic images of the Caribbean and that continued with the modern film and advertising industry. And yet, with their accelerated circulation through networks of communication and changing image technologies, Rose’s art faces the tension of becoming as deeply implicated in projecting an affable image of Barbados and Barbadians as were those postcards of the early tourism industry. The use of social media, digital photography and animation may be new media for old subject matter. Judging by the comments made about Rose that I mentioned above, it is precisely a harmonious, normalised projection of the post-colony that some Caribbean art audiences will continue to find appealing.

For certain other audiences, however, Rose’s work may have a different inflection. After decades of tussles and disputes with their national art establishment, artists of the Caribbean diaspora located in metropolitan centres of the North Atlantic may presently find themselves in a position from which it is safe to challenge the global art establishment. In this climate, a particular status is conferred on art that appears to have an anti-institutional inflection (happenings, performance and participatory works), and this would grant value to works of that media by Sheena Rose. However, I would suggest that when a Barbadian artist embraces these forms of expression, it is less an attempt to challenge a powerful institution than a means of compensating for the absence of such institutions as they exist in the metropole. Rose’s internet presence thus attempts to ‘do the job of the institution’ (validating her work and redeeming the hope of fame) rather than to destabilise it. Further, by turning to the internet (or other public spaces) as a means of gaining visibility, such works offer an approach to art in the Caribbean which is proto- rather than post-institutional.

Even if the premise for Rose’s strategies may not answer to a conventional metropolitan perception of art as an anti-establishment or counter-hegemonic intervention, her public performances do carry an implicit critique of cultural policy in post-independence Barbados. The island has shown an increasingly instrumental approach to the arts. Although initially committed to the construction of national identity through more popular expressive forms, such as music and festivals, Barbadian cultural policy has become increasingly predicated on the prospect of economic gain, as well as market diversification. Thus, the visual arts have been pressed into the role of a driver for economic development and a complement to the island’s tourism and heritage industries. By literally taking her ‘gossip-posters’ to the market place – threading her way among Bridgetown hawkers and vendors – it is tempting to see Rose as offering a parody of official policy and its ‘market-expectations’. Furthermore, with their participatory and immersive approach, such artworks can be said to reiterate the need for social outreach and community building, which was politically encouraged in the early phase of the nation-building project.

Therefore, if Rose’s work at some level is subversive, it is primarily so in ways that can only be recognized within their specific national context. This is why I...
would agree with Jameson’s assertion (2008) that every artistic statement by necessity must be reflective of a national situation; and that, notably, the more marginal the nation is, then the more its ‘national concerns’ tend to impose themselves on its art. In current Caribbean criticism, however, a mode of evaluation that bases itself on a historical and largely national dialectic has seemed rather less pressing than the resumed expediency of a diaspora aesthetic – which for the most part is based on the experience of artists of Caribbean descent based in the north Atlantic.

I have offered discussions of just two artists – Atkinson and Rose – but pose these as examples of wider problems of art historical critique. Such problems arise from the recent methodological repositioning of Caribbean art that has sought to promote transnational experiences and cultural practices over national ones. The wide enthusiasm for artists like Sheena Rose and Ewan Atkinson may be differently motivated in local and metropolitan fora (including among members of the Caribbean diaspora community). I contend that elements which audiences outside of Barbados may interpret as cosmopolitan are misrecognised as such by having their national context stripped away. Of course, such practices are in dialogue with the same cosmopolitan approaches to art that configure the metropolitan mainstream. But the ability of artists like Atkinson and Rose to simultaneously gratify audiences of potentially conflicting outlooks and interests, must force us to take more seriously the contingencies and locations in which Caribbean art is made, received and historicised through scholarly and curatorial representation, as well as popular promotion. The oversimplifications need addressing, picking apart assumptions that such art is antithetical to nationalist endeavours, or that it conforms readily to the conventions of a transnational or diasporic field of art discourse. In sum, any belief that all art of the Caribbean is a palpable visualisation of a critical impulse toward ‘resistance’ demands serious scrutiny.

Evading the matrix?
I turn to another young Barbadian artist in order to exemplify what conversely falls outside the parameters of a (putatively) cosmopolitan, diaspora aesthetic in Barbados, yet still demonstrates a historical awareness and critical approach to its context. When Alicia Alleyne’s work was exhibited in the 2009 portfolio show at the Barbados Community College,6 a friendly dispute erupted among tutors eager to buy her works. In this small forum, it was clearly perceived that Alleyne offered an aesthetic without precedent in Barbados. Her ideas are typically expressed in small works on paper. These range from experimental photography to alternative printing and painting techniques and explore the relationship between random and intended marks, evolving or interrupted patterns, odd symmetries and subtle disturbances. Many works gesture towards the collapse of meaning through the implosion or explosion of ideal geometric shapes and thereby undertake a form-orientation that rejects rather than seeks to transcend the historical trajectory of Barbadian art (Figures 2.10 and 2.11). The relatively small scale of these works and their avoidance of subject matter may be seen as a retreat from the optimism and subsequently thwarted ambitions of previous artistic generations. Alleyne also shows a resolute determination to foreclose interpretation of the work through the artist’s social or ethnic identity.

One of Alleyne’s pieces (Figure 2.10) is a black rectangle in duplicate. The upper version is flat, the lower one built up with black glitter, resembling perhaps a volcanic landscape. Meanwhile, the strange and untidy splotches and stains on the edges of the lower version and of the paper itself, challenge the linear accuracy of the upper rectangle. They indicate that the replication of the upper shape has in some way ‘failed’. I see this deliberate sense of non-conformity and, the refusal to comply with an established matrix, as an emblematic aspect of Alleyne’s work. The metaphor may be extended powerfully to her refusal of past and present avenues for art making in Barbados:

---

6 The annual exhibition of works by artists graduating from the college’s BFA programme.
the picturesque landscapes of empire; the Creole modernism of the anti-colonial generation; the pure abstraction of international modernism; or the more recent brand of postcolonial ‘cosmopolitanism’ and diaspora aesthetics.

Measured against her tutors’ enthusiasm for Alleyne’s work, the wider reception of her art has been disappointingly lukewarm. When a joint exhibition of works by Alleyne and photographer Mark King was staged at the Zemicon Gallery (an exhibition space that I established and ran from 2000–2010), some members of the artistic community were excited about the novelty of the works. Yet my lasting impression was a sense of uncertainty on the part of the community of artists. Many older artists might have regarded complete abstraction an unaffordable indulgence, and younger artists (registered their uncertainty...) registered their sense of uncertainty toward art that was hardly approached in the performative or quasi-political manner of Atkinson, Rose and others contributing to the ‘postcolonial contemporary’. Then there was the plain reactionary appeal to matters of ‘quality’, with an openly hostile response online by the journalist Ian Bourne (2010), who dismissively captioned one of the works as follows: ‘This is not sludge. It is an extreme close-up of Alicia Alleyne’s work – not impressed’.

The reception of Alleyne among visiting artists and curators has been similarly tentative. Although her work in many ways can be regarded as ambiguous and possibly even ‘deconstructive’ in its assault on the perfectly finished, immutable shape, it also represents a kind of formalist essentialism, which certainly does not come across as hybrid, ironic or politically inflected. And while Alleyne’s work complies with the current disavowal of emphasis on ‘Caribbeanness’, she has avoided playing the contemporary game of inscribing the work into the more fluid and geographically unspecific category of a transnational, diasporic Caribbean. Wainwright has picked up on this, observing Alleyne’s ‘refusal to be co-opted or subsumed into dominant art spaces’ (2012, p.46).

Altogether, these features leave Alleyne’s work with little ‘use-value’ for any faction of the Caribbean arts community. Nor has she been offered much opportunity to take part in international exhibitions of new or contemporary Caribbean art, in a way that would indicate significant recognition in the wider diasporic communities. Whether Alleyne has fallen victim to or oddly succeeded in her own resistive efforts has to be pondered within view of the wider issues of reception that characterise the field of possibilities for Caribbean artists.

**Final reflections**

The works I have discussed, arguably derive their most poignant critical inflection in a strictly Barbadian context, where they respond dialectically to a particular set of historical conditions and of the art of the nation’s own past. As I have outlined, these include an art historical trajectory with pronounced race, class and gender divisions, very little institutional support, and a tendency to read the artwork through the artist’s biography or identity.

It may be an inevitable upshot of the choices artists make in their critical practices that important aspects of their works at times will be overlooked or suppressed at a national level. Indeed, from an artist’s point of view, being released from a national context can be liberating. Controversial issues broached by Ewan Atkinson’s work, for example, were initially overlooked by Barbadian audiences, yet in turn they were picked up and given value through international exposure. However, when Caribbean artworks are embraced precisely because of their apparent criticality or ‘progressive’ purpose, it forces us to ask how such an apprehension of their meaning is changed through the work travelling and being received at different locations. In a metropolitan setting, where there is a more established practice of artists bringing out issues around queer sexualities, such work can hardly

---

7 For a fuller exploration of this concept, see Hadchity (2015).
be regarded as particularly challenging or counter-hegemonic in the same way as in a more socially conservative environment such as the Caribbean. Even so, it is clearly possible that works deemed to be politically subversive for a Barbados audience will become trophies for those in the metropole who are keen to be seen as patrons for artists earmarked as progressive in the post-colonial South.

The situation becomes more complex in the case of artists such as Sheena Rose. Her example seems representative of more concerted international aspirations on the part of Caribbean artists. Yet, while gratifying a Barbadian audience by their mere ability to draw ever wider audiences, Rose’s art may ultimately not match current metropolitan or post-colonialist expectations for a ‘forward-looking’ practice. Moreover, the polarities between which Rose finds herself suspended, are redoubled by generational tensions. While her persistent endeavour to ‘put herself in the frame’ appears to replicate an older generation’s militancy, she re-directs its energies towards the maintenance of a market share in the arts. Ironically, her mutating self-image has nothing to do with the collective drive towards constructing Caribbean subjectivity or identity that so motivated artists of the previous generation.

Finally, there has been a complete failure on the part of the wider diasporic community to absorb the resolutely counter-hegemonic character of Alicia Alleyne’s work. It is a fail ing that extends to much of the local community in Barbados as well. At the very least, this says something about the prospects – in a world of hugely discrepant institutional resources and critical support – for a cosmopolitan global culture in which each individual may participate through the use of their ‘own language and cultural symbols’ (Beck cited in Byrne and Schoene, 2013, p.2).

Against this background of attention to individual artists, this article has sought to make two main points. First, that the almost unanimously applauded concept of a ‘transnational Caribbean’ carries internal hierarchies, and that these somewhat replicate the centre-margin dynamic that such claims for transcending the national have tried to render obsolete. Second, that the departure from the ‘national’ as an interpretive lens may at times obscure fundamental differences in the transatlantic art community with the effect of reinforcing them. The dilemma remains how art criticism may tackle the specificities of place and come to recognise the importance of individual artistic strategies, while drawing on global lessons, in order to bring about a historical reading of art of the contemporary Caribbean.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


