

REPRESENTING HER GENDER – REPRESENTING HER NATION

Because Jamaica is English-speaking, the temptation has always been to see contemporary Jamaican culture as an offshoot of culture in Britain. Either that, or, because more than 90% of the Jamaican population is of African descent, to choose what looks like the obvious alternative – to see it as a version of African culture, transported to the Caribbean thanks to the iniquities of the slave trade.

In fact, though there are some fragments of truth in both of these descriptions, neither of them quite fits.

Jamaica and all the other islands of the Caribbean are closely related culturally to Central and South America, despite the fact that the majority language in those regions of the globe is Spanish, closely followed by Portuguese. The pattern of exploration, trade and development that produced the Jamaican nation as we know it today is not identical to what happened in the Spanish-speaking Americas, but the resemblances are clear.

Anyone who studies contemporary Latin American cultures rapidly becomes aware of certain features they all have in common. One is that they have made a remarkable contribution to the Modernist spirit in the visual arts, but that this contribution has been given a particular coloring by two things in particular. They all possess non-European elements, things that do not appear in European or even in North American art. And they all owe something to colonialism. European art forms were quite rapidly transmuted when they were exported to these regions of the New World.

Another, perhaps even more important, is that the major Latin American artists – men and women alike – are modern culture heroes. Much more central, much more present, in the cultures they belong to, than even the most celebrated and feted artists from the Modernist and Post Modernist epochs working in Europe or in the United States. They speak for and represent nations that produced them. One thinks here of figures such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo (Mexico), Wifredo Lam (Cuba) and Tarsila do Amaral (Brazil).

Until now, Jamaica has not had a creative personality of this kind, perhaps because it was much slower in attaining full nationhood than the Latin American nations I have just cited. Laura Facey has arrived to fill that gap. Her work speaks both 'of' and 'for' the nation she belongs to.

One of the current problems for European and North American artists is the creation of convincing public sculpture – sculpture that has no need to seclude itself in a museum (or failing that, in some kind of dedicated sculpture park), but which can be out there in public ready and willing to speak to anyone who encounters it. One of the works that has helped to make Facey's reputation in her native Jamaica is her monument Redemption Song situated in Emancipation Park in Kingston, the capital city of Jamaica. The monument, partly because of the nudity of the huge figures, was hugely

controversial when it was first unveiled in 2003. The controversy helped to implant the work in the island's collective consciousness and, now, more than ten year's later, it has become a favorite location for taking wedding photographs.

The role it now plays, as a signifier of Jamaican identity, is similar to that, for example, occupied in contemporary Mexican consciousness by Diego Rivera's great mural cycle about the Conquista at the Palacio de Cortés in Cuernavaca.

The experience of slavery is, not surprisingly, deeply branded into the Jamaican consciousness. A more recent successor to Redemption Song is the installation Their Spirits Gone Before Them, in which a typical Jamaican canoe, filled with tiny figures that are miniatures of Redemption Song, floats on a sea created from stalks of sugar cane. Slavery in the West Indies was of course closely linked to the cultivation of sugar, and the canoe is a surrogate for the ships that brought the slaves, tightly packed in their holds, from the distant shores of Africa. Yet here the figures, standing up not lying down, as they would have been in a real slave ship, are moving joyously towards redemption.

Facey's work ranges over a number of other issues that are especially relevant to Jamaica society. There is the richness of Jamaican nature, and a sense of unity with nature. There is religious faith, always strong in Jamaica, where it manifests itself in multiple forms. And there is also feminism.

When one speaks of feminism in a Jamaican context, the term carries with it a complex series of social and historical echoes. Jamaica is often represented in tourist brochures as a hedonistic easy-going sort of place, where the violence of the past has been conclusively laid to rest. Yet in April 2014 a report released by the United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) listed Jamaica as having the sixth highest homicide rate in the world. It is also noted that, globally, 15 percent of all homicides stem from domestic violence, and that the overwhelming majority of domestic violence fatalities – 70 per cent - are women. There is no reason to think that the overall pattern in Jamaica differs from the global one.

There are, however, some special factors. Jamaican religiosity contains a – paradoxical in the circumstances – strong dose of Puritanism. That is why Laura Facey's depictions of nude figures have always been controversial on her home territory. Jamaicans are very conscious of the body, but they also fear it.

In addition, one of the legacies of slavery, bequeathed to those who were set free, is an often strong sense among Jamaican males that women can be owned – owned in the most literal sense, physically. Phibbah, one of the major works illustrated here, is a commentary on this.

Laura Facey is an artist who not only draws on the rich, extremely complex of her native country – she also challenges important aspects of it, and seeks to give her countrymen – and perhaps above all her countrywomen – a truer vision of themselves.

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