

# *Caribbean* **Beat**



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# BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

Laura Facey's art reveals a very personal story of inner anguish and gradual recovery. Petrine Archer-Straw meets this woman who converts the facts of private life into monumental studies of human resilience

Laura Facey's sculpted figures are perfectly formed, pristine in their presentation. They capture the gestures of the human body in all its pity and rapture, pain and pleasure. Recent works like *Still Singing*, a larger-than-life-size goddess surrounded by swathes of feminine pink tulle, resonate a joyous inner strength and signal Facey's commitment to happy endings.

For, above all else, Laura Facey is a storyteller. Look carefully at her sculptures from the past decade and they reveal a

classic tale about the struggle between good and evil, between beauty and the beast — where beauty is the ultimate winner. They also tell of a modern-day princess kissed back to life, and the unlikely prince who has become the hero behind her work. But despite her use of mythical imagery, the stories Facey tells through her art are not fairy tales. They are haunted by personal realities, and her use of found objects, family memorabilia, and poetry are clues she offers for unravelling their mystery. "There's plenty of drama and pain in my past life," she says, "and you can see this reflected in my work . . . but now my work is changing, charting my healing and progress."

She comes from a background of privilege; the Facey name is well known in Jamaican industry, commerce and agriculture, as well as in the arts. The only daughter of businessman Maurice Facey, Laura grew up like a Caribbean princess, her upbringing evident in her quiet dignity and gracious personality. But there is also something of the



COURTESY LAURA FACEY

FRANZ MARZOUCA

Laura Facey at work in her studio  
*Right* Family Portrait 2 (1995)



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*Above* Still Singing  
(2001)  
*Right* Detail of Still  
Singing  
*Opposite page* Prince of  
Peace (2001)



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free spirit about her, a quality probably inherited from her artist mother, Valerie Facey, who encouraged Laura's creativity at an early age. The financial and cultural wealth of Facey's childhood left her with high expectations, yet in the family's St Andrew home Laura's upbringing was surprisingly simple. Here, on the open land and in the gully that backed onto their garden, she developed her love of nature, poetry and fantasy, escaping Jamaica's harsher realities.

Nourished by this environment, her imagination expressed itself through a precocious artistic talent, so that by her teens her mother arranged for her to study art abroad, first at the West Surrey College of Art and Design in England, and then at the Rhode Island School of Design in the United States. This stint was the catalyst for her later experimental approaches as an undergraduate at the Jamaica School of Art. "I decided on sculpture from early, but, as well, I'm a multimedia person," she explains. "I love different textures, hard-soft, rough-smooth, and how they can be enhanced by colour." Her assemblages and installations are compositions that demonstrate her natural tendency to *gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork), in which elements appear and reappear in print, paint, wood, found objects, and even theatre-size installations.

Facey's earliest works were mythical landscapes inhabited by Caribbean ghouls and gremlins, echoing a childlike innocence of fears, and her love of nature. They represent the carefree days when Laura first met her husband, Gordon Cooper, and the time they spent in Salt Island, "bird country", one of the most isolated spots in Jamaica. Here, close to nature, she could act out her fantasies, shunning city life in favour of solitary weekends hunting and fishing. "I accepted hunting because I grew up with it . . . my father was a

bird shooter, my husband also has a similar passion ... it is an instinctive thing."

In Salt Island, Facey and Cooper had a "home" with no running water (they bathed in a stream) and no electricity (they used a little pump lamp). They lived like children of nature. Salt Island inspired her to write *Talisman the Goat* (1976), a children's story about a goat and the animals he meets as he goes in search of fresh water. The crabs, wild pigs and crocodiles that Facey and her husband encountered daily in the swamps became characters and illustrations.

Her art also echoed her Salt Island sojourns. It became more multifaceted, combining painting, assemblage, and writing. Facey integrated bones, feathers, old pottery shards, twigs, and other found objects into surreal collages that were nevertheless a record of this unusual terrain. She remembers: "I went with Gordon to extraordinary places. I would sketch while he hunted. Later, I made works using bones and feathers . . . maybe I thought the animals would live on through my work."

**T**his same instinct for survival drove Laura's work after she married and moved to St Ann. Later, when domestic problems entered her life, she began to question her predominantly male environment and the harsher, lonelier side of life as a farmer's wife. Her early work gave way to more chilling visions that echoed fairy tale evils, sinister forests, cunning wolves, and grandmothers ready to eat you. Landscapes that once seemed innocently magical were transformed into backdrops for darker, more interior spaces. Her scenes held a menacing violence that tarnished the nursery rhyme image of the farmer's dell. These ominous qualities hinted at the personal traumas and internal struggles Laura was experiencing. It was



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*Above* Earth to Earth (1999)  
*Below* Facey's studio is a small barn-like structure on her farm, right next to a goat pen  
**Opposite page** "I'm a multimedia person . . . I love different textures, hard-soft, rough-smooth . . ."

a time when Laura felt overwhelmed by the masculine world. She retreated into her femininity.

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rior worlds she had explored since childhood; and, as with her earlier fragments of hunted prey, the female body, severed and fragile, insinuated itself with increasing persistence. These works were silently underscored by prose and poetry, sometimes alluded to in her cryptic titles, sometimes expanded in text hanging alongside, at other times remaining coded, as if teasing the viewer to search for hidden mysteries.

There was a silent sadness about these broken bodies, such as *Goddess of Change* (1996), speaking about her vulnerability, her alienation from her family, and isolation from the rest of the world. This god-







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*Top* Surrender (1998)  
*Above* Detail of Prince of Peace  
*Right* Goddess of Change (1993)  
*Opposite page* "The bodies I  
create are more whole, because I  
feel more complete"



COURTESY LAURA FACEY



dess's fragmented body, surrounded by root-like formations and charcoal-black shavings, seemed to nuance the ancient Hindu ritual of *suttee*, death by fire. At the time, Facey wrote, "The body and empty shell, parts are missing, in a stark landscape — it's time for a change."

The sparseness of her art during this period perfectly mirrored her ascetic tendencies and feelings of self-deprivation. Her personal traumas were manifested in the dislocation she felt from her own body: as if denying her existence, she began to lose weight dramatically. "I became thin, my life came to a halt, so much 'stuff' that I hadn't dealt with, that had been building from childhood, came to a head."

Facey's 1996 series *Family Portrait* summarised her anxieties. These assemblages, encased in three old wooden cabinets with glass doors, allowed intimate glimpses into her private life. Birds and animals, so typical of her work, replaced family members, but their relations, antagonisms, bondings and alliances were reinforced by their groupings, their compartmentalisation, and sometimes their isolation. *Family Portrait* marked the beginning of an exploration of Facey's life and work that would become increasingly personal and self-revealing.

Works like *Surrender* (1998) also demonstrate this intimacy. This is a prone female form, completely nude and surprisingly rubenesque, with its bulky thighs and jutting breasts. But what seems contradictory is that, even as the figure appears to be lying back, its severed head and supporting wing-like hands are also pleading heavenward. This work is a powerful appeal for spiritual support. For all its angelic qualities, it is a painful depiction of the female condition, but also the clue to how Facey survived those difficult times: a programme of meditation. She remembers: "The first three years were lonely. I received criticism from family ... but I stuck with it. And layer by layer, inner turmoil was removed. I had help too, from incredible people who guided me and were a vital part of the healing process."

Her next significant commission was the sculpture *Earth to Earth* (1999) a challenging, larger-than-life female figure in cement and marble, designed for the Sculpture Park of the Caribbean, at Jamaica's University of Technology. As if expressing the success of her meditation, it is a commanding earth goddess arched backward in a yoga posture, firmly rooted into the soil, and beautifully formed and executed.

Discussing her own recovery during that time, she explains: "I willed myself to get better, I asked for it, I screamed for it, and I literally climbed up the hill doing it ... I became a procreator with God ... I remember being so thin and so low, but I just learned to love myself anyway ... that was the hardest part." The recent transformation of scale and content in her work signifies this profound shift in Laura Facey's life, productivity and spirituality.

Facey is currently in an enormously productive phase. She is usually a painfully slow sculptor, spending months and years honing and refining a single work. Yet in just two years she managed to complete some of the most challenging pieces of her professional life: *Earth to Earth* (1999), *Christ Ascending* (2000), *Indigo Prayer* (2000), *Still Singing* (2001), and *Prince of Peace* (2001) are installations and commissioned works that demonstrate this surge of activity, all the more remarkable because of their commanding scale and robust physicality. The fragmented body parts and fragile puppet-strung forms that marked Facey's earliest works have been usurped by larger-than-life figures with a commanding wholesomeness that boldly announces a victory for vigour. She confidently asserts, "When I work now, the bodies I create are more whole, because I feel more complete. I'm alive and energetic."

Her largest work ever is the wooden relief aptly titled *Prince of Peace* — an enormous icon of Christ similar to the antique reliquaries found in many orthodox churches, except for its size. Standing over 12 feet tall, it testifies that the new prince in Laura's life is a spiritual saviour rather than a fairy-tale hero. What is striking about this piece is its radiance, its beatific quality, emphasised by Facey's use of gold and an uncharacteristically colourful palette.

The clarity and colour of Laura Facey's recent works is a sign of her coming to terms with her past and her new zest for life. Reading between the lines of her sculpted poetry need no longer be a chilling experience. The exaltation projected by *Prince of Peace*, or the interior space opened up by the athletic arc of her Demeter-like *Earth to Earth*, tell a story about renewal in this artist's life: a story of healing. ■



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