

The New York Times

Caribbean Visions Of Tropical Paradise And Protest

In its apparent continuing effort to be as un-Manhattan as possible, the Brooklyn Museum has been cooking up shows that the fashion-obsessed art establishment is guaranteed to find uncool. Hip-hop, "Star Wars," feminism. What could be next? "Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art" is next.

HOLLAND

COTTER

ART

REVIEW

Multiculturalist terms like identity, hybridity and diversity may sound like words from a dead language in Chelsea, but they are the lingua franca of the Brooklyn show. Once-hyped forms like installation art and the neo-conceptual object may be disdained by Manhattan tastemakers, but they are embraced here.

The embrace is wide. "Infinite Island" is a large show: 45 artists, with a collective of designers, photographers and architects from the Dominican Republic adding to the count. The work fills two floors of exhibition space, and care has been given to the selection. Several of the most substantial pieces were commissioned for the occasion. Organized by Tumelo Mosaka, associate curator of exhibitions at Brooklyn, the show wasn't designed to travel. It's an in-house job, a labor of love.

That being so, I'd like to report that the labor has paid off in a triumph, but it hasn't. Nor has it produced a failure. Like many group shows, this one is all over the place stylistically. The visual and aural competition is intense, and low-impact work retreats from the field. More problematic is the fact that much of what's here treads ground already covered, in very similar ways, by other art over the years. Some of the video and photography feels generic, like scene-setting filler.

But what's good is really good, and the very existence of a show about identity politics in 2007 is cause for reflection. A few decades back, when the art world was smaller and easier to police, and "international" meant Manhattan and Western Europe, New York more or less dictated what kind of art would be looked at, what ideas would circulate, what would be cool.

But this is no longer so. The arena has expanded. Although economically powerful, New York is increasingly just one of many art centers doing their local thing. Most work that turns up in Manhattan galleries has little connection with, or pertinence to, what artists are doing and thinking about in Africa or India or even in the Bronx. And what's happening in those

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Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art

In this show the Brooklyn Museum displays works by 45 artists, including the Cuban Alexandre Arrechea's photograph "Architectural Elements II" (2004).



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places apparently holds little interest for Manhattan.

The average Chelsea artist — white, male, middle class, born in the United States and a graduate of one of four or five powerful art schools — is a preapproved art-world player, as are his dealers, collectors and critics, who mostly fit the same demographic. Cultural identity is not likely to be a burning issue for any of them.

But if you are an artist in one of the 14 Caribbean nations represented in the Brooklyn show, the basics can be more complicated. Your roots may be African, Asian or indigenous. And you were very likely shaped by histories of colonialism, slavery and radical displacement. These histories may dictate your class status and economic prospects in the present.

If art education and jobs are limited where you live, you may need to relocate. This will mean entering a new social environment, probably learning a new language and feeling pressure to put aside, or suppress, familiar customs and values. Initially, at least, you will be outside the existing power loop. And you may stay outside, waiting, say, for a green card that never arrives.

Under such circumstances, your identity — the hard facts of your skin color, sex, class and political and spiritual beliefs — may well work to your disadvantage. Certainly this identity will be thrown into relief. Very likely, it will become an element in, even the focus of, your art. If identity-based art was just a passing fad for the New York art establishment, it necessarily remains of considerable interest to a wider world.

How such art can be persuasively presented is, of course, the question. The thematic categories Mr. Mosaka applies to the show — religion, politics, memory, popular culture — have been used in countless shows. They are clichés by now, perceptual straitjackets rather than enlightening guides. As conceptual models, they require rethinking, as does the model some of the art follows.

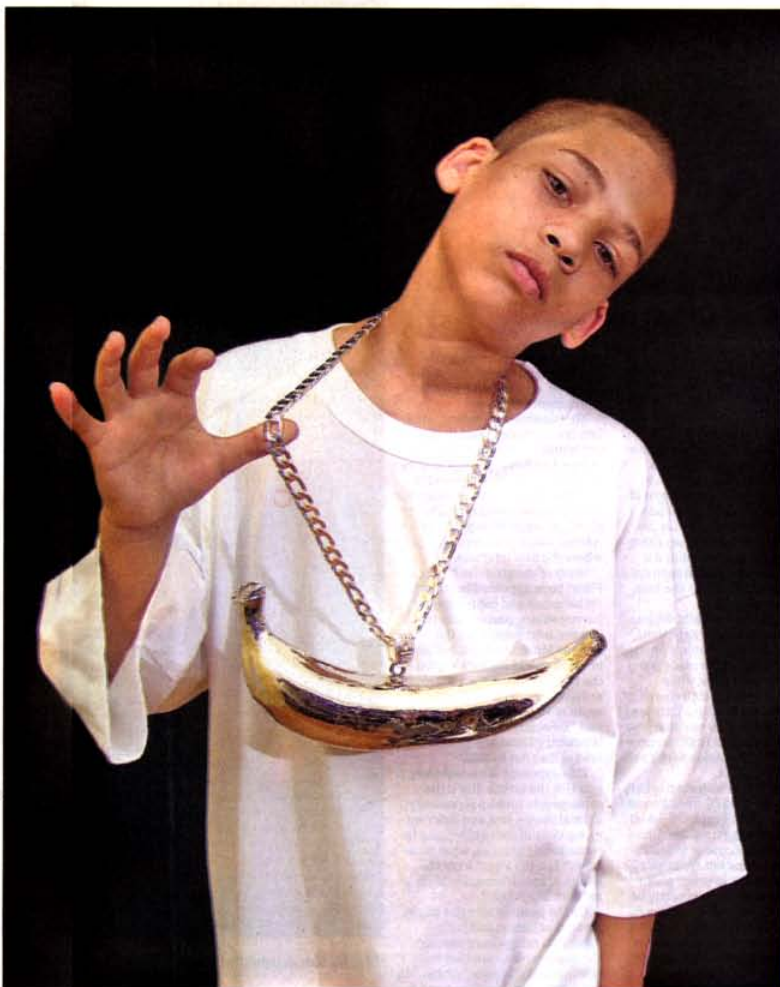
After the complex and subtle art about race and history produced by figures like Kara Walker and Yinka Shonibare, what can it mean now to stamp diagrams of slave ships in an attractive pattern on a gallery wall? Or to offer blurry photographs of tropical land-

A group of artists for whom issues of identity can be complicated.

scapes, or deep-colored lifestyle pictures, images that gain what interest they have only from explanatory wall labels? Not much, I would say. Certainly not enough to warrant inclusion in a major survey.

The show's best work is the most abstract, much of it performance-based. A staged photograph of a dark-skinned man carrying a stack of white bricks that obscures his face, by the Cuban artist Alexandre Arrechea, can refer to Cuba's crumbling Modernist architecture, or its persistent racism, or to something else. By avoiding full disclosure, the picture gives viewers a lot to work with.

For another for-the-camera performance, the Puerto Rican artist José (Tony) Cruz asked children playing baseball in a park to trace the trajectory



MIGUEL LUCIANO

"Platano Pride" (2006), a photograph by the Puerto Rican Miguel Luciano, features a platinum-plated plantain.



JOSE (TONY) CRUZ

To create "Drawing on Ballpark" (2003), detailed above, José (Tony) Cruz enlisted the help of children playing.

ies of the balls they were throwing on the ground in colored powder. In the photographs the lines they drew look ghostly against the packed-down dirt of the field, like quivering beams of light.

Much of the political work Mr. Mosaka has chosen also has a comparably light, allusive touch. Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla turn shoe prints on sand into protest art. A series of photographs by Quisqueya Henríquez sets images of the Caribbean paradise of tourist lore next to others of the actual tainted Eden of social unrest and economic deprivation, without making the contrast instantly clear.

One of the show's stated purposes is to ask whether there is, in fact, a cultural entity — or a type of contemporary

One set of images contrasts tourist dreams with a tainted Eden.

art — that can be securely identified as Caribbean. And it arrives at its answer — no — through a display of sheer multiplicity. There may be fundamental links between the diaristic drawings of the Trinidadian artist Christopher Cozier; the platinum-plated plantains of the Puerto Rican Miguel Luciano; the self-portrait in lederhosen of the Haitian artist Jean-Ulrick Désert; the participatory installation by the conceptual artist Sach Hoyt; and a sad, suspenseful video piece by the young Cuban artist Alex Hernández Dueñas. But if so, they are not mapped here.

Mr. Hernández Dueñas's contribution is an exhibition standout. So is the mystical flying machine called "Dreamcatcher" by the Jamaican-born New Yorker Arthur Simms, who should be a lot better known in the city. The piece de résistance, though, is a sculpture by a British artist of Caribbean descent, Hew Locke.

Titled "El Dorado," it's a monumental portrait bust of Queen Elizabeth II assembled from thousands of small, cheap toys — plastic gold guns, plastic swords, rubber lizards and scorpions — with a kind of topiary hedge of fake flowers for crown and coiffure. Whether as a tribute or an insult, it's sensational.

Despite some fine things, though, the show feels warmed over and sluggish: it doesn't have the sense of risk or discovery that a re-arguing of identity as a subject now needs, at least in a New York context. (Luckily, another contemporary show, "Caribbean Crossroads of the World," a joint project of El Museo del Barrio, the Queens Museum of Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem, is coming in 2009.)

Nor will it give anyone who has problems with the maverick direction the Brooklyn Museum has been taking — and who does not? — much comfort. Still, in turning its back on art world whims and fads in "Infinite Island," the museum is staying true to its present self, against all objections, and there's something cool about that.

ONLINE: MORE CARIBBEAN ART

Additional images from "Infinite Island" at the Brooklyn Museum: nytimes.com/design

"Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art" remains at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, through Jan. 27.

