

proliferation of grids and geometric profusion Mexico City looks like when seen from a circling helicopter. In the video (which I had the chance to see elsewhere) the lack of editing and repetitive movement enhances the sense of a disciplined search for a truthful experience.

*Zócalo*, *Pourings* and *Spiral* approach the public with the discursive authority of an already gained trueness, after detouring through an objectified exteriority which diminishes their scope.

I don't think that the exhibition can be said to subscribe or be guided by the exclusionary

principles I describe above. There are too many artists (like Abaroa, Garduño and Guzmán) who don't conform to that mold. But I do think that the misleading urge to measure the relative capacity to generate and/or document "real," "sited" experiences, unstable meanings, destabilized categories and unpredictable outcomes played an important role in defining the "key" artists the catalogue mentions and in excluding many excellent artists who don't go out of their way to produce the objective conditions of their encounter with Mexico.

#### NOTE

1 MOLAA and MCASD have in the past shaken and expanded the narrow frame of Mexican Art in the US with ground-breaking exhibitions like TRANSactions: Contemporary Latin American and Latino Art, Strange New World: Art and Design from Tijuana, Siqueiros: Landscape Painter, Manchuria: Peripheral Vision —A Felipe Ehrenberg Retrospective and the upcoming MEX/LA: Mexican Modernism(s) in Los Angeles 1930-1985.

2. I would include among this group Ruben Ortiz Torres, Yvonne Venegas, Marcos Ramírez (ERRE) There are no artists from Tijuana and no Chicanos.

Fabián Cereijido

## Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions

Art Museum of the Americas. Washington, DC

On February 3, 2011, Edouard Glissant, one of the most important writers of the French Caribbean, died at age 82. Born in Martinique in 1928, Glissant moved to Paris in 1946 to study at the Sorbonne. Friends with figures such as Frantz Fanon, and guided by his own status as a colonial subject, Glissant's plays, poems and essays reflect on the legacy, history and meaning of colonialism, the slave trade, and racism. Though Glissant's politics changed and evolved over time, in 1997 he wrote in a single sentence that would become his most well known political position: "We demand the right to opacity." In hearing this phrase, it must be made clear that the demand for opacity is not a demand for invisibility or obscurity, but a demand for the right not to be understood. It is a demand for the right to exist without fulfilling what he, Glissant, believed was the western perspective's desire for transparency and the denial of difference.

Obscurity absolutely frustrates knowledge, but this frustration—this unknowability—is also, for Glissant, a sign of potentiality, a kind of identity that exists as a becoming rather than a static being.

The first time I saw "Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions," Edouard Glissant had just died and his advocacy for opacity as a strategy of resistance was on my mind and guided my viewing. This proved to be a serendipitous lens through which to see the show as curators Christopher Cozier and Tatiana Flores presented a model for viewing or representing history as an emerging and fragmented partiality. A partiality, however, that does not preclude, but rather enriches one's ability to contemplate the circumstances it seeks to describe. In the exhibition, which opened at the Art Museum of the Americas in Washington, D.C. in January and was up through mid-March, Cozier and Flores grouped

together thirty-six artists from fourteen Caribbean countries and the international diaspora. Included are works of photography, drawing, painting, video, and installation.

Among the works that seemed so eloquently to speak to the notion of opacity and transparency was Nikolai Noel's (b. Trinidad) *Toussaint et George*, which juxtaposes a drawing of George Washington with one of Toussaint L'Ouverture, the Haitian revolutionary and hero of Haitian independence, and I might add, the subject of one of Edouard Glissant's plays. In the work, only a very thin wash or veil of paint fills Washington's silhouette. His utter transparency stands in sharp contrast to Toussaint's bust, which is marked by thick black paint. As Flores notes in her catalog essay, Toussaint's "gruesome mask-like appearance" situates him as Washington's other, "his dark side." But the black paint also renders Toussaint opaque, literally and figuratively. Noel has drawn the

**Nikolai Noel.** *Toussaint et George (Two Rooms)*, 2010. Acrylic, graphite and linseed oil on panel. 10 x 8 in. (25,4 x 20,3 cm.).



**Ebony Patterson.** *Entourage*, 2010. Digital print. 80 ½ x 120 ¾ in. (204,5 x 306 cm.).



two figures so that they seem to be looking at one another, but Toussaint in his *opacity* refuses to become an object of knowledge for his western observer. Or consider Heino Schmid's (b. Bahamas) video *Temporary Horizon* (2010). In this work, a man's arms and waist appear on screen, and we watch him attempt to keep two glass bottles balanced on top one another. He momentarily succeeds, but then the bottles quickly fall. The figure puts the bottles back into place. They fall again. The transparency of the bottles—we can see through them—contrasts with the inscrutability of the action, and its repeated failure.

Rather than stage an argument about Caribbean art *in toto*, "Wrestling with the Image" highlights the diversity and range of art practice among artists of Caribbean descent. Or as Jerry Philogene in her terrific review of the exhibition has already noted, "'Wrestling with the Image' suggests that the idea of 'the Caribbean,' or a 'Caribbean' art exhibition, is fraught with stereotypes, inconsistencies, and misconceptions." Nevertheless, it would be hard to walk through the exhibition and not notice the various strategies put forth that all demonstrate how identity remains a key term for the artists included in the show. That is, identity remains a key theme here, yet the way it is worked through pressures what the terms experience, hybridity, even identity-politics might mean within contemporary art. At a moment when so much contemporary art strives to exceed the parameters of what came before—in many instances, to break down the very category of art in an effort to prove one's politics and the contemporary relevance of practice—"Wrestling with the

Image" stands out as an exhibition that rejects this iconoclastic impulse and instead embraces creative practice and representational space. There is nothing grand about this show, nothing iconoclastic or fashionably radical, no mass denunciations. It is a quiet, surprising show that seeks without pretense to address the complexities of Caribbean history and identity. And it gently demands to be viewed on its own terms.

To these ends, the work is not grouped by any common theme, media, or geographic locality. The aesthetic diversity the viewer encounters as she travels from painting to photograph to drawing to photograph to video to installation is matched by the conceptual shifts of moving from a work that addresses the history of the slave trade and slave rebellion (*Fragment kbi wi kani*, 2007, by Marcel Pinas, b. Suriname) to one that parodies the visual language of failed businesses and collapsed economies (*Western Union International*, 2007, by Hew Locke, b. Edinburgh) to one—beautifully rendered and psychologically charged—that speaks to issues of the self and doubling (*Specimen from Local Ephemera: Mix More Media!*, 2009 by Nicole Awai, b. Trinidad) to one that confronts not only the stereotype of the Caribbean as untouched paradise, but also the immaterial labor that went into producing that stereotype (*Discovery of the Palm Tree: Phone Mast*, 2008 by Blue Curry, b. Bahamas). All of this shifting functions as an effective metaphor for the multiplicity, cultural mixing, and perhaps, following Glissant, ultimate unknowability that characterizes the vast and constantly becoming space of the Caribbean. The result

is sometimes utter disorientation, particularly for the viewer not familiar with either the history of the Caribbean or the art production associated with the region. Yet this disorientation seems precisely the point. In its production, the curators resist duplicating conventional organizational structures and create in its place a viewing experience that denies the certainty of identity, the safety of categorization, and the ultimate clarity of signs upon which established power rests.

This approach to the installation differs from that employed by another major exhibition of contemporary Caribbean art: Tumelo Mosaka's 2007 show at the Brooklyn Museum, "Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art." That exhibition featured the work of forty-five established and emerging artists who work in the Caribbean, the United States, Canada, and Europe. And a significant number of the artists included in "Infinite Island" are also included in "Wrestling with the Image": Ewan Atkinson (b. Barbados), Nicole Awai, Terry Boddie (b. Nevis), Keisha Castello (b. Jamaica), Jean-Ulrick Désert (b. Haiti), Joscelyn Gardner (b. Barbados), Hew Locke, Ebony Patterson (b. Jamaica), and Marcel Pinas. Christopher Cozier, "Wrestling with the Image" co-curator, was also included in "Infinite Island." Mosaka's show divided the exhibited work into four themes: History and Memory; Politics and Identity; Myth, Ritual and Belief; and Popular Culture. In his catalog essay to the show, Mosaka smartly writes that the work included in "Infinite Island"—that all art—"is a mobile entity...Its meanings change depending on its social context, location, and audience. As such, the works do

**Hew Locke.** *West Indies Sugar Corporation*, 2009. Acrylic paint on paper. 12 x 8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (30,7 x 22 cm.).



**Heino Schmid.** *Temporary Horizon*, 2010. Digital video, variable dimensions. Duration: 00:05:03.





**Marlon Griffith.** *Louis*, 2009. Digital print. 47 ¾ x 31 ¾ in. (121,3 x 80,6 cm.).

not present a singular coherent identity but rather exist in manifold realities distributed across diverse spaces.” Similarly, in an email exchange with me, Cozier noted that one of the successes of Mosaka’s “Infinite Island” was the way in which it sought to “engage rather than define the Caribbean.” That exhibition’s groupings, however—particularly

in the show’s catalog afterlife—sometimes seemed to limit a work’s multiplicity, that is, the structured presentation risked creating controlled readings.

“Wrestling with the Image” manages to avoid these potential limitations by remaining slightly awkward in its presentation, maintaining dialogue between the show’s components, and staying clear of self-enclosed thematic groupings. As a result, adjacent displays, intentionally or not, became provocative for their very antagonism. In the largest room on the second floor the sound of glass bottles falling from Schmid’s *Temporary Horizon* filled the room. Mysteriously mesmerizing, the video plays on a continuous loop that never grants the viewer total access to the staged event. Positioned in front of the video was Santiago Cal’s (b. Belize) *Some Kind*, a display of meticulously hand-crafted wood hammers that evoke manual labor, but that are utterly non-functional—not only designed to break, but carved to fit just one hand, that of the artist’s. The crashing of bottles in *Temporary Horizon* seems to contest or challenge the calm silence of Cal’s *Some Kind*. The street hustler’s trick and the non-functioning, but painstakingly fabricated, hammer, placed adjacent to one another produced a simultaneously nostalgic and cynical view of labor in a globalized economy.

In his essay for the catalog, Cozier explains that he got the idea to name this exhibition “Wrestling with the Image” while looking at a series of pictures by John Cox (b. Bahamas) with titles such as *I am not afraid to fight a perfect stranger*. For Cozier, the way in which Cox’s images depict the artist boxing himself, wrestling and fighting himself among a tangle of images characterizes not only the condition of artistic making for all the artists in the show, but also the way in which he and Flores wanted viewers (those unfamiliar with region and those not) to wrestle with their own expectations of the region. In this I think the show was tremendously successful. And while I was deeply moved by particular works in the show: Schmid’s video, for instance; or Ebony Patterson’s *Entourage* (2010)—a large-scale photograph depicting Jamaican dance-hall culture; or Marlon Griffith’s (b. Trinidad) *Powder Box Schoolgirl* (2009) photographs—an amazing series of pictures that depict three young women with powder on their necks and chests in “bling” patterns, ultimately the strength of the exhibition resides not in these individual examples, but in its wholeness, its material abundance. The work in the show was not all equally successful, but grouped together it demanded that its audience wrestle with images too.

**Terri Weissman**

## Figuration of Utopian Space, Configuration of Dystopia

Museo de Arte Moderno. Medellín, Colombia



Artistic reflection about urban spaces have been a constant of recent years, to the point of being included in the curricula of many art schools and institutes, or to materialize in concrete proposals that intervene a city’s architecture and spaces or turn it into an object of representation in drawings, paintings, and videos. Artists today gaze upon the city not because they are interested in responding to ways of constructing urban space through temples, murals, and graffiti, as in the past, but because the city itself is now open to new ways of understanding and of being understood, and also because the relationship between city and citizen is different in our times, as is the relationship between the work of art and its viewer.

**Juan Raúl Hoyos.** *Compound*, 2010. Installation with 513 paper bags and silkscreen prints. Variable dimensions.

Urban spaces feature many forms that reveal the city’s polyvalent visage, where polyphony, synchronicity, utopia, dystopia are all possible; this is to say, the open and critical shapes of a space where both encounter and misencounter are possible. *Puntos de fuga, arquitecturas posibles* speaks to all this; it tells of the territorialization and deterritorialization of space, the conquest of place, and the tumbling of walls, as the city finds *vanishing points* that go from engineering construction, architectural reference, and social practices, to the critical accumulation of a universe of doubts in which contemporary people close the borders of their gaze and open up the space to a different understanding.

This exhibition, conceived and curated by Oscar Roldán-Alzate, curator at the Museo de Arte de Medellín, brings together 18 artists from Colombia, Ecuador, Cuba, Venezuela, Romania, USA, and Spain, and seeks