

# Treasure Islands

## The Brooklyn Museum hosts a broad exhibit of contemporary Caribbean art

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If Caribbean art is getting hot, if it's considerably more visible—as suggested by the advent of Circa Puerto Rico, which in 2006 became the first international art fair in the Caribbean—this is at least partly due to the fact that so many artists have left the region. Of the 45 artists included in the Brooklyn Museum's sprawling new show "Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art," more than a third live elsewhere. And as they leave, more and more tourists arrive for a few days in paradise.

Coming and going, Eden and its seamy underbelly: These paradoxical themes occupy most of the artists in this uneven though consistently engaging survey. Some see the Caribbean as a troubled paradise, others as a piquant hybrid of cultures and classes, languages and places. Playing on what a tourist might notice (or not), Quisqueya Henríquez, a Cuban artist residing in the Dominican Republic, displays green-tinted photo diptychs juxtaposing views through the two lenses of a pair of sunglasses: in the left one, a dog asleep under a bench; in the right, a homeless man passed out on the sidewalk. But hers is perhaps an overly literal approach to social and economic problems that will surprise no one.

Visitors will be surprised, however, by the number of artists living in Cuba who feel free to criticize their country openly. Alex Hernández Dueñas's short film *Zona Afectada* (*Affected Zone*, 2006) follows a shirtless man as he painfully lugs two buckets of water, filled from a truck, up several flights of stairs. He makes the

trip five times simply to fill his bath. In a series of formally beautiful color photographs, Alexandre Arrechea—a former member of the well-known collective Los Carpinteros who divides his time between Madrid and Havana—depicts young men holding stacks of crumbling white bricks against their torsos, so that only their

Courtesy: Brooklyn Museum



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Fly fruit: Miguel Luciano's *Platano Pride*, 2006

Details:  
**"Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art"**  
 The Brooklyn Museum of Art  
 200 Eastern Parkway  
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arms, shoulders, and legs are visible. Called *Elementos Arquitectónicos (Architectural Elements, 2004)*, the series plays on the socialist propaganda refrain "construction of a new society" by commenting on Havana's decaying buildings and infrastructure. Roberto Diago, a Havana resident, has reproduced the worst of those conditions. His installation *El Poder de la Presencia (The Power of Presence, 2006)* consists of miniaturized versions of the sorts of tin-roofed shantytown shacks occupied, a wall text informs us, primarily by Cuba's marginalized black population.

But fear not: There are just enough humorous, souped-up, or colorful pieces here to break the tedium of the numerous earnestly critical, '90s-style installations like Diago's. From toy swords, fake flowers, plastic lizards, and other flea-market finds, London-based Hew Locke—he was raised in Guyana—has composed a jangly sculptural portrait of Britain's Queen Elizabeth. He also produced an elegant wall-sized tableau by "drawing" figures with strands of black beads and braided ropes—it's one of several pieces commissioned specifically for the show.

Locke's found-object assemblages reflect a broader practice among these artists. Caribbean islanders import so many of their basic items, and have absorbed so many cultural influences, that it's no wonder they excel in bricolage—building with whatever washes up on shore. K. Khalfani Ra of Jamaica "paints" by threading nails, and even machetes, through slits cut in swaths of white fabric, while New York's Satch Hoyt takes an oblique look at the ways islanders retool cultural borrowings. His *Dub Ramp (2005)*, an AstroTurf-covered triangular ramp with red cricket balls and a black wicket atop it, and a speaker set into it, plays dub music over a cricket-match play-by-play. Like dub musicians, who remix existing beats, West Indians have infused the English sport of cricket with their own accents, just as they've turned aspects of African life into Caribbean Rastafarianism—represented by the piece's black, green, and red color scheme.

Still, artists like Dzine (Carlos Rolón) and Miguel Luciano remind us that the streams of cultural influence flow in two directions. For the show, Dzine pimped out a bicycle with rhinestones, gold plating, and the words "Pura Familia Car Dub" on the front; a screen mounted on the back plays a video about the impact of West Indian gangs on life in the Bronx. Luciano's photograph *Platano Pride (2006)*, of a kid fingering a necklace that sports a cast-platinum plantain, transforms an indigenous plant into American-style bling. And in one of the funnier pieces on view, *Negerhosen 2000: The Travel Albums*, Jean-Ulrick Désert exports himself to northern Europe. A wall of postcard-style photographs documents this ongoing performance, for which the artist, a black man of Haitian decent, dresses in the traditional German garb of lederhosen and feathered cap, then poses with natives and tourists throughout Germany.

Despite—or because of—the opportunities for humor they afford, hybrids, Désert seems to say, are preferred to the myth of purity. It's an argument borne out by "Infinite Island": The varieties of invention found here suggest that the Caribbean's tides of migration and return have ultimately enriched its art. And museum-goers will praise the winds that have blown its delights to the shores of Brooklyn.