

ART

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Still Life

Becky Beasley interviewed by Mark Prince

On the Surface

Michaële Cutaya

Alicja Rogalska

Profile by Rose Higham-Stainton

Blue Curry

Profile by Paul Carey-Kent



Profile

Blue Curry

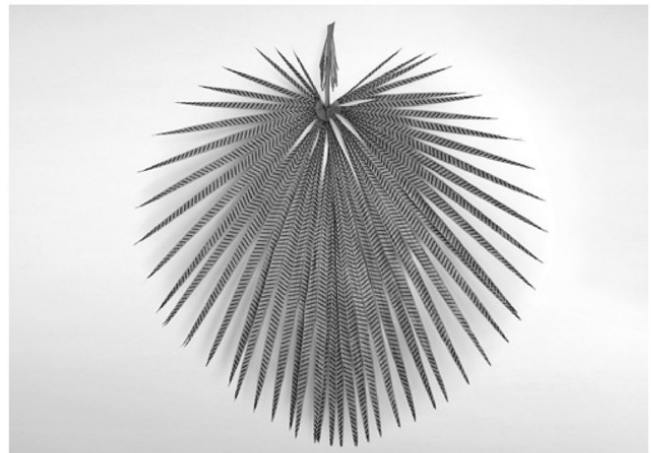
The artist, who is based in both the UK and The Bahamas, interrogates the origins, characteristics and impact of the tourist experience.

The first work I saw by Blue Curry was *Untitled*, 2010: a cement mixer filled with sun cream. It had a definite allure in the post-Duchampian tradition of finding interesting objects and materials that can be combined, arranged and presented in a gallery context to give them a different charge. 'I like to make things that are sort of sexy,' he says, 'the look is important, and that's what I enjoy.' As such, he might be seen as a formalist. Curry, however, is also one of the 46 artists currently included in Tate's politically charged survey show 'Life Between Islands: Caribbean-British Art 1950s - Now' (see Morgan Quaintance's 'Centre. Margin. Other.' feature in *AM* 543 and Letters p15). As that show suggests, there are other things going on in Curry's work.

Tate's title is particularly apposite for Curry. He grew up in The Bahamas, but came to the UK in 1997 aged 23. Prior to that he had studied in the US, with a year in Spain as an exchange student, and spent six months in Brazil - all good experience given that, as he says, 'The Bahamas is a small place to come from'. He started his exhibition career there before he took up formal art studies in London: a part-time degree in photography at the University of Westminster, then an MA at Goldsmiths. For 25 years, then, Curry has been living a 'life between islands', bouncing back and forth, making work in both the UK and the Caribbean. He has spent time working throughout the islands and takes an interest in how the whole region is viewed and consumed. Utilising that background, he stacks up and compounds ideas of the exotic, the native and the tropical, facilitating their critical examination. His two works at Tate Britain are typical.

Caribbean Queen, 2020, features a huge palm leaf cut from his garden in Nassau, an exemplar, says Curry, of the type of 'exotic' nature that was exploited and exaggerated by early explorers and colonisers to make the Caribbean more fantastical. Some 450 feet of cassette tape is meticulously woven into the leaf. 'I'm fascinated,' says Curry, 'by the continued expectation that art coming from the developing world will be handmade and creatively re-use waste materials - El Anatsui's use of bottle caps is a prime example of this sort of expected "upcycling"'. Curry gives that expectation a conceptual twist by using a dozen copies of 'Caribbean Queen' by the Trinidadian-British singer Billy Ocean. The 1984 hit takes us back to pre-digital modes in both the replay and crafting. The woman in the song plays into conventional expectations: 'she said I was the tiger she wanted to tame'. The tape medium takes us back in time, too; Curry says he looks at the past as another type of exotic.

Sun Chasers, 2020, consists of 1950s/1960s aeroplane seats tricked out with items derived from Curry's activity as a flâneur of The Bahamas. There is what he calls 'seashell vomit' over the seats - shells which could perhaps have been washed up by the sea but which call to mind more how 'every March when American colleges go on break The Bahamas is hit by thousands of teenaged tourists who drink way too much'. And the shells so spewed are a frequent



Caribbean Queen, 2020



Like Taking Sand to the Beach, 2006,
Nassauischer Kunstverein, Wiesbaden

trope of the tourist souvenir. The trays hold mousepads, another item headed towards the past, with archetypal images of sunsets. Synthetic hair braids lie across the tops of the seats – ‘also part of the tourist experience’, says Curry. The seats are completed with bamboo, universally used to signal the exotic, even where – as in The Bahamas – it does not naturally occur. And the whole thing is held together with ‘upcycled’ bicycle inner tube.

Another artist with a deft hand for found objects, Isa Genzken, has recently been attracted to airline seats. Her 2020 installation *Window* featured rows of seats lined by aircraft windows with their blinds raised and lowered varyingly. But, whereas for Genzken the work represents travel as a positive experience which presents the opportunity to view the world differently, Curry finds himself ‘on the consumed end’, where the perspectives and expectations of visitors are limited. ‘Satisfying them’, he says, ‘is like living in a deafening echo chamber of clichés and stereotypes.’ Curry’s use of the seats is over the top and garish in comparison with Genzken’s starker presentation, expressing a frustration laced with mischievous humour.

‘I’m interested in the fantasy and the reality of the Caribbean,’ says Curry, ‘and how one replaces the other.’ In one of his earliest projects, *Like Taking Sand to the Beach*, 2006, he took a section of beach from The Bahamas to a gallery in Germany and then back. The conceptual exercise was an attempt to methodically dissect the construct of paradise into its basic elements. Visitors were only allowed to enjoy the transplanted beach under fluorescent lighting surrounded by stark white gallery walls. In a similar vein, *PARADISE.jpg*, 2014, papered the rougher parts of downtown Kingston with posters of an ocean horizon taken from travel adverts. Returning this image of unspoiled natural beauty to the gritty streets of a Caribbean capital city was both spectacle and sharp commentary. His work *55 Gallon*, 2016, hybridises a barbecue and a steel drum ensemble to fulfil another possible holiday fantasy: eating skewers of plantain hot off the grill while being serenaded with tropical melodies. He has also worked comparably with swimsuits, beach towels and hair combs.

Curry’s work clearly deals with the impact of tourism. How critical should we take him to be? He was once told ‘you’re just trying to ruin our holidays’, but he’s not after the holidaymakers, but rather the historically constructed image of the Caribbean to which they unwittingly subscribe. He cites Krista A Thompson’s 2007 study *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*. Thompson investigates images of Jamaica and The Bahamas as tropical paradises and demonstrates that, far from being timeless, the origin of such images can be traced back to the roots of the islands’ tourism industry in the 1880s. Photographers were hired to create carefully crafted representations of the islands as picturesque ‘tropical’ paradises. That activity altered everyday life because, for example, hoteliers imported tropical plants to make the islands look more like the images. Nonetheless, Curry points out that contemporary mass tourism wouldn’t exist in the tropics without the subsequent development of sun cream and air conditioning. That work I saw in 2010 was signaling that sun cream has been a significant factor in driving construction in The Bahamas.

Realistically, though, the Bahamian economy needs tourism because the country’s islands have few natural



PARADISE.jpg, 2014, installation view, Kingston



Sun Chasers, 2020

resources. The plantation economy was never lucrative and, says Curry, its economy has relied on the rest of the world: in the 19th century, piracy and smuggling; more recently, drug running and offshore banking. Now tourism dominates, but the industry must move to a more responsible model.

Reading the foregoing, one may be surprised to learn that Curry is one of only three white artists – Peter Doig and Lisa Brice being the others, though they have no Caribbean lineage – in the ‘Life Between Islands’ exhibition. That’s a helpful corrective to the UK norm of equating ‘Caribbean’ with ‘black’ and ‘white’ with ‘colonisers’. In reality, the Caribbean was the world’s first ‘melting pot’ of different races, and some 10% of the 385,000 Bahamians, for example, are not black. ‘Outside of the region it is difficult for me to be understood as an artist who *can* speak from that space,’ Curry says. ‘If I get in a taxi in Kingston, it’s accepted naturally that I’m Caribbean. But in Britain, I don’t fit the stereotype. I’m always asked, “when did your parents move there?” I have to justify my Caribbean-ness when I’m outside the Caribbean.’ Yet Curry, whose family can be traced back in The Bahamas for seven generations, clearly belongs in Tate’s show, adding an extra dimension to the narrative of ‘Life Between Islands’.

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