

# Of Simple Places—Familiar and Strange

## Blue Curry's Leisure Aesthetics

By Marsha Pearce, PhD

The Caribbean has long oscillated between perceptions of place as *mastered*, and place as wild and primal; between the picturesque and a Romantic aesthetic. In these discourses the term 'aesthetic' has less to do with questions about beauty, although we can find many travel magazine headlines announcing the most beautiful islands, with their azure waters and crisp, white sands. Rather, and more critically, conversations about aesthetics in the Caribbean point to something beyond a skin-deep beauty. They reveal assumptions, ingrained 'truths', or visual philosophies that underpin the way tropicality is regarded and consumed in the Western imaginary. Blue Curry's invocation of *Leisure Aesthetics* engages this history of tropical perceptibility by attending to tourism as a particular way of seeing; tourism as a manifestation of leisure that yields particular visualities of people and place, and imposes certain effects. Through a mix of sculptural installations and video work, Curry confronts and plays with tourism as an optic that bends the light in which the Caribbean is seen. In that illumination, we discern an aesthetic of the simple place, and an aesthetic of the familiar/strange. By refracting some of that light with his minimalist, conceptual forms, Blue Curry redirects how we see and define Caribbean art.

### ***Far from Centres: A Simple Place...and People***

Writing about the impact of tourism on the Caribbean, Polly Pattullo notes that the region, "whatever the brutality of its history, kept its reputation as a Garden of Eden before the Fall." She adds that the "idea of a tropical island was a further seductive image: small, a 'jewel' in a necklace chain, far from centres of industry and pollution, a simple place, straight out of Robinson Crusoe. Not only the place, but the people too, are required to conform to the stereotype" (1996: p.142). Pattullo describes an unsophisticated place—an uncomplicated, clichéd paradise—situated far from global, metropolitan centres, and a people equally simplified, reduced. It is this aesthetic of the simple place, and by extension, a simple people, that Blue Curry addresses. In his work *AKA* (2022), he presents six plastic badges, name tags typically worn as part of the tourism and hospitality service experience. Yet, the badges bear the descriptors 'native,' 'exotic,' 'other,' 'colonial.' We cannot use these to summon the lived memories, aspirations and afflictions that come with a bartender, as a matter of course, when we signal her by name, or stir up family ties when we hail our taxi driver: Pinder, Ferguson, Johnson, Williams. The badges erase any reference to the personal, to individual biographical histories. Instead, Curry envisions a wearer who has been typecast, or assigned a role to be performed—the intricacies of a life story disentangled and paraphrased as one, homogenizing word. This uniformity is intensified by Curry's choice of a conch shell-pink hue for the badges. The colour is used to paint and identify government buildings in The Bahamas. By deploying it in the work, Curry implicates the State in how tropical places present and sell themselves, and he

underscores the institutionalization or normalization of unnuanced ways of being that are reproduced and reified in tourism practices.

In his digital video, with accompanying soundtrack, titled *1492-2022* (2022), Curry sets up a tension in the aesthetic of the simple place by drawing our attention to social complexities. The video shows actual footage of a man vandalizing a Christopher Columbus monument, a major tourist attraction which stood at the front of Government House in The Bahamas. In 2021, the man was arrested for taking a sledgehammer to the statue. We witness his reckoning with the colonial vestige in the video, but Curry disturbs our view with his deliberate editing. He prevents a steady gaze upon a society's deep contention and frustration. Flat blocks of pink colour (the same conch shell-pink) crop and obstruct the moving image—the solid, unmodulated colour functioning as a visual signifier of a simple place. Swatches of pink veil the difficult subjects of monument culture, public space, racism, and violent histories. To these images, Curry adds an additional layer. The song “Yellow Bird” is heard as the video plays. There is a dissonance between image and sound, as our eyes catch moments of the hammer's forceful blows to the statue, and our ears hear the gentle strum of a guitar. The sweet melody works in opposition to the real-world clash between a man and a colonial ‘hero.’ But, Curry's musical selection is intentional, here.

“Yellow Bird” is a staple in the repertoire of performance acts crafted for vacationers in the Caribbean, a soundscape for sipping rum punch and sampling spicy plantains under the warm glow of the setting sun. Listeners often enjoy its pleasant notes without knowing the details of its origin. The song, known today with English lyrics, comes from *Choucoune*, a Kreyòl lyrical poem written in the nineteenth century by Haitian poet Oswald Durand, and set to music by Haitian composer Michel Mauléart Monton. It was remixed and popularised in the 1950s when it was released as part of the album *Calypso Holiday*, featuring tracks sung by the North American Norman Luboff choir. In the 1960s, Hawaiian musician Arthur Lyman made the song a hit under the genre of exotica, a musical style steeped in island-life fantasy. Now used as a backdrop for tourist leisure, “Yellow Bird” is emptied of what Caribbean cultural theorist, Rex Nettleford, refers to as a “textured history”—a dynamic and complex narrative (2003: p149). Like the colour pink in Curry's work, the song is rendered flattened too. In this video, the music serves as a sonic mask for the images, its tempo softening—flattening—the rough edges of a past that still lingers in the present. Colour and sound are threaded together to offset any firm sense of a multidimensional, complex place. They compress and simplify tropical realities, presenting a partial or unbalanced view of Caribbean experiences. This creative handling of (im)balance is evident in other artworks, as Curry not only explores this idea of the simple, but also notions of familiarity and strangeness.

### ***Balancing Acts: The Familiar/Strange***

The Caribbean is not exempt from leisure practices that attempt to offer what Zygmunt Bauman calls the “right proportion” of otherness and familiarity. “Holiday Inns or Sheratons are there not to bring the far away life closer,” says Bauman, “but to supply an extraterritorial enclave, the reassuring sameness amidst variety—impermeable and invulnerable, immune to the local idiosyncrasies...You may go hundreds and thousands of miles, in order to find yourself

in cosily familiar surroundings, comfortably secure because familiar, with a few ‘local touches’ sprinkled over it to justify the expenditure. Powerful minds are working on that, trying to strike the right balance between security of the familiar and adventure of the strange” (Franklin 2003: pp. 212-13). Blue Curry’s *Islands* (2022) visualizes and experiments with this balancing act. Mirroring the gallery’s tiled floor, he arranges materials in square formations on the ground. *Island, No 1* comprises twenty-five conch shells with flashing LED lights. *Island, No 2* is a careful corralling of beach sand dotted with casino dice, and *Island, No 3* is a swirling mix of braided synthetic hair and plastic beads. The flatness of this sculptural installation extends Curry’s reflection on the Caribbean as a simple place. Island topography is compacted, condensed and described with little depth. However, Curry pushes his thinking about aesthetics further.

The materials in this work are all familiar to us. The artist makes use of a vocabulary of leisure, drawing upon a language of tourist customs to construct a map with defined borders—a comfortable geography of known things. Each square a secure enclave of objects. And yet, Curry’s material combination—dice, hair, sand, lights—facilitates an unexpected dialogue that disrupts familiarity and gestures toward an “adventure of the strange.” He troubles an experience that is safe and predictable. This is the aesthetic of the familiar/strange, a sensation of the known and unknown, the mundane and the exotic. Even when our eyes eventually adjust to the contours and visual amalgams in this work, when we presume to have read and grasped it, Curry reconfigures his islands. On a return trip to the installation you might find it has taken a different shape, squares shifted and recomposed to create an archipelago with unanticipated coordinates. It is this element of the unforeseen that Blue Curry translates into formal qualities that defy stereotypical beliefs about art from the Caribbean.

### ***Assumptions about Art from ‘Other’ Places: Toward New Destinations***

An outcome of seeing tropical places as simple, and as reverberating with the familiar and the strange, is a superimposition of these aesthetics on cultural productions. Art from the Caribbean is often assumed to be primitive and reductive. The idea of the familiar becomes synonymous with formulaic and unchallenging work, while what is strange is not so much singular and idiosyncratic, as it is quaint and oddly anachronistic—art that is out of step with Western creative traditions. Blue Curry’s proposal of leisure aesthetics comments on tourism and its consequences, but there is nothing *leisurely* about the art he makes. His sculptures demand work from the viewer that unsettles a casual aesthetic experience, and insist on new ways of seeing artistic practice from the Caribbean.

His piece *Destination* (2022), is a fitting example of this attention to how we see: our *sight*, and the spatial framework for enacting our power of vision: tropical *site*. Curry’s three-dimensional work is a metal display stand, complete with sunglasses. However, he customizes the eyewear, replacing the glass lenses with elaborately patterned sea fans. Seeing through the perforations of the coral is no easy task. He uses tropical symbolism, not as a passport for quick access, but as material resistance. He complicates practices of looking, asserting a “right to opacity” (Glissant, 1997: p189) and emphasizing the position that the Caribbean, and its art productions, are not so transparent. Difference can be, as Édouard Glissant observes, “contrive[d] to reduce

things to the Transparent”—a transparency that closes and fixes ideas (ibid.). In contrast, opacity creates an openness. “The opaque is not the obscure...It is that which cannot be reduced” (Glissant, 1997: p191). Curry attends to tropical difference. He invites open-ended interpretations through the visual device of opacity, enlarging his artwork beyond confining expectations, and expanding a sense of Caribbean place past the boundaries of neat and tidy shores. The Caribbeanness that we perceive in Curry’s practice is not seen and felt as a foregone conclusion. “It doesn’t matter where you’ve left from, it doesn’t matter how far you’ve gone,” writes Cuban author Antonio Benítez-Rojo, “Caribbeanness will always remain beyond the horizon” (1996: p.xi). Blue Curry’s *Leisure Aesthetics* gives us no final destination.

## References

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