

BLACK BOYZ M...



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

ARTIST GRAHAM FAGEN
TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO | BARBADOS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction p.01

About the Artist p.06

Graham Fagen p.07
essay

Barbados p.10
Community
College
feedback

Therese Hadchity p.14
essay

Melanie Archer p.23
essay

Nikolai Noel p.32
quote

Acknowledgements p.34





INTRODUCTION

Graham Fagen at Alice Yard, Trinidad
Photo by Arnaldo James

Annalee Davis,
Caribbean Arts Manager,
for the British Council

Juliet Dean,
Visual Arts Adviser,
for the British Council

The British Council is pleased to have partnered with the **Barbados Community College** and **Alice Yard**, Trinidad and Tobago, in welcoming Scottish artist, Graham Fagen, to the southern Caribbean in April 2017, beginning with his tenure as external examiner for the BFA Fine Art students in Barbados. In both countries, he gave public talks on his art practice and engaged in studio visits where he met with artists to speak about their work. These conversations have opened a window to the stark differences of opinion on historic relations between Britain and the Caribbean, revealing how differently narratives are constructed to shape national consciousness.

There is increasing interest in exploring the legacy of the colonial relationship between Scotland and the Caribbean

Over the past two years, the British Council has been actively building relationships between the arts sector in Scotland and the Caribbean. Arguably, these sectors operate in very different contexts; in the Anglophone Caribbean, for example, there are few museums and galleries, no MFA programmes available to students, and very little funding for the arts. Whilst Scotland (and the UK, as a

INTRODUCTION

whole) has a well established network of museums, galleries, artists studios, and production facilities, it has been hit by funding cuts to the arts over the past 10 years and, in Scotland, as with the Caribbean, there is little (or next to no) arts market.

... for Scottish and indeed UK audiences who still tend to have a rather eurocentric and stereotypical view of the Caribbean characterised by the notion of “paradise” – exoticism and tourism on the one hand – and drug and knife crime, and homophobia on the other.

Increasingly, there are shared synergies and approaches between the arts sectors in the two regions. Both can be characterised by an interest in innovative ways of building an art scene with a focus on artist-led, grassroots, collaborative practice. There is also a renewed interest in cross cultural exchange between the two regions; this is in part due to the Commonwealth Games Cultural Programme, which took place in Glasgow in 2014 and provided a platform for Scotland to re-examine its links to the Caribbean through its role in the slave trade. This can be evidenced through Stephen Mullen’s book, *It Wasn’t Us: The Truth About Glasgow and Slavery*.

Underpinning the programme of arts activity between Scotland and the Caribbean is the aim to facilitate greater understanding between the peoples of both regions. This is particularly the case for Scottish and indeed UK audiences who still tend to have a rather eurocentric and stereotypical view of the Caribbean characterised by the notion of “paradise” – exoticism and tourism on the one hand – and drug and knife crime, and homophobia on the other. This programme seeks to open up conversations across the waters and move towards a more mature and nuanced understanding of each other’s culture.

The overarching goal of the British Council’s arts strategy in the Caribbean is to develop an awareness of the UK arts within the Caribbean, to connect artistic excellence of the Caribbean with the UK, and to facilitate meaningful conversations through the arts.

In November 2015, a Caribbean Focus Evening was organised by the British Council and presented in partnership with the National Galleries of Scotland as part of a week-long international curators’ visit to Scotland. Hosted by the British Council, this event brought together leading curators and practitioners from the Caribbean and Scotland. The focus was to consider some of the concerns and ambitions of the Caribbean’s dynamic visual arts ecology, and to explore the region’s developing connections with

INTRODUCTION

the visual arts sector in Scotland. A round-table discussion, moderated by Remco de Blaaij, Curator, CCA: Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, included presentations from:

Holly Bynoe, *Chief Curator*,
National Art Gallery of The Bahamas, Nassau, and
co-founder and director of ARC Magazine

Tiffany Boyle, *Curator and*
co-founder of research-led practice,
Mother Tongue, Edinburgh/London

Christopher Cozier, *Visual artist and*
independent curator, **Alice Yard**, Trinidad and Tobago

Graham Fagen, *Visual artist*, Glasgow

There is increasing interest in exploring the legacy of the colonial relationship between Scotland and the Caribbean, which was the premise of Caribbean Focus. The question of amnesia as a recurring theme was addressed by both the Scottish and Caribbean panellists¹; more can be read about these presentations in this review by Moira Jeffrey. Provoking new conversations through the lens of contemporary art practice and curatorial frameworks allows contemporary society to become aware of the level of erasure and amnesia that has distorted Britain's understanding of the far reaching effects of the Empire, both abroad and at home.

The overarching goal of the British Council's arts strategy in the Caribbean is to develop an awareness of the UK arts within the Caribbean, to connect artistic excellence of the Caribbean with the UK, and to facilitate meaningful conversations through the arts. For example, the British Council has done so through its alliance with **Tilting Axis**² and the **Trans-Atlantic Artist Residency Exchange** programme (TAARE).

Regarding the former, the British Council has been an ally of Tilting Axis since its inaugural manifestation of the first convening in Barbados in 2015³, the 2016 meeting in Miami, and the recent convening in the Cayman Islands⁴. At each iteration, it has supported the robust participation of Scottish curators who either work independently or have institutional ties. This involvement led to the Tilting Axis

INTRODUCTION

Emerging Curatorial Fellowship,⁵ supported by the British Council with Scotland-based cultural partners including CCA Glasgow, David Dale Gallery, Hospitalfield, and the curatorial collective, Mother Tongue. The fellowship was produced as a structural long-term fellowship for an emerging contemporary art practitioner living and working in the Caribbean. The inaugural fellowship was awarded to Jamaican-based curator, Nicole Smythe-Johnson, who moved through a number of Scottish institutions and artist-led spaces in Grenada, Barbados, Suriname, and Puerto Rico.

TAARE is a partnership with UK | Caribbean residency programmes, designed to focus on Trans-Atlantic exchanges between the UK, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago, and offers new residency opportunities to visual artists. The residency is supported by British Council, its UK partners including Delfina Foundation in partnership with Autograph ABP and Gasworks and Hospitalfield Arts; and its Caribbean partners including NLS Kingston in Jamaica and Alice Yard in Trinidad.

This e-publication, documenting Graham Fagen's recent trip to the Southern Caribbean, developed specifically out of the Caribbean Focus programme, will span two other countries, including Jamaica and The Bahamas. The project includes two exhibitions with other Caribbean and British artists complimented by a public programme of talks and workshops to unfold in the coming months.

There is, of course, a centuries-old entangled relationship between the UK and the Anglophone Caribbean, explored through various art forms, by many artists, on both sides of the pond. The goal of this particular visual arts programme, beginning in Barbados with Graham's visit there, is to function as a catalyst for new Trans-Atlantic conversations about this complex affiliation.

The University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica, recently hosted the International Stuart Hall Conference: "Whither the Caribbean?: Stuart Hall's Intellectual Legacy." At the conference, Hall's widow, Professor Catherine Hall, launched the posthumous publication, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*⁶. Hall's articulations of how we are shaped by the forces of history, on both sides of the Atlantic, provide a lens through which one might ruminate on this deeply entwined history, one which is understood in quite different ways.

INTRODUCTION

Having Graham in the Southern Caribbean beginning to engage in conversation with artists who have been making work about the complex history of the region, including the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, is an important first step in this larger project, one which builds on much work that has gone before, even if not easily accessible to most.

Hall writes, “The ‘romance’ of Abolition disguises more than it explains, and produces its own mechanisms of amnesia – as it still forcefully does in public life in Britain, with the invocation of ‘Wilberforce’ as the archangel of liberty.” Graham’s retelling of the experience of his education in Scotland and the received narrative around Robert Burns, the much celebrated national poet of Scotland, speaks to similar romantic notions about a man whose life story was told only in part. Having Graham in the Southern Caribbean beginning to engage in conversation with artists who have been making work about the complex history of the region, including the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, is an important first step in this larger project, one which builds on much work that has gone before, even if not easily accessible to most.

The British Council trusts that this extended programme will contribute to the increasing number of current conversations, shaping more nuanced understandings of Caribbean culture while broadening the multilayered nature of UK/ Caribbean relations.

1. In keeping with this recent examination of the historical relationship between Scotland and the Caribbean, it is worthy to mention the **Empire Café**, a project founded by co-directors **Jude Barber** of Collective Architecture and author **Louise Welsh** for the Commonwealth Games hosted by Glasgow in 2014. The Empire Café explored “Scotland’s relationship with the North Atlantic slave trade through coffee, sugar, tea, cotton, music, visual art, academic lectures, poetry, debate, workshops, historical walks, film and literature.” The café was based in the **Briggait** in Glasgow’s Merchant City.
2. **Tilting Axis** is a roving project conceptualized by **ARC Magazine** and the **Fresh Milk Art Platform Inc.** The first iteration was hosted at Fresh Milk in Barbados on February 27 + 28, 2015 under the banner **Tilting Axis: Within and Beyond the Caribbean | Shifting Models of Sustainability and Connectivity**. The two-day conference brought together independent art organisations and museums operating across the Caribbean, U.S., E.U. and China. The goal of the meeting was to negotiate strategic regional and international alliances for the further development of infrastructure, production, and markets for the Caribbean’s visual arts sector. <http://tiltingaxis.org/>
3. <http://tiltingaxis.org/tiltingaxis2015>
4. <http://tiltingaxis.org/news/2016/10/23/tilting-axis-3-curating-the-caribbean>
5. <http://tiltingaxis.org/news/2016/10/26/nicole-smythe-johnson-announced-as-curator-for-the-tilting-axis-curatorial-fellowship-2016>
6. *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*, Stuart Hall, published by Allen Lane, 2017

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Photo by Arnaldo James

Graham Fagen is one of the most influential artists working in Scotland today. His work mixes media and crosses continents; combining video, performance, photography and sculpture with text, live music, and plants. Fagen's recurring artistic themes, which include flowers, journeys, and popular song, are used as attempts to understand the powerful forces that shape our lives.

Fagen studied at The Glasgow School of Art (1984–1988, BA) and the Kent Institute of Art and Design (1989–1990, MA), and is senior lecturer at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design in Dundee.

In 1999 Fagen was invited by the Imperial War Museum, London, to work as the Official War Artist for Kosovo, and since then has exhibited widely both in the UK and abroad. Exhibitions include “Golden Age”, Institute of Contemporary Art, London (1999); “The British Art Show” (2000); “Zenomap”, Scotland + Venice at the 50th Venice Biennale (2003);

“Bloodshed” at the Victoria & Albert Museum and “Art of the Garden”, Tate Britain (2004); Busan Biennale, South Korea; and the Art and Industry Biennial, New Zealand (2004).

In 2011 Fagen was the International Artist in Residence at Artpace, San Antonio, concluding with a solo exhibition, “Under Heavy Manners”. With theatre director Graham Eatough, he created *The Making of Us* – a performance, installation and film, for Glasgow International 2012. In 2015 Fagen was selected to represent Scotland at the 56th Venice Biennale. Other recent exhibitions include “Cabages in an Orchard” at The Glasgow School of Art (2014); participation in “GENERATION: 25 Years of Contemporary Art from Scotland” (2015) at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art in Edinburgh; and “In Camera” (2015) with Graham Eatough at the Panorama, La Friche, Marseille; “The Mighty Scheme” with Matt’s Gallery at Dilston Grove and CPG London (2016); and “Complainte de l’esclave” at Galerie de l’UQAM, Montreal (2017).

www.grahamfagen.com



Graham Fagen chats with students at Barbados Community College

Photo by Ewan Atkinson

BARBADOS TO TRINIDAD, APRIL 2017

By Graham Fagen

I have Kia Redman – a final year student in the Bachelor of Fine Arts programme at the Barbados Community College – to thank for reminding me of Stuart Hall’s R-O-O-T-S versus R-O-U-T-E-S understanding of culture.

If you think of culture always as a return to roots – R-O-O-T-S – you’re missing the point. I think of culture as routes – R-O-U-T-E-S – the various routes by which people travel, culture travels, culture moves, culture develops, culture changes, cultures migrate, etc.

—Stuart Hall

As an artist, I work with what I call cultural forms and formers. Hall’s description of culture as a route through life, rather than a return to roots, was a timely reminder for me about the work I’ve made as an artist, and what aspects of that work would be important to share during my formal talks in Barbados and Trinidad.

After all, I was there as a white man “from a foreign” who had made a work called *The Slave’s Lament*. Also, at the time of my visit, a painting by Dana Schultz of Emmett Till called *Open Casket*, exhibited at the 2017 Whitney Biennial,



Teeth drawings from Fagen's experimental drawing workshop

Photo by Ewan Atkinson

was causing much public debate about cultural appropriation and who was allowed to say and do what in relation to race and history.

What became clear to me, after my days assessing the final year students in the Studio Arts programme, was the need to describe the routes that led me to *The Slave's Lament*. What also became clear, through meetings with artists such as Ewan Atkinson, Katherine Kennedy, Versia Harris, Nick Whittle, and Ras Akyem, was the need to talk about the common subject matter and methodology we share as artists; the simple, complexity of expressing thought and imagination of life, through aesthetic form, as a fundamental human trait.

Also helping me to find appropriate ways to describe my routes, were the conversations I was able to have with Therese Hadchity, who was commissioned to write about my visit to Barbados. Such conversations continued in Trinidad with Melanie Archer, who was commissioned to do the same job as Therese.

Also too with Sean Leonard, architect and co-founder of Alice Yard, and Christopher Cozier, artist, curator and co-founder of Alice Yard. Meetings with both Sean and Chris were important, as they helped me understand more about the complex history of Trinidad in relation to Barbados. Travelling to Trinidad's North Coast with Sean and walking through the heart of Port of Spain with Chris gave shared perspectives of the common ground in jobs artists and architects do.

Getting to talk with some of the See You on Sunday artists working out of Granderson Lab was important too. I was fortunate to have some time in the studio of Nikolai Noel, and had brief conversations with Dean Arlen and Tamara Cruikshank.

Sadly, time was tight and conversations about our art, and our place as artists, felt as if they were just getting started. I had hoped to talk more with Tamara about her work and her thoughts, after she heard my talk, but unfortunately we were beaten by time but hopefully we can keep the discourse going by email and of course with our peers.

My last meeting of the trip was in Joanna Helfer's studio space at Alice Yard, where she was based while working on her Trans-Atlantic Artists' Residency Exchange. Joanna spoke well about making work in the context of a transatlantic programme, and of the many tough questions of white privilege and cultural dominance.

If the question is felt to be too much of a problem, then it is easy to back off. That would be a mistake.

Joanna, having been in Trinidad for a number of weeks, was probably expressing her own thoughts on the type of conversations that she had been able to be part of, and that I was just starting to get introduced to.



Graham Fagen presents his work at Granderson Lab

Photo by Arnaldo James

I think it is important that artists ask these tough questions, and continue a dialogue through their artwork. If the question is felt to be too much of a problem, then it is easy to back off. That would be a mistake. If you back off, you ignore or forget or leave a vacuum, rather than suggest or progress or understand routes that you're a part of.

The danger in understanding tough questions as problems can result in people neglecting responsibility. I think that is evident in Scotland's lack of acknowledgement of its role in the transatlantic slave trade, which has been described by historian Professor Sir Tom Devine as "collective national amnesia". I believe this "amnesia" has many causes, but one is the backing away from a perceived problem.

I agree with Stuart Hall's comments on roots versus routes, and I would add that, what is important in being aware of our individual and collective routes, is an awareness of how those paths cross with others, enabling us all to share the life of the journey with the life of the journey of others.

The support from the British Council that has enabled artists and curators from Scotland and the Caribbean to meet and to start developing a creative dialog on shared routes is an important step that can help us avoid "amnesia".

I look forward to doing more of this work with the British Council and colleagues in other parts of the Caribbean and the Americas in the future.



Photo by Annalee Davis

BARBADOS COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Ewan Atkinson, BFA Programme Coordinator: I cannot say enough about how important it is for our students to engage with working contemporary artists. This kind of exposure qualifies the aims of our BFA program by inspiring confidence through example, inspiration in close proximity. During his visit, Graham Fagen fulfilled this role in ways that exceeded expectation.

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The role of the external examiner is very important to our teaching methodology. While the internal examiners are very familiar with each student's progress, as a moderator, the external examiner brings additional knowledge and a fresh perspective to the grading process. The result is a welcome balance. The practice also allows us to assess the programme in comparison with other institutions – it helps us to remain current and consider other possibilities. Graham was amazingly helpful in this regard. His assessment of the students matched ours, and he was impressed

with what we have been able to achieve in such a limited environment with many social and financial challenges.

It is vital to the development of knowledge building and artistic camaraderie.

In the past, our external examiners have not been able to spend sufficient time with the students and faculty, and this is where Graham's visit proved invaluable. In leading a workshop and hosting a public talk about his own practice, Graham was able to share ideas, draw comparisons between Caribbean and Scottish cultural histories, and inspire us all. The students thoroughly enjoyed the entire experience. He made them exceedingly comfortable with his part of the examination process, and led them to consider concepts that were unfamiliar yet exciting. As a practicing artist, I found the time spent introducing him to our world just as beneficial.

It is our hope to continue to help facilitate this kind of practical working interaction at the college. It is vital to the development of knowledge building and artistic camaraderie.



Photo by Ewan Atkinson



Photo by ©Ewan Atkinson

STUDENTS' COMMENTS

Moving back and forth, we followed the rhythm of the work, letting it lead us where it would.

Kia Redman:

After two years of working, failing, and reworking, we were all tense, stressed, and anxious. Yet, the moment Graham walked into the room, we all calmed down. At the time, my peers and I marvelled at the absurdity of it, however now it all makes sense: Graham is one chill dude. As external examiner, he dissolved the stiffness of the situation and created an atmosphere akin to a dance. Moving back and forth, we followed the rhythm of the work, letting it lead us where it would. Graham perfectly maintained the balance between conductor and conspirator in his experimental drawing workshop which proved to be a great de-stresser. In his talk, he was infectious, as his passion flowed throughout his presentation. Ultimately, being able to calm down, let loose, and share in another's passion was the perfect beginning to the end of my degree programme.

Akilah Watts:

During my external exam, Fagen made sure that the atmosphere was light and easy to present my work, and was open to the idea of learning a little about my culture, around which my work is heavily based. He shared stories

“Listen to what your tongue is telling you”—this in the first stages of the workshop when we were drawing our teeth.

and some of his experiences with hearing a few of the local sayings that I used in my work, and was openly excited to hear about the meanings. Fagen gave a workshop as well as a talk, both dealing with his work. The workshop was one of the most interesting workshops I have ever been to. Fagen’s approach to leading the session was great, in that he actually participated in the workshop while we all had discussions, made jokes, and just over all had fun while sitting around the table creating our pieces. A phrase that I’m sure we will all remember from the workshop is, “Listen to what your tongue is telling you” – this in the first stages of the workshop when we were drawing our teeth. During his talk, Fagen opened my eyes to a little bit of the relationship between Scotland and Jamaica, his approach to finding out more about some things he was taught in school, and how he feels about different aspects of his culture. Graham Fagen was enlightening and inspiring and I don’t think I could have asked for a better external examiner to end my time in the BFA programme.

Theresa Bailey:

He paid attention to the technical aspects, and special attention to the thought process behind the work.

As an examiner I thought Mr. Graham Fagen was quite straightforward in his questioning. He paid attention to the technical aspects, and special attention to the thought process behind the work. He questioned my views on my chosen subject, which in my case involved the museum, to see how I approached the different dilemmas I was trying to bring forth. The workshop was fun and interactive; there was no right or wrong as to how you chose to perceive the project. We had to draw our teeth using only our tongue as a guide; it was an odd concept to grasp at first, but then later made you more conscious of how you interact with your own body. Through this, he gave us a better understanding of how he approached his own work. Lastly, his afternoon talk was informative, through his work, he found ways to connect with the audience through relatable past experiences, history, and, in the case of us, the third year students, he incorporated what he had heard and seen from our own critiques to further push the ideas and make connections within his own work. Overall, it was an insightful experience, with Graham being approachable and open – with his own ideas and those of others.



Graham Fagen, *Scheme for Consciousness* (2014),
India ink and enamel

TRAVELS IN THE REPUBLIC OF ARTISTS: With Graham Fagen in Barbados

By Therese Hadchity

In the visual arts, a set of cosmopolitan codes certainly infuses the contemporary scene and has produced, if not an outright state of global homogeneity, then at least agreed ways of expressing cultural difference . . .

In this era of incessant travel and cultural crosscurrents, it is often assumed that people across the world – despite the flagrant setbacks of particular moments – are advancing towards a global common sense, a universal package of cultural and historical references, which inevitably must inform our perceptions of the world, and how we go about living in it. In the visual arts, a set of cosmopolitan codes certainly infuses the contemporary scene and has produced, if not an outright state of global homogeneity, then at least agreed ways of expressing cultural difference. But are these codes equally well understood everywhere, or are they in themselves contingent on geo-political “situatedness”?

This year's external examiner for the BFA exam in studio art at the Barbados Community College, was the well-known Scottish artist Graham Fagen. As the record shows, the Barbados Community College warmly welcomes such high profile guests, who, as programme coordinator Ewan Atkinson notes, "inspire confidence through example" and help "assess the programme in comparison with other institutions." Fagen's visit, which was sponsored and facilitated by the British Council, also encompassed a public lecture, a workshop for the graduating students, and a series of studio visits.

The work was prompted by Fagen's astonishment at the historiographic silence that, until recently, has surrounded the original connection between Scotland's prosperity and the slave trade . . .

When asked to accompany Fagen on these studio visits, with a view to writing something about them, I was keen to put the notion of "glocality" to the test between the Barbadian artists, Fagen, and myself, and to find out which "cracks" would appear in our supposedly shared, but locally grounded understanding of each other and the art that would come before us. Less than halfway through our programme, however, I realised that these quick, and largely one-way exchanges (since the Barbadian artists were unfamiliar with Fagen's work), would at best offer very tenuous "evidence" of any such dynamic. Nevertheless, the tour did offer Fagen a glimpse of a generational dynamic, which suggests stronger ties between his own artistic disposition and those of younger Barbadian artists, and the exercise was therefore indicative of other, but no less significant global processes after all.

One of the premises for Fagen's oeuvre does indeed appear to be a strong notion of cultural formation. In conversation and interviews, he often returns to an early and (no pun intended) formative piece titled *Former and Form* (1993) – a simple conceptual piece consisting of a brick and its mold (tightly held together with large clamps). The "former", of course, refers to a given culture, and the "form" to its products: you and me.

When I picked Fagen up for our introductory meeting, the question at the forefront of my mind was, therefore, how he thinks culturally determined perspectives could affect the reception of *The Slave's Lament* (2015) – one of the works he submitted to the 2015 Venice Biennale.

In this video installation, he has three screens showing string musicians from the Scottish Ensemble performing a gentle composition by Sally Beamish, while one screen shows the UK-based reggae artist Ghetto Priest reciting



Graham Fagen, *The Slave's Lament* (2015), 4-panel video-installation

“Your man Burns was born to write that poem, and I was born to sing it.”

—Ghetto Priest

Robert Burns’ poem “The Slave’s Lament”. The work was prompted by Fagen’s astonishment at the historiographic silence that, until recently, has surrounded the original connection between Scotland’s prosperity and the slave trade, and (especially) by his discovery, that the great poet himself – notwithstanding his apparently abolitionist and culturally open-minded writings – at one point in his life nearly took up an administrative position on a plantation in Jamaica.

I was keen to ask Fagen what exactly had been his intention with the piece, and whether he ever hesitated to ask a reggae-artist to perform Burns’ poem – Rastafari, after all, being one of the most thoroughly subversive cultural movements of all time. Did Ghetto Priest have any qualms about participating in a project, which arguably could be seen as equally redemptive for the black diaspora and for Scottish national culture? Fagen’s response was extensive and surprising. Starting with his teenage love for reggae, his peer-group’s immersion in counter-culture, and their identification with “sufferation”, he diligently explained the process and considerations that went into the making (and re-making) of the piece, which has gone through several incarnations. One of the most perplexing moments was indeed that of approaching the music studio, and he did so with a tremendous sense of risk. Visibly stirred by the memory, he told me of his initial confusion by Ghetto Priest’s behavior at their first meeting (when Fagen arrived, the latter stood by himself in a corner, rocking and singing, but backing everyone, as if refusing to acknowledge the newly arrived) – and his infinite relief, when the singer finally turned to him and said, “Your man Burns was born to write that poem, and I was born to sing it.”

So it would appear that I, like Fagen, could put aside any concerns about the “co-optation” of Rastafari, but I still wanted to know more about his intention with the piece. Was it meant as a concession, an apology of sorts, or perhaps, I mused, as an expression of transcultural, working-class solidarity? The answer was neither. Rather, Fagen explained (in slightly different words), it was a deliberate effort towards cultural hybridisation. Having grown up in Scotland on a forced cultural diet of “Robert Burns” and a chosen one of reggae and punk, it seemed logical for him to open Burns’ poem up to a black Caribbean interpretation. Fagen, as I understood him, simply wanted to “loosen the clamps” on the Scottish “former”!



Katherine Kennedy, *Burst* (2010),
mixed media

Prior to our conversation, I had made a mental connection between Fagen and a number of Barbadian artists, who likewise have addressed the issue of colonialism, centre margin relations and history's impact on the present. For many such artists, the Caribbean (and the nation state) remains an ongoing "project". Younger Barbadian artists, however, tend to be more interested in dismissing cultural stereotypes, than on asserting a collective identity. Among these is Katherine Kennedy, who was the first artist I went with Fagen to meet.

Not unlike that of Fagen, and yet in entirely different ways, her work has been centered on "cultural baggage" – a topic that, understandably, started to preoccupy her when she went to university in the UK and suddenly found herself and her cultural references to be considered "exotic". This started a series of works, which humorously play such preconceptions off against her own – homesick – projections of the Caribbean. A recurring feature of these works is an innovative use of "trivial" objects. In the two versions of *Diametric Accord* (2016) we thus find a fan-like arrangement of kitchen sieves, where the "head" of each sieve offers connotations of travel and mobility through references to famous cities and excerpts of maps. The most compelling feature of these pieces is, however, the shadows they cast on the wall. This foreground/background effect evokes a duality between the immediately visible and the indirectly visible, for example metropole and margin (in another variation of the piece, the connotations are domestic and gender-related). Elsewhere, Kennedy's preoccupation with cultural stereotypes has elicited a parodic strategy of "overkill". In *Tropical Gilt* (2012), her take on the Caribbean as a region of tropical splendor and carnivalesque excess is thus a palm frond meticulously covered with colorful beads to produce an entirely hybrid product – both natural and manufactured, authentic and stereotype – as a visual metaphor for "Caribbeanness". The piece echoes previous works, like *Burst* (2010) (made in the UK), where Kennedy manufactured a series of "tropical plants" (using shredded cloth and wire) and "grafted" them onto English trees to great photographic effect.

It was no coincidence that Fagen responded with particular interest to these works, for he too has been in the business of creating plants(!). One of his social practice-works thus involved the breeding of a new hybrid rose for a low-income community, whose members were



Graham Fagen, *Rope Tree* (2015), bronze



Versia Harris, *Still from They Say You Can Dream a Thing More Than Once* (2013), animation

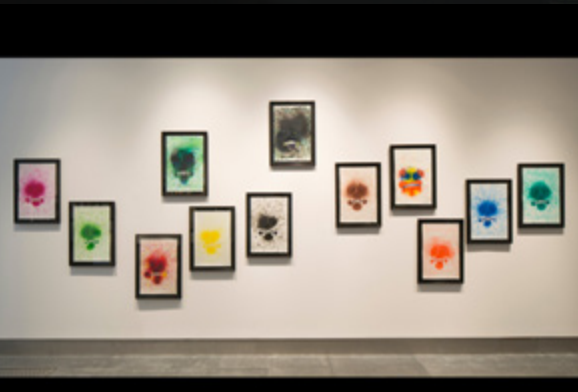
invited to come up with a name for it (it was eventually called “Where the Heart Is”, and a cast of it, by the same name, was later made in bronze (2002)). His Venice exhibition likewise featured a large bronze sculpture titled *Rope Tree* (2015). Here, the “tree-trunk” is a thick rope, which splits at both ends, thus producing roots and branches. While the piece has both positive and sinister connotations (of trees and nooses), it exemplifies the fascination with the nature/ culture intersection, which is a recurring theme of Fagen’s work.

The foisting of “unnatural” events, creatures or objects upon a “natural” landscape also occurs in certain works by Versia Harris (for example in *Merely a Chimera and Parataxic Distortion* (both 2015)), and once again offered an entry point for a conversation with Fagen. Since graduating from the Barbados Community College, Harris has been noted for her surreal and poetic animations. Drawn in painstaking detail, these short and engaging visual narratives – which follow a lonely “swan-girl” bicycling through landscapes, forests and villages – reflect on how we absorb and aspire towards externally imposed ideals and success measures. Even though Harris’ primary reference are the blockbuster Disney movies that were spoonfed to her generation, and even though her expression of existential

despair may be connected to being an artist on a small Caribbean island, it strikes me that these narratives often stop just short of the political allegory. At a particularly memorable moment in *They Say You Can Dream a Thing More Than Once* (2013), for example, the swan-girl approaches a number of open doors in the middle of a landscape. Each door opens in turn and reveals a tantalising view of “elsewhere”, and each, but one, slams shut, when she comes closer. Walking through the only remaining door, she realises that there is no difference between the new landscape and the one she came from – that, for her, there was never going to be a “better place”.

While I contemplated the combination of slightly surreal narratives with oblique social commentary, which I think Harris and Fagen have in common, he picked up on the “beautiful sense of place and pace” in Harris’ animations and told her about the importance of timing in his own video works. At times quite comical, at times virtually

Kafkaesque, these include *Peek-a-Jobby* (1998) and *Theatre* (2000), both of which evoke a sense of shifting perspectives, contingency, and communicative uncertainty. Very reminiscent of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, *Killing Time* (2006) and *In Camera* (2014), however, take this uncertainty to another level in their portrayal of seemingly mundane situations interrupted by grotesque, but oddly symmetrical (and therefore seemingly inevitable) acts of violence.



Graham Fagen, *Scheme for Consciousness* (2014), India ink and enamel

With a few decades behind him as a professional artist, Fagen's oeuvre is, of course, made up of very many works and alternating methodologies, and in the *Scheme for Consciousness* series (2014), he approaches the question of what it means to be "human" in an entirely different way. A selection of these works accompanied *The Slave's Lament* in Venice and complemented its "hybridising" efforts in what seems to me a touching and thoughtful way. All we see

in each of these, at first slightly frightening and off-putting drawings, is a strange morbid grin – a set of teeth in a loosely rendered cranium. But these works do not, as one might presume, allude to the staggering death toll of the Middle Passage and all that followed – rather, as the artist pointed out in his public lecture, they represent an attempt to make the human consciousness visible. Each and every tooth is the externalisation and visual translation of what the artist felt with the tip of his tongue. This is a sensed rather than observed knowledge – an elementary exploration, which commences inside the body and only gradually works its way through the intellect to the artist's hand and brush. Fagen reminds us that "teeth" are one of the few things, that are both universal and unique to each individual (dental records are often used in forensic identification). The concept was further developed in the installation *Scheme for Conscienceness* (2014). Here, ceramic imprints of faces and teeth, as well as pieces of clay merely squeezed by hand, are displayed on contraptions that look like bottle-racks or Christmas-trees. Rather than trying to convey emotions or outrage – expressions which will somehow always fall short – at the reminder of slavery, which *The Slave's Lament* of course primarily is, Fagen seems to explore what it means to be human – what it means to have a consciousness, a self-consciousness, a conscience, and then, impossibly, leaves it up to us to reconcile what we have seen.

Like Fagen, the British/Barbadian artist Nick Whittle, whose studio was the next stop on our tour, has had the moral courage to address the issue of colonialism from an inherently “white” perspective and often in quite provocative ways (though provocation never has been an end in itself). Since arriving in Barbados in 1979, he has tried to understand how colonial history has shaped (and misshaped) Caribbean and British identities, and how this fraught dynamic has impacted on his own life. Whittle’s symbolism has, however, been rather more complex and opaque than Fagen’s, especially as it has been incorporated into a dense, and perpetually evolving, personal mythology.

If there is a more than superficial kinship between Whittle and Fagen, it therefore lies not so much in their preoccupation with British/Caribbean history, or intersecting references (both were, for example, early followers of Linton Kwesi Johnson), but in their use of sensory impressions as a gateway to the cognitive self. In Whittle’s case (especially in the last decade), this has come about through a stream-of-consciousness technique, where the more conceptual approach and symbolic references of his previous work is replaced with fragments of pictures, texts and material, with rapidly drawn images and, sometimes, with found or made objects. The process is one of constant adjustment between visceral impressions, memories and feelings and their visual representation, and therefore a little like the exchange between Fagen’s sensation of his teeth and the marks he put on the paper. Occasionally, these works are arranged into symbolic shapes (which subsequently become their titles, for example *Big Fish* (2009) and *Open-Ended* (2010)), but the primary method is one of emotive “channelling”.



Nick Whittle, from the series *This is not my land, is not my island or Esaki no ta mi tera, e no ta mi isla* (2013), mixed media

With their rhythmic or symmetric arrangement of large paper boats (a meeting between the matryoshka doll and newspaper origami) on backgrounds of brightly patterned fabric, Whittle’s most recent mixed media works (including the series *This is not my land, is not my island, or Esaki no ta mi tera, e no ta mi isla* (2013)) have foregrounded tactile qualities even further. With their compounded, and often clashing formal and thematic connotations (Middle Passage, poverty, children’s games, genitalia, cultural assimilation, bricolage etc.), it is impossible to reduce the meaning or effect

of these works to a single statement – and yet, they remain quite firmly anchored in a specific world-view and do not offer themselves up for any and every interpretation. They are, in other words, acts of both cultural and personal resistance, and very deliberately demand a certain amount of labor on the part of the viewer.

In Fagen’s case, conversely, I believe the indeterminacy of certain works is strategic – that they, on the contrary, indicate a reluctance to insist on a particular world view. Our visit was, however, far too short for such subtleties to be explored. Instead, Fagen and Whittle talked and reminisced about Scotland, Britain and Barbados and the merits of the recent Glasgow exhibition “Rum Retort”!



Ras Akyem Ramsay: *Horsemen and Chariots* (2004), mixed media on canvas

The final stop on our route was the studio of the painter and sculptor Ras Akyem Ramsay. Needless to say, I was keen to sit in on the meeting between the author of *The Slave’s Lament* and one of Barbados’ most established Rastafarian artists, keen to see how Fagen would respond to Ramsay’s four-decade-long engagement with history, imperialism, and social injustice. But,

sadly, Ramsay greeted us with profuse apologies for being unable to show Fagen much of his work. A while ago, he told us, the studio had been raided and vandalised. Not only were his tools and several works-in-progress gone, but the trauma had left him almost unable to work in the space.

Fagen did, however, take an immediate interest in the kiln Ramsay had built on the terrace, and the two were soon engaged in a discussion of ceramics and bronze-casting methods. As we sat down to talk about his work in general, however, it was to his early life and inspirations that Ramsay turned, and it was here, in the personal domain, and in memories of their early idolisation of “great artists” (Picasso for Ramsay and Henry Moore for Fagen!), that the conversation took off. It was lively, but never broached the enormous issues that have preoccupied them both and yet elicited such vastly different responses. As the afternoon wore on, the mood was too mellow for me to push my own agenda by confronting the two with the issues that possibly set them apart – perceptions of human agency, spirituality, the notion of redemption, Ramsay’s absolute and political worldview, the primarily ethical tenor of Fagen’s work.

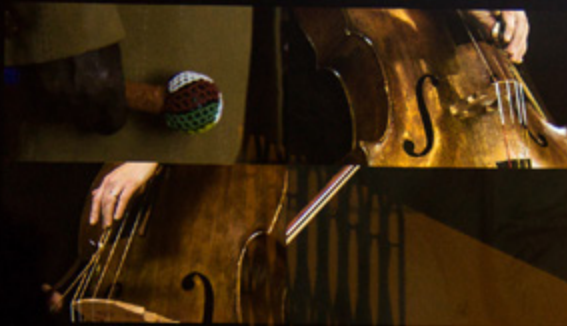
If any point about “glocality” rang home to me that afternoon, it was the fact that, as artists, Fagen, Ramsay, Whittle, Harris, and Kennedy all belong to the “world republic of pictures” (to paraphrase the title of Pascale Casanova’s wonderful book). Through their practices, they already occupy common ground, to the point that my questions about cultural baggage become secondary in their interactions with one another (though this may still be relevant when it comes to these artists’ audiences). As ordinary citizens, however, they are surrounded by crucially different material realities. The fact that there is no public access to a representative selection of works by Ramsay, an artist whose contribution to Barbadian art by any measure is enormous, and the fact that he, in his mid-sixties, essentially has to “start again”, because his studio is unsafe and uninsured – these are the things that really sets his reality apart from that of Fagen, or any other well-established Scottish artist.

My lasting memory of Fagen, and the two days I had the privilege of touring Barbados with him, will be of someone determined to reach across borders and comfort-zones, intent on finding common ground and affirming a shared humanity. During our studio visits and conversations, he frequently – and with unmistakable glee – remarked on the unexpected connections he’d found between his own work, and those of the younger Barbadian artists and students. His outreach to the graduating students during the public lecture was especially heart-warming and, on the whole, they seemed highly energised and encouraged by his handling of the examination, the workshop and, indeed, by the example of his work. I believe one student spoke for them all, when she proclaimed Graham to be “one chill dude”!



Short Bio

Therese Hadchity (PhD) was the founder of the Zemicon Gallery in Bridgetown (2000-2010). She is a freelance critic and curator and teaches art history at the Barbados Community College. Her doctoral dissertation was on the emergence of a postnationalist hegemony in visual arts criticism and practices in the Anglophone Caribbean.



DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

Graham Fagen's presentation at Granderson Lab
Photo by Arnaldo James

By Melanie Archer

Who has the right to fight for whose wounds, and why? Consider that question: it's by no means easy. In fact, once you have an understanding of the context in which it was asked, you might be inclined to shift it squarely over into the "difficult" category. Still, it begs to be answered and, thanks to my hearing it asked recently – when and, specifically, where it was – I've gained a more conscious understanding and appreciation of how elegant speaking up on behalf of others can potentially be. You see, it's all about authenticity. It's about a considered and appropriate response and well-executed delivery. But, we'll circle back around to that in a bit.

The Slave's Lament was Robert Burns' only work to empathise with the appalling hurt of the displaced, the trafficked and the enslaved.

In 2015, artist Graham Fagen represented Scotland at the Venice Biennial with a hauntingly beautiful multimedia work called *The Slave's Lament*. This evocative, multi-chan-

nel work features reggae singer, Ghetto Priest, performing a 1792 poem of the same name by Robert Burns. According to the Scottish National Galleries, where the work is on display until October 2017:

The Slave's Lament was Robert Burns' only work to empathise with the appalling hurt of the displaced, the trafficked and the enslaved. A beautiful lyric written over two hundred years ago, it is a narrative that remains entirely contemporary as we think of current tragedies unfolding on borders and in hinterland locations. Replete with a moving score written by Sally Beamish, performed by the Scottish Ensemble and Reggae singer Ghetto Priest, and produced by legendary On-U-Sound founder Adrian Sherwood, Graham Fagen creates a fascinating soundclash, where Burn's poetry finds a haunting bedfellow in Jamaican reggae music – and finds much common ground.

Earlier this year, I was contacted by the British Council: Graham was making a trip to the region, and would I be interested in engaging with him while he was in Trinidad, possibly attending a presentation of his work, and writing about his trip. This was a daunting prospect, given the resonance of the *The Slave's Lament*, and the international conversation around it. But, I was very interested in observing how both Graham and that particular piece of his work would be read in the Caribbean – a complex and culturally varied space where an estimated 1.6 million people were brought from Africa under the slave trade.

How (or even would) people welcome a white, British artist into this space to talk about that issue? What questions would be raised around the work? Surely the word "appropriation" would be said at least once. What story would Graham himself tell?

According to his schedule, Graham was due to spend a couple days here; he would visit Granderson Lab and Alice Yard in Belmont and Woodbrook, respectively. After email intros, he and I met in person at Granderson on a Saturday, a couple hours after his arrival from Barbados.

He was set to spend some time navigating these spaces and meeting with locally-based artists and arts administrators. When I walked into Granderson, he was already there, chatting with a small group that included Alice Yard founder, Sean Leonard, designer Kriston Chen, artist Shanice Smith, and artists Nikolai Noel and Luis Vasquez from



Lunch with Graham at Granderson Lab

Photo by Arnaldo James



See You on Sunday (SYoS) – an “artist collective committed to arts education & to expanding the critical space in which art production/s can be considered and discussed.” Also present at Granderson were photographer Arnaldo James and Joanna Helfer, a Scottish artist who had been at Alice Yard since March 2017, as part of the British Council’s Transatlantic Artists Residency Exchange. Joanna and Graham had met before, briefly, years ago, in Aberdeen.



The conversation at Granderson was easy and informal – it felt much more geared towards Graham settling in by asking questions about Trinidad than any sort of high art discussion. We talked about everyday lives and careers over our roti lunch. Graham seemed keen to get a sense of place, and to have a genuine interest in who we were and the different experiences and perspectives that had brought us to that point.

After lunch, Graham spoke with Nikolai about his work, which was pinned up upstairs in Granderson. From the body language, I could tell that

Graham chats with Nikolai Noel, and visits The National Museum

Photos by Arnaldo James

Graham was both engaged and engaging, and interested in hearing about this work. I hung back, not wanting to disturb their conversation, but catching phrases like: “black in the new world,” “live on your terms,” “is that a tooth?” (that one, gleefully) and “last among the least; on the edge between here and now.” With the crit wrapped up, we moved en masse to the National Museum and Art Gallery to check out the University of the West Indies (UWI) Visual Arts final show. On the way up to the show, we wandered into the museum’s ground floor display, with Graham inspecting various artifacts of colonialism and the sugar trade, pointing out items like medals from the British West India Regiment uniform (1914-1918) that he’s looked at within his own practice. When we eventually went up to the UWI show, Graham met a couple of the artists whose work was on display, and took a liking to a very large-scale installation by Shane Mohammed.

With multiple, breakout conversations happening around us, Graham and I glimpsed taxidermied animals through glass doors adjacent to the art exhibition space, and we set off to explore. I lost Graham around a corner and then found him in a nook of the museum that I’d never been in before: tucked away, through a series of doors and entryways, was a miniscule section on the slave trade in Trini-

dad and Tobago. Graham drew my attention to a document he'd been looking at. It was a register, dated 5th October 1834, titled:

“Return of the Number of Slaves and Estimated Value thereof, in each Class, in possession of [Name] on the 1st day of August, 1834.”

The return went on to break slaves down into categories: Head Tradesmen; Inferior Tradesmen; Head People employed on Wharfs, Shipping, or other Avocations; Inferior People of the same description; Head Domestic Servants; Inferior Domestic. Graham spent a lot of time looking at this document. He eventually turned by to me and asked, quietly: Could you imagine if we were to classify people in society like that today?

Later that evening, we gathered at Granderson once more for Graham's presentation on his work. Held downstairs, this informal presentation was open to the public; a few passersby stopped to check out the projected images, curious as to what was taking place, while loud cars going by drowned out a word here and there. Graham showed several pieces of his work, including his fascinating teeth drawings (which he executes not by looking but by feeling his way around his mouth with his tongue). He then presented *The Slave's Lament*, but only after he gave some background as to how he came to make the piece.

Graham posited the question, “What is culture?”, and spoke about Stuart Hall's roots versus routes – how the notion of culture can travel and develop, and how the routes we take have the potential to lead to the interaction of cultures. He then spoke about his own cultural history; he explained, carefully, about having the work of Robert Burns foisted upon him during his school years as part of his “cultural heritage” – never quite relating to that work but connecting, instead, to dub and reggae – “sufferation” being a type of expression that was more poetic and meaningful to him as he grew up in council housing on the west coast of Scotland. This was the cultural heritage with which he identified – music as a type of influence and exchange that we sometimes fail to consciously register, until it makes itself apparent.



Graham presents his work at Granderson Lab

Photo by Arnaldo James

... he started the years-long process of crafting an appropriate response: a mash-up of distinct voices and times – a sort of cultural hybridization of classical music and literature and reggae.

After researching Burns later on as his career developed, Graham discovered that the poet had first booked a passage to Jamaica in 1786 (but, ultimately, didn't sail). Then, after Graham found Burns' "The Slave's Lament" poem, he started the years-long process of crafting an appropriate response: a mash-up of distinct voices and times – a sort of cultural hybridization of classical music and literature and reggae. Its fading in and out of focus on faces and instruments (here are Ghetto's Priest's eyes *fade* now his mouth *fade* now his whole face, relaxed, composed) and its haunting, stirring phrase, repeated in song: "And alas! I am weary, weary O."

After viewing this piece, Graham spoke about the potential of art to educate for social change, as well as the social responsibility of the artist. He then opened the floor up for questions. Trinidadian artist Dean Arlen expressed admiration of Graham's work, but also his initial surprise: when he saw the promotional image for the talk, he assumed that the black man in the image was Graham (as opposed to Ghetto Priest). When he'd first seen Graham, he was curious but, ultimately, after his presentation, satisfied with Graham's response and the thorough way in which he went about engaging and collaborating with people in order to make his work.

It was during this same session that Joanna asked Graham the question that opens this piece of writing. Speaking later to me about that question, Graham remarked: "Joanna talked about when things become a problem. When there's the perception of something as a problem, people tend to stop and step back from it. One of the reasons for the amnesia in Scotland is that the government saw Scotland's role in the slave trade as problematic, and stepped back, allowing for that amnesia. As an artist, issues might be tough, but if we see them as a question or a thought and use artwork and research to deal with these, especially through questions with oneself and others, things can continue in a positive direction."

... "Among my peers, who else is addressing this work?"

On the night of the talk, Graham asked the question: "Among my peers, who else is addressing this work?" and went on to touch on needing to refresh fixed and dated notions. He spoke about being in conversation with the Tate when they were purchasing *The Slave's Lament* – they'd been back and forth with correspondence until the day Graham told them that he hoped that the irony of the purchase wasn't lost on them, and that the work wouldn't be locked away in a vault never to be seen. The conversation stopped. During his talk, Graham mentioned difficult conversations a few times, and reiterated the importance of having them.

I went home that night and thought a lot about that idea of difficult conversations. There are many suggestions given by myriad medical and better-living sources as to how to go about having them. Some provide guidelines: know your objective, make a list, choose the right place, and so on. Studying these lists, I realised just how many accurate steps Graham made; how genuine and considerate he was in making *The Slave's Lament*. So, when we sat down to chat the following day at Alice Yard, I asked him a few questions around the idea of conversations.

In order to have a difficult conversation, you must understand the subject, right? What's the balance of careful contemplation versus intuition in your work?

Some work that you can make as an artist you go with on a hunch, like my teeth and tongue drawings. Some works are intuitive, other works, where you need to be more conscious, it would be foolish to do on a hunch. That balance is important to me, to have that possibility of different ways of creating... Works in collaboration with others, you have to be considerate about what you're asking and you have to be clear about roles and come to an agreement. In the studio, on your own, that's one thing, but when you're waiting on others you're having to be calm, to have that spectrum/balance of approach.

What's the most interesting conversation you've had so far while here in Trinidad? Or the most challenging one?

I guess my most challenging conversation on this trip has been with myself, both here and in Barbados. I was very conscious of speaking to a very different audience than the one I've spoken to in North America and Europe about this subject. My initial conversations with reggae singers,

when I first approached them to work, I had similar apprehensions except I was hoping to approach them in order to team up and do something together. I was very aware that I wasn't teaming up here – this being more about speaking to strangers about things you have done as an artist. I was very conscious that it was a different conversation I was coming here to have. I had to think about how to have that conversation, and what information I had to provide in order to be clear about what my role as an artist is and has been in relationship to the subject matter I'm working with and talking about, i.e., Scotland's role in the slave trade.

How did you prepare for that conversation?

Well, you're prepared by the decisions you've made and the experience you've had in making and exhibiting the work. Talking about it is different, though, but I prepared myself by trying to not forget things that were important in the process. I'd talked about this work a lot before, trying to communicate. But in those situations, it was different than what ended up being communicated here. Such an absence in Europe in terms of communicating its involvement in the slave trade, and what needs to be done. But in the Caribbean there's not that amnesia; people aren't unaware of their own possession and relationship.

What about the idea of choosing the right place to have the conversation?

The right place for conversations . . . I guess I've always gone to the environment of the people I'm asking the question of. For example, with the first version of *The Slave's Lament*, I went to meet the producer and musicians in their place of work – I would make initial contact through email or phone and ask to meet. It was always at their place of work. Even when questions were less tough, like speaking to Sally Beamish who composed the Venice version of *The Slave's Lament*, I went to her house and studio to share that conversation with her.

Does art have a sense of social responsibility? And, after a work like *The Slave's Lament* has been created, do you have further responsibilities?

For some works, I'm happy to let responsibility go. Other works it's clear that it's got other jobs to do, and others that it can do, and I feel that I should be making sure it can do those other jobs. For example, with *Slave's Lament*,

we've had primary school children brought in and they got to see the artwork and were engaged after in a discussion and were given exercises to do [based on the work]. It's been a really important part of what I've been doing and, through things like being the artist who represented Scotland at Venice, who got to meet government ministers and heads of government . . . you get to tell them your thoughts on your own education and lack of and you can tell them that to their face. Also, in August 2015, Scottish Parliament was open for a debate on Scotland with regards to the slave trade, and I heard my work in Venice being used as an example as to how artists were starting to work within the subject area. Beyond that, I keep doing what I can trying to have conversations in terms of the role that education plays in the advancement of our national conversation.

"When you're an artist, it's a difficult thing to know what is genuine feedback from how people look at and understand the work you've made, because people can be polite, or they can be nasty or honest," Graham said during our chat. "I've had a lot of feedback about certain works, most of all with *The Slave's Lament* in Venice, and it's ranged from an old couple dancing in front of the screens to people sharing how they felt emotionally with me about the work."



Graham observes a stiltwalking session at Augustus Williams Park

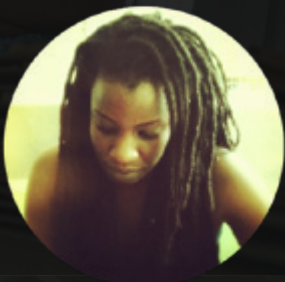
Photo by Arnaldo James

On the Sunday that Graham and I chatted, he was scheduled to spend some time with the groups, #1000mokos and Touch d Sky, for a moko jumbie session. But, close to start time, Sean took Graham and me for a drive up Trinidad's north coast, where we stopped for a late lunch, and took a few minutes to sit on the beach and chat. When we returned, we checked out the stiltwalking session, by that time in full swing, with veterans of the artform performing gravity defying movements on six-foot stilts, as well as those just starting out with shaky steps. Graham was invited to try walking on stilts, but he declined, saying he was tired from his walk around Port of Spain with Alice Yard co-founder Christopher Cozier earlier that day. After looking at Graham looking at the dancers, though, I wondered if he was conscious of being from elsewhere, busy-ing himself, instead, with active observation from what may have felt like a suitable, respectful distance.

The Slave's Lament is due to be exhibited in the Caribbean later this year, along with works of other Caribbean artists, in the Bahamas and Jamaica, in partnership with the British Council. As my time with Graham drew to a close, I found myself wondering about the work's reception when shown in its full incarnation in this space. What sort of response would it evoke, especially from people who don't have the benefit of understanding its depth and the craft and care that went into making it? After all, here's the thing about difficult conversations: Yes, they might be uncomfortable, but the outcome of having them, successfully, as Graham has done, is the chance for less pain on both sides. Perhaps it's the start of healing as well as the paving of a pathway, however bumpy at the get go. It might be as simple as a new connection over shared values (what's better than someone saying: I hear you?). It's a chance for a genuine connection – a chance to be open; for resolution as to the way forward. I would argue that that makes any conversation, no matter how difficult, worth having.

Links

Robert Burns *The Slave's Lament*
National Galleries Scotland: Graham Fagen
Alice Yard
See You on Sunday
British Council Caribbean TAARE
Scotland + Venice
Hospitalfield



Short Bio

Melanie Archer is co-editor at *Robert & Christopher Publishers*, and has worked in illustrated book publishing for more than a decade. She is also a freelance graphic designer, design manager, and curator who writes on art, design and culture – her articles have appeared in *PRINT* magazine, *The Caribbean Review of Books*, *Caribbean Beat*, *Small Axe* online, and *ARC Magazine*. Melanie lives and works in Trinidad and Tobago.

www.melaniearcher.com

NIKOLAI NOEL, Artist

During his tour of Granderson I had the opportunity to show Graham some drawings I was working on in my studio at the time. We shared a fruitful, engaging and good humoured conversation around these drawings. We discussed materials and the way I was making the drawings, then we talked a little about navigation, culture and narratives behind hopelessness and escapism. We also shared a few stories and insights related to our practices. We had a very interesting exchange about our feelings and understandings of what it was to be on/at the edge of things.

Photo by Arnaldo James





Alice Yard entrance

Photo by Arnaldo James

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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The Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art at the Barbados Community College has had a significant impact on Barbadian and Caribbean art. The programme provides students with technical, conceptual and critical skills as the foundation for contemporary artistic practice. Learning is supplemented with lectures and workshops led by renowned visiting artists, exhibitions in the college gallery, and international art-study field trips. In the twenty years that the programme has existed, both graduates and faculty have been continually included in important regional and international exhibitions and publications.

www.bcc.edu.bb

The logo for Alice Yard, featuring the text "Alice YARD" in a white, sans-serif font on a green, tilted rectangular background.

Alice YARD

Alice Yard is a contemporary art space and network, based in the backyard at 80 Roberts Street, Woodbrook, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Since September 2006, we have hosted a programme of artists' projects and exhibitions, performances, discussions, readings, film screenings, and other events. Alice Yard also runs an informal residency programme, bringing artists, curators, and others to Port of Spain. Our adjunct Granderson Lab, in Belmont, Port of Spain, hosts a series of artists and designers in a collaborative and shared working space.

aliceyard.blogspot.com

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

ARTIST GRAHAM FAGEN

TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO | BARBADOS



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