

Eric Johnn

HEEDING THE MERMAIDS INSTRUCTIONS: THE WORK OF THREE GRENADIAN ARTISTS



Many Grenadian artists often paint pictures of the scenery that graces the island trio of Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique. After all, there is no dearth of beauty; from the sun-drenched beaches with the coconut palms gently swaying to the rhythm of a tropical breeze, to the crisp, spectacular view of the St. George's Carnage and waterfront, or just a group of farmers cutting sugarcane. One might conclude that these painters are being “sentimental,” and it is that, and so much more. What Grenadian artists do with their art is to correlate their expressive talent to the world around them so that they can give an insight as to what their beloved island looks and feels like.

For most artists of the island it is a thin line between where they are and conveying that message through artistic media to others, especially to people from different cultures. Grenadian art resonates within a framework based upon experience and knowledge of the landscape and its people. Sometimes what the artists attempt to convey to an audience may not be what the audience perceives. But this juncture between artist presentation and public perception is the place where valuable dialogue on the nature and

value of Grenadian art takes place. For its amazing number of artists, art dialogue in Grenada occurs primarily among the artists. Currently, the only art school is at the TA Marryshow Community College. There is no national gallery, only private ones, and the island has yet to develop a full body of formal art criticism. Most of the art is consumed by foreign tourists who visit the island, and governmental support in terms of money and materials is lacking.

Given this backdrop the development of the many artists who live and work in Grenada from the early twentieth century to the present is amazing. There are many men and women who are very active in the Grenadian art scene working in a variety of media and some have gained worldwide prominence. For example, two well-known artists, Canute Calliste and John Benjamin, are both well-respected and international figures within the Grenadian art scene who present divergent artistic interpretations of Grenada in their works, whereas Eric Johnn is a relative newcomer to the Grenadian art scene, and indeed, Johnn creates outside of the trio of islands (he is based in New York) even as he draws inspiration from the history and mythology of the islands.

CANUTE CALLISTE –

Man is Myth, Myth is Art

Critics often describe the work of Canute Calliste as “primitive” and “unskilled” in technical and anatomical finesse. But to do so is to misunderstand that art and the artist for Calliste’s art emanates from what the Jamaican art critic David Boxer would call an “intuitive” perspective. Canute Calliste was born and raised in Carriacou, a tiny seafaring dependent north of Grenada, in the early 20th Century. The island is dry and the

life there is hard. Many Carriacouans earn a living by fishing or farming. Carriacou is an island still steeped in the ancestral African practices of drumming and storytelling that must have been common to Calliste during his early years; practices that must have had an enduring influence upon his psyche. The Big Drum, Maroon and Saraca festivals are all part of the legacy brought to Carriacou from the continent with the enslaved people who once worked the sugar and cotton plantations. These festivities are associated with planting and harvesting and continue to influence life on Carriacou to the present.

Inspired by an enchanted and elusive mermaid when he was only seven years old, Calliste's work pays homage to the mermaid in paintings laden with the raw emotions and experiences of everyday life as he sees it around him and reproduces it in his art. As the story goes, Calliste was a little boy when he saw a mermaid rising from the waters who told him that he had to become a painter. Fortunately for the art world, Calliste heeded the mermaid's instructions. Coming from the post-slavery era Calliste's vision of his native Carriacou could not have been glamorous. The work attempts to portray the islands' realism, as opposed to indulging a sophisticated aestheticism. The irony surrounding such a portrayal, however, is that what is "factual" about Calliste, and many of his paintings, is suffused with the mythical and the folkloric.

On the island of Carriacou, legends and folk tales abound and they include many that mention the mermaid. In many ways, the mermaid fits in perfectly in West Indian folklore because she is a creature of water. The mermaid also poses a question -- a question of belonging -- for where exactly is the "home" of this part-human, part-fish creature? Africans migrated to the Caribbean on water as captive slaves and the sea still roils with the spirits of those who did not survive the ordeal of the middle passage. In one of Calliste's paintings there are black birds hovering over the beleaguered waters of

the Kick-em-Jenny cone of islands situated between Carriacou and Grenada. The water is said to contain volcanic mobility and the sea is always rough. In the painting, the birds look like vultures, devouring the very “flesh” of the ocean. It is a scene of horror in which even a sea captain trembles at the thought of navigating through the restive souls that seem to trouble the waters of Kick-em-Jenny.

Calliste’s work defines a living culture based on daily toil, dream, myth, pain and above all survival. He is a man who is a master of other art forms. A player of the banjo in the quadrille, Calliste entertains visitors with his music and folk songs when they come to Carriacou during the annual Regatta Festival, a boat race established in 1965 by Jamaican, Linton. J. Riggs, and held annually during the Emancipation weekend. Calliste is also harbourmaster, gardener and the proud father of dozens of children in the village of L'Esterre, Carriacou. To translate the spirit of the folk and their lore into artistic representation, Calliste paints on found materials -- cardboard boxes are his canvases -- that come from the raw materials of the life of the Carriacouan people. Using his cardboard cut outs primed with white paint, Calliste paints directly off the tube, giving his work an opaque and matte effect.

Weighed against the paintings of others, his work is not about being “stylized” and “decorative,” or presenting pieces that have commercial appeal. Calliste's artistic talent is leveled squarely on the pretext of his culture and personal experience. When taken objectively, the lives of Carriacouans and Grenadians are not saturated in a visual charade of gentle breezes blowing through the gloriously beautiful and manicured beaches and suburbs of Grenada the tourist port of call. Rather, his art captures the beauty of the people of Carriacou in their natural state as hard-workers who must make sense of life on a hard, but sunny isle where they struggle to survive. It is this inspired

passion to paint the world of a people that gives appeal to the work of Canute Calliste such that his works are owned by queens, prime ministers, presidents, and other avid collectors

JOHN BENJAMIN –

Renaissance, Rebirth of Learning

To move from Calliste to John Benjamin requires a paradigmatic shift in the conception of Grenadian art. Whereas, Calliste’s art is “unschooled” and references a life of innocent and mythical insularity, John Benjamin’s work comes from classical training that plays with aesthetic forms. John Benjamin was born in the 1930’s on Grenada. Like many of the middle-class from his generation he went to the “mother country” of England to study since there were more educational opportunities open to people from the colonies. He returned to Grenada after completing his studies and taught art and other subjects for many years in elementary and secondary schools. Benjamin was also a supervisor of art in the Ministry of Education.

Benjamin came of age in a time of social and political upheaval in Grenada.

During the 60’s and 70’s the island agitated for self-rule while retaining ties to Great Britain and in 1967, Grenada became an associated state of Britain with full internal self-government. Independence came later in 1974 and Benjamin, during those defining times, enjoyed a period of social status where he was ranked highly among foreign and local dignitaries, both political and otherwise. The work of John Benjamin represents a Grenada that celebrates its cultural heritage, its right to national self-determination, and the right to create a post-independence identity. It was important for

politically prominent figures to support the movement of Grenada to produce a local national art that was just as good as, if not better than, the colonial legacy of art that characterized Grenadian culture. Benjamin's art contributed to the burgeoning cultural identity that sprang from agitation for political independence from Britain. His work spoke to a whole new generation who struggled to re-make Grenadian society.

Although he is classically trained, Benjamin does not do classical pieces of still-lives and landscapes. He paints the human form in circular shapes that resemble human figures clad in padded costumes of various different colors. The carnivalesque quality of many of his images is aided by the swirling movement in the forms depicted on a large canvas or hardboard. His work is often done in watercolors so that the figures appear to almost melt into each other. The use of the circle empowers his works and makes it seem as if his subjects are constantly in motion. His work references the surreal but is often void of three-dimensional form, except for his detailed depictions of the nutmeg as one of the sensory organs of his human forms, usually the eyes. Benjamin has been for years, quite prominent within the carnival circles in Grenada, especially in his hometown of Grenville. Notably, Grenville is also home to one of the larger nutmeg processing plants in Grenada so it is little wonder that the image of nutmeg pervades Benjamin's visions.

Benjamin uses the nutmeg as a kind of allegorical expression in Grenada's visual art. He paints the nutmeg with pride to emphasize the legacy that Grenada has as one of the top producers and exporters of the crop. One of his paintings is a portrait of teaching colleague and friend with bulging, oval eyes in the shape of nutmegs. Even the head of the man has the oval nutmeg form. The tone of the man's skin is bluish-black with a glossy effect that references the dark outlayer of the nutmeg that glows in the Grenadian sun. The nutmeg is endemic to Grenadian society since it provides one of the largest

sources of income and employs at least a third of the country's population. Nutmeg is a labor-intensive affair and takes ten years or more to produce a crop. Despite the hard labor that is involved, and the dominant nature of nutmeg in the lives of ordinary Grenadians, the nutmeg industry fetches a little under four million United States dollars annually in export earnings.

Those facts, perhaps, have influenced Benjamin's art, infusing it with vivid, vibrant characters that beg to be noticed. They are characters who represent the complicated nature of life on an island that wants to honor its past but remains troubled about its future. Benjamin is still considered one of the forefathers of the Grenadian art world; his paintings command high prices and most of his clients are foreign admirers of Grenada. Benjamin has won many accolades during his artistic career, the most notable being the European *Who's Who Award* in 1992 for one of the most gifted and prolific artist from the British Commonwealth.

ERIC JOHNN

– Study War No More

The Grenadian artist, Eric Johnn regards himself as a kind of prodigy of Benjamin, even if he produces differently. Benjamin was involved in the post-Independence struggle to prove something to the colonial overlords -- that an independent Grenada could manage very well on its own. John, however, comes from an era of radical politics when Grenada and socialist revolution were coterminous ideas. Johnn's work has not been exposed to the Grenadian public since he's been living overseas for almost 20 years. However, he is known in New York and other American cities and his

personal life experiences in Grenada and the United States have influenced him to use his art as a vehicle to expose Grenada to the wider world.

His youth in Grenada was influenced by the political upheavals there in the 1970s and 1980s and some of his paintings reflect the times and events. In 1979, England-trained lawyer and native Grenadian, Maurice Bishop and his New Jewel Movement led a coup d'état and took power of the government. Four years later there was serious schism within the New Jewel Party that led to Bishop's assassination. The United States military intervened in 1983, and an Interim Advisory Council ruled Grenada until the constitution and parliamentary government were restored in December 1984. John depicts scenes from the invasion by the United States Marines when he paints marines jumping off a United States carrier into the Grenada Ocean. In another painting John depicts cricketers fighting off United States marines on their playing field.

Many of John's other paintings reflect the patriotic spirit of the Grenadian people for the love of their land against foreign invaders. The first invader was Christopher Columbus who sighted Grenada in 1498 and was prevented from colonizing the Island by the indigenous Carib Indians. The island was a site of contention between the English and the French until 1650 when the French managed to settle the Island. Grenada remained in French hands until 1762 when the British successfully invaded the island during the Seven Year's War. The French recaptured the island in 1779 but the British finally acquired Grenada by the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Despite the island's long history of British rule, the island's French heritage survives in its place names, its buildings, and its strong Catholicism

In 1795, British rule was challenged by Julien Fedon, a black planter inspired by the French Revolution. Fedon led the island's slaves on a rebellion to take control of

Grenada until the British ultimately regained control. John's painting, *Fedon Rebellion*, is one piece that deals with this episode in Grenadian history. The painting shows Julien Fedon, ex-slave-cum-revolutionary, on his signature white stallion horse, in full French regalia, hauling Nnian Home, the defeated Governor, home to his Belvedere Estate to be tried and executed. There is also another work dealing with the Caribs' last stand on Grenada. In the painting, the French are on horses charging towards fleeing Caribs at Leapers Hill, the place where legend has it that the Caribs sprang to their deaths in the rough sea, rather than surrender to the French in 1651.

Events of historical significance permeate John's work but there are other aspects of Grenada that are there. There is the Grenada that is serene and natural, as in a solitary boy indolently fishing in the serenity of a pretty Grenadian river. John paints fruit in wild and carefree colors that are palpable and tinged with emotion. John's work seems to have an exilic, longing quality, often associated with Caribbean artists who work outside of the region. His work is also both a recasting and a re-telling of "heroic" aspects of Grenadian history, from the point of view of a native Grenadian son.

It is in an artist like John that viewers get a blend of the counter-cultural aestheticism of Benjamin coupled with the intuitive magical realism of Calliste. All three painters transmit the depth of feelings that define the character of Grenada and her surrounding isles. They share their tropical haven, beset with its own set of growing pains, abounding in color and unrestrained in its desire to make viewers love Grenada just a little bit more.

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