

LETTER FROM

JAMAICA

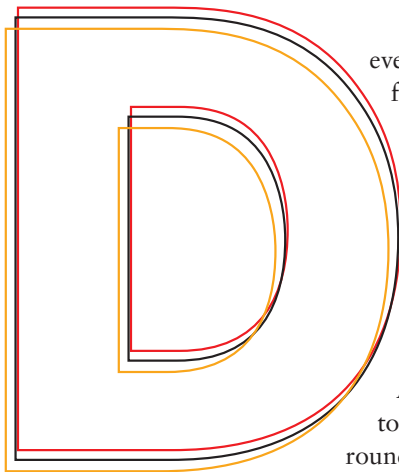
A report from the Caribbean nation, on the occasion of its most recent biennial, proves that market factors—or the absence thereof—have little to do with the vibrancy of art-making.

By Sara Roffino

Kimani Beckford's
Young, Gifted, and Black,
2016, in oil on canvas.







Developing an art scene these days is a matter of formula: bring together investors, warehouses, architects, canapés, and ... voila. Capital, more than creative ambition, tends to drive such development, with places like Dubai and Shanghai serving as prime examples of the use of private wealth to spur creative industries. It's an approach espoused by the glitterati of the art world circuit—who right now are likely somewhere along the route from Athens for Documenta, to New York for Frieze, to Venice for the Biennale, to Kassel for the second round of Documenta, and then, finally, to Basel, before a summer respite. Though their art world is global, it remains decidedly insular.

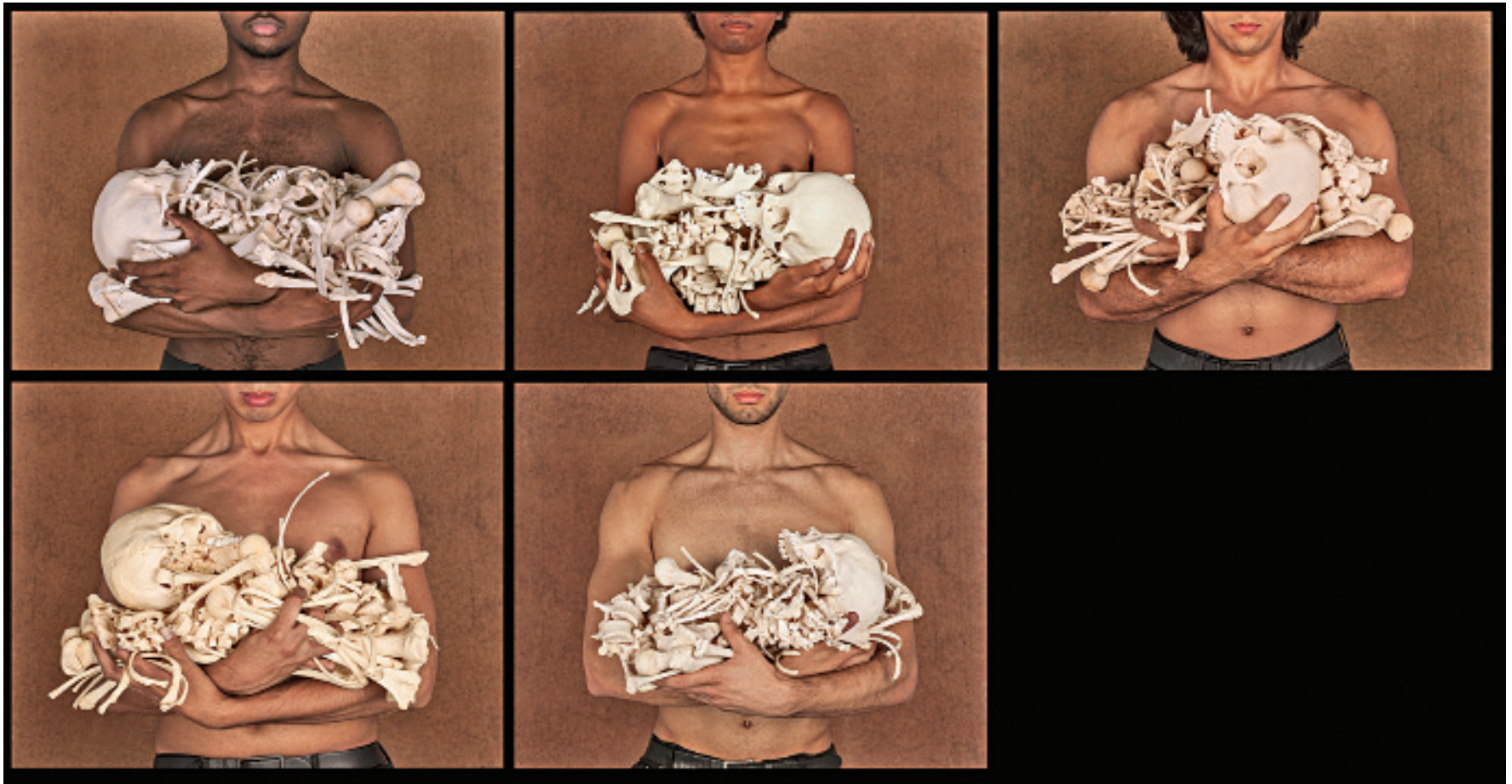
In Jamaica, however, where artists work in relative—although decreasing—isolation from the rest of the art world, artistic ambition is flourishing despite the absence of significant capital. The Jamaica Biennial, on view through May 28, offers an opportunity to take stock of the art scene in a country whose creative force has already made an outsize contribution to world culture through music, but has yet to find a place within the art world establishment. Organized by the National Gallery of Jamaica (NGJ), under the directorship of Veerle Poupeye, the biennial brings together more than 90 artists at three venues around the country, including the recently established National Gallery West in Montego Bay and Kingston's Devon House—a colonial-era mansion built by the first black Jamaican millionaire in 1881.

The former home, also the first place to house the National Gallery, retains its period decor, with antique furnishings and historic photographs on the walls. For the biennial, six artists were invited to install works in dialogue with the space itself, and its complex legacy, and they do so with significant success.

Upon entering, visitors are welcomed by Leasho Johnson's installation *In the Middle*. Stockpots and speakers are set on a dining room table-sized platform about a foot off the ground. The pots are set atop the surface while the speakers are embedded within, leaving concave circles. Both are covered in a reddish substance, which, in places, drips and pours from the vessels. A pair of red childlike legs leans into a pot so that the rear-end sticks up, seeming to moon the entire room. Another set of legs, adorned in high heels, kicks outward from the bottom of a pot as if a child had fallen backward and couldn't escape. The dark humor sets in, as does the context of the setting, imbuing the works with a clear historical weight. Yet deciphering what it is requires a bit of local knowledge. First, one must be familiar with *Dagging*—a relatively recent development in dancehall culture that has a woman lying on the ground with her legs apart and a man jumping from a height, landing on top of her and miming sex. National Gallery trustee and biennial juror Suzanne Fredericks explains, "It's almost like the women are empowered by disempowering

Village Venus, 2016,
by Judy Ann MacMillan.





An initial aversion to the plight of the sufferer (*Pietà*), 2017, by Nicola Feldman-Kiss.

themselves. They give up their power and yet retain it in some way.” As for the pots, “We call them Dutchies in Jamaica, which is a shortening of Dutch pots,” Johnson says. “They’re really cheap reproductions of cast iron pots, and are made out of scrap material. Jamaicans talk about their famous rice and peas, which are done in a pot like that. It’s an important staple to the social setting.” Fredericks continues, “It’s a pot in which things are stewed for a long time on a low heat. It simmers up, and it comes to a head, but then it simmers down.”

In the formal dining room of Devon House is an installation by Jasmine Thomas-Girvan, *Parallel Realities Dwelling in the Heartland of My People*. In contrast to Johnson, whose subtlety does much to create depth in his work, Thomas-Girvan looks you in the face while punching you in the gut. “Devon House represents the colonial ideal, and many Jamaicans have antique furniture and very fine china and crystal in their homes. It’s something that everybody aspires to,” the artist says. “When we are aping another culture and we have ideals that come from somewhere else, that’s okay—but there’s something at the root of it that we need to look at seriously as well.” *Parallel Realities Dwelling in the Heartland of My People* stretches throughout the room, with dozens (if not hundreds) of vignettes depicting the history of Jamaica. “These are

the current symbols of what represents that system,” she says, pointing to a silver platter with stickers of corporate logos affixed to the surface. “Historically we have moved on, there are no more plantations, but the system is alive and well in the form of multinational corporations and the debt in which many Caribbean countries are drowning.”

The afternoon following the opening at Devon House in February, the main exhibition launched at the NGJ, bringing hundreds of people to the building, originally designed as a department store along Kingston’s waterfront—a gorgeous stretch that despite various efforts over the years has failed to thrive. Tightly installed through all but a few of the galleries (where historical exhibitions remain on view), many of the works continue the self-reflective discourse that has taken over Devon House. Seemingly straightforward photographic portraits of a young man and a young woman by Marlon James (no relation to the novelist) are complicated when considered alongside his *Couple Strangers*, an ambiguous photograph of a couple, dressed for a night out, or perhaps for Carnival or Halloween, as the woman’s witch hat suggests the possibility she is in costume. Two photographs by Michael Chambers—one of a young man who is albino and sporting a black mohawk, the other of two women in ruffled white garb with covered heads—were striking, possibly because of their indecipherability. Simultaneously requiring and



Above: **Nicholas Rose's** *Trelawny-Untitled (Win-gie)*, 2016, in permanent marker, housepaint, and oil paint. Right: *Cowheadman*, 2007, by **Peter Dean Rickards**.

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BOTH IMAGES: NATIONAL GALLERY OF JAMAICA

rejecting a narrative, the works are clearly not formal studies, yet neither do they seem to function as documentary.

Painted portraits by Tina Spiro, Alicia Brown, Judy Ann MacMillan, Nicholas Rose, and Gregory Bailey range vastly in temperament and tone. Where Spiro's *Ma Jaica*, 2015, an idealized and dreamy portrait of a woman who, in lieu of hair, has a lush forrest growing on her head, replete with flowers and a few buildings, is celebratory, Brown's *Exchange*, 2016, and MacMillan's *Village Venus*, 2016, are contemplative. Bailey's *Colonial Legacies*, 2016, manages to address Jamaican politics without being limited by them. His bold, precise work is somehow fun in spite of its seriousness. Rose, working on a blue plastic tarp rather than a canvas, uses hard black lines to define a figure set against an impressionistic sunset—his *Trelawny-Untitled (Win-gie)*, 2016, is a measured study in contrasts.

The latest in a long line of Jamaican national exhibitions that dates

back to 1938, the biennial added a broader regional outlook in 2014 when it introduced a special projects section, with seven artists from the Caribbean asked to participate this year, along with the 84 artists in the invited and juried sections. Amanda Coulson, director of the national gallery of the Bahamas, and Christopher Cozier, an artist and writer based in Port of Spain, Trinidad, both jurors for the biennial, open the exhibition catalogue with a discussion of the potential of a shared Caribbean identity. “The idea of ‘nationhood’ and ‘sovereignty’ was so important in the formation of our countries that I think it’s hard—even scary—to disconnect from that idea,” writes Coulson. “It was necessary,” she continues, “to be able to imagine a new identity post-independence but perhaps, moving forward, we need to identify a way to find strength in numbers as a regional collective.”

Integral to taking a regionalist approach would be the cultivation of collectors of contemporary Caribbean art. Collectors in Jamaica “tend to be conservative,” says Poupeye. “We had a retrospective for Barrington Watson, who was an academic painter, and I had corporate sponsorship coming out of my ears for that exhibition, but it is the hardest thing for me to get corporate sponsorship for a contemporary exhibition. There’s no culture of patronage for that. It’s something I hope will change, but it’s an uphill battle that has to do with the perception of what art is, what it should be, what it should look like, and so on.”

Coulson is part of a cohort of artists, curators, and writers with



From left: Phillip Thomas's *High-Sis in the Garden of Heathen*, 2017; an installation shot of Leasho Johnson's exhibition "*Belisario & the Soundboy*," earlier this year at the artist-run non-profit New Local Space (NLS), which was established in Kingston in 2012.



Caribbean roots who have spent time abroad and are now returning to the region, with hopes they can help build that culture. Paul Morrison, a marketing consultant who lived in Washington, D.C. and New York for 10 years, launched the Red Easel pop-up gallery in 2015. “I want to provide spaces for artists and I want to demystify art by having it in public spaces,” he says, describing why he has curated exhibitions of emerging artists in a car dealership, in the middle of a town square, and on the campus of the University of the West Indies. “I work with corporations as sponsors because they are trying to engage with that audience as well, so they get the benefits of interacting with a creative industry and they’re seen as innovative by being a part of something that is also innovative.”

Deborah Anzinger, an artist whose work is on view in the biennial at

Devon House, established New Local Space (NLS)—an artist-run non-profit in Kingston that she describes as “micro-residency” and a “micro-project space,” in 2012 after spending several years in the States. “We have really good artists here,” she says. “We have a good art school. We have a good museum that incorporates contemporary art programming into its exhibitions. So the question was how we can create something dynamic with all of those ingredients already in place.” NLS presents exhibitions and produces a podcast in addition to hosting the residency, and it also “fills other gaps within the contemporary art scene,” she says, “such as doing portfolio reviews and helping establish avenues for artists who are leaving the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts to enter into a dialogue with the already active



From left: **Alexander Cooper's** undated *Symbols of Life*, in oil on canvas; and **Alicia Brown's** *Exchange*, 2016, also in oil on canvas.



From left:
Couple Strangers, 2016,
by Marlon James; *Isaac*,
2014, by Michael Chambers.

contemporary art scene.” Committed to widening the scope of art discourse and practices in Jamaica, the residency is open to both international and Jamaican artists and writers. Acknowledging the importance of developing a market for artists, Anzinger says, “We wanted to come up with a program that didn’t rely on the art market, but rather could determine an art market. We’ve now found that a lot of the people who started following the artists we work with eventually end up collecting these artists. We want to facilitate an understanding of the artistic process and develop that relationship before it becomes a commercial relationship.”

Returning to Jamaica after living in New York and London, art advisor Rachael Barrett was planning to open an exhibition venue called *_space* in Kingston in 2016. After working for more than a year on a Jean-Michel Basquiat show, Barrett had to call off the exhibition because of complications with the building. Realizing she needed to adapt her plan

to address the realities of Jamaica, Barrett is now focusing more on education and is teaching at Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts, where she is re-designing curricula in partnership with the school. “Some of the courses I’m working on deal with cultural strategy and positioning so that students get a better understanding of the varied scope of the contemporary art world,” she explains.

While there is clearly work ahead for the Jamaican art scene, explicit support from the government is a positive sign that progress is possible. Senator Hon. Thomas Tavares-Finson, the chairman of the board of the NGJ, is proposing legislative changes in order to ease the import and sale of art in Jamaica. “We recognize that for the contemporary art scene to truly flourish, changes need to be made in context to current customs and consumption tax,” he says. “We need to create a bonded warehouse model for exhibitions such as the biennial, and to widen that remit to commercial galleries who also want to bring in artwork for exhibitions and local sale so they are able to do so without costs that negate any kind of profit for the artist or the gallery.” Senator Tavares-Finson also points out that “the government of Jamaica has a strong history in supporting the development of the visual and performing arts locally.”

“We founded and fund the Edna Manley College,” he says, which is “the only tertiary art institution in the English-speaking Caribbean. And we initiated and fund the National Gallery of Jamaica.”

Writing in the biennial’s exhibition catalogue, Fredericks notes that “public and private funding is still virtually non-existent, the conventional commercial gallery model is unsustainable, media engagement is minimal, art writers are moving away from critical thought, and a new generation of collectors is hiding somewhere! And yet,” she continues, “there is an increasing vibrancy to the contemporary art scene.”



A Jamaican National Treasure

David Boxer discusses the Intuitive artists and his role in recognizing them

The interior of David Boxer's home, with works by Boxer, Milton George, and Edna Manley, and carvings by William "Woody" Joseph and Winston Patrick.

The first person to write a dissertation on Francis Bacon and a long-term director of the National Gallery of Jamaica (NGJ), Boxer lives in Kingston amid a trove of art, much of it made by artists who—through his championing—are known as the Jamaican Intuitives.

After receiving a scholarship to study medicine at Cornell, Boxer left Jamaica in the 1960s.

He soon discovered art history and began making his own paintings, drawings, assemblages, installations, and photography.

When he returned to Jamaica in 1975, he was invited by Edna Manley, the "mother of Jamaican art," to run the NGJ, which she helped establish the year before.

Here, Boxer reflects on Jamaican art and the Intuitives with Art+Auction's Sara Roffino.

When I came back to Jamaica they used to show what are now called the Intuitives at the Institute of Jamaica. I came back one year after the National Gallery was founded and took over as both the director and the curator—and I was the only curator. The collection I inherited from the Institute of Jamaica was very small and very uneven, so my main goal was to work on the collection. The

very first thing I did was purchase, in Canada, Edna Manley's *The Beadseller*, from 1924, which was the beginning of her Jamaican work. The Institute of Jamaica used to have two exhibitions—one for what they called professional artists and one for self-taught artists, which included a few of the Intuitives. Mostly the self-taught artists were Sunday painters who had no training, but were trying to

paint in an academic fashion. When I started the National Exhibition, which is the forerunner of the biennial that is going on right now, I abolished the idea of self-taught artists and I showed everyone together.

One of the earliest shows I did was a John Dunkley retrospective in 1975. I felt he was one of our greatest artists, but his work was not well known. In fact, nobody seemed to even know where the majority of his work was. Now, they're having a show of his work at the Pérez Museum in Miami and I've written the major text for the catalogue.

In 1979 I did the "Intuitive Eye," which was a ground-breaking exhibition. A lot of people were amazed, but there was also a lot of resistance, especially from the academic artists. Shortly after that I was invited to curate an exhibition for the Smithsonian to travel in the United States. I called it "Jamaican Art, 1922 to 1982," and I worked it out very carefully. We placed all the artists together and treated them all with the same respect. The maximum number of works per painter or sculptor was four. People were very upset that somebody like Kapo had eight works in the exhibition, because I gave him the maximum for both painting and sculpture—they said I'd put together an Intuitive exhibition, when actually two-thirds of the exhibition were mainstream artists—even that is a problematic term, but that's what we've sort of settled on to call everybody else. Kapo was known as a preacher and a revivalist, so he was already a known figure. The former prime minister, Edward Seaga, was one of the first people to recognize Kapo as an important artist and when he was in office I persuaded him to buy the largest collection of Kapo's work in existence.

I chose the word "Intuitive" in combination with the exhibition, "The Intuitive Eye." There were people who would say, "I'm intuitive too." I would say to them, you don't have an intuitive eye, you have a trained eye. You may have intuitions that steer you in certain directions, but you have a trained eye. They sort of finally accepted it, but it was both the "Intuitive Eye" exhibition and the fact that I had started including these artists in the National

Exhibition that brought them to prominence.

For the National Exhibition I always made sure that of the five judges there were at least two people who understood what the Intuitives were all about so if a new one turned up, they would not be disregarded. Quite a few of the Intuitives developed through the National Gallery and the National Exhibition.

I was just looking at William "Woody" Joseph's work. He's one of the sculptors who died a few years ago. I remember when we had the opening of the "Intuitive Eye," there were a lot of foreigners there and Woody Joseph came over and said he needed to talk to me. He said, "A man from Germany wants me to sign his catalogue, but you know I can't write." He always used to sign his works with "J." I said, "that's okay, go and put down your J." But he didn't know how to do that either. He didn't know how to carve the J. He would always get one of his children to write it on the sculpture

and then he would chip it out for his signature.

One of my theories is that there is a connection between the collective unconscious and the intuitive, or an intuition generally.

When I did the "Intuitive Eye," I was constantly at war with the critic for the *Gleaner*, who was actually on the payroll of one of the top academic artists because he was supposedly writing a book on him. He disliked the Intuitives and once we were talking about Woody Joseph and the African nature of his sculptures, and he basically said that it was nonsense about intuition and that the reason Woody Joseph's work looked the way it did was because he must have gone to Sangster's bookstore, which is the biggest bookstore uptown, and browsed through one of the books on African art. Now can you imagine that, a man who can't even write a J going to a bookstore? That was as ludicrous as many of the other arguments.

Forerunner, 1941, by Edna Manley is set within the library at Boxer's Kingston home. Manley, the "mother of Jamaican art," helped found the national art school, which was named for her in 1995. She was also a founding committee member of the NGJ, in 1974.



Jamaica's John Dunkley in Miami

“John Dunkley: Neither Day nor Night,” the first international exhibition of the late, great Jamaican artist, opens at the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM) on May 26. Curated by PAMM’s Diana Nawi along with independent curator Nicole Smythe-Johnson, with David Boxer serving as curatorial advisor, the exhibition—on view through January 14, 2018—is Dunkley’s first show outside of Jamaica, and the first solo exhibition of his works to take place in more than 40 years. *Art+Auction*’s Sara Roffino checked in with Nawi in advance of the opening to discuss how the exhibition came to be, the themes of the artist’s work, and his role in Jamaica and beyond.

How did you learn about Dunkley and how did this exhibition come together?

I first saw the work of John Dunkley in the exhibition “Caribbean: Crossroads of the World” [co-organized by El Museo

del Barrio, the Queens Museum, and the Studio Museum in 2012], which traveled to PAMM in 2014. I helped organize our presentation in Miami and was captivated by Dunkley’s work *Spider’s Web*. On subsequent trips to Kingston, his

work, particularly the exceptional holdings of the National Gallery, really struck me. The show grew out of that interest, and seemed an excellent embodiment of PAMM’s commitment to the region and its art history.



Why did you select works from the '30s and '40s, and what are some of the dominant themes in the work from this period?

Dunkley returned to Jamaica after traveling abroad for work in 1931, and died in 1947. So while he might have been producing work while he was out of the country, the only work that exists was produced in the 1930s and '40s. The most dominant theme in his work is landscapes and within that there are a few types of landscape images that he returned to in a number of works, namely the homestead,

Images from opposite left: John Dunkley's *Feeding the Fishes*, ca. 1940; *Acrobat*, undated, in mahogany; *Vase of Flowers*, also undated; *Tennis Player*, ca. 1941. All paintings in mixed media on plywood.



pastoral scenes, ravines, and receding paths or roads. There are also two works featuring politicians, Roosevelt and Bustamante, some scenes of everyday life and recreation, and one still-life of a vase of flowers. Most of his paintings have a very particular compositional approach and a distinct visual vocabulary for depicting flora and vegetation, as well as recurrent figures and animals.

How do these works relate to the rest of his oeuvre?

This show attempts to bring together as much of his work as possible. The works haven't been shown together since 1976, so we wanted to be as comprehensive as possible in assembling his production.

How can his work be contextualized in relation to regional and global artists working at the same time?

Dunkley was self-taught but was an

avid consumer of visual culture and his work, while very imaginative and executed with a very particular style and palette, seems to be influenced by popular imagery from the local and international press, his peers in Kingston, and importantly, European, Chinese, and West African art history. He was part of a circle of artists, historians, curators, and politicians who were involved with the Institute of Jamaica (IOJ), a cultural institution in what was then colonial Jamaica and which was very engaged in the project of establishing a distinctly "Jamaican" culture. So while it's tempting to think of Dunkley as an "outsider" artist, he was very much an insider in many ways.

How did his life outside of Jamaica affect his practice? Are there particular techniques or influences from abroad evident in his work?

It's not possible to say for certain how Dunkley's biography



influenced what he made, but we assume, based on titles such as *Cuban Scenery* and *Panama Scenery*, that in some instances he is depicting places he traveled to or his memories of those places. More generally, we also believe that what Dunkley encountered and was exposed to in his travels would have offered him new perspectives and connections. For instance, it is believed that he worked for a photographer in Costa Rica at some point, possibly retouching or coloring photographs, so it's interesting to think how that may

have influenced his work, especially his sometimes almost sepia or black-and-white palette.

Olive Senior, a historian and writer, has a wonderful text that is published in the catalogue of the show contextualizing Dunkley in this moment alongside his peers as a "diasporic subject." Marcus Garvey is a contemporary Jamaican figure who likewise traveled to work abroad. While she doesn't pin down direct influences, she discusses the way his life and sensibility would have been shaped both in Jamaica and, significantly, elsewhere. ☐