

Laura Facey Exhibition

Opening remarks

David Boxer

Institute of Jamaica

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Laura,

Congratulations once again on your recent award of the silver Musgrave Medal. I won't repeat the facts of the citation which I read at that memorable wind-swept ceremony; rather I want to take this opportunity to salute you and that core of essential honesty and integrity which permeates everything you do...to salute you too for that constant search for meaning in life and in art, and for your unabashed espousal of deeply felt spiritual and religious values.

I want to salute you as well for this exhibition and your celebration of the organic beauty of wood...cedar wood, cotton tree wood, mahogany...the spirits of these fallen giants are truly pleased with the use to which you have put their bones. And I salute those who aided you in this work, the students of the Edna Manley College and the youngsters of the Orange Hall District community. I salute Melinda Brown too for her assistance with the installation. Melinda has become something of a legend in the art community for boldly taking on the problems of downtown living. Inspired by Melinda's daring, Laura, by staging this exhibition here in this place, has symbolically joined with the new forces of regeneration that seem to be surfacing below Torrington Bridge.

The twinning of Laura's exhibition with the Southside community photography project, which I have not yet had a chance to examine, is highly important and we thank Wayne Modest and Vivian Crawford for enabling the exhibition and for the restoration of this Art Gallery where so much of the history of twentieth century Jamaican art was enacted. I trust that with exhibitions such as Laura's, the gallery will become a meaningful counterpoint to the stultifying forces of banality and mediocrity parading as democracy that have invaded so many of our other art and cultural institutions....

Ladies and gentlemen, I saw the exhibition on Tuesday and I feel that the *reliefs* on the walls speak to architectural spaces and to interior design with such insistency that I hope Maurice and Stephen are taking note. When I first saw them my first question to Laura was whether she knew of the new thrust to create works for the Montego Bay Airport. She did...

But, Maurice, Stephen, in the restructuring and refurbishing of Downtown Kingston which **must** be accelerated, it is artists like Laura and Melinda with their devoted communal spirit that must join forces with our architects and city planners and with the citizens of communities like Southside to create a vibrant, living, aesthetically exciting environment for us all to live in and to work in...

But beautiful and as ingenious as they are Laura, I have not come here to speak of your panels; nor of architecture and Kingston's restoration. I really want to speak of the extraordinary canoe in the centre of the gallery...

When I saw the "Canoe" on Tuesday I was immediately catapulted back in time to that intense period from August 2003 to January of 2004 when I was embroiled in the creation of my **PASSAGE: A CHORUS OF SOULS** installation for Lowery Sims's CURATORS EYE exhibition at the National Gallery. You remember that period Laura, you were one of the artists Dr. Sims selected and you were involved in creating your own memorable installation, the serenely beautiful Golden Torso of Christ with its streaming bed of blood red roses....

My **Chorus of Souls** was the climactic work of a series of meditations on the Middle Passage that had begun fully a decade before and which was to culminate in the **Black Wall** hosting the three **Black Books** with their three hundred and forty pages chronicling our history in surreal/symbolic pictorial form from the arrival of Columbus in 1494 to the proclamation of emancipation in 1838. There was a page for every year of that history.

Laura you were very much in my mind during those months/weeks/days/hours...this was the period in the aftermath of the unveiling of your **Redemption Song** sculpture when certain elements of the society were reacting negatively---and vehemently so---to your magnificent prayer in bronze as I termed it then.

One aspect of the attacks I found particularly insidious and that was the questioning of your legitimacy in authoring such a piece; of questioning our having a light skinned Jamaican creating a sculptural tribute to the process of emancipation and the attainment of Freedom for our ancestors. It didn't matter that you had won a BLIND competition, meaning that the entries were anonymous, which as a Jamaican you were totally within your right to enter. "Once the judges and organizers recognized that the winner was fair skinned, she should have been disqualified" ...so ran the incredulous argument. The same coterie of "racial purists" then extended their assault with vicious attacks on Edna Manley and particularly her two icons of the Nationalist movement...Negro Aroused and the statue of Paul Bogle.

This question of racial correctness, of racial authority and legitimacy weighed heavily on me and clearly entered the complex dialectical structures of my own work *The Chorus of Souls*. I remember thinking then, and recording in my notebooks "I wonder where they draw the line? Surely if Cidella Booker had even as little as 1% of Caucasian blood...then Bob Marley presumed to be a mulatto, would tip to the white side of the racial scale. He would be whiter than black. Would Carolyn Cooper have HIS Redemption song expunged from the annals of Reggae History...?"

Let me read a few of the other jottings among the 530 pages of three notebooks that were produced during the months of the *Chorus of Souls* gestation...

From Pages 99/98 Notebook 1

Monday 7th September

Blood Blood Blood

Raguso: just saw a news item re: U.S. firefighter Michael Raguso who died on September 11th. No remains were ever found so no funeral possible. His parents found out that a doctor had a vial of his blood kept in connection with him being a bone marrow donor. So the Ragusos are having a funeral and "Michael" represented by the vial of blood is to be buried today next to his best friend, another fire-fighter who died on Sept 11th.

A demonstration of the potency of blood as a symbol – Blood is essential to this installation---The blood of the martyrs (relate to my "contribution" to the emancipation monument where I suggested a ritual every August 1st red dye representing blood of the martyrs is released in top fountain flows to bottom fountain- a one day ritual

The wine glasses symbolized the Eucharistic connection but somewhere I would like a shrine with blood of the descendents of slaves. Perhaps I could get six vials for the six reliquaries

1. **Self?**
2. **Kirk? David?**
3. **Laura Facey?**
4. **Paul Pusey?**
5. **Petrona Morrison?**
6. **Mrs Clarke?**

In the end I used only my own blood

Blood

Re: Redemption Song

The "debate" concerning Laura Facey's colour---as one editor puts it "not high enough melanin count" is ridiculous on every level. By the time of emancipation 1834-1838 Slaves had been substantially hybridized thus there were mulatto, quadroon, mestizo, octoroon slaves who were liberated along with the "pure" Africans and descendents of Africans.

From Pages 107/106 Notebook 1

Tuesday Sept 9th

A sleepless night---constant dreams involving the installation, its design, its construction. Need to finalise the reliquaries: Must spur Michael Gardner on.

What drives me with this theme?

Recap:

Fear - Claustrophobia - Fear of the sea

Indignation - Indignation at the forces of history that could have allowed the institution of slavery

Racism - The abhorrence of racism and the ignorance that could generate such hatred/fear of an entire race based essentially on colour

Hybridisation - The processes that led to the interracial mixes of which I am a product

Family History - As a product of the slave master and the slave, This "ambiguity" fuels my imagery

Art - My own construct of the Collision of Cultures---my **Memories of Colonisation** series derived from the **Fontainbleutch**. Let the **Fontainbleutch** and the intuitive nature of that work be a guide. (Fontainbleutch...the Haitian Revolution at the back of it all?)

Following on that thought--I think it is important that the reliquary bases not be bland bone/mask dull and impotent behind the smoked glass. They must glow - darkness must be mysterious [check Fontainbleutch] There must be a glow within--a feeling of potency and mystery a symbol of the mysterious pull and power of African Art for me. They must have the intensity of [[**Leni Reifenstahl, 101 years old has died. Just heard on the news**]] the **Fetischcabinet**.

From Pages 124/126 Notebook 1

Wednesday Sept 10th

Wow - an incredible revelation

Visiting with Lisa Harrison at the IOJ and seeing the 300 odd ibejis lined up in storage--- immediate thought of massing them in the exhibition! An army of souls!

Incredible concept but where to put them for maximum effect

"The Yoruba regard twins as possessing supernatural powers and their birth is the cause of great rejoicing. As they also believe that twins have a combined, inseparable soul, the minute one twin dies, the life of the other is immediately imperiled, because the balance of his soul (without which his continued existence is impossible) has been seriously disturbed. To counteract this, an artisan is commissioned to carve a small wooden figure as a symbolic substitute for the soul of the departed. Upon the death of both twins, two figures will be carved so as to commemorate their passing. These figures are called *ibeji* (*ibi*= born, *eji*=two) and are supreme expressions of African art.

A CHORUS OF SOULS!...

In the ***Chorus of Souls*** I created a work which was in effect a complex set of meditations on a legally enacted series of measurements that elicited the famous slave-ship diagram published by Clarkson and enshrined in the legend that I repeatedly use in my Passage installations. A series of measurements that have haunted me since childhood

"After the Regulation Act of 1788, the slave-ship Brookes was authorized to transport 454 slaves. They allowed accordingly, to every man slave six feet by one foot four inches for room, to every woman five feet by one foot four, to every boy, five feet by one foot two and, to every girl, four feet by one foot."

...its not only me, I may have been the first to use that diagram in modern Jamaican art, but it has inspired---if that's the correct word---numerous art works mostly by artists of the African Diaspora, artists whose legitimacy should be unquestioned because the chances are, that some ancestor or ancestors, made and survived that horrendous journey. Edna Manley claimed through her quadroon Jamaican mother such ancestry, Laura Facey claimed that ancestry through her father's African ancestors, I claimed that ancestry through the African ancestors, slaves and free Africans who came here, of all four of my octaroonish, quadroonish, mulatto-ish grandparents.

I was so incensed by the debate over the legitimacy of Laura's racial credentials and by extension Edna's and my own, that I created in the installation opposite my ***Chorus of the Ibejis*** a complex piece the ***Violon d'Ingres Creole***...a monument to the creolisation and miscegenation processes that shaped *homo sapiens jamaicensis*...a genus of which I am proud to be a part.. In the ***Violon d'Ingres Creole*** a column of sugar of various hues, from white to dark brown mediated the different strata of Creole society....

In it too, I paid tribute to a wide number of historical and anonymous figures that had a mixed racial heritage---from Pushkin, the great Russian Poet to our own George William Gordon, to the celebrated violinist and concert-master to the Prince of Wales, George Bridgetower, Beethoven's "mulattisch" friend for whom the composer had originally written the famous ***Kreutzer Sonata***. Its amusing to think that if Beethoven and Bridgetower had not fallen out over their simultaneous pursuit of the same woman the greatest Violin Composition in western music would actually be titled ***The Mulatto Sonata***.

I remember when I was assembling a part of this particular section of the installation, and started to include a series of photographs of quadroon and octoroon slaves from the American south (which I had paid a small fortune for), one of our curatorial assistants, a rather naïve young lady wanted to know why I was putting in "*all those white people*."

I had to remind her as I remind Carolyn Cooper and the racial police, that emancipation day, August the first 1838, that day that we still honour and celebrate, meant full freedom not only for full blacks, but for countless sambos, mestizos,, mulattos, quadroons and octoroons as we were then called. We were all in the same boats: The canoes of enslavement and miscegenation.

Elsewhere in the installation I recalled through the parliamentary records of the period the harsh treatment and indignities suffered by a certain quadroon slave and her octoroon slave daughter, both of whom were probably the daughters of a particular Custos of Port Royal who along with his wife, owned and savaged them.

Numerous other references to Ancestry and racial origin abound in the ***Chorus of Souls*** and there are specific references in the central shrine to my own ancestors...

Ladies and Gentlemen, I speak at length about this aspect of my installation for obvious reasons...Laura's principal work in this exhibition I believe has been spawned by much the same concerns. I used *ibeji* soul figures from Africa to diagram my ancestral slave-ship; Laura uses miniature replicas of her now famous monument, a work which I have always viewed as a contemporary, new world counterpart to the traditional Dogon primordial/ancestral couple which is usually presented seated on an *imago mundi* stool.

In the Canoe which she titles "***Their Spirits Gone before them***" Laura boldly peoples her slave-ship canoe of history with replicas of her once beleaguered monument. She has responded to her critics I feel magisterially and with imaginative insight with a pair of conceits (the other is the sea of sugar cane stalks) conceits that hopefully will not be beyond the understanding of her critics, conceits that will emancipate their minds as they recognize how in one fell swoop she has reclaimed her own and her monument's history. By filling the canoe with a slave-ship full of her contemporary figures she has compressed time and brought the past forcibly into the present and directed her monument's future...

Laura I end with words that guided my own installation and which I placed at the entrances to its various episodes.... Lines of the man who exploited poetic ambiguity as no other poet could. T.S. Eliot...

Time present and Time past
 Are both perhaps present in Time future,
 And time future contained in time past.
 If all time is eternally present
 All time is unredeemable.
 What might have been is an abstraction
 Remaining a perpetual possibility
 Only in a world of speculation.
 What might have been and what has been
 Point to one end, which is always present.
 Footfalls echo in the memory
 Down the passage which we did not take
 Towards the door we never opened
 Into the rose-garden.
 My words echo
 Thus, in your mind.
 But to what purpose
 Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
 I do not know.
 Other echoes
 Inhabit the garden. Shall we follow?

(...)

... I have said before
That the past experience revived in the meaning
Is not the experience of one life only
But of many generations-not forgetting
Something that is probably quite ineffable:
The backward look behind the assurance
Of recorded history, the backward half-look
Over the shoulder, towards the Primitive terror.
Now we come to understand that the moments of agony
(Whether or not due to misunderstanding,
Having hoped for the wrong things or dreaded the wrong things,
Is not in question) are likewise permanent
With such permanence as time has.
(...)
Time the destroyer is time the preserver,
Like the river with its cargo of dead Negroes, cows and chicken coops,
The bitter apple and the bite in the apple.
And the ragged rock in the restless waters,
Waves wash over it, fogs conceal it;
On a halcyon day it is merely a monument,
In navigable weather it is always a seamark
To lay a course by: but in the somber season
Or the sudden fury, is what it always was.

Thank you.