

A Suitable Distance? Revisiting a Millennial Approach to Curating Art in the Caribbean

In the autumn of 2006, Soft Box Studios, a small, privately run art gallery in Port of Spain, Trinidad, staged the exhibition *A Suitable Distance*, comprising twenty-one paintings by artists who were at that time living on the island yet who hailed from elsewhere.¹ Curated by Andy Jacob, a teacher and former deputy curator of Trinidad and Tobago's National Museum and Art Gallery in Port of Spain, the five featured artists were Kofi Kayiga (b. 1943) and Roberta Stoddart (b. 1963)—who have a Jamaican background—alongside Chris Ofili (b. 1968), Rex Dixon (b. 1939) and Peter Doig (b. 1959), who are originally from the United Kingdom. The occasion was notable for many reasons, not least of which was that Ofili and Doig, two prominent figures in art of the northern Atlantic metropole, were showing their works together for the first time. That was, perhaps, a surprising development, given their well-known friendship and long association with one another through the British art scene of the 1990s and early 2000s. Picking up on this landmark of sorts, the New York serial of arts and letters *Bomb Magazine* ran a piece on the two artists. It was essentially a transcript of their conversation about what living and working in the Caribbean meant for them personally, commissioned by Trinidadian artist Christopher Cozier (b. 1959), who was consulting editor of the magazine and invited me to write the short editorial introduction.²

Beyond that publication, however, *A Suitable Distance* met with silence in the international art press, and its larger significance was missed. Arguably, Soft Box Studios had taken the lead by shining some curatorial light on the relocation to the Caribbean of such globally known artists. But it was not long before the exhibition began to receive mentions here and there. Tate Britain curator Judith Nesbitt borrowed the phrase “a suitable distance” as the title for her framing essay accompanying a major retrospective of Doig in 2008.³

Another major exhibition at Tate Britain in 2010 focused on Ofili's art and the work he produced since his move to the Caribbean. But these were references to what a move to the Caribbean had done for these two artists, what had changed in or about their paintings, in attitude, subject, and style. More ambitiously, *A Suitable Distance* focused on the larger challenges of putting into a local context, and into a regional history, the phenomenon of movement itself—of what happens when artists move to the Caribbean, or move across or within it.

What predicament and what place, then, for a group of foreign artists such as those in *A Suitable Distance*, working on the island of Trinidad? I tried to answer this question in my essay for the modest publication that went with the exhibition, which I revisit here.⁴ The essay looks in brief at the conditions of production and reception for all art in the Caribbean and highlights ideas of “foreignness” as well as those of “belonging” within the Trinidadian art community. It suggests what that community might make of artists such as those in *A Suitable Distance*, whose biographies and careers were largely built either elsewhere in the Caribbean or outside the region entirely. There is a clear difference in scale between the artistic reputations and market status of Ofili and Doig as compared to the rest of the group. Thus, I probe the matter of what place all of the artworks in the exhibition could occupy for a local audience, when confronted with that difference and in view of Trinidad being a former British colony, when some of the participating artists are British. In doing so, I have tried to take into special consideration the significance of my own position as a UK-based academic.

It pays to revisit *A Suitable Distance* for the distinctive picture it provides about concerns around contemporary art in the Caribbean during the first decade of this millennium. Here I reflect upon the significance of the exhibition, in the light of more recent developments as well as with the benefit of a wider historical perspective. At the time of the exhibition, in 2006, there was an extreme deficit of opportunities and exposure for artists in

the region. Curatorial strategies set out to address these problems, such as by focusing on the foreignness of the Caribbean itself as it was perceived (or likely ignored) by the wider world.⁵ The Caribbean's national boundaries and regional geography, and the surrounding political economy of the visual arts, are explored in my essay for the exhibition in a way that curatorial practice during the 2000s began to do when it asked questions about globalization and the idea of a "global art world." Having alighted on matters of nationality and nonbelonging, I suggested that an artist could participate fruitfully in a given national art community without being a citizen of that nation. This strand of cosmopolitan thinking had hitherto been applied mainly to itinerant, exilic, or diasporic artists suffering displacement, exclusion and marginalization. The nub of the matter, scrutinized by my essay, was how to explore the same line of thought when it is applied to more privileged artists as well.

The exhibition's curator, Andy Jacob, has reflected on events of 2006:

I had recently left the National Museum and was interested in displaying my new skills and perspectives in an independent arena. Doig and Ofili had been here for several years and in typical Trinidadian fashion, the local artworld was ignoring them. I wanted to showcase them somehow. In addition, Carifesta [the largely state-funded, Caribbean-wide exposition] was taking place in Trinidad and as usual short shrift was being given to the visual arts.⁶

Jacob alludes to a deeper problem with "the national" in Caribbean art discourse, one that various contributions to art historical writing in recent years have succeeded in laying bare and which I saw firsthand as a postdoctoral researcher in Trinidad and Guyana in the years 2004–5. In the mid- to late twentieth century, the country's drive for national independence from the British Empire would draw heavily upon art making, art writing and curating. For artists of the younger generations, including many who had trained abroad, the continuing emphasis on the idea of the nation within the visual arts was felt to have become an obstacle

to much-needed cultural change. In response, they were beginning to negotiate new critical ground for themselves, seeking *metaphorical* distance. An excellent, book-length study by Barbados-based scholar Therese Hadchity, published in 2020, pinpoints the transition in the visual art and art criticism of the Anglophone Caribbean from an anticolonial nationalism to a cosmopolitan postmodernism. Using the lens offered by Hadchity, we can gauge *A Suitable Distance* to have been an early example of that transition. Curatorial projects designed to tackle and call out the global art world and—just as importantly—the Caribbean’s “*local* artworld” have proliferated across the Caribbean in recent decades, in a way that is intent on “unravelling many forms of prejudice, encouraging (and demonstrating) intellectual flexibility and exploring new ways of engaging the public.”⁷ Hadchity has shown, however, that such interventions have their shortcomings. The divide between what she has termed an “avant-garde” critique in the arts and forms of globalizing neoliberalism is rapidly narrowing in the Caribbean, most notably in the way that states are approaching matters of investment and infrastructure in the visual arts.⁸

Where did *A Suitable Distance* sit in view of such conditions? The exhibition gave pause to reflect on a range of artworks by artists who share the status of being migrants but whose personal experiences, subjectivities, and routes of migration differ from one another very widely. Some of the participating artists, by virtue of having relocated to the Caribbean, were only ever at a *geographical* distance from the global centers of art and influence in the metropolitan Global North—where they nevertheless maintained a presence (Doig and Ofili have never lost international visibility through moving to Trinidad, quite the contrary)—while others were standing at a distance, professionally and from the market, largely ignored by the art community internationally (Stoddart, Dixon, Kayiga). Bringing them together was thought to be a means of resolving this discrepancy. It was assumed that the unwavering critical and market attention paid to the former set of artists would serve to draw benefits for

the latter, their success somehow trickling down to the others. Of course, by and large, that is not what has resulted—not from this exhibition nor from the wider attention paid to the Caribbean within the metropolitan North. Instead, Caribbean “distance” proves to be much more intractable. No simple juxtaposition of artists will suffice in supplying the magic ingredient necessary to overcome the wider world’s ignorance of the art and artists of this region. Sometimes, such as with Doig or Ofili, an exception can very much prove the rule.⁹ Evidently, the terms “visibility” and “success” have not been duly problematized.

The rationale for exploring *A Suitable Distance* today is in part justified by how the exhibition came to be so consistently overlooked but more so because it broached the same tropes of mobility and placelessness, and the liberatory mood, that have emerged in art history and curating through their attention to artists of the Global South at large. In my book-length study *Timed Out: Art of the Transnational Caribbean*, published in 2011, I wrote that “the celebration of the Caribbean as a seminal example for the new global geography of border-crossing, intermixing and mobility needs to be handled more carefully.”¹⁰ A fitting response is Carlos Garrido Castellano’s important survey published in 2019, which draws comparisons across the Caribbean’s Hispanic, Francophone and Anglophone territories, taking into view the conceptualization of space among visual artists and organizers in the arts.¹¹ Together with the art historian Kitty Zijlmans and a host of artists, curators, and policymakers of the English- and Dutch-speaking Caribbean and their diasporas (in a range of countries including in the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, and Canada), I have explored this matter of cultural geography in depth.¹² In an era when the dissolution of borders through the free movement of art and artists is, on the surface, a welcome cultural change, nonetheless the Caribbean demonstrates its frictional underside. Many artists in the region have come to view geographical movement toward art “centers” in the larger metropolises of the north Atlantic as a burden. They have a much more ambivalent

relationship to travel, since movement provides a path to opportunity but can also lead away from a sustainable form of cultural community.¹³ To look with the benefit of hindsight at the phrase “a suitable distance” is thus to read it differently. The situation is crystallized in the diversity of circumstances for the artists who took part in *A Suitable Distance*. Connecting the dots between this exhibition and the surrounding picture, we should ask: For whom, precisely, are the distances that the Caribbean experiences— whether culturally, economically, psychically, or historically—ever a matter of suitability?

Apples and Grapes “from Foreign”

On a canvas of unequal dimensions, Dixon painted the Orinoco River, or at least included its name in painted lettering.. With the works *Abigail's Grey Scale* (2000) and the miniature diptych *Learning to Glide* (1998), both essays in mirroring and repetition, Stoddard drew from her series of paintings *Seamless Spaces*, a response to a community of people living around the impoverished Beetham Estate. Doig created *Lapeyrouse Wall* (2004), a monumental painting of the boundary around a Port of Spain cemetery, where a single figure—no doubt recognizable to the local residents of Woodbrook, a middle-class enclave of the capital city—conveys a portable shelter in the afternoon sun. Doig's huge image *Music of the Future*' (begun in 2002) was presented alongside another with a musical theme, Ofili's *Iscariot Blues* (2006), a scene staged on the balcony of a tropical house. *A Suitable Distance* was thus distinguished by these artists' various visions of places outside the Global North. At the same time, the curating of these works did not resort to an examination of personal narratives of relocation or autobiographical reflections from the artists. Much less did the exhibition confine itself to examining the Caribbean as some sort of topic or theme. Instead Stoddard offered painterly, impasto works that are fragments of her ongoing adventure with the tension between publicly readable symbols and indices of more private, intangible conventions. In

Learning to Glide a long loop of thread couples her canvases, connecting two winged bodies of different ages, each rolling toward or away from the other, with a sort of feathered, balletic symmetry. Doig's painting has less to do with Trinidad than with the complex and changing technologies of picture making. He has taken a chance encounter in Woodbrook and codified the material it allowed him to gather—first in pixels with a digital camera, next in paint—to play with the act of translating from one visual medium to another. Dixon's graphic processes of grids and stenciling touch the word-and-image studio genre of late 1970s Britain, and two decades earlier, of Pop art. [Fig. 1, L] As he lays out forms and text together, he is a champion of the value of the "intermedial": the fertile transfer of signifiers across several media. Trinidad's bill stickers that announce music events, regularly pasted on roadside telegraph poles or walls, have worked their way into Dixon's painting *At the Mouth of the Orinoco* and in the spooneristic wordplay of his triptych *Variations on Sport of Pain*. [Fig. 2, L] Kayiga is similarly engaged with color, flattening out fields of color and leaving gaps between his marks. The emphasis here is on eluding the demand for spatial illusion; laying out hard edges; dry-brushed lines; and geometrical, repeating rhythms. [Fig. 3, L] There is no single formula for these abstractions, and in places—such as in his *Mystical Shield*—he has allowed in some discernible objects, which are overlaid with pattern, slipping beyond the frame. [Fig. 4, L]

Visitors to Trinidad have always compulsively pictured their vision of the island, whether in travelers' reports or sojourners' letters, painted scenes and sketches, snapshots, and picture postcards. But the paintings shown at Soft Box Studios were suitably distanced in the first meaning of the phrase: they were very far from being images of Caribbean scenes, and had nothing to do with the spatial imagination of the visitor who constructs the Caribbean as an exotic space or insular social topography. Indeed, they offered a critical affront to that tradition. For, rather than representations of the island's beaches, its rivers and estates, or its

inhabitants, their focus rested instead on these artists' own presence as outsiders to "the local." What brought them together in a common space was the sense of this art being both a luxury good—like apples and grapes, which are completely impossible to grow in the balmy climate of this eastern arm of the Caribbean—as well as the fruit of a local engagement. In short, this art was being reclaimed on this occasion as a domestic product *and* as a foreign import.

Art from Outside the Global Art World?

Exploring that ambivalence, I talked with Jacob about the biographies of these artists, and was struck by his remark that their move to Trinidad was in part a search for a place to live that would support and stimulate their art. But how would the fact of their "foreignness" come to figure in the reception of their art at the local level? Would it matter? Such questions prompt the drawing of some parallels. I noticed when I visited Trinidad that not only could a person be described as being "from foreign," with its insider-versus-outsider, citizen-versus-noncitizen distinction, but the same could apply to all kinds of other things too: vocabularies and turns of phrase, clothing, food, music, money. And then, beyond these, were more abstract things: values, styles, ideas. Sometimes the volume of things "from foreign," from "outside," would seem so vastly overwhelming that I could not see where the domestic or "inside" might be found. Yet such differences are far less fixed and in fact fleeting; the status of being "from foreign" is prone to change. How long does someone have to live in Trinidad before they stop being "from foreign"? There is a significant Trinidadian diaspora, and I wonder whether or for how long a Trinidadian might live abroad before being considered a foreigner back home? How often or for how long must the concept of "foreigner" be in use before it loses its meaning as someone who is an outsider? I spent most of 2004 on the island

wondering, were I to stay for a few more years, could I too make the passage from foreign to familiar?

A similar set of issues, with its challenging dimensions of fluidity and instability, are found at the heart of Trinidad's progress in constructing a discrete national history of art. Hans Guggenheim wrote in 1968 about Sybil Atteck (1911–1975), Amy Leong Pang (1908–1989), and the many other artists whose art then seemed to be the core of a national canon and was among the first examples of fine art acquired by the National Museum and Art Gallery when it took over the colonial-era Royal Victoria Institute, founded in 1892. His account would justify these artists' appropriation of foreign or international modern styles as a way of depicting local or "native" themes.¹⁴ Nowhere did Guggenheim problematize that distinction, however, let alone address the apparently indissoluble hierarchy of native and modern.¹⁵

During the 1980s in Trinidad, Michel-Jean Cazabon (1813–1888) emerged as the focus for art historiography. Regarded as a figurehead for a national art story, his landscape drawings and paintings were regarded as a secure basis for claims to a peculiarly Trinidadian art.¹⁶ Yet Cazabon's biography of multiple Atlantic crossings—his Trinidadian birth, African and European descent, English education, and Caribbean career—seemed never to trouble such assumptions of nationhood. The articulation of an idea of the national artist through the life and work of Cazabon is problematically anachronistic in itself, given that he lived well before Trinidad and Tobago were declared to be one nation. He lived even before the first fine-art organizations began to appear: Atteck and her contemporaries came together to form the Society of Trinidad Independents several generations later, indeed not until 1929. The drawing of sharp lines between the national and the foreign is nigh impossible, but focusing on it is a useful means to understand the surrounding interests, the interplay of power between authorities in a given moment, and agents of resistance.¹⁷

The Jamaican political anthropologist David Scott, in his discussion of this intellectual and material history, has offered the concept of a “problem space.”¹⁸ It is a term of description for the conjunction of critical initiatives and concrete circumstances that those intent on lasting change and transformation in the Caribbean are jointly “thinking through.” Scott’s contribution is vital for helping to evaluate the effectiveness of phases of political thought in the Caribbean. It holds special pertinence when we apply ourselves to the task of historicizing a region’s visual art. In thinking through it, as it were, it becomes easier to see that the earlier *anticolonial* problem space delineated by Guggenheim is one that many artists in Trinidad have continued to participate in, even after independence from the British Empire. Alongside that form of problematizing is a more properly *postcolonial* task of extricating cultural meaning in the Caribbean from both its colonial *and* its anticolonial past. Against the background of the dynamics of Trinidad’s art community, Scott’s analysis may prompt the question: Were the artists on show at Soft Box Studios party to this contemporary problem space or simply part of a contemporary problem? In response, it is worth emphasizing that these artists were not—and are not—somehow aloof from the wider community of artists in Trinidad, who also live at a geographical periphery while engaging with the issues, the innovations, and indeed with the problems, of the globalizing art world.

Many of the artists in *A Suitable Distance* have often banded together with other practitioners in Trinidad, sharing successful partnerships. In that sense they typify the premium that is placed on collaboration in Trinidad’s art community more broadly. Stoddart, for example, has titled one of her pieces in tribute to the photographer Abigail Hadeed and her way of carefully calibrating the tone of photographic prints—an analogy to their shared resort to more routine poles of visual definition, as Stoddart has put it: “the letting go of one form as we become another.”¹⁹ Dixon has an interest in curating; in tandem with the sociologist and cultural theorist Patricia Mohammed of the University of the West Indies, he

created the exhibition *The Caribbean in the Age of Modernity*.²⁰ Dixon's reflections on his art practice and his commentary on Caribbean culture have been formative in the ways that Mohammed has analyzed points of visual correspondence between such scattered locations as Haiti, Jamaica, Barbados, the Cayman Islands, and St. Lucia. Indeed, Dixon's art has revealed how Caribbean visual cultures and funerary images share a common horizon, in the context of religious ritual and mark making such as the sacred diagrams (*loas*) of *vaudou* (voodoo).²¹

The partnership between Doig and Trinidadian artist Che Lovelace is especially significant as evidence of the seriousness with which Doig has come to be transplanted in Trinidad's cultural landscape. From early 2003, the two have staged StudioFilmClub, weekly, free film screenings in the neighborhood of Laventille which help to develop a venue where artists making video can interact with musicians (most recently the bands jointpop and 12) as well as the cinemagoing public. The format was subsequently adapted for Doig's show at the Museum Ludwig in Cologne (2005) and New York's Whitney Biennial (2006). Initiated by a creative team that includes Doig and is spearheaded by artist Mario Lewis, Galvanize, a grouping of artists' projects based in Trinidad, opened in 2006 under Doig's suggested theme "Visibly Absent."

Do these collaborations amount credibly to a critical thinking through of the lasting problem of the division between artists of global centers and artists of global peripheries? Regardless of the instability of inside-versus-outside cultural distinctions, not all artists can freely migrate. There are those who experience migration more as a matter of necessity than choice. Can one drop in and drop out of the Caribbean problem space and yet still share the community and commensalism that its membership requires? What degree of participation is needed for an artist (or critic, or curator) to count as a stakeholder in the Caribbean? Some answers may be found in the differentiation between the artists of *A Suitable Distance*.

Stoddart's use of the photographic greyscale is illustrative here: these artists are indeed all "from foreign," but are not so in identical ways.

Tropical Family Trees

It may be a defining irony of anticolonial thought that "alien" ideas and values, cultural forms and conventions, can each be forcefully reclaimed and promoted as homegrown. But there is a certain difference between aspects of the world outside the Caribbean region being given new meanings within it in order to meet local concerns, and the process whereby anything "from foreign" can also be misrecognized as being "from here." A case in point is the concept of "cosmopolitanism." It is a word often attached to the easy embrace of difference thought to be unshakably Trinidadian, and so worn with pride on the national sleeve. The Trinidad-born writer V.S. Naipaul had famously debunked any such claim that Trinidad commands examples of an authentic cosmopolitanism. He found the incorporation of things "from foreign" to be far too easy, indiscriminate, undiscerning, and tasteless. While researching his book *The Middle Passage*, he found that the Trinidad he visited in the 1960s had widely adopted foreign values and products—ample proof for Naipaul of Trinidad's provincialism. His logic was self-serving and condemnatory. He claimed that Trinidad's population was easily enthralled by what other countries in the West had come to tolerate or discount as simply negligible by-products of their modernity.²²

Through that ironic process by which outside phenomena come to be seen as homegrown, Trinidad's history of art has increasingly held a love-hate relationship with its outsiders, an ambivalent mixture of desire and detachment. No amount of analysis appears able to resolve its contradictions. Perhaps art practice itself might envision a way beyond that divide. One of the critical purposes of collecting together the work of these artists was to make such a possibility appear conceivable. As figures in this landscape, the artists of A

Suitable Distance were presented neither as native to Trinidad nor as apologetically or even especially foreign. Some may have felt that Stoddart and Kayiga sat the closest to home, given their Jamaican birth, or wished to dwell on the well-documented fact of Doig's brief childhood years in Trinidad. And the local viewer may have been tempted to conclude that the exhibition attested to how national sovereignty cannot be upstaged by an "outsider" presence. But does not the construction of a national culture and identity partly depend on the presentation of such an alien presence, by providing a graspable apparent contrast to all things domestic? Did the art in this exhibition undermine the terms of that division? Can the inside-outside divide in the Caribbean dissolve through the promise of transcendence offered by works of art?

Ofilé's contribution could be heard speaking to these questions. His painting *Iscariot Blues* shows apparently diametrically opposed meanings repositioned along a more subtly differentiated spectrum. [Fig. 5, L] I should point out that it has never been clear to art critics where Ofilé intends us to go on his various excursions into biblical themes, which he made again at Soft Box Studios with a painting of a hanged Judas. There is normally a cordon sanitaire around sacred themes in the generally secular mainstream of contemporary art, but Ofilé's *Iscariot* painting is an incitement to claw that boundary away, to wreck its cloisters. Critics in my UK home have been flummoxed and gratified by this approach, in equal measure. (One writer set a wager for audiences of Ofilé's installation *The Upper Room* [2002]: "I defy anyone to explain precisely why Ofilé is painting a Last Supper of monkeys, if that's what this is."²³) Those who have tried to understand the Caribbean aspect of his works have also come up against limits. Trying to interpret cultural symbols from Trinidad, Adrian Searle committed an error of interpretation when he told readers of *The Guardian* newspaper that the blue devils that so interest Ofilé are a pre-Columbian "relic."²⁴ Searle has betrayed a common assumption that anything authentic to the Caribbean can only ever be a survival

from before European contact and colonialism, rather than taking the approach that authenticity lies in the Caribbean's active, present-day, and changing modes of appropriation, cultural inventions that have diverse local and global origins. That mistake may not have cost him much in London but would be unforgivable in Trinidad.

Since art criticism is prone to such limitations in its engagement, it could be said that it opens up an opportunity for curators. It would be impossible for a curator to miss that Peter Doig's move to the Caribbean saw a change in the register of his art, with the introduction of new subject matter, ranging across carnival characters, urban settings, seascapes, beach scenes, and landscapes. The colors and materials and the flora, fauna, and buildings in his works are unmistakably drawn from Trinidad or the tropics. Included in the catalog for *A Suitable Distance* is an interview with Doig by Jacob. It opens with a question about the Trinidadian environment and its bearing on Doig's work since his coming to live on the island. As Doig explains: "That's difficult because my work has typically been stimulated by places where I'm not. . . . I'm not the kind of artist who looks out of the window and makes a picture; so I went deliberately to subjects that would represent here for me by proxy."²⁵ Thus, any conclusion that Doig is an artist "inspired by" or documenting his life, or everyday life, in the Caribbean, is not quite correct. Certainly, Doig's *Music of the Future* was painted in Trinidad. But it is hardly *about* the island in any literal sense, since it was based on a postcard he found of a river scene in southern India. Even so, audience views of works like this one will insist on returning to the fact of their Caribbean provenance, and most critical questions, perhaps quite rightly, will sit within those parameters. Such is the ground on which curatorial accounts of the work will be destined to move, with the result that even greater care is demanded of their interpretative framing on the part of anyone writing, presenting, or indeed teaching about this art. The potential for stereotyping and prejudice—cultural and racial—in the reception of art in, or from, the Caribbean is high, to say the least, and there is a foremost

need to evaluate their impact upon the reception of Doig's artworks, while applying the same rigor to discovering the facts of the production of his art.

Just as it has become impossible to grasp the art of Doig or Ofili today without a firm knowledge of the Caribbean, so the critical issues surrounding the Caribbean's history of art make much more sense when we consider the role of these artists there in recent decades, not least in their involvement with *A Suitable Distance*. Indeed, without viewers of the exhibition's works sharing a greater awareness of the cultural fields that they occupy, *both* viewers and artists are disadvantaged. As the pace of production accelerates for art in the Caribbean, the difficulty deepens. Failing to reckon accurately with the detail and depth of art and its histories in Trinidad, one suspects that its artists will continue to be praised excitably by art critics and audiences who at the same time miss out lamentably on this deeper history of art. Far more than mere familiarity is required to make sense of, reflect upon, apprehend, or even appreciate this art. What is needed is a proper shift away from seeing it simplistically as a signifier of its context (since the context itself is so commonly misread), and instead seeing how the works themselves offer a locus of contemporary historical experience. One such path toward this goal could be the introduction into art historical analysis of a greater range of conceptual frameworks than the discipline has conventionally deployed. The Caribbean has always been a site of interrelationships and interactions between people of different backgrounds and racialized identities; the exhibition *A Suitable Distance* replayed the sort of fraught and yet culturally generative nature of such relations. Here was an art exhibition whose participants and thematization as well as its timing were all contingent on the politics of cross-culturalism, foreignness, familiarity, place, and space. After he moved from Northern Ireland to Jamaica, where he taught for over a decade at Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, Dixon came to belong to "the great family tree of Jamaica," a phrase I once suggested while assessing his contribution to the Jamaican National

Biennial of 2004.²⁶ The imagined category of Jamaicanness in that instance could include Dixon, since its branches seem to spread so wide. Perhaps the same may be said of the place of foreign artists within the art community in Trinidad: with the exhibition *A Suitable Distance*, apples came to grow on tropical trees.

Biographical Statement

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Captions

Fig. 1. **Rex Dixon, *Crossing Over*, 2006**, acrylic on canvas, 56 x 123 in. (142.2 x 312.4 cm).

Collection of the artist (artwork © Rex Dixon; photograph provided by the artist)

Fig. 2. **Rex Dixon, *At the Mouth of the Orinoco*, 2006**, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 56 in. (76.2 x

142.2 cm). Collection of the artist (artwork © Rex Dixon; photograph provided by the artist)

Fig. 3. **Kofi Kayiga, *Rhythms and Vibes*, 1998**, acrylic on canvas, 38 x 50 in. (96.5 x 127

cm). Collection of the artist (artwork © Kofi Kayiga; photograph provided by the artist)

Fig. 4. **Kofi Kayiga, *Mystic Shield*, 2000**, acrylic on tar paper, 48 x 36 in. (121.9 x 91.4 cm).

Collection of the artist (artwork © Kofi Kayiga; photograph provided by the artist)

Fig. 5. **Chris Ofili, *Iscaiot Blues*, 2006**, oil and charcoal on linen, 110 5/8 x 76 3/4 in. (281

x 194.9 cm) (artwork © Chris Ofili; photograph provided by David Zwirner)

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¹ *A Suitable Distance: Impressions of Trinidad by Five Artists*. Rex Dixon, Peter Doig, Kofi Kayiga, Chris Ofili and Roberta Stoddart ran from September 26 to October 7, 2006.

² “Peter Doig and Chris Ofili,” a conversation, with an introduction by Leon Wainwright, *Bomb Magazine*, no. 101, Fall 2007, 32–41, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/peter-doig-chris-ofili/>. It should be noted that this piece in *Bomb Magazine* neglected to mention by name the other artists involved in the exhibition. It is an oversight for which I share responsibility: I should have insisted that they were included. At the time I was simply glad of the chance to mention the exhibition at all, and gratified that the magazine’s editors had chosen a writer with some background of research on the Caribbean to introduce and frame a discussion between Doig and Ofili. Up to this point that connection had barely been made, whether in print or through public exhibitions. See also Leon Wainwright and Nicholas Laughlin, “Peter Doig: StudioFilmClub,” *Modern Painters*, March 2006, 66–67.

³ Judith Nesbitt, “A Suitable Distance,” in *Peter Doig*, ed. Nesbitt (London: Tate Publishing, 2008), 9–20. Nesbitt writes in a footnote: “Doig has only once shown his work in Trinidad, in a joint exhibition in 2006 with his friend, the artist Chris Ofili, who also lives there. The show was appropriately titled ‘A Suitable Distance’ and this seemed a most apt title for this essay too” (154, n24). (Again, there was no mention of the other artists who were involved in that joint exhibition.)

⁴ Leon Wainwright, “Apples and Grapes from Foreign: Five Figures in a Landscape,” in *A Suitable Distance: Impressions of Trinidad by Five Artists*. Rex Dixon, Peter Doig, Kofi Kayiga, Chris Ofili and Roberta Stoddart, ed. Andy Jacob, exh. cat. (Trinidad: Soft Box Studios, 2006), 4–11.

⁵ For an overview, see Leon Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011).

⁶ Email correspondence with the author, December 5, 2019.

⁷ Therese Hadchity, *The Making of a Caribbean Avant-Garde: Postmodernism and Post-nationalism* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2020), 191. See also Hadchity, “Both Centre and Margin: Alternative Spaces and Artists’ Networks in the Anglophone Caribbean,” *Wasafiri* 34, no. 1 (2019): 18–28.

⁸ Hadchity’s research provides a forceful argument. While many Caribbean countries have yet to adequately develop public infrastructure for the visual arts, many more are mired in patriarchal archaism when it comes to the manner of the state’s support for art and culture at large. Rather than holding Caribbean nation-states to account by insisting on greater support as well as modernization, however, the self-supported “blue-chip” arts activity that sprang up in the Caribbean after the millennium may have succeeded only in communicating on its own frequency. It is plain to see that “independent” arts projects and organizations in the Caribbean can enable new networks of connection; intercommunication through fixed art “spaces” effectively bridges the Caribbean region’s spread-out geography. But placing a premium upon having such arts organizations has helped to let public institutions off the hook. Such “independent” entities cannot, and so will not, be expected to offer the same accountability to the public: they *cannot*, as perforce they are clandestine private enterprises; and they *will not* for as long as they are presented as an alternative, in a situation where the state is failing to provide adequately for the visual arts. Brilliantly unpacking such arguments

by setting them against ample evidence, Hadchity reassesses the putative independence or autonomy of these developments. Her conclusion is that it would be going much too far to bill this recent history of art as some sort of heyday for resistive counterculture. Its posture of liberation should be seen properly as part of a widespread global, neoliberal reaction against the nation-state—one that has brought mixed outcomes for relatively newly independent regions of the Global South where the state’s role in developing the visual arts has been problematic in kind and/or little in evidence.

⁹ As Chin-Tao Wu has put it so well: “Rarely if ever does an artist from London or New York move to, say, Thailand or Trinidad.” See her “Biennials without Borders?,” *New Left Review* 57 (May/June 2009): 113.

¹⁰ Wainwright, *Timed Out*, 12.

¹¹ Carlos Garrido Castellano, *Beyond Representation in Contemporary Caribbean Art: Space, Politics, and the Public Sphere* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019).

¹² See Leon Wainwright and Kitty Zijlmans, eds., *Sustainable Art Communities: Creativity and Policy in the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2017).

¹³ See Leon Wainwright, “Timed Out: Pathways and Pitfalls for Art History and Caribbean Studies,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 19, no. 2 (2015): 185–96; Leon Wainwright, “Materialities and Mobilities: A Note on the Political Geography of Contemporary Caribbean Art,” in *Reshaping (G)local Dynamics of the Caribbean: Relaciones y Deconexiones—Relations et Déconnexions—Relations and Disconnections*, ed. Natascha Ueckmann, Anne Brüske, and Anja Bandau, (Heidelberg: Heidelberger Universitätsverlag HeiUp, 2018), 143–57; and Wendy Asquith and Leon Wainwright, “A Moment to Celebrate? Art of the Caribbean at the Venice Biennale,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 9, no. 1 (2020): 40–68.

¹⁴ Hans Guggenheim, “Social and Political Change in the Art World of Trinidad during the Period of Transition from Colony to New Nation” (PhD diss., New York University, 1968).

¹⁵ It is also vital to note in Guggenheim’s retrospective view a rereading of Trinidadian art of the interwar period, which succeeded in forgetting the reception its artists met with during that time. The artist and arts organizer Christopher Cozier broached this matter: “When artists such as Cybil [*sic*] Atteck first began showing they were accused of being unoriginal and foreign. Their involvement with cubist pictorial space and other forms of contemporary painting inspired this attitude; it emanated from the nationalist drive related to our independence thrust of the 40’s and 50’s. Consider that the work of artists such as Cybil [*sic*] Atteck and Carlyle Chang, with images which appeared too Modernistic to their contemporary detractors, is today the only visual associative reference of that era to the extent that these artists have become synonymous with that era. To me that is their authenticity, their significance. They are the only access we have to the creative imagination of that generation of artists. The significance of their art for us does not reside in what we thought about and looked at in the 40’s and 50’s but in how we thought.” Christopher Cozier, “Ideas about Form: The Enamel Basin,” *Trinidad and Tobago Review*, March 1994, 62.

¹⁶ See Geoffrey MacLean, *An Illustrated Biography of Trinidad’s Nineteenth Century Painter Michel Jean Cazabon* (Trinidad: Aquarela Galleries, 1986); and *Trinidad and Tobago Through the Eye of the Artist: From Cazabon to the Millenium, 1813–2000* (London: Commonwealth Institute, 1997). A critical account of Cazabon is given in Amar Wahab, “Inventing ‘Trinidad’: Colonial Representations in the Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2004).

¹⁷ These patterns are repeated and modified elsewhere in the Caribbean, nowhere more obviously than in its art institutions. In Guyana the “indigenization of archaeology,” long celebrated among the achievements of scholars such as Denis Williams, George Mentore, and

Desrey Fox, is held in tension with the firm international provenance of their research methods and approaches. (Indeed, the curatorial work and research conducted at Georgetown's Walter Roth Museum of Anthropology and Art History are notable within Guyana for their more global intellectual values, sharing networks of professional connection with curators extending beyond Caribbean borders). The history of art institutions in the Caribbean, including their attempts to try to settle upon arrangements for the region's cultural heritage, is an unfinished one. The very significance of terms such as "cultural," "social," "identity," and "national"—as Alissandra Cummins has shown, reflecting on the central significance of Barbados for understanding the role of Caribbean nation-states and their interpretation in museum settings—is continually contested. Alissandra Cummins, "Caribbean Museums and National Identity," *History Workshop Journal* 58 (Autumn 2004): 243.

¹⁸ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Abigail Hadeed and Roberta Stoddart, *Roberta Stoddart: A Profile* (unpublished manuscript, 2004).

²⁰ The exhibition (held between May 25 and June 8, 2006, and organized for the 31st annual conference of the Caribbean Studies Association) brought together thirteen practitioners, including Errol Brewster, Elspeth Duncan, Steve Ouditt, Ellen Spijkstra, and Donnette Zacca. See *The Caribbean in the Age of Modernity: An Exhibition of Photo-Based Works by Caribbean Artists and Photographers*, ed. Rex Dixon and Patricia Mohammed (Trinidad: Rex Dixon and Patricia Mohammed, 2006).

²¹ See, for example, Patricia Mohammed, *Imagining the Caribbean: Culture and Visual Translation* (London: Macmillan Caribbean, 2010). See also Patricia Mohammed, "The Sign

of the Loa,” *Small Axe* 18 (September 2005): 124–49. Dixon contributed images and interview material to this article (138–41, 145, 147).

²² As such, Naipaul failed to distinguish between the consumption of “foreignness” through the use of everyday things, and the more complex, considered appropriation of cultural politics gathered from abroad. While he came closer to exploring this latter aspect elsewhere in *The Middle Passage*—in the chapter on Black Power in Trinidad—even here he may have misunderstood. V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage: Impressions of Five Societies—British, French and Dutch—in the West Indies and South America* (London: A. Deutsch, 1962). It cannot be overestimated how the postwar Caribbean could engage so meaningfully with international discourse in the area of political rights when quite aware of its non-Caribbean provenance. The Black nationalism of the early 1970s is an example of political alignments that went beyond the postcolonial nation and proved to be powerful and mobilizing. Such politics were inherently “contesting,” in the sense of challenging the racializing status quo. Once brought into the Trinidad setting they came to be “contested,” as cultural Blackness was repurposed, adapted to suit a country progressively wary of all forms of ethnocentrism.

²³ Laura Cumming, “The Eden Project,” *The Guardian*, July 7, 2002.

²⁴ Adrian Searle, “Ofili: The Blue Period,” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2005.

²⁵ Andy Jacob, “Interview with Artist Peter Doig [August 25, 2006],” in *A Suitable Distance*, 15.

²⁶ Dixon was a lecturer in fine art at the Edna Manley College of Visual and Performance Arts from 1985 to 1998. I have discussed his work in the context of the Jamaica National Biennial in Leon Wainwright, “Art and Inclusion at Jamaica’s National Gallery: The 2004 National Biennial,” *Jamaica Journal* 29, nos. 1–2 (October 2005): 18–25. An earlier version of this article appeared as Leon Wainwright, “Jamaica National Biennial: Contradictions in Coherence,” *Art Fairs International* 1, nos. 5–6 (2005): 45–47.