



Rev Jonathan Evens welcomed guests to St Stephen Walbrook and to Jamaican Spiritual. Standing close by to add her words of welcome is the evening's patron Theresa Roberts.

DISPATCH FROM LONDON: Jamaican Spirituality on Display

EARLIER this summer, in an interesting little church in Central London, St Stephen Walbrook, British Jamaican art cognoscenti and patron Theresa Roberts curated a small but absorbing exhibition showcasing "Jamaican Spiritual" art. The show ran from July 3 to July 14 and while I missed the opening I was able to catch the exhibition a few days before it closed. I was glad I did.

There were only 20 pieces drawn from private collections, galleries and the artist themselves, but the 20 works shown captured a reasonable representation of our artistic efforts in recent times. While the pieces skewed more towards 2016/2017 there was a stunning oil on canvas by Carl Abrahams from the '80s and a gentle Facey-Cooper bronze pair of hands from the '90s

Jamaican culture has always thrived uncomfortably between the pious and the profane. On the one hand is our famous statistic for the most churches per square mile and from these pulpits bellow our voices of righteous approbation or condemnation. "No sex, please, we are Jamaican!" Around the corner of these same churches we find our dancehall sessions with voices bellowing from loud speakers enticing and encouraging us

Pondi **ROAD**

to gyrate our bodies in unholy rhythms. "Come inna mi romping shop!" Our public life exemplary, our shadow life scandalous. Any attempt to display Jamaican spirituality, even in a church, will always carry with it our profanities. Roberts's St Stephen Walbrook exhibition was no exception.

Carl Abrahams's oil on canvas *Schoolgirls with Prophet* contemplates the notion of innocence lost. The Prophet is proselytising his holy message in one direction, while the girls already have their backs to him. They will leave him behind as they move forward out of the protective enclave of the painting towards our secular world. The "bad gyal" in the middle donning her shades holds a rather phallic object in her right hand at the exact point at which the Prophet's privates might be erect. Perhaps she holds all men in only one regard at this point. With feet apart and a knowing look, she shares her wanton stories with her more innocent friend. The friend, walking with less confidence and feet together, is



The evening's patron Theresa Roberts and David Neita, the Jamaican-born poet and lawyer who handled the evening's formalities (Photos: PONDI)



Lesli-Ann Belnavis's, digital print on paper, *Eyes Wide Shut*

trying to protect her privates with her books while glancing over at the viewer to see if we are watching the choices that she is facing. One gets the feeling that neither books nor prophets will protect this girl from the future that awaits her.

Marlon James's digital print on paper *Trio*, captures a moment when three trainee nurses in pink uniforms march resolutely past a closed church. The gate is padlocked. It is a weekday. Cut off from the spiritual healing, the three women (Macbeth's three witches?) are unperturbed as they need to get on with their day. Their healing mix of potions and tender touch for the sick continues even while the place of spiritual nourishment is closed. As Catholicism is a minor religion in the Jamaican spiritual landscape, the Madonna holds

little sway in this culture. Moreover, the Madonna is too genteel a figure to keep our boys in check. It is the nurse, like the great Mother, who holds archetypal significance in the Jamaican imagination. It is that uncanny mix of maternal tenderness and dominatrix discipline, the caress and the spank, that holds the Jamaican culture together; the thin, fragile line between civilised life and violent chaos which is always threatening to unravel but never does.

Laura Facey-Cooper's bronze *Prayer* was another standout. The hands delicately frozen in time in that "he's got the whole world in his hands" stance. It first struck me as odd that Facey would call this piece *Prayer* because these hands will never touch and therefore never complete



Mabusha Dennis, acrylic on canvas, *Sunday is Coming*

the full prayer motion which requires tightly touching palms. Then it dawned on me that it is not these hands that will pray; these are the hands that will hold those who do. The space between the hands is just wide enough to protect the hearts of the seekers.

Greg Bailey's oil on canvas *The Sacrifice of Isaac* takes as its inspiration the biblical story of Abraham being asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. In the original, Abraham builds an outdoor altar out of stone, ties Isaac to the altar and is about to kill him using a knife when an angel holds back his (Abraham's) arm and basically says God wanted to see whether he would do it, but he actually doesn't have to. In my reading, this is a twisted little tale of God's sadism, if ever there was one. In Bailey's hands, the scene is moved indoors into the bedroom, on top of bed sheets, and the tool of choice is the machete rather than a knife. The age difference between Abraham and Isaac in the painting makes them seem more like contemporaries rather than father and son. The subversive nature of these

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Artists Sireita Mullings (left) and Laura Facey-Cooper (right) with the show's patron and curator Theresa Roberts



Laura Facey Cooper, Bronze, *Prayer*

"If Jamaica were an actor she would have appeared in more than one hundred and forty-one films."

JAMAICA,
THE LAND OF FILM.

PETER POLACK

NOW available online from Cambridge Scholars Publishing
 Documentary available on YouTube
 Tour available at jamaicalandoffilm.com

Greg Bailey's, oil on canvas, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*



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Marie Guerlain of the French Guerlain perfume and cosmetics dynasty and artist Alexander de Cadenet (Photos: POND!)

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choices is laid bare when one realises that the work has fused the biblical story with an overt homo-eroticism. After all, here we have two boys in a bed, one naked and the

other half-naked, with the latter preparing to stab the former. Isaac seems serene and prepared for any fate that awaits — eroticism or death? Erotic *and* death! In Jamaica the machete of the community



Christopher Lawrence, oil on canvas, *The Redeemer*



Alicia Lisa Brown, oil on canvas, *Priest 1 and Priest 2*





Carl Abrahams's, oil on canvas, *Schoolgirls with Prophet*

would likely come down on any such erotic exchange. Strewn around the bed are several Polaroids, some of which resemble Renaissance scenes of biblical life and others that are dark, which suggests things we dare not see, dare not name. The pious and the profane come in the pink floral bed sheets.

Phillip Thomas's contribution is the mixed media *Exodus the golden calf has matured...* The story of the Golden Calf is where Moses having rescued the Israelites from Egypt goes off to the mountains to receive the 10 Commandments from God. While Moses is away, the Israelites get restless and hunger for a God they can see. They agree to pool their gold and build a golden calf to worship. When Moses returns in anger he breaks the tablets of the commandments over the calf and destroys it. The moral of the story being that when God stays away too long the people will worship the material over the spiritual. One could argue that today we live in the Age of the Golden Calf. Thomas's calf is indeed matured, as this calf is neither golden nor young but a big ageing cow. In Thomas's hands we wonder what exactly we are still worshipping. We turned away from Jehovah for this? Headless (brainless?) men whose worth comes not from who they are (no face, no character) but what they wear, even if what they wear is aged and decrepit from some bygone era. The materialism in this painting is all propped up and dusty. The riches are faded. The men are lifeless. The only thing of vibrancy that remains is the breasty bitch who breeds. Nature's supreme principle and the central visual point of this painting is the over-productive vagina. A triumph of

Nature over culture!

The pièce de résistance of this small show has got to be Christopher Lawrence's oil on canvas *The Redeemer*. This image was used as the signature piece on the brochures to promote the exhibition, and it was absolutely the right choice. This may be the best representation of Afro-Christo that I have ever seen. Using the afro as a halo, and the right hand held in a gesture that simultaneously suggests holding a spliff, giving a blessing and beginning a lecture is pure genius!

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Sireita Mullings's, digital print on paper, *Sister Beloved In My Temple*.



Phillip Thomas's *Exodus*



Phillip Thomas's close-up of *Exodus*

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This Afro-Christo image emerges from the dark and appears ready to guide our way. An intriguing little touch is the cleft beard often associated with Satan. The light and the dark converge?

On a personal note, when I first saw this image I had an absolute artgasm over this rich and complex piece. I teach a class called Critical Thinking at Campion College and as part of this enquiry we talk about whether it matters that we are the only race in the world whose "god" representations don't look like us. I have been searching for a lifetime for an image of

the Christo which I would love to replace in the minds of black Christian children and this is the first one I have seen that best fits the bill. I am not sure if this is the first of many to come from this artist, but I hope that Lawrence takes this image and proliferates it into famous Christian narratives. I would love to see this Christ parting the Red Sea and nailed to a cross. The world over, black Christians are in desperate need of visual iconography.

Lesli-Ann Belnavis's digital print on paper *Eyes Wide Shut* with its black and white contrast was another standout in the church. The image leaps off the page. The white



The St Stephen Walbrook choir band prepares for Sunday Mass. Laura Facey-Cooper's silk installation *Prince on Peace* looks on over the proceedings.



Marlon James, digital print on paper, *Trio*

tribal paint on the black woman's face reminds us of photo images from ancestral Africa. Is this Mary the saintly mother of God or Mary Magdalene the whore-cum-saint or the great Mother from the Savannahs? *Eyes Wide Shut* (also the name of Stanley Kubrick's last film about group eroticism) is a title that suggests pretending not to see what's right in front of us. Any attempt to separate the whore from the saint is an illusion. Here, there is only one Mary. Any attempt to separate the light from

the dark, the black from the white, is doomed to failure as the colours and the textures, the natural and the unnatural, are completely intertwined. *The Peaceful Resolve* (another piece by Belnavis) is found by embracing and accepting the duality that resides within. We are Africa and Europe. Here, the pious and the profane are not opposites but conjoined siblings. Jamaica's churches and dancehall sessions reverberate from the same impulse. We are all saints and sinners.