

VISUAL ARTS

Capturing the not-so-sunny side of the Caribbean

Exhibits reveal poverty, politics

By Christine Temin, Globe Staff | January 9, 2005

PROVIDENCE -- At a distance, Tony Capellan's "Caribbean Sea" looks like lotus or water lily pads. The visual siren song of this installation on a gallery floor lures you closer: The "lily pads" are actually flip-flops, that most basic form of footwear, here in the brilliant blues of tropical waters. Hundreds of them, in all sizes, aim in the same direction, clambering over one another in a rush to escape.

Escape, however, comes at a price: The usual plastic thongs that fit between your toes have been replaced by barbed wire. Feet in these flip-flops would be martyred, bloodied, and infected, all in the interest of leaving a place some would call paradise; others, prison.

Capellan lives in Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, one of the places scrutinized in "Island Nations," a provocative show now at the Rhode Island School of Design.

In frigid New England, there is a critical mass of Caribbean art this winter. In addition to the RISD show, there are "Island Thresholds: Contemporary Art From the Caribbean," opening next month at the Peabody Essex Museum, and a more focused show of contemporary art from the Dominican Republic, opening later this month at Samson Projects in Boston's South End.

Capellan is the only artist who has work in all three group exhibitions. His work at Samson includes another painful image: a curved glass window from a VW Beetle he found on the beach, to which he attached rubber nipples from baby bottles. Jutting through the nipples are needles.

All three shows contradict the North American notion that "Caribbean" is synonymous with "resort." To artists living there, and to those who have left, the islands are rife with darker issues that they incorporate in their work. Poverty, politics, corruption, colonialism, slavery, and religion are among themes they address -- often through found objects.

"In a country where everything is used and then used again, artists have to be resourceful in finding materials," says Camilo Alvarez, the 28-year-old cofounder of Samson. All nine of the artists in his show have done found-object pieces, although some will show other work in Boston. Among them is Jose Garcia Cordero, whose painting "The Island Is Crying" is a silhouette of Hispanola, the island the Dominican Republic shares with Haiti, filled with weeping eyes and screaming mouths. Painted barbed wire outlines the image of this place that so many people try to leave in search of a life they see on American television, "a life that is totally unrealistic," Alvarez says.

The work of another artist in his show, Pascal Meccariello, deals with homosexuality -- in a country where the topic is taboo because of the Catholic Church's power. "If you even mention that you're agnostic," Alvarez says, "you're looked on as a freak."

Work that criticizes government policy is more likely to be tolerated if the artist has an international reputation. Kcho, a Cuban and the best known of the artists in the Peabody Essex show, "is treated by the government as a kind of unofficial ambassador of the arts," says PEM show curator Sam Scott. This despite works such as "To Forget," which will be in Scott's show. Its components are a ramshackle wharf over a sea of empty bottles that, for the most part, once held alcohol. It's not a flattering view of Cuba -- yet it's been allowed to travel as far away as Tokyo.

While "To Forget" will come to PEM, Kcho won't. The US government won't give him a visa. "Absurd" is Scott's summation of that situation.

The absurdity of government policies is the message of the RISD show's opening salvo. The piece itself, Charles Juhasz-Alvarado's massive installation "Garden of Forbidden Fruits: Duty Free," is absurd, intentionally so. It's the fictional saga of a group of "radical vegetarians" trying to get fruits and veggies past US customs. Photo collages and texts document

people wearing okra necklaces and claiming they're jewelry, not food. Customs officials scan bags and throw out anything organic. A display of oversized plastic insects hints at the dire consequences of sneaking foreign fruit into the United States. The deadpan attitude is hilarious -- but it stumbles on its argument that customs discriminates against residents of the Caribbean. I've witnessed lots of blond Europeans entering the country with, say, an apple discovered by sniffing dogs that is then confiscated.

Juhasz-Alvarado's installation is, nonetheless, an attention-grabbing intro to a show. It includes photography, video, sculpture, DVDs, and a gallery devoted to architectural themes. It also includes a couple of Boston artists -- photographer Abelardo Morell and painter Santiago Hernandez, both Cuban-born.

It puts new work into context through permanent collection pieces by renowned artists including Jose Bedia and Ana Mendieta. Bedia's painting of a stick figure bravely walking a tightrope suspended over pointy peaks and menacing skulls perfectly illustrates what the unofficial immigrant faces.

The show also includes a lot of feet, or hints at them, as Capellan's work does. Modes of transport are generally the dominant subjects in exhibitions from this part of the world. It used to be boats. Now it's airplanes -- and feet. Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla collaborated on the series of photographs called "Land Mark (footprints)," images of the feet of political protesters in the sand. For his "Translife" project, Cuban artist Abel Olivia invited senior citizens to dance on a long roll of paper placed over defunct railroad tracks. The marks they left symbolize the disappointments their generation encountered.

Meccariello, who is also in the Samson show, exhibits "Pilate's Chair" at RISD. The back of the empty seat is in the form of a cross. The chair's front legs are in a wash bowl, where a backlit pair of feet appear. On each is a tiny crucifix, stigmata on the man who authorized Christ's death.

"Pilate's Chair" comes across as reverent. Another work rooted in religion, Ernesto Pujol's photograph "Frontal Novice," is anything but. Here is a cross-dressing nun, a male face gazing out from a sea of white cloth.

The architecture section of the show is both the bleakest and most moving. There's none of the romance of Havana's boulevards filled with crumbling yet majestic buildings, just housing "solutions" that didn't, or never could, work. Cuban photographer Manuel Pina's "Deconstructing Utopias" is a suite of 16 black-and-white photos documenting a 1960s initiative in which the government gave people materials to build their own houses. The results, grim concrete structures that look about to implode, are reminiscent of the photos of industrial architecture by Bernd and Hilla Becher.

The slightly more hopeful photos of San Juan artist Chemi Rosado Seijo are a result of his cajoling residents of cheap, impromptu houses into painting them green, to blend in -- and spiritually reclaim -- the verdant foothills they occupy. Here is at least a sliver of optimism.

There is none of that quality in Jorge Pineda's installation "The Forest," a visual fairy tale -- or nightmare -- that will never have a happy ending. Ruined adult lives are tragic enough, but the life of a child that will never turn out right is heartbreaking. In Pineda's piece a girl, carved in wood and dressed in ill-fitting hand-me-downs, turns away from us, as if beating her head against some Dominican version of a wailing wall. We do not see her face. We do see a thicket of black carbon drawn next to her, like pollution invading her soul.

"Island Nations: New Art From Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and the Diaspora" -- at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, through Jan. 30. Organized by Judith Tannenbaum and Rene Morales. Island Thresholds, Contemporary Art From the Caribbean" -- at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Feb. 19-June 5. Organized by Sam Scott. Dominicanazo! The New Dominican Wave in Art" -- at Samson Projects in the South End, Jan. 21-Feb. 27. Organized by Camilo Alvarez. ■