Arrested transmission: from periphery to center

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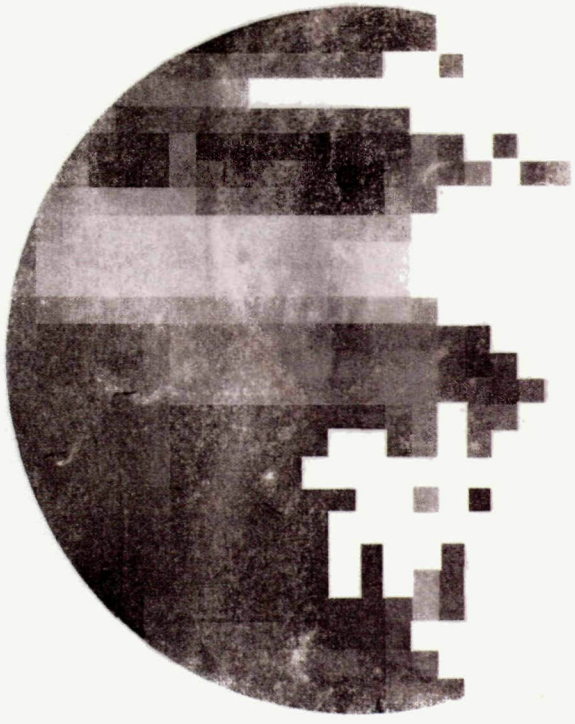
TEXT / LEON WAINWRIGHT



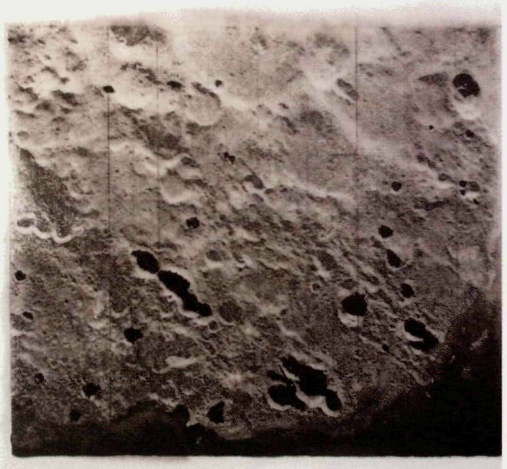
The New York-based shows this summer focusing on the Caribbean have gestured to a region whose art is firmly part of an expanding interest in the African diaspora.[1] They follow a pattern over recent years of new blood coming to the United States from the Caribbean: a migration of sorts which artists from all over the region are scrambling to enjoin. The typical path of entry is for an individual artist, or more likely a freshly formed collective, to stake almost everything on the digital formats that are needed to float their work online. Of course it's a mode of promotion that's not unique to the Caribbean: self-marketing through the web is the contemporary default for creativity the world over.

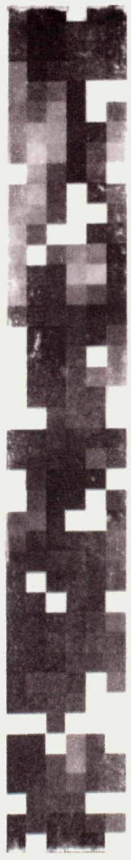
The Caribbean and the United States share a distinctively relational geography that has tempted some Caribbean artists to try and operate in a digital register tout court, in order to bridge the distance and take themselves to market. Conversely, there are significant numbers of artists who have chosen a stance of defiance, sitting out the rush to the web—refusing to transmit themselves along cyber channels or to translate their art in a way that would entirely eclipse all other visual means. This may involve shuttling more deliberately between media, with artists broadening their practice as to correspond with a spectrum of public attention, along a scale from local reach to global transfer through the web.

Caribbean artists have a long history of resetting the expectations of viewers. Their present tactics may be seen in a painting practice that has an island or small nation partly in view, yet is mindful of that community's preoccupations, while unprepared to resign to the false comforts of insularity. There are instances in which an artist may speak to this ready-at-hand audience, and at the same time reach out to much more distant locations. This requires honing the various aspects of a given artist's practice until they are suited to this demanding geography. Such simultaneity of postures throws light on how Caribbean artists have sought paths toward the United States. It also raises the profile of their more complex motivations to stop and disengage at times from global involvements outside the Caribbean region.

In the works of two artists in particular are some revealing approaches to these circumstances: the Barbados artist Alicia Alleyne, and Carl Anderson, based in Georgetown, Guyana. Alleyne takes photographs, which are then made into photocopies, and turned from there into delicate painted shapes. She unfolds a zoological garden of textured forms, where exquisitely crisp, hard-edge lines run steadily through cut-and-paste assemblages. There is a surprising frequency to those translations and her particular handling of color. Such pieces have lost (if they indeed ever had) any color, although this is hardly a matter of limited resources for an artist who has so many technical tools at her fingertips. Shunning a more varied palette as Alleyne has done, is a means to strike a posture. It happens in the

INSIDE FRONT COVER: **Alicia Alleyne**, *Untitled*, 2010, ink, photocopy transfer, 8 x 10 inches / ABOVE: **Alicia Alleyne**, *Untitled*, 2009, photocopy transfer, 7.5 x 10.5 inches; OPPOSITE: **Alicia Alleyne**, *Untitled*, 2010, gouache, ink, glitter, 22 x 30 inches (all images courtesy of the artist)





face of Caribbean peers who otherwise revel in hyper-colored compositions.

Alleyne is quite prepared to employ the digital record on the web as a window onto her works, and yet she is at pains to make clear that this medium is a poor substitute for apprehending the originals. The Caribbean has been so roundly and frequently dismissed as a locus for contemporary art, and it would be a disaster if the works that the region is now producing were somehow included or assimilated in the art market without those negative attitudes toward the Caribbean being faced head on. Alleyne's rationing of how much of her works give over to a digital medium is part of that refusal to be co-opted or subsumed into dominant art spaces whose arbiters of value have for too long disadvantaged the Caribbean. Her more sparing use of the web seems a prudent way of reminding its users that her pieces should not be taken as detachable from their Caribbean provenance. Their presence online is not their final destination—that presentation can only ever fall short of delivering the impact of her art in the flesh.

The same may be said for pieces by Carl Anderson and the virtues of seeing them firsthand in Guyana. In his *Ribbon* paintings, Anderson has reached new ground for a technique that exploits the photograph and that same cut-up arrangement that Alleyne is drawn to. He explained for me the evolution of his technique, starting from extensive reading at a library in Venezuela thirty years ago when he saw artists who had emerged in the 1960s working with machine mesh and cloth with holes. His early *Ribbon* pieces were charcoal drawings, some very large indeed: "I made a big piece, 13 by 77 squares of 9 inches ... another 13 feet by 6 feet." The later results are impeccably presented and photorealist, often starting out as sketches of maquettes, to be scrapped if the artist doesn't like them, before starting again.

It seems plain to me that all of these works yearn for an audience beyond Caribbean locations. At the same time, there is no easy application of this practice to a digital channel which might draw a less place-bound range of attention. Looked at in this way, the problem is not that the Caribbean is somehow outside or cut off from digital networks (quite the contrary, since each artist has a wide web footprint). Its art calls for an audience that is capable of being seen firsthand, without electronic mediation.

Take, for instance, Alleyne's way of pushing a single shape over its successive reformulations, so that what seemed to start out as a moonscape or liquid on glass will turn a corner and end up entirely somewhere else. Or note how Anderson is just as much concerned with what can ensue through pursuing a series of works. He interrupts the picture plane with grids that derive from some arcane formula, the command of which is Anderson's alone. These take the shape of viewing channels onto an impossibly long, twisting ribbon, that fills frames with an oddly rotating geometry. Clustering and clumping blocks of color—the absolute and random poetics of the ribbon form—in places, these build up the figure of a woman. The composition is uneasy and in motion, and the whole painting seems to flutter at its surface.

To look at these works and others with such directness is impossible through any virtual representation. It raises the matter of how location gives rise to distinctive approaches to image-

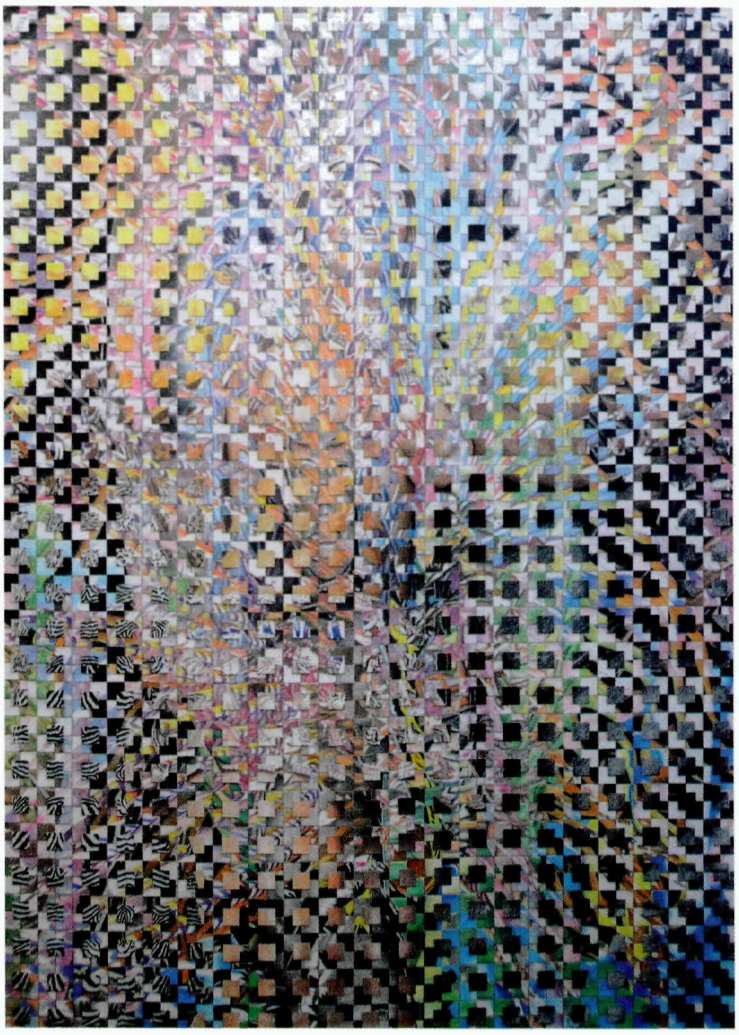
ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Alicia Alleyne**, *Untitled*, 2010, glitter, ink, photocopy transfer, 10 x 10 inches (courtesy of the artist); **Alicia Alleyne**, *Untitled*, 2009, photocopy transfer, 7.5 x 10.5 inches (courtesy of the artist); OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT: **Carl Anderson**, *Carnival Joker*, 2011, oil on canvas, 58 x 42 inches (courtesy of the artist); **Carl Anderson**, *Mash to the Beat*, 2012, oil on canvas, 56 x 42 inches (courtesy of the artist)

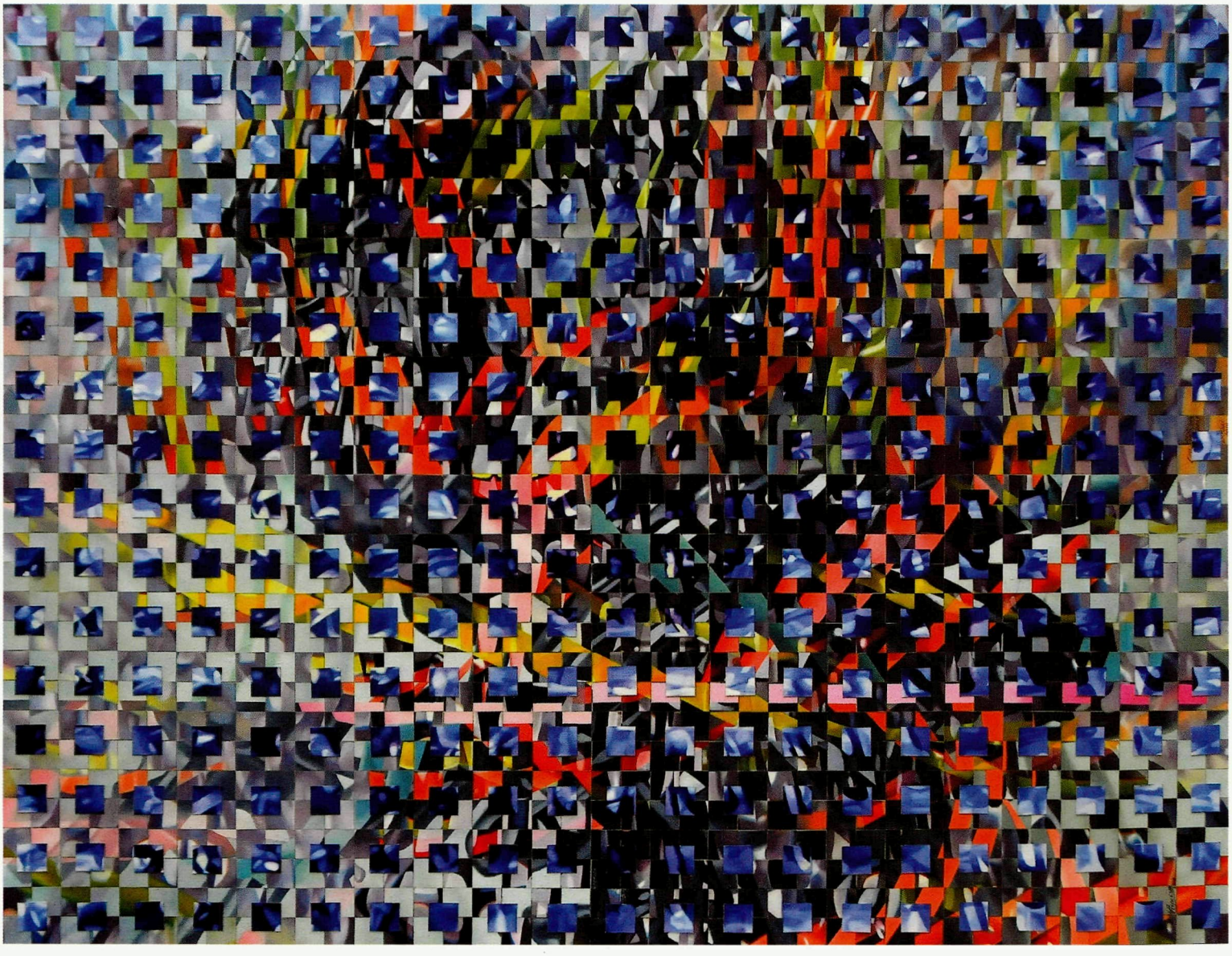
making and to conditions for viewing. This takes us beyond any standard complaint about being an artist who has little or no access to a contemporary art center. If the web effectively deprives the viewer of a proper grasp or appreciation of the context for the work, then artists like Alleyne or Anderson have sought to expose that appetite and its shortcomings with great success. They belie the illusion that a web-bound facsimile of their paintings somehow amounts to readily shared cultural information. It is an astonishing feat given the prominent collusions of art with the digital age, and given the pressure to provide the viewer a visual index of what it may mean to make contemporary art in the Caribbean, or elsewhere.

For all the excitement about how the Caribbean is tied up ever firmly with northern art networks, that quickening global economy of images and ideas seems at odds with the ambitions of artists like Alleyne and Anderson. It is easy enough to find them, of course, present in virtual space, as any name search would reveal. But what cannot be accessed has to be considered against the promised benefits of that form of connectivity. This is an arrested transmission of artistic vision, despite that spaces of diaspora and digitization are celebrated for being open and shared. A wider picture is there of imbalance, even inequality, which is that much harder to take in.

I often hear it said that the careers of Caribbean artists are being transformed, having become subject to favorable global flows and novel transnational links: the slow funeral for an older order in the art world when local-versus-foreign divisions ruled. While I am sure that art and its world(s) are changing through such movements and expansions of the field, the noncontroversial aspect of this story needs to be exposed as a problem. That tale of globalizing progress seems to have been told by someone looking in the wrong direction; certainly someone talking past artworks and artists that want (and deserve) something more.

Perhaps there are grounds here to question whether the global turn has indeed shifted the arrangement of center and periphery, bearing in mind the outsized efforts on the part of art history to change its makeup and to include (or pretend to include) artists from beyond a conventional center. These artists are living and working well away from globally dominant spaces, metropolitan centers with the wealth and infrastructure to attract capital and around which art markets and their adjacent organizations grow. Conversely, the claims to have overcome this geographical distance are instances of misrecognition. For despite the pretence to involve these artists in a shared transnational





space, there is very little change to the frameworks on which art is prevailingly narrated and criticized, exchanged, made visible, mapped, and remembered. Such curatorial and critical representations, when addressed to art of the Caribbean, have treated the arrival of such art as solid proof of the openness of contemporary art spaces, tending to forget the long narratives of mutually entwined relationships—those conjunctive histories—that have bound the Caribbean to the Western world all along.

That the Caribbean has never really been absent from the history of art is evidenced in the countless biographies of artists who have moved between that region and the many other shores of the Atlantic. Such creative personalities have to be seen in a greater expanse: the hundreds of years of intimacies, exchanges, tensions, and conflicts that have bound the Caribbean to the wider world. The recent spate of Caribbean art exhibitions in the U.S. should not be mistaken for a world that is suddenly about migration and movement; nor should the boasted fluidity, freedom, and borderlessness of the contemporary artworld be taken on face value.

There is an illusion of nearness, transparency, comprehensiveness, accessibility, and so on that frames the process of discovering the art of the Caribbean online, yet misses the crucial differences that define art production in Caribbean countries as compared to its larger Atlantic neighbors. It's a supposition that fits with a misguided mytho-poetics of a truly cosmopolitan and globalized art world. Into this play of illusions about a fully enjoined art community should be added the celebrated idea of diasporic group belonging—the two have much in common. Indeed, the application of the diaspora concept may at some extremes subsume the Caribbean into an analytic of race, ethnicity, and culture that bears more relevance to a center (in fact, the United States) than to anywhere else in the Atlantic. It brings a homogenizing gaze that flattens out Caribbean differences and provides the semblance of order and harmony for an art world empty of any real diversity or conflict.

Perhaps the power of the term "global" owes much to the fact that it is so abstract. We seem to be talking about spaces and narratives, without ever defining how they implicate one another. The dominant values and visions of this art are subject to the crossmatching or entwining of spatial thinking with a prevailing concept of time. Caribbean artists find themselves disadvantaged and displaced not only from the space but also the time—the temporal category—of contemporary art. Through reception of their art and in curatorial presentation, these artists have faced more than anything the disadvantages that come from certain temporal discriminations. This politics of temporality has an impact on artists who are refused the status of being at the leading edge of contemporary art, of being up to date. As I have described elsewhere, it has seen them being *timed out* of art history.[2] Evidently, opportunities for inclusion in the field of visual representation—associated with art's globalizing field—are extended to the Caribbean according to certain spatio-temporal values that are in any case externally contrived.

In many Caribbean settings, resident contemporary artists are barely registered by the local official, canonizing authorities of art history; unjust reward perhaps for them having shown more than a passing interest in the wider global art community. From what I have witnessed, they are subjected to much more disregard in the global art market: being seen as not at all apace with the leading edge of contemporary art, they are relegated to a secondary or backward position out there at a perceived periphery. If this frustrates the motivation for making one's presence felt in an ostensibly global milieu, it is met by a more critical stance on whether such a presence is really of much value.

Have the inadequacies and inequalities of the situation even been registered? The worst part is that viewers of this art have fallen under the misconception that something of the Caribbean context has been understood, but the question remains of what is being lost in the process. We seem a long way from accepting that there is an agenda of difficulties. Instead, the general tendency is to sit in judgment about whether this art serves our domestic use. Reversing that relationship, we should be asking what these images and artists demand of us. For all the attention to the diversity of art in the African diaspora, it is time to stop recycling a common myth we live by: that ours is a borderless art environment with access to novel technologies that equal only unprecedented freedoms and an unquestioned good.

NOTES

1. In June this year at three museums was *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* (El Museo del Barrio, Queens Museum of Art, and The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2012). It followed a five-year period of exhibitions highlighting work from the Caribbean: *SSV4KY*, a collaborative sound installation (University of Kentucky Department of Art and the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, 2012); *Into the Mix* (Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, 2012); *Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions* (World Bank Art Program and Art Museum of the Americas, Organization of American States, 2011); *The Global Africa Project* (Museum of Arts and Design and the Center for Race and Culture, Maryland Institute College of Art, 2010); *Rockstone and Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art* (Real Art Ways, 2009); and *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art* (Brooklyn Museum, 2007).
2. Leon Wainwright, *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester University Press, 2011).

Leon Wainwright is an art historian based in the United Kingdom. In the late 1990s, Wainwright set out to establish art of the African and Asian diasporas as a leading research area, and to radically reassess the way that historiographic, curatorial, and intellectual traditions in Europe are implicated in a more global and entwined history of art. In 2004, with support from the Leverhulme Trust, he began long-term study of diverse locations in the English-speaking Caribbean, a project that later broadened to Dutch-speaking countries and Latin America. He was Reader in History of Art at the Manchester School of Art before becoming Lecturer in Art History at The Open University, UK. From 2006 he was a member of the editorial board of the journal *Third Text* (Taylor and Francis) and has held visiting fellowships at the University of California, Berkeley and the Yale Center for British Art. Alongside numerous scholarly articles, he is the author of *Timed Out: Art and the Transnational Caribbean* (Manchester University Press, 2011) and co-editor, with Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, of the forthcoming volume *Art in Theory: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Wiley Blackwell).

OPPOSITE: **Carl Anderson**, *Mysterious Girl*, 2010, oil on canvas, 42 x 32 inches (courtesy of the artist)