

Jacqueline Bishop

IN CONVERSATION: WRITING & PAINTING



I was astonished several months ago when my first collection of poems was published and over and over again various individuals remarked about the preoccupation in the collection with the visual arts. I wrote about individual artists ---

*... van Gogh and Gauguin must have struggled
in the yellow house at Auvers,
how Vincent always wanted community,
this, before he cut his ear off in desperation when Gauguin moved on:
before the black crows started circling in and over Vincent,
mixing the memories, before the enduring
myth overtook both artists and they started to spin
slowly away from each other and out into the world.*

I wrote about individual paintings:

*The figure of the young girl is lovely,
And it is almost an exception to the great master's work¹*

*The studies that have survived
Shows a dying or exhausted mother, a meditative father*

*And a nude child, his dark hair
Blowing in the wind.*

*The boat is crowded. Everyone is in rags.
There is not much space --*

¹ Said of Géricault's painting "a Paralytic Woman" by his first biographer, Charles Clément.

*Only a few can survive.
Study after study Géricault makes decisions,*

*Leaving in what is essential, taking out what
is not, much the same way that I am doing now.*

*In the final painting, the woman is gone, replaced
by a heroic couplet: a father and a son.*

In other poems I wrote about the act of painting and I had somehow merged the painter and the writer in still other poems. In so many ways I feel that my writing feeds my visual arts and my visual arts gives me subjects for my writing. For example, there is a whole section of my first collection of poems devoted to flowers that, “speak in female voices.” Unconsciously, I was also working a series of drawings called, *Flower Still Life: Blue-on-Blue*, in which there is an obvious sensuousness to the paintings; an exploration of femininity; the “givingness” of nature in the form of the flowers.

The shapes, curves, and “organic” forms of the drawings in *Flower Still Life: Blue-on-Blue* makes a statement about female power and beauty; yet at the core of the work there is something sad, the flowers are drooping, so the drawings are almost a contradiction. These works then are an exploration of fragility, of the nature of the “ephemeral” right alongside a meditation on femininity; femaleness, “roundness” and womanhood. In these drawings I am exploring how flowers are often transplanted and expected to grow in many and various parts of the world that they are not “native” to. I am astonished how much these drawings capture so many of the “tropes” of my writing life.

In fact, what I have come to realize is that there is a deep communication between my paintings and my writings, that they cross-fertilize each other. In a series of photographs I did entitled *Childhood Memories* characters in the photographs are located in a particular geographical space--either the Caribbean or the USA--while there are allusions to the other geographical “space”--and here is one of the many poems from my collection that deals with this very issue:

JAMAICAN BIRDS

*You will find them everywhere,
numbered bands on their legs
tracing the route of their migratory flight.
I know a family of Jamaican birds,
the mother bird and four of her five baby birds
are in the United States;
the father has remained in Jamaica.
There is a brother bird in Toronto
along with an aunt bird, and two niece birds.
One of the birds in the family is skittish,
she is forever flying off somewhere,
for a while she lived in Paris
and one night, watching television,
saw birds from her island being interviewed
from their nests in Holland!
Large colonies of Jamaican birds
are dispersed all over the Caribbean,
many went to build the Panama Canal,
and some have even retraced the flight across the Atlantic.
In North America three or four species
have been identified for the peculiar way they sing.*

Exile is a major feature of my work as is indicated in a collection of oral histories I published last year, *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York*. My first novel, *The River's Song*, looks at some of the reasons why a young woman would leave the island of Jamaica; while my current writing preoccupations looks at why someone would return. Exile is also represented in a series of quilts I recently completed: *Odes to the Mountains of Jamaica*. These quilts were inspired by a trip to the island several years ago. A trip that would be the last time I would see my great grandmother alive. My great grandmother was a great maker of quilts and, after she died I ended up with these quilts that no one else wanted. Spectacular quilts. Bold in color, composition and design. A strong indication of who this woman was and what she thought of and how she lived life; what she thought was beautiful. But here and there some of the quilts were in need of repair; and one or two of them unfinished: I was only too happy to complete the quilts that were uncompleted and to repair the ones in need of repair. In so doing I had a strong sense that, *again*, I was having a conversation with my Great Grandmother; trying as best I could to stick to her aesthetic sense, even as I sought to insist on some of her/our quilts, my own aesthetic sense. I loved the piecing of things

together; of trying to make something whole out of pieces; of something old taking on new life; of one thing becoming another; of making so much beauty out of the scraps of life. These 5 large quilts of my Great Grandmother's became *The Conversation Series*.

By the time I finished working on my Great Grandmother's quilts I was hooked. This was at a time when I was looking for a way to pay homage to my Great Grandmother and to my troubled but beautiful homeland of Jamaica. And what did I miss more than the flora and fauna of Jamaica--the legendary mountains. Those dark blue mountains. Those purple-blue mountains. Those emerald green mountains. Because I am first and foremost a poet, I wanted to pay tribute to the mountains in the form of poems. Praise poems. Odes. A form that elevates the person, the object, the occasion.

The celebrated poet Eavan Boland states that odes are "full of flatteries, exaggerations and claims for the excellence and high standing of the subject..." This is exactly how I feel and talk about the mountains of my native land. As a child I remember gazing up and taking strength in the mountains of Jamaica. I remember feeling as though the mountains would always and always be there. I remember thinking that I could always turn to the mountains in moments of crisis. Those purple-blue mountains. After her death my Great Grandmother merged and eventually became one with those mountains; buried as she is in the district of Nonsuch, surrounded by the dark blue mountains of Portland. The purple-blue mountains around the district like a protective womb. The many shades of green mountains. These ode/quilts that I have made are, for me, a perfect marriage of the visual and written art form.

Several years ago when I had to write a statement about my art I wrote that you travel, but you take yourself with you. That is what I think I express in my creative works. My experiences as a Jamaican woman and an exile/immigrant are always at the center of what I do whether that is my written or visual works that are always in conversation.

Works Cited

Bishop, Jacqueline. *The River's Song*. Leeds, United Kingdom. Peepal Tree Press. 2007

Bishop, Jacqueline. *Fauna*. Leeds, United Kingdom. Peepal Tree Press. 2006

Bishop, Jacqueline. *My Mother Who is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York*. New Jersey, United States. Africa World Press. 2006