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The Visual Arts of Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles

SINCE THE EARLY NINETEEN-EIGHTIES, Caribbean festivals and biennales have been instrumental in breaking the insularity that has characterized Caribbean art. These events have stimulated artists to share and exchange their work.

The Havana Biennial and the Biennial of Print in Puerto Rico were pioneers in bringing together Caribbean artists. Similarly, the Caribbean and Central American Biennial of Painting, held in Santo Domingo gave impetus to the development of the Caribbean arts. "Carifesta," a cultural Caribbean festival celebrated every two years in different islands, includes art shows and has done much to promote the visual arts of the region. Other important events have been organized in Guadeloupe and Martinique. The Gala di Arte exhibition in 1991, the Carib Art exhibition in 1993, and the Arte'99 exhibition have been especially important for artists in Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles. For, if visual artists in the region as a whole have suffered from a lack of visibility, the artists in Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles have suffered a double invisibility.

Speaking with artists from the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba,¹ one observes a certain pessimism regarding art instruction, museums and opportunities for work. Curaçao has no art academy where one can receive a professional degree in studio art and art theory. Aruba offers only a part-time course of study. The Foundation for the Arts organizes art classes and workshops in Saba. In St. Martin, art education falls under the Department of Culture and art instruction is offered in the high school as one of the subjects of the final examinations. Consequently, after completing training in the local schools, art students from Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles pursue further art education in art academies in the Netherlands or in universities in Latin American or the U.S.A.

There is no art museum in the Netherlands Antilles nor in Aruba. Exhibitions generally take place in museums of other disciplines, convention centers, libraries, or private institutions and galleries. There is some hope that a Museum of (Modern) Art may soon be founded in Curaçao. This ten-year long project gained the official support of the island authorities on the occasion of the last art exhibition held in 1999.

Relative to the size and population of Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles,² there exists, however,

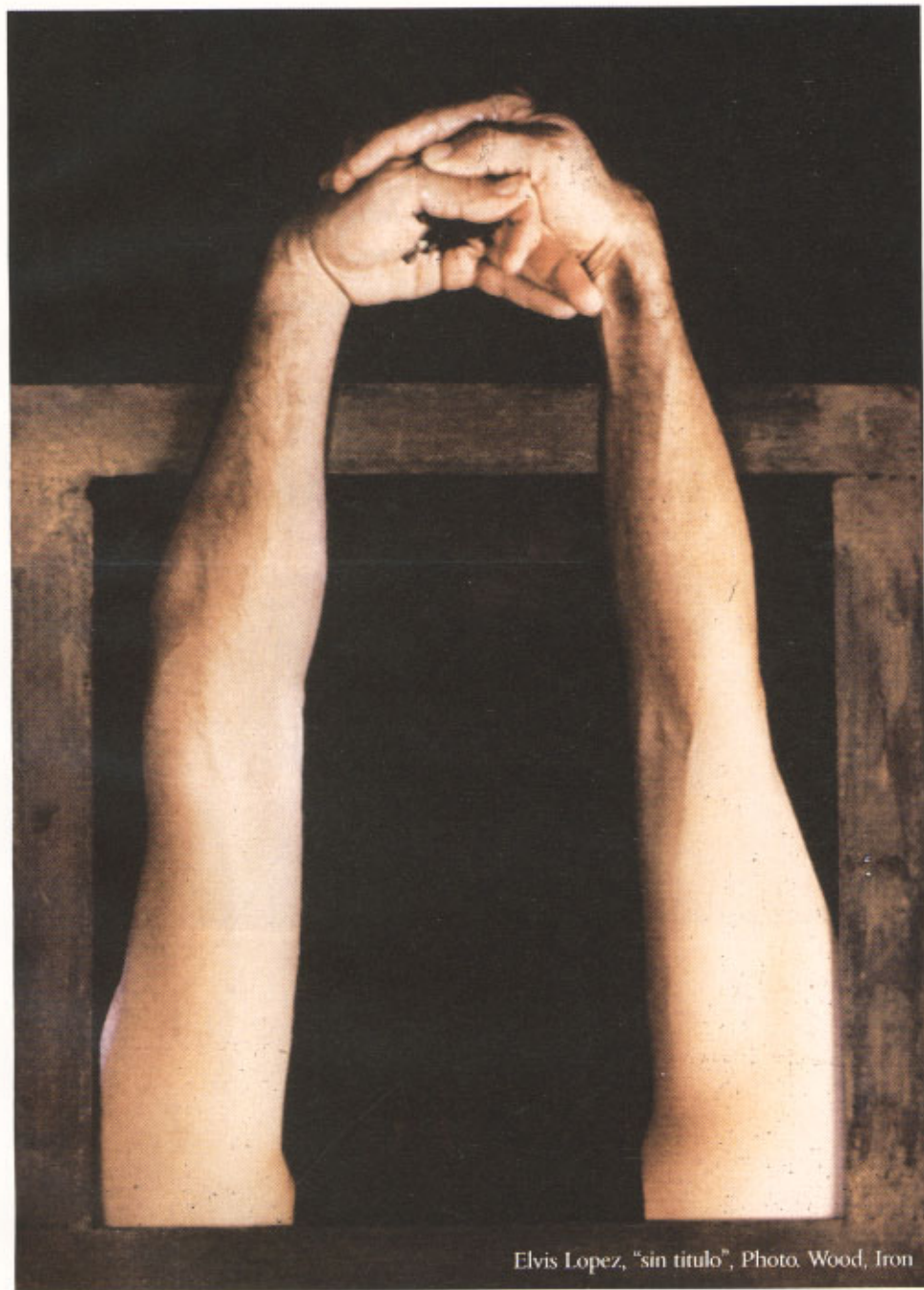
a rich network of art galleries. For example, Willemstad alone has six galleries. Patronized in large part by tourists, these galleries offer handicrafts, souvenirs, maps and posters, in addition to original works of art. This tourist-dominated patronage has challenged even such established galleries as Eighty-Six in Curaçao and the Studio Gallery in Aruba to maintain a balance between exhibitions of serious contemporary art, including “rupture” art, and the sale of commercialized art.

In the past ten years, three regional events have been organized in Curaçao with great success, focusing attention on the visual arts of Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles: *Gala di Arte* in 1991, *Carib Art* in 1993, and *Arte'99*. All three exhibitions aspired to demonstrate the strength of the visual arts of Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles. In each of the events, local leaders in the art field assumed responsibility for organizing the exhibitions and were assisted by efficient collaborators. Lectures, educational programs and other activities have accompanied these events.

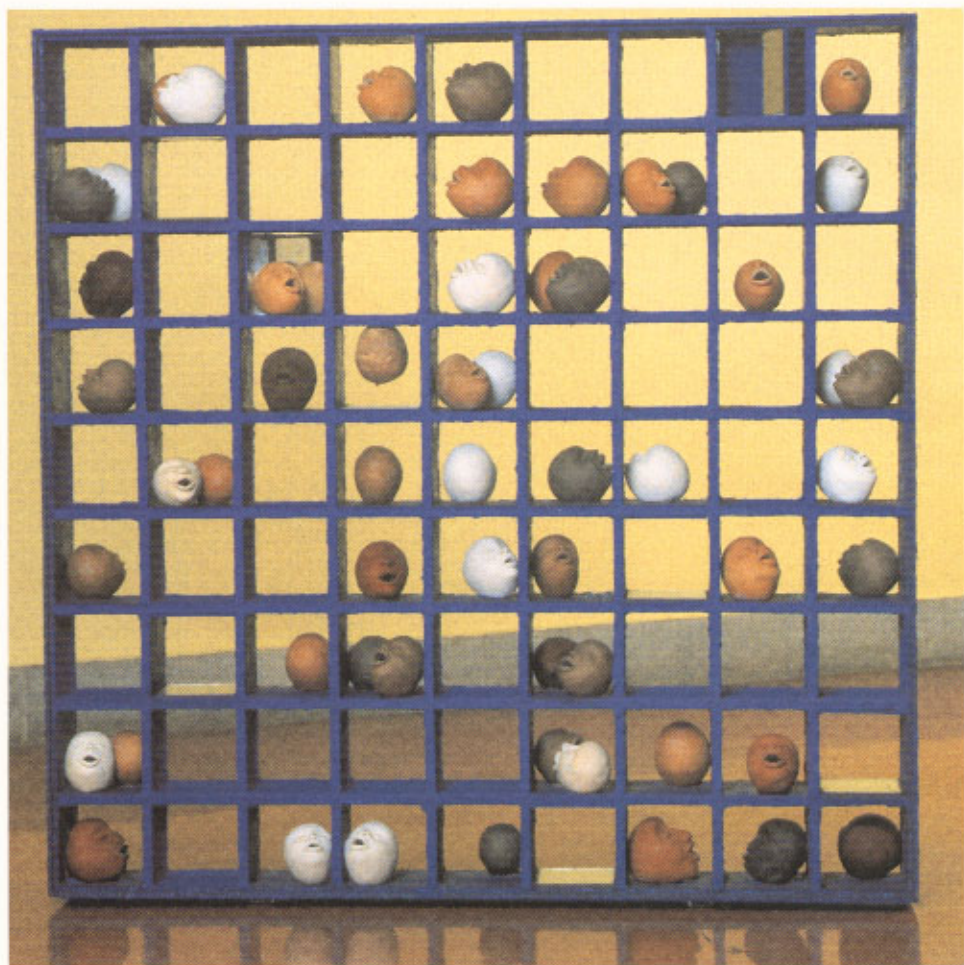
In November 1991, *Gala di Arte* was the first exhibition of the visual arts from Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, revealing high level, original work that fused regional and international characteristics. Included were ceramics, sculpture, painting, drawing, print, and one installation. Thirty-eight of the artists came from Curaçao, eight from Aruba, three from St. Martin, and one from Bonaire. Maduro & Curiel Bank underwrote the cost of the entire exhibition, which also commemorated the bank's 75TH anniversary. One of the bank's owners, May Henriquez, a painter herself, was instrumental in getting sponsorship for the exhibition. Henny Blok, director of Gallery Eighty-Six, and Ruby Figueroa-Eckmeyer, currently the head of the General Secretariat of UNESCO in Curaçao, were the organizers of this exhibition.³

Less than two years later, in August 1993, *Carib Art* was organized, financed by the National Commission of UNESCO of the Netherlands Antilles. The coordinator Ruby Figueroa-Eckmeyer and the project manager Frank Elstak faced the challenge of including artists of the entire Caribbean region. Thirty-two countries were successfully represented. In addition, the exhibit was of vital importance for artists from Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles in that it brought recognition to their art and confirmed their acceptance—even of the tiny Saba and St. Eustatius—into the larger Caribbean art community.

In 1999 Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire commemorated five hundred years of written history. On October 23, the exhibition and competition *Arte'99* celebrated “identidat ... ayera awe i mañan” (identity: yesterday, today, tomorrow), in the beautifully renovated *Mangansina di Arte*. In this nineteenth century warehouse, property of the Maduro & Curiel Bank, the sponsors of the event, one hundred works were exhibited, selected by a local jury from over three hundred submissions. This large number of submissions indicates the fertility of the visual arts in Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles. The curator of this exhibition was the art historian Jennifer Smit, who had the cooperation of Nicole Henriquez, daughter of May Henriquez. The efficient staff of forty people included technicians and well-trained guides.



Elvis Lopez, "sin titulo", Photo. Wood, Iron



Emily Francisca, "Cállense, llegó la hora de meditar." Installación.



Heleen Cornet, "The Fantastic City of the Rain Forest", Acrylic



Philippe Zanolino, "Mahogany", oil on canvas

The proportion of artists in Arte'99 was more or less the same as it had been in Gala di Arte: twenty eight artists from Curaçao, seven from Aruba, three from Bonaire, two from St. Martin, two from Saba, and seventeen artists from the Netherlands who had more than five years residence in Aruba or the Netherlands Antilles. This exhibition reveals the evolution of the visual arts of Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles of the last ten years: at Gala di Arte, there was just one installation. In Arte'99 over half the works were installations. An enthusiastic international jury composed of the art critics Maria Luisa Borrás (Spain), Edward Sullivan (USA), and Marianne de Tolentino (Dominican Republic) awarded prizes on the basis of originality, expression of Caribbean identity, and quality of contemporary idiom. The installations received many prizes. Aruba scored very high in relation to the number of participants. Arte'99 signaled that the fever of the visual arts in Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles is indeed burning high!

Collectively, these three exhibitions have increased the visibility and recognition of the visual arts of Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles. In addition, they challenge us to pay attention to the rich artistic heritage and output from this almost "invisible face" of the Caribbean.

Artists

AS JENNIFER SMITH RIGHTLY POINT OUT, there is "an astonishingly broad and varied presentation of expressions of contemporary Dutch Antillean and Aruban art." First, there are self-taught or "intuitive" artists, to use the Jamaican art historian David Boxer's term. Among the most famous of these are the painter Hipolito Ocalia (1916-1984)⁴ and the sculptor Maximiliano Nepomuceno (?-1975).

The second group are artists that have studied in the Netherlands, other European nations, the United States, or Latin America. Although these artists may exhibit regularly in the Netherlands, they have chosen their native land as their definitive domicile. These artists include Elis Juliana (1977), Yubi Kirindongo (1946) and Jeanne Girigori (1948) in Curaçao; in St. Martin, Ras Mosera; in Aruba, the neo-abstract painter Ludwig de Lisle (1949), Elvis Lopez (1957) and the abstract-landscape painter Stan Kuiperi (1954). In addition, connected to the Galeria Eterna are Osaira Muyale, Giolina, and Renwick Heronimo who returned home to Aruba after their education abroad. Until the creation of local art academies, this trajectory will remain a most likely option.

The third group consists of artist who work and live elsewhere (mostly in the Netherlands or the USA) though they come back regularly to the Caribbean. Among these are Jose Maria Capricorne, Nelson Carrilho, Cynric Griffith, Rudy Martina, Sam Parabirsing, Roland Richardson, Felix de Rooy, Myrna Ruiters, Norva Sling. They constitute a remarkable proportion of the exhibitors. Their work—in theme and message—often celebrates the Caribbean landscape or the ancestral regional legacies, be these Amerindian or African-Caribbean.

Finally there are foreign artists, most of them from the Netherlands, who have migrated to the region. They are often dazzled by a new nature and culture, and, as “converts,” they show in their work sometimes a true Antillean mysticism and enthusiasm for their elected new world. Heleen Cornet (1948), in Saba, a visual poet of the rain forest, illustrates this affirmation, as does Philippe Zanolino (1960), from France, an installer and painter, who has elected Curaçao as his second “patrie.”

Finally, a gratifying sign of progress is the increasing number of women artists, among the best and most advanced creators in their respective countries: Heleen Cornet (1945), Barbara Joyce (1917) in Saba, Glenda Heyliger (1957), Alida Martinez (1964), Osaira Muyale (1964) in Aruba, Lucia Trifan (1949) in St Martin, Barbara Lane (1946) in St Eustatius, Emily Francisca (1965), Ellen Spijkstra (1957), Jeanne Girigori (1948), Norva Simon (1947) in Curaçao. Nel Casimiri, Jennifer Smit and Ruby Figaroa-Eckmeyer are contributing to present and future of art from Aruba and the Netherlands Antilles, as curators and art historians. 🍷

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1. For a discussion of contemporary art of Suriname see the catalogue of the exhibition in Amsterdam. Binnendijk, Chandra van and Paul Faber. *Twintig jaar beeldende kunst in Suriname, 1975-1995*. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1996. Also see, Angel, Felix. *In Search of Memory: 17 Contemporary Artists from Suriname*. Washington: Inter-American Development Bank, 1998.
 2. For historical information on these countries, see Blakely, Allison. “Historical Ties among Suriname, The Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands.” *Callaloo* 21.3 (1998): 472-478.
 3. See Blok, Henny, Ruby Eckmeyer, and May Henriquez. *Gala di Arte: Antillean and Aruban Arts*. Curacao: International Trade Center, 1991.
 4. Henriquez, Nicole and Jacqueline Romer-de Vreese. *Ocalia Paints Curacao*. Zutphen (Neth.): Walburg P, 1995.