

Under the shade|Without a shadow

This year, our first International Cultural Exchange to Belize took its inspiration from the country's motto "Sub Umbra Florero" meaning "under the shade we/I flourish." According to the Encyclopedia Britannicus, "the Latin motto is a reference to the area's forest and its establishment as colony under British protection." While we visited the Image Factory Art Foundation gallery space in the heart of Belize City, its co-founder Yasser Musa stated in his introductory remarks, "Belize has 9,000 years of art practice." It was a reminder that Belize was the center of Maya civilization. The Maya developed astronomy, calendrical systems and hieroglyphic writing. They were also known for elaborate and highly decorated ceremonial architecture, including temples, palaces and observatories. The Maya were equally skilled as weavers and potters and cleared routes through the jungles and swamps to establish trade networks with distant people.

During our seven-day International Cultural Exchange, we navigated the contemporary art scene and verified the pertinence of Musa's statement. From Belize City to San Ignacio to Santa Elena to Dangriga, we traveled an art route designed by Adrienne Shadwick, our expert collaborator on the ground, and Rosie-Gordon Wallace, DVCAI's founding president. The itinerary highlighted the diversity and vibrancy of the art landscape.

Musa captured the essence of the 2019 project with his further observations. He declared that as a trans-shipment space, Belize is situated at the intersection of Guatemala and Senegal, referencing the forced migration of Africans to Central America during the slave trade and the encounter with the Amerindians. By traveling to Central America DVCAI purposely problematized some more the conversation on Diasporan artistic and cultural identity. Culturalist Paul Gilroy's view that the African Diaspora's dispersal and relocation across bodies of water was modern and transformed the West as well as Africa served as a backdrop to the trip. In a review of

the exhibit *Afro-Modern -Journey's Through the Black Atlantic* (2010) art historian and curator Petrine Archer states, “The Diaspora’s restless migratory patterns since their removal from Africa, has left its communities in constant motion, a people of the sea, forever looking back to points of entanglement rather than their origins” (1).

A coalescence is in play in the former known British Honduras colony bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the east, Guatemala to the south, Mexico to the north and Honduras to the west. The Maya, Mestizo, Creole, Garifuna, East Indian, Mennonite, Arab and Chinese cultures bring to bear on the arts. The contemporary Belizean art scene took shape in the 2000s when, capitalizing on the strategic positioning of Belize as the crossroads of the Caribbean and Central America, young local artists chose to collectively exhibit their work beyond the national borders. Starting locally with exhibitions in Mexico, Guatemala, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Cuba, the movement reverberated transnationally and travelled to the USA, Spain, Portugal and Taiwan.

Currently, the dissemination of and management of art is left to state-sponsored entities on the one hand and artist-ran organizations on the other hand. Armed with two years of training in Taiwan, artist and curator Ilona Smiling provides leadership at the Museum of Belize. Additionally, houses of culture (HOCs), found throughout the country, and the St John’s College offer a substantive art curriculum at the elementary and post-secondary education level. Under the umbrella of the National Institute of Culture and History, the HOCs like the one we visited in San Ignacio, are meeting points where neighbors, residents and students come together and are provide each other inspiration and uplift through cultural activities.

Parallel to the state-sponsored bodies there are several artist-operated organizations. We networked with members of Belize Soul Project, Wildfire Artzmosphere and the Image Factory Art Foundation. Located also in San Ignacio, Belize Soul Project comprises a bar, an art gallery

and hotel. The owner, local artist, film maker and conservationist, Daniel Velazquez shows edgy art. During our visit Velazquez was joined by an American anthropologist he had just collaborated with on a Garifuna culture documentary. The founder of the Cayo Film Festival, Velazquez has directed several films. Stephanie Willis and Virginia Hampton, founders of the theatre company Vampire, manage Wildfire Artzmosphere, a collaborative space for theatre, performance and visual arts. We caught an intergenerational aerobic dance class the day we called on.

The Image Factory Art Foundation is the nerve center of the art world in Belize under the leadership of its visionary director Yasser Musa a talented poet, visual artist and art instructor. The Foundation's mission is the promotion, exhibition and documentation of Belizean art. Situated in Belize City, the gallery space hosts exhibitions, performances and other art-related gatherings. To date, it has released *Landings: New Art and Ideas from the Caribbean and Central America 2000-2010* (2010), a two-book set *Binomium* (2015) and *Bembe Vision: Leadership Notes for the Belizean Classroom* (2018), a book dedicated to prominent Belizean women. Also, the Factory publishes an art e-magazine BAFFU. The institution is interdisciplinary in its approach: it is open to spoken word artists who shared their work with DVCAI along with visual art members during a talk.

In Dangriga, the Garifuna culture heartland, we visited the Gulisi Garifuna Museum and met with independent artists (photographer Tony Rath, Alice Bowman a scrap artist and Crystal Lopez) for a talk at the Ignacia Cacho library. We visited Pen Cayetano's studio gallery too.

Challenging the concept of national identity, in a provocative Ted Talk presentation writer and photographer Taiye Selasi suggests, "Don't ask where I'm from, ask where I'm local." DVCAI felt quite at home in Belize among art practitioners. Across borders, thematically speaking some of the concerns are similar. Both groups presented environmental-themed work as well as social

commentary pieces. Tony Rath, Alicey Bowman and Adrienne Shadwick advance an ecological discourse that addresses the erosion of the organic ecosystem and traditional ways of life for the benefit of real estate and land developers and consumers obsessed with greed. Michael Barber, Kelvin Byzer, Pierre Obando, Izia Lindsay all raise the question of the pertinence of a Caribbean identity. How does one create or use existing symbols to construct marking traits recognizable by all? Ilona Smiling and Devorah Perez break boundaries and subvert.

Briheda Haylock, Gayla Lopez and Carol-Anne McFarlane underscore the emotional, psychological and physical violence visited on women. Additionally, they examine other gender issues such as cat calling, patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia and heterosexism. Rosa Naday Garmendia, Aisha Tandiwe Bell, Kurt Nahar, Michael Elliot and Katie Numi Usher comment on socio political ills disenfranchised constituents are faced with. The artists consider the impact of racism, (neo) colonialism, police brutality, dictatorship and corruption on the black and brown subjects. Most use a feminist, gender or intersectional lens.

These points of connection as well as questions concerning the politics of the visual, of aesthetic, of seeing and visibility in Belize which we started debating predicts richer conversations as we anticipate returning to the country in the future.

Alix Pierre, Ph.D., Scholar-in-residence

