

Bermuda International Cultural Exchange Program

This year DVCAI inaugurated a new destination, Bermuda. Throughout our exchanges with Bermudians across the socioeconomic spectrum they defined themselves by referring to the Atlantic World Experience. What constitute the Bermudian identity? Bermuda is an island, but it is not in the Caribbean. Many islanders have lived, studied, or travelled to North America. They do so regularly. The closest land mass to Bermuda is North Carolina but the island is not American or Canadian. Bermuda is part of the British Commonwealth but it's not in the UK. Many citizens have an American or Canadian accent. Some sound British. This positions the place in a unique situation.

Dr. Deborah Atwood, curator of the National Museum of Bermuda highlighted the importance of Bermuda concerning the dialectic between Caribbean nation states and the former colonizers. She revealed that the island inspired William Shakespeare to write his seminal play *The Tempest*. From Aimé Césaire to Maryse Condé to Édouard Glissant to Derek Walcott and George Lamming, many Caribbean writers, theoreticians, and essayists have engaged and appropriated the text to address colonial oppression. In doing so they have crafted a literary theoretical framework still in currency today.

As the resident scholar I was asked to develop a survey that captures the participants' overall experience, goals, active on-site participation while in the host country, the correlation between the ICE program and DVCAI's mission statement, the quality of housing in the host country, the relevance of pre-departure information shared, intercultural competencies, and final thoughts. 100% of the respondents indicated that overall, the experience was excellent. In their estimation the exchange was well planned. It left time to meet with leaders at art institutions in Bermuda and local artists. There was time to explore the region's history as it relates to DVCAI artists' practices. The careful selection of the participants ensured that everyone added value. There was a balance between learning from artists and the museum visits. Someone was grateful to be part of a space dedicated to both emerging and senior artists.

Regarding the participants' goals they ranged from seeking cultural immersion to learning about art administration including fundraising, archiving, and experiencing international culture. Key also was the will to hear and learn about other ways of understanding the world as well as connecting with forms and artists in Bermuda not known to the DVCAI artists. One creative revealed gaining clarity and guidance on the next steps of her career as a central goal.

The participants unanimously agreed that the ICE was on par with DVCAI's mission statement. It promoted a better and mutual understanding of Bermuda's art world and their homelands. 66.6 % of respondents pointed out they identified a Bermudian artist they connected with and would eventually collaborate with.

Regarding intercultural competencies, the culinary tradition of stew fish with rum, Mary Prince Day (a holiday honoring an enslaved woman who published her biography and played an important role in the abolitionist movement in the UK) and the architecture (the use of shades and angles) ranked high among the cultural traditions of Bermuda DVCAI artists were not familiar with. The high level of national pride in being Bermudian and the tradition of Gombay came second.

The High Tea ceremony, conversations with local Bermudians (their accents intertwined with many others), the willingness to experiment artistically and the presence of so much local art at the museums were part of the culture that our artists experienced.

One of the differences between the target country and the US was the weather. Though it looks tropical regarding the fauna, flora, blue ocean, and presence of beaches everywhere it was very cold. Someone thought Bermudians were more formal in their manners, very kind and welcoming. The issue of segregation was addressed in a very polite way. A respondent observed that the local artists we met were all participating in exhibits and seemed supported and encouraged by their government to study and contribute to shows regardless of their background and income. Another member noticed the large number of young Bermudian graduates employed at art and culture institutions compared to the US. Succession planning and generation leadership was demonstrated at almost every institution.

Regarding the most rewarding aspect of the ICE, one artist said the film festival we attended was very important as she learned about unsung Bermudian heroes and cultural icons, she would not have been aware of otherwise. Someone else experienced artistic and cultural growth while a third person laid emphasis on the strong group of DVCAI artists coming from Miami, Jamaica, Suriname, and South Carolina and a resident scholar based in Atlanta. The daily ritual of reflecting over a scholarly quote provided by Dr. Pierre during breakfast was grounding.

Artists were asked how their perspective changed because of the ICE experience. Someone gained better insight on how geography influences artistic outcomes. Somebody stated, “I am a firm believer that deepening cultural understanding and forging lasting connections across borders are essential for promoting peace, fostering mutual respect, preserving cultural heritage, and nurturing a sense of global citizenship among individuals and communities worldwide. This, in turn, contributes to a more interconnected and harmonious world.” Another creative affirmed, “Cultural engagement across borders need to happen! I was astounded how a program like this exchange has existed at DVCAI for close to 25 years! Visiting Bermuda allowed me to see how forward-thinking Bermuda is in their cultural movements. I enjoyed seeing the photography exhibition at the Bermuda National Museum and how Masterworks preserves their artwork in their archive. I was also reawakened when learning about each DVCAI artist traveling with us and their work too. We had the time, space, and care to listen so attentively to each person’s passionate presentation.” Somebody else commented on how interesting it is to visit a space where resources for artists are limited yet they find alternate ways to make and share their work. She added, “I return to Miami noting the vastness of resources and institutions that support art-making, residencies, and exhibitions.”

The ICE was made complete by interfacing with contemporary Bermudian artists. We visited Jonas Jones’ studio. In addition to seeing their works exhibited at the National Museum of Bermuda or Masterworks Museum of Bermuda Art, we spent an evening with filmmaker Antoine Hunt, painter and educator Sabriyya Harvey, musician Hana Bushara, photographer Jayde Gibbons, beauty studio owner Astoria Smith, poet Mathew Johnson, multi-disciplinary artist Jahbarri Wilson and Keanté. The open-heart conversation helped paint a fuller picture of the art scene. We are forever grateful to our partner Lisa Howie, founder director of Black Pony Gallery for facilitating the 2024 Bermuda International Cultural Exchange program.

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