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(Reprinted from Guyana Dreaming, April 1990)

Aubrey Williams

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Abstract
The first CAM Conference, in September 1977, held at the University of Kent at Canterbury, was opened by Elsa Goveia, historian, born in Guyana. Aubrey Williams spoke later the same day. I was very disturbed, intellectually, by Professor Elsa Goveia's talk this morning. She made it clear that we have just done a very difficult thing in breaking out of one phase of our development and entering the new freedoms of the different islands and countries in the Caribbean. We will also at the same time have to move from colonialism into the 20th century in one jump, and we will have to do this in our creative arts first.
I was very disturbed, intellectually, by Professor Elsa Goveia’s talk this morning. She made it clear that we have just done a very difficult thing in breaking out of one phase of our development and entering the new freedoms of the different islands and countries in the Caribbean. We will also at the same time have to move from colonialism into the 20th century in one jump, and we will have to do this in our creative arts first.

It always seems in the history of man that the arts give the direction for the technology, the philosophy, the politics and the very life of the people. Art is always in the foreground; it is the true avant-garde. The visual arts, being the simplest and the most direct, should be a little ahead of literature, because with emerging peoples you have the problem of illiteracy, and direct contact is the natural level of communication in this society. We have considered the strength of folklore in emerging societies. We know that this is direct contact.

Now, I am worried about a prevalent conception that good art, working art, must speak, it must be narrative. I do not see the necessity for art to be narrative, in that in thinking about the past and man, art has never been ‘narrative’ to any great extent. I would not call primitive art in any sense directly representational or figurative. The arts of past civilisations were to a great extent non-figurative. One does not question the validity, or the strength of impact, of so-called primitive abstract designs on shields, on houses, in pottery, in the weave of fabrics; one just accepts them. But strangely in the West today, one makes demands upon the visual artist, demands that I think are not warranted in many cases. (It was a bit sad for me to see that it was our elder statesman in letters, C.L.R. James, who has turned, over the past two years, into being a champion for the more advanced and adventurous avant-garde in the visual arts. I would have thought that our young writers would have
fooled the bill far easier as they should be involved in the tensions that would produce an avant-garde art in the Caribbean.)

If our intellectuals have not got an automatically functioning visual chain reaction going yet, what must we hope for from our people at home? When I was last in Guyana at the celebration of Independence, I was stopped in the street by a man driving a dray cart that was loaded with people who had come all the way from a village named Buxton on the east coast of Demerara. They had come to Georgetown. And this man came up to me. I was taking photographs, and he made himself known. I did not know him and he told me how glad he was to meet me and he told me of a new function in his life, one that gave him great pleasure. He said to me, ‘You see that dray cart there. One day every month I load it up with people from my village and I bring them down to look at your paintings.’ I felt very crushed and humble, and I just didn’t know what to say. I said to him, ‘They are abstract, people say they are abstract.’ He used a very strong Guyanese cuss-word. He said ‘Abstract, what is that? I don’t understand abstract. When I look at your paintings I can think about my days in the bush.’ And I thanked him and I went up to the dray cart and I shook everybody’s hand and I spoke to the children for a while. And it was one of the most touching episodes of my visit back home. I am not trying to ask Caribbean intellectuals to consider abstraction as ‘high art’, or the ‘art of the future’ or anything like that. As a matter of fact I don’t even think of my paintings as being abstract. I can’t really see abstraction. Abstraction to me would be two colours on a surface, no form and no imprint of the hand of man. I do not think that painters paint abstraction, nor do I think that sculptors sculpt abstraction. I am not very sure that I understand the meaning of the word.

Another much abused term is ‘modern art.’ We should see to it that this awful virus does not get a foot-hold in the Caribbean—the attitude to the visual arts that automatically attaches labels to what we see when we look. Much of my work has come out of a long contemplation and a search into the pre-Columbian civilisation in the New World—primarily, the Aztec, the Maya, the Toltec and the Inca. Also, a long immersion in the work of our South American Indians in Guyana. I firmly feel that such art should be automatically appreciated by people from the Caribbean and from Guyana because they share the same environment. The South American and the Caribbean environment as compared with the ordered environments of much of the rest of the world, appears naturally ‘abstract’. It is yet, thank Heavens, not rearranged too much by the hand of man. We are losing it fast, but we are lucky to have our roots still in the earth of the Caribbean. We are still in a position to contemplate terrestrial reality. Ours is a beautiful landscape, unbelievably beautiful in some cases; but, as compared with the ordered landscapes in the countries that have been over-lived in, bizarre, unreal, incongruous. It is a very strong landscape and the primitive art that came out of this landscape remains
Aubrey Williams with his painting 'Shostakovich Quartet No 7, Opus 108', at the Commonwealth Institute, 1981

Photo Val Wilmer ©
unique. We should be proud of our non-figuration. We should be proud of the essences of human existence that the people from that neck of the woods have produced in the world. We should be very proud of people like Tamayo from Mexico. We should be proud of people like Matta from Chile. We must become more involved with the visual output of our artists in the Caribbean, because they are going to change the real seeing of the world. They are going to do it just as the politicians and the writers will do it.

And I would be far happier if I could see a greater interchange between all the arts in the Caribbean. Caribbean art seems to me up to now terribly isolated. Everybody is in his niche, using up endless energy working alone without the help of his colleagues. We should have more interchange, we should have dialogue between the novelist and the painter, the musician and the dancer, the potter, the weaver; even the artisans should be included in this. And the dialogue with the people would then be automatic.

We come from this environment, we came out of this environment, and we produce the things that belong back to the environment. If our painters must grope and search and forge ahead, we do not as yet know the language they should speak. We will have to grow into this language and it is a movement from a great state of frustration into one of a growing norm. I hope that we will eventually reach what can be called a norm visually, but we must not be too impatient, and I would hope that the interchange between all the arts would promote an atmosphere in which the Caribbean people will find a greater intimacy with the visual arts.