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**Brent Malone Exhibition Review/Cultural observations and opinion**

Sound, movement, energy, colour are all aspects of Brent Malone's paintings that grab the observer. The vibrance and life of the work is clear. It is not just capturing the spirit of say Junkanoo, but is a testament to it, to its multilayered, multivocalic and nuanced way of being. The canvas is alive! The movement, apparently fast brush strokes across a wide expanse, sweeps the person in front of the work into its pulsating rhythms. This is an intricate part of Bahamian culture, but does not delimit what is Bahamian. The beat is on, the heat is up and the culture, even when captured on canvas, paper, wood, is alive.

Malone's work transcends his era, which is an indication of a true work of art, and it transcends his space. He inhabited a space and time that was incredibly controlled, yet his work is not tied by those same wires to one space, one reality. He crossed boundaries of class, colour, race and subject matter that would be controlled, determined and imprisoned by the above restraints. He depended on no organisation to liberate or guide his artistic expression. Though he may come out of the Chelsea Pottery, he is not defined by it. He was guided by his own light; that is something incredibly important to any artist or entrepreneur; society does not like when boxes are left behind and people move outside of them.

In the twenty-first-century Bahamas, we seem to assume that we need to wait for things to be allowed, to be encouraged to be made to happen. In Malone's day, he made things happen. He did not sit back and ask politely for what he thought he wanted. He requested what he wanted and then made the other things happen with his own steam. The boldness of that character is art. It is not being dominated by acceptability and the norm. Now, we all look to the government for culture. They are to show us what to do. Those who choose to strike off on their own are criticised by society for being too this and too that. Government, normally, is behind in everything artistic and cultural. If people want to make culture happen and produce great art, they must push government; government moves at a snail's pace, and this is not limited to here, this is the same everywhere. Government catches on to these things after they have already begun and been ongoing for some time. They do not take risks and they are not visionaries. Visionaries do not good government officials make because the status quo does not want them. Malone was a visionary and his work demonstrates that in its vivid uniqueness but obvious cultural grounding.

Culture, of which art is a part, is alive and constantly changing. Those visionaries that make these changes are usually on the borders of society, at times they may come from the elite, but it is unusual for them to be as dynamic with their art work if they remain bridled by the constraints of the elite in society. Malone, in his own way, made things happen and certainly was not 'controlled' by the art that could be produced by those in his set. His Junkanoo work is a testament to that. His ability to

capture the movement is also proof that he felt that force in the culture. He had it cursing through his veins. Many will argue that Junkanoo would be outside of his cultural experience as a white Bahamian, be that as it may, culture is not segregated nor is it coloured nor bounded by government limits, unless we impose those on it.

Erica James's exhibition of some of Malone's works attests to his eloquence in colour, sound and culture. The show also drew one of the most diverse and widely assorted groups I had seen at the gallery in recent times. It was a packed house that meant one had to come back to really see the work, to experience their dynamism and to sit with the impact of their statements, The opening showed that we do art, we have been doing art for a very long time. We started doing art before 1973. What has changed, perhaps, is the young artists' reluctance to step outside of the permitted space, themes and textures or subject matter. (There are of course exceptions to this reticence to push boundaries; one quick example is a work at the recent Central Bank exhibition) What has also changed is government's control of art and culture. The paternalist government of the landowner overseer remains intact in this country and there is this belief, albeit unspoken, that government must help. In fact, government must lead the way. It is thus ironic that so many voice their desire for government to manage culture. The Central Bank has done an excellent job in encouraging young artists and the development of art in the country, but it has not done this by controlling cultural development, it seems to have done this almost outside of its identity as government agency/broker.

Malone's work and James's exhibition certainly attest to the reality that C/culture is not government run. Culture is an organic form that develops through the genesis of time and space, where a people create, live and move around an environment that partially determines how we can live. Hurricanes are a part of culture and become ingrained in the psyche of the people. It is a common experience that forms common culture that can manifest differently from one neighbourhood to the next, one island to the next, but bares some resemblance across time and space. Antonio Benítez-Rojo referred to this as the repeating island, it repeats across time and space but has a uniqueness in island communities. James's capturing of Malone's work brought all of this to mind as it was a retrospective that encompassed such a wide variety of work, styles and themes: from Junkanoo to portraits he had a finger on the Bahamian pulse, as varied as it may be. Malone's work shows that there are no borders, no boundaries and no barricades to cultural flows. How does culture flow? French Caribbean thinker Édouard Glissant argues that it is submarine and there are roots that link us all. These roots can be metaphysical or they can be physically manifest, as Benítez-Rojo imagines with his repeating island.

We are islands that repeat despite the violence of enslavement and colonialism. We are the plait in Red Bays Andros, the thatch that grows on many of the Bahamian islands, the reefs that surround the cays, rocks and islands that provide the colour and marine life for tourism, that have fed generations of Bahamians prior to this new reality. We are the islands that are rapidly and swiftly, almost deftly being removed from the archipelago through quiet sales and dynamic bottom lines. These

are bottom lines in empty treasuries raped by unscrupulous national developers and blameless leaders who claim the reigns of culture and attempt to meld it into an industry resembling nothing indigenous, nothing Bahamian, kill the local.

The exhibition shows how fluid culture is, how raw and how refined. It attests to the blurred lines that allow all Bahamians, if they so choose, to enjoy, celebrate, produce and reproduce street culture. Junkanoo is a part of street culture, it is also a part of national culture, but cannot be stuck into a bracketed existence that negates its street, its living nature and its transversality. It began as an outlawed manifestation of self and a blending of colonial and noncolonial cultures, much like the cultural space in which it was performed, and it has become an almost gated cultural artifact, so controlled and regulated, which is good for spectators but not for cultural growth, not for cultural transformation and certainly not for the life it articulates, that we risk killing its realness.

James points out the importance of the Chelsea Pottery in the development of Bahamian Art and C/culture. This space, almost forgotten in current artistic praxis, significantly influenced Bahamians and the growth and fame of The Bahamas. It was a space, tightly controlled yet open and expansive that brought in so many levels of expression and encouraged such a wide spectrum of people, notwithstanding its racial constraints. Today, we talk about creating a space to produce artists and art. We want to make this space transnational, regional and emblematic of what can be. That space though, already exists. It exists in the country as a whole. We cannot continue to sanitise spaces and create museums of culture that kill the very culture they propose to 'celebrate'. Learning art, much as is done at the College of The Bahamas through contact between practicing artists as young or old as they may be and emerging young people, learners, artists, cultural 'manifesters' will define a future for the country. That artistic space though cannot be a clean, well-lighted space without lifeblood flowing through it. It could be funded internationally but it cannot be the victim of international relations and policy breakdowns. Simply put, it must be a living breathing space. Glass, brick and mortar do not a cultural iconic and producing space make, it is what that space facilitates that is culture. As The College of The Bahamas seeks to expand its artistic expression, it must understand, much like Brent Malone's fabulous repertoire of Bahamian life exposes and Erica James's incredible curatorial skills bring to the public eye, the depth and breadth of Malone's Bahamianness and national significance, any artistic space must understand that it does not govern C/culture.

If we consider Cuban art and C/culture and how they thrive, it is in part because government embraces them, but it is so much more than that. Government encourages what is there. It is also noteworthy that the culture of Cuba develops often on the street in counterdistinction to what government allows or allowed. Why Bahamians wish to impose government control of Bahamian culture seems counterproductive. We often talk about the need for government to take culture *over*, but that means that government can encourage cultural development, which is not as they currently understand their role as the purveyors of culture, through

direct involvement and stranglehold control. They cannot manage it, or reduce it to tourism, which is an economic industry, not a cultural one. Their management is reductionist and unproductive, unless they allow artists and other practitioners to manifest the real identities multivocalic, multivisual as they truly are, hybrid, nuanced and locally infused with international flare as they see, feel, live them. They can create an institute of culture to encourage the growth of local culture, but not made-in-China and label Bahamian. To create such an entity would destroy many voices, many visions and certainly a great deal of what is Bahamian. Government cultural management as it stands now translates into a world of disappearing thatch because of massive land sell-offs and privatisation. Without land, there is no Bahamian life and no space to produce Bahamian culture.

No two Bahamians will ever live culture in quite the same way, though they inhabit the repeating island of Bahamianness, so no two Bahamians will have exactly the same practice or expression... commonality does not sameness make. Government often pushes or reduces to sameness. That is what makes the Bahamas a nation. Malone was not sameness but a multiplicity of identities and their expressions. Nationhood does not come from controlled national pride nor limited cultural understanding and expression. Junkanoo was once viewed as ungodly and unBahamian and now we hold it up as if it were all we had to offer. Let us move beyond this and take some examples from Malone's massive body of work. If this exhibition attests to anything it is the rich cultural tapestry that we inhabit, that inhabits us a, that there is enough for hundreds of artistic spaces, 'galleries, museums, workshops and street spaces to thrive. James's Malone show not only brings a part of history into the present with its physical manifestation, but the accompanying catalogue becomes an historical document to an almost silenced history of Bahamian (silenced) past, culture, art and life. (We must now simply choose to read it and it will live beyond the physical exhibition once each piece of work is returned to its current home).