

## Building Projects & Exchange in Barbados, Tiffany Boyle & Jessica Carden [Mother Tongue]

Between 26<sup>th</sup> January – 26<sup>th</sup> February, Mother Tongue undertook a residency with the artist-led space 'Fresh Milk Barbados', culminating in our participation in the regional symposium 'Tilting Axis: Within and Beyond the Caribbean – Shifting Models of Sustainability and Connectivity' alongside David Dale Gallery and CCA Curator Remo de Blaaij. Fresh Milk is an artist-led, non-profit and interdisciplinary platform working locally, regionally and internationally. Our dialogue with Fresh Milk that initiated the residency came out of their inclusion in David Dale's Commonwealth Games cultural programme exhibition 'International Artist Initiated,' which provided us with the opportunity to meet Fresh Milk's director Annalee Davis in-person and our conversations continued from there. Annalee invited us to attend the 'Tilting Axis: Within and Beyond the Caribbean – Shifting Models of Sustainability and Connectivity' symposium Fresh Milk was co-organising with Holly Bynoe of ARC magazine and Mario Caro of Res Artis. However, given our interest in artists and writers from the Caribbean – for example our inclusion of Trinidadian-born artist Richard Fung in our 2014 project 'A Thousand of Him, Scattered' – we felt that it would be beneficial for us to travel for both a residency and the symposium. Together with David Dale and CCA Glasgow, we then began to think through the funding possibilities to make this trip possible. Part of the residency also encompassed an outreach element, for which we made two presentations and screened an artist film and video programme to the students at Barbados Community College.



Teaching an Introductory Seminar on 'Curating' to Final Year Fine Art Students at Barbados Community College, February 2015.

Barbados is a small island in the Lesser Antilles, 21 miles in length, 14 miles wide and with a population of approximately 280,000 making it one of the most densely populated islands in the world. Unlike many of its neighbours, Barbados is a coral island, with very little indigenous plant life as the island's natural flora and fauna was cleared to make way for the sugar fields. Under British colonial rule, Barbados' economy was composed almost entirely around the production of sugar cane. Harvests are now at an all-time low, and tourism has replaced its production as the

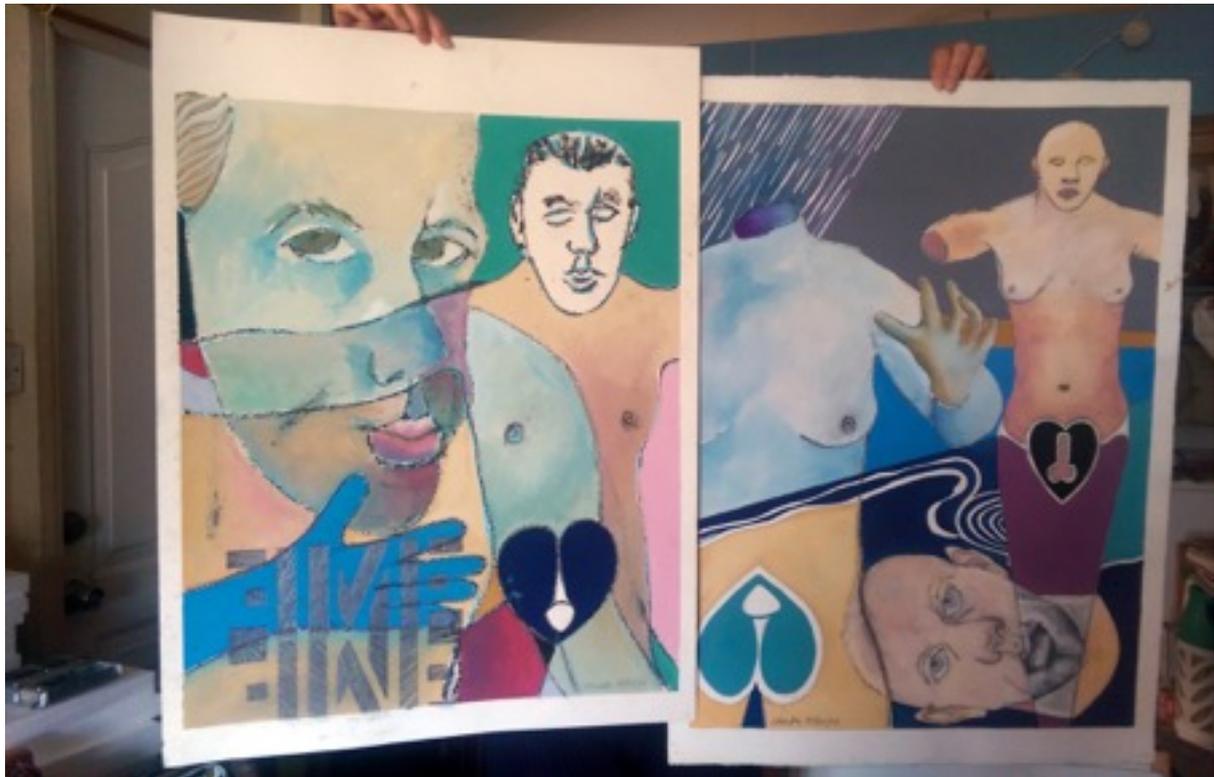
main industry on the island. In 2016, Barbados will celebrate 50 years of independence and will also host Carifesta XIII, the Caribbean Festival of Arts, for the second time, the first being the 1981 edition. These contexts, of post-independence and botanical heritage, were to be points of return for us throughout the residency period.



The West Indies Central Sugar Cane Breeding Station, a world-renowned research centre in the scientific development of sugar cane, where we met with the director Dr Kennedy.

Arriving in Bridgetown, our objective for the residency was to get an overview of the contemporary art infrastructure of the island, and to understand how the arts scene in the 70s, 80s and 90s has shaped the present. As such, our residency involved not only studio visits with artists and meetings with curators, but viewing public and private collections; meeting bodies including the National Cultural Foundation and the Ministry of Culture; the art departments of both the college and university; and meeting with researchers, writer and poets. We met artists across generations, emerging, mid-career and established, including Ewan Atkinson; Alberta Whittle; Mark King; Holly Bynoe; Joscelyn Gardner; Nick Whittle; Alison Chapman-Andrews; Versia Harris; and Ras Ishi Butcher. The majority of the curators whom we met previously ran

independent spaces: Denyse Menard-Greenidge (Dayrells Gallery in the 1970's); Joscelyn Gardener (The Art Foundry late-1990's); and Therese Hadchity (Zemicon Gallery, 2000's). In response to the challenges facing such as financing these initiatives, those working as curators based out of Barbados at present are producing work primarily outside of Barbados and are also working as arts consultants or in academia to sustain their practice. We also undertook some preliminary research into the history of the British Council in Barbados, where it previously had its regional headquarters.



Studio Visit with artist Nick Whittle.

Currently in Barbados, in terms of exhibition spaces, there are infrequent exhibitions of contemporary art at the Barbados Museum & Historical Society (these were previously more frequent, but the original exhibition space was turned into a gift shop); there is the Queen's Park Gallery (in temporary settings due to structural problems with the original building); both the university and college maintain a gallery space; and there are two main commercial galleries. Fresh Milk does also host informal exhibitions from time-to-time, but is not a gallery as such. There is no national gallery, but there have been multiple committees set up over the past thirty years by individuals and groups attempting to establish one. This means that the national collection and private collections that have been handed over to the public would rarely ever be on public show. Private collections, such as the Central Bank Collection, are opened to the public twice a year. Therefore, attempts through the Fresh Milk Coleen Lewis Reading Room and Therese Hadchity's module for the undergraduate students on post-independence Caribbean art history, are trying to ensure that there is an inter-generational understanding of what has come before the arts to help better inform the young generation of how they stand now.



Visiting the private collection in the home of collector Clyde Cave.

The financial challenges facing the arts in Barbados was an issue articulated consistently throughout our residency. Also raised was the issue of digitalising works, archives and material relating to the arts; a very time-sensitive issue given the effects of high levels of humidity experienced all-year round. There is very little state funding for the arts, artists and curators, which would be primarily administered through the National Cultural Foundation and the lottery, which provides grant funding through the Art and Sports Promotion Fund. Our impression of the National Cultural Foundation through our conversation with them was that – instead of working akin to an arts council – that the NCF was taking on too large a range of programmes, festivals and initiatives, such as the prisoners' rehabilitation art programme, that should be undertaken by other governmental agencies or at least be a shared responsibility. The Ministry of Culture recently commissioned a consultation on the creative industries on the island and separately passed a bill for the sector, although the current opposition party – the Barbados Labour Party – is generally seen as being more pro-culture than the ruling party, the Democratic Labour Party. The bill among other things asks those involved in the sector to register and offers certain VAT exemptions for the sector, but there did appear to be suspicion of the bill from within the visual arts.



Ewan Atkinson, 'Bubalups/Mother Sally: Private Audition,' 2013, photograph by Katherine Kennedy.

The 'Tilting Axis' symposium marked the first time artist-led spaces from across the Caribbean had gathered together, travel within the Caribbean is very expensive and language barriers can prove difficult between islands despite the geographical proximity. The colonial history of each of the islands also reflects upon the arts infrastructure, with there being much stronger ties and support between Europe and the islands formerly governed by the French and Dutch. Part of the agenda for the 'Tilting Axis' symposium was for each participant to table a suggestion, an idea, to promote exchange, collaboration, expansion and sharing across artist-led spaces throughout the Caribbean. Mother Tongue put forward the idea of a mentorship programme between the UK and the Caribbean for artists and curators, which David Dale Gallery, CCA Glasgow and Videobrasil also expressed an interest in partnering with us on. Part of the remit of the grant from the British Council is to produce a return UK project responding to our time in Barbados. Furthermore, since returning, our proposal to curate an off-site exhibition in Barbados next year was selected for the Apexart Franchise Program. As we work towards this currently, we are also looking for the partnerships and possibilities that would allow us to travel this exhibition back to Scotland in 2016/17.



Delegates to the 'Tilting Axis: With and Beyond the Caribbean – Shifting Models of Sustainability and Connectivity' symposium, held at Fresh Milk, 26-28<sup>th</sup> February 2015.

The most enjoyable aspect of the trip for us was the opportunity to meet with many artists and curators, producing exceptional work under strained circumstances, which has really compelled us to find ways to work with those in the region. The relationships built between ourselves, Annalee Davis of Fresh Milk and Holly Bynoe of ARC magazine, have been particularly special, and we look forward to returning to Barbados for the Apexart exhibition in 2016.