

Gardening in The Tropics - An Appreciation

Mervyn Claxton

Gardening in The Tropics: An Exhibition of Artwork by Jasmine Thomas-Girvan

<http://www.normangirvan.info/thomas-girvan-gardening-tropics/>

In her very perceptive presentation of Jasmine's exhibition, Gardening in the Tropics, Melanie Archer made repeated attempts to decipher the emotions and thoughts that lie behind the enigmatic expression of a male figure in brass. She kept on returning to the figure during her visit to the exhibition. *"I try to imagine him in a different space, and wonder how he will be read by others who don't have the benefit of explanation."* There is also some doubt in my mind that all the exhibited objects are reproduced in the catalogue. There is a reference, for example, to "The Pumpkin Seed", which I do not see in the online catalogue, unless it is the unnamed frontispiece. Since I do not have the benefit of Jasmine's explanation nor the opportunity to see the exhibition "live", I shall confine my comments to the symbolic aspects of the exhibition and leave the artistic aspects to those who enjoy that privilege and would thus be in a better position than I to comment on them. In making my comments, I take as my guidelines Jasmine's written commentary in the catalogue and her whispered (to Melanie Archer) comments, explanations, and source of inspiration in respect of individual exhibits, as she guided Melanie Archer around the exhibition.

The creative artist articulates a society's shared beliefs and values and stimulates its collective imagination. In this respect, the artist can play a key role in a society's transformation. The artist, and those who create, carry in them forms of expression and vision which make them, at one and the same time, the vector of cultural values and the creators of new values which, in turn, serve to point to the direction in which the future of their society lies. C. L. R. James has eloquently articulated the transformational role a talented artist can play. In his 1959 UWI lecture, "The Artist in the Caribbean", James observed: *"A supreme artist exercises an influence on the national consciousness which is incalculable. He is created by it but he himself illuminates and amplifies it, bringing the past up to date and charting the future."*

This fascinating, very original, visually-arresting exhibition of Jasmine's latest work provides us with a tantalizing view of a supreme artist bringing the past up to date and charting the future. Melanie Archer recognized that prophetic, visionary quality in Jasmine's work: *"All [the objects in the exhibition], however, nod to....the act of looking beyond to the potential of that which is yet unseen."*

Jasmine's exhibition is a paean to Nature, to Mother Earth, and to the power, beauty and (inner) strength of ancestral Amerindian and African-Caribbean women. It radiates symbolic meaning and glorious subliminal messages. The exhibition is a metaphor for life, a glimpse of a future that lies in store for us if we can sum up the courage to begin the Quest for it ("*We Dare Be Brave*"), and if we do so with humility and selflessness ("*pure love*"). The underlying message Jasmine conveys to us, through her collection, is, as she explains herself, that we can obtain a view of the marvelous future that could be our own ("*the most marvelous landscape on the Planet*"), only if we overcome our apathy ("*lethargy*") and make the effort to surmount the redoubtable obstacles ("*Breathtaking vistas only if you are willing to climb*") that stand, or have been placed, in our path.

Jasmine informs us that "The Quest" for that marvelous future begins with a single step on the climb to "*the uppermost story of the Tower of Victory*", and implies that there is no better place to take that first single step than a Garden in the Tropics. The Garden, where "*sometimes you come across these strong Amazon women striding across our lands*", is clearly situated in the Amazon rainforest - the legendary abode of Amazonia, who is a central figure in the exhibition. The analogy between the rainforest garden and the multi-storied Tower of Victory that requires courage to climb, the uppermost storey of which must be reached before one can see the marvellous landscape, strikes us immediately.

Rainforests are multi-storied. They possess a unique vegetative structure composed of several distinct vertical levels - the forest floor level, the shrub layer, the understory (consisting of several leaf and branch levels), the canopy, and the overstorey - the emergent layer that rises into the sky well above the canopy. Each vegetative layer in the rainforest has a unique ecosystem, to which the plants and animals that inhabit that layer have adapted. Like the Tower of Victory, one must climb to the uppermost storey of a tropical rainforest - the overstorey - to be able to see "*Breathtaking vistas*". Like the Tower of Victory, also, taking the first step would require courage, for the forest floor level is littered with decomposing vegetation and organisms, almost no plants grow there, and only about two percent of the sunlight reaches it.

Climbing the Tower of Victory, "*on each step, souls colour becomes more intense, its form becomes more perfect the light that emanates from it shines ever brighter...only when it reaches the topmost step, can one truly view this spectacular landscape....*" Similarly, only two to five percent of the available sunlight filters through to the understory of a tropical rainforest. There is much insect life at the understory level, but life becomes really intense at the canopy level, which traps about 80% of the sunlight and where, it is estimated, 90% of all species in the rainforest ecosystem are to be found. Like the Tower of Victory, only on reaching the topmost level - the overstorey -- would fear be vanquished and one can truly view the spectacular landscape. The journey to the uppermost storey of the Tower of Victory is also one of self-discovery. As Hal Borland, the 20th-century American nature writer, observed: "*I challenge anyone to stand with autumn on a hilltop and fail to see a new expanse not only around him, but in him, too.*"

The rainforest analogy embodies social, political, environmental, and gender messages. Our

Caricom societies are among the most diverse in the world. Tropical rainforests are host to the greatest diversity of plant and animal life on earth. With some fifty percent of all species, the Amazonian rainforest contains more plant and animal species than any other region in the world. That unimaginable number of living organisms have been able to survive in a relatively small area (tropical rainforests cover only two percent of the earth's surface) and in a highly competitive situation, through biological interdependence - a key characteristic of rainforest ecosystems. All species that inhabit a tropical rainforest are, to some extent, dependent on one another. Furthermore, many species maintain complex symbiotic relationships with other species, relationships from which they derive mutual benefits. The disappearance of a keystone species (a key organism in an essential link between a number of species in the ecosystem) could disrupt the functioning of the entire system and could, possibly, lead to its destruction

The social message is that our diverse Caricom societies should emulate the biological interdependence of the rainforest species by acknowledging our mutual dependence on one another and promoting the qualities of community, solidarity, inclusion, and belonging. Moreover, as Jasmine implies, such qualities are inherent in our ancestral African cultures: *"The family has no borders...Our children have many mothers and many fathers. As many as they wish". And the ancestral spirits, the ones that help you make your way, are the many grandparents that each of you has.*" In contrast to the Western atomistic conception of society in which the individual stands alone, our ancestral African cultures conceived society in holistic terms, with values that are communitarian, not individualistic. Society is not divided into "them" and "us" and solidarity is the glue that makes their society cohere.

"Through their symbolism, these pieces carry a certain agency regarding current events. We speak about the State of Emergency, violence and guns." The social exclusion suffered by certain groups in the society is, to a large extent, responsible for the alienation, marginalization and socio-economic inequality which have fuelled much of the crime and violence that are gradually destroying the social fabric of in some Caricom countries. In order for Caricom societies to survive, policies of inclusion must replace those of exclusion.

People who have a sense of belonging, who feel included, who consider that they have a role to play in the society even though it might be an insignificant one, are likely to become stakeholders in the society and would thus be inclined to engage in behaviour that protects rather than destroys their society. That sense of ownership would also tend to inhibit destructive behaviour, on their part. Even the smallest organisms in a rainforest, such as ants for example, play a more or less important role in the ecosystem. Ants maintain symbiotic relationships with many species in the rainforest including plants, fungi, and other insects. All the ecosystem's living organisms are "included"; none is "excluded".

Moreover, in societies that favour community values over individualistic ones, group approaches, which are more effective than individual ones in promoting deeper levels of participation and greater political empowerment, can be employed. René Dumont, the French sociologist, has described the

effectiveness of group approaches to development in Senegal - village groupings, communal cereal banks, cooperative milling units, among others - and their potential for stimulating healthy political development: *"One would say that those organizations are but economic ones. But when populations are associated, in such a way, around common objectives, they constitute a force, they acquire a political power....To discuss the prospects of these organizations, and the associations in which they are grouped, is to envisage the future - and even the political future of the country."* (*"Démocratie pour L'Afrique"*, 1991).

The political message conveyed by the rainforest analogy is that Caricom political systems could derive valuable lessons from rainforest species in areas such as participation (social and political), inclusion, the importance of group decision-making in politics, among others. Ant colonies, for example, function on the principle of organised co-operation and task-sharing. It is generally recognized that decisions that are made collectively by large groups of people are more likely to be accurate than those made by individuals. Studies conducted on ants have shown that though individuals ants are not clever, collectively, they are capable of performing complex tasks. Such "swarm intelligence", as it is called, has been applied by corporations to improving industrial processes. The study of how ants reach decisions has also shown that the dynamics of collective decision-making have a positive influence on the implementation of decisions, an area in which Caricom countries, like most countries in the South, are deficient.

The environmental message conveyed by the rainforest analogy is that our diversity - human, plant and animal - is an immense source of wealth, which should be preserved and protected. We should *"replenish the earth"* but should reject the ancient religious injunction to *"subdue it; and have domination over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."* Melanie Archer shares with us Jasmine's thoughts on the subject: *"Jasmine speaks of the "incomplete vision" of men who travel with caged birds, and wonders aloud about the strange cruelty of this phenomenon."*

The multiple Amerindian references, in Jasmine's exhibition, and the explicit comment on African animism (*"The great-grandfather or your great-great-grandfather is now that stream snaking down the mountainside"*), convey an insistent message that we should emulate Amerindian and African respect and reverence for Nature, for the environment, and for the plants and animals that share the Earth with us. We should recognize the symbiotic, even spiritual, relationship we enjoy with all other species - plant as well as animal: *"For many peoples of Africa ancestors are the spirits that live in the tree beside your house or in the cow grazing in the field."*

All Amerindian communities and cultures espoused an environmentally-friendly philosophy. The Iroquois, for example, considered that the lands they inhabited did not belong to them. They merely held them in trust for future generations, and each generation had an obligation to preserve those lands and transmit them to the next generation, in the same condition in which they had received them from the previous generation. In her commentary, Jasmine draws our attention to

"fair Anacaona, Taino chieftainess..." Taino deities are environmental ones. They are Guardians and Protectors of Nature and the produce of the Earth that provides sustenance to man. Yúcahu, one of the two most important Taino deities, was the god of cassava and the sea. His mother, Atabey who was his equal in importance, was the goddess of fresh waters and fertility. The Taino took environmental conservation very seriously. Macocael, the Taino god who had failed to guard the mountain from which human life sprung, was transformed into stone, a bird or a reptile (depending on the particular version of the legend) as punishment for failing in his duty.

Nature can be exploited for man's benefit, but only in a sustainable manner. The Taino can teach us valuable lessons in that respect. They cultivated manioc, their principal food, in

Conucos, which were raised gardens that produced abundant harvests with organic fertilizers only. The raised gardens system of agriculture is a highly productive, sustainable system which produces crops without depleting the soil of nutrients and without any decrease in crop yields. It has been utilized by Amerindian peoples in North, Central and South America for thousands of years.

Sharing with us the inspiration behind "The Pumpkin Seed", Melanie Archer says that it is Jasmine's own take on a Chamoiseau story, one in which a *"single, simple gesture has ramifications beyond itself."* "The Pumpkin Seed" is a pointed symbolic reference to "the Butterfly Effect", a postulate of Chaos theory, which explains how a very small occurrence can produce unpredictable and, occasionally, startling results by triggering a series of increasingly significant events. According to Chaos theory, the flutter of a butterfly's wings in China could theoretically affect weather patterns thousands of miles away, in the United States for example. There exists a real-life rainforest example of a butterfly in our wider region, the Transparent Butterfly, so-called because of its translucent wings, whose natural habitat is Central America. It is so delicate and fragile that rain forest ecologists consider its presence as an indicator of the habitat's high environmental quality. The disappearance of that rare butterfly would alert them to imminent ecological change. Theoretically, that single, simple occurrence could have ramifications far beyond. For example, it could herald increased rainstorms, heavy flooding, and disastrous mudslides in the Caricom region. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzRMNVela7M>

The seed is also a powerful metaphor for the source of life and life's potential. The thought behind "The Pumpkin Seed" and Jasmine's philosophy of the Quest are echoed by Borland: *"Man is wise and constantly in quest of more wisdom; but the ultimate wisdom, which deals with beginnings, remains locked in a seed. There it lies, the simplest fact of the universe..."*

The George Orwell quote placed next to "Flame", the last object in the catalogue, is taken from his novel, "Coming Up For Air". In the paragraph immediately following the one containing the

quotation, Orwell marvelled at the great variety of living organisms to be found in just one small pool in the English countryside that had attracted his attention: *"You could spend a lifetime watching them, ten lifetimes, and still you wouldn't have got to the end even of that one pool."* The juxtaposition of the two paragraphs is perhaps a subconscious invitation, on Jasmine's part, to compare the species diversity in an English pool, that so astonished Orwell, with the far greater species diversity in a rainforest. It is estimated, for example, that a single bush in the Amazon region might contain more species of ants than are to be found in the whole of Britain. One square mile of rainforest in Trinidad was found to contain more than three times the number of tree species that exist in Canada and the United States, combined.

The subliminal message is that the enormous biodiversity in our tropical region is not only a very important natural resource but also a potential source of wealth that must be preserved, for its depletion would impoverish us greatly. *"Looking beyond to the potential of that which is yet unseen"*, in the not so distant future when ecologically sustainable development replaces the current, unsustainable standard model of development, a country's wealth might well be measured in per capita units of biodiversity rather than per capita GNP. If we preserve our biodiversity, the Caricom region (and other tropical countries) could possibly leapfrog temperate zone countries on the ladder of development.

But above all, Jasmine's exhibition is a paean to women and an affirmation of their myriad qualities - their nobility (*"noble women like Nanny the Maroon queen"*); their strength (*"these strong Amazon women"*); their legendary qualities of resistance, sacrifice, and rejection of *submission* (*"Anacaona, Taino chieftainess who was brutally slain by the colonists"*); their capacity for leadership (*"like Toeyza who founded the Worishiana nation of female warriors in the mountains of Parima"*); their multiple skills (*"The carib women whom they said Colon relied on for navigation through the islands"*).

In placing legendary, larger-than-life Amerindian and African-Caribbean women centre stage and weaving her exhibition around them, Jasmine subtly draws our attention to the great loss to Caricom countries because of our failure to profit from the enormous contribution that women can make in all areas of society. In so doing, Jasmine implicitly invites us to follow the example of Amerindian societies which accorded women a central role in all spheres. The North American Iroquois, the date of whose constitution has recently been revised back to the middle of the 12th century (some 60 years before the English Magna Carta), not only accorded women gender equality but also a more important role in the society than men. In a recent book, Lesli Favor, an American writer and educator, described the extensive powers that the Iroquois granted to women in their constitution:

"One of the most distinctive aspects of the Iroquois Constitution was its provision for the social and political powers of women. To a degree, the Constitution reflects the social status that Iroquois women always held. Kinship is traced through the mother's family, and families related through their women share a long house. It was logical in this society, in which women already held status

as clan leaders, to give women the rights to nominate chiefs, hold political councils, and reprimand or remove errant chiefs. Moreover, the Constitution specifies that women are the landowners. 'In them is it vested as a birthright....they shall own the land and the soil.....the females of the family have the proprietary right to the Lordship title for all time to come.' " ("The Iroquois Constitution: A Primary Source Investigation of the Law of the Iroquois", 2003).

Amerindian societies, throughout the Americas, accord(ed) women rights which no Western society has equalled to this day. Discussing the Shipibo of the Upper Amazon, Angelika Gebhart-Sayer, the German anthropologist, asserted: *"Shipibo women enjoy more rights, freedom, individual fulfilment and spontaneity than women of other cultures may ever dream of."* ("Cosmos Uncoiled: Indian Art of the Peruvian Amazon", 1984). When the Spaniards first arrived in Mexico, they noticed that the Zapotecs of Oaxaca practised gender equality. Their Shamans were (and still are) both male and female. The Cuiva of Venezuela and Colombia and the Kuna of Panama are both matriarchal societies. Among the Kuna, the line of inheritance passes through the women, who also hold the purse strings - they manage, and thus control, the family/tribe's finances. Among the Cuiva, it is the man who must leave his family after marriage and go to live in his mother-in-law's house where he has to work for several years under apprenticeship to his father-in-law.

Jasmine's symbolic reminder that there are other traditions from which we can seek inspiration, in the manner in which we should organize and manage our society, is a very timely one. Unlike the three patriarchal, monotheist religions which have resolutely excluded the feminine principle from their concept of divinity, Amerindian and African religions have fully embraced that principle. A Taino god (Yúcahu) and a goddess (Atabey) are placed at the top of the Taino pantheon, for example, sharing divine power between them. The Barbarians (the ultras and extremists of the three monotheist religions) at the Gate give us a horrifying glimpse of the type of society we might find ourselves living in, if we remain passive and offer no resistance. The ultras and extremists have the wind in their sails; they scent blood. Under their insistent pressure, many societies are undergoing a tectonic shift. The Far Right is shifting even further to the Right, pulling the Right in the same direction; the Centre cannot hold; the Left is threatened.

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity."

There is clear evidence of the tectonic shift taking place in Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and

Muslim societies in the Middle East, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Africa, as the following news reports show. It is only a matter of time before that world-wide tectonic social shift reaches the Caricom region:

"Clashes erupt between police and ultra-Orthodox Jews near Jerusalem"

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/8978325/Clashes-erupt-between-police-and-ultra-Orthodox-Jews-near-Jerusalem.html>

"Clashes erupted on Monday between police and several hundred ultra-Orthodox Jews from Beit Shemesh, a town near Jerusalem who are campaigning for men and women to be segregated, an AFP journalist said. Israeli police had stepped up their patrols in Beit Shemesh following unrest sparked by discrimination against women imposed by a radical fringe of the town's religious Jews....Israeli media said images broadcast on Channel Two last week of an ultra-Orthodox man in Beit Shemesh spitting at a woman led to his arrest on Saturday night."

"The violence in the town west of Jerusalem came after a wave of incidents elsewhere in Israel in which women have been compelled to sit at the back of segregated buses serving ultra-Orthodox areas or get off, despite court rulings that women may sit where they please. Women's rights activists say that the ultra-Orthodox – around 10 per cent of the population – have become increasingly radical over gender segregation and are winning concessions that harm women."

Another news report on the attempted gender roll back by ultra-Orthodox Jews in *Beit Shemesh* relates the incident of an eight year-old girl who was spat upon on her way to school, and verbally abused by an adult man who accused her of not dressing in a modest manner. Apparently, the little girl was wearing a short sleeve blouse which left her arms uncovered.

"Nine-Year-Old's Abortion Outrages Brazil's Catholic Church"

<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1883598,00.html>

"The case of the pregnant 9-year-old was shocking enough. But it was the response of the Catholic Church that infuriated many Brazilians. Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho of the coastal city of Recife announced that the Vatican was excommunicating the family of a local girl who had been raped and impregnated with twins by her stepfather, because they had chosen to have the girl undergo an abortion. The Church excommunicated the doctors who performed the procedure as well. "God's laws," said the archbishop, dictate that abortion is a sin and that transgressors are no longer welcome in the Roman Catholic Church." The girl's stepfather, who had been raping her since the age of six, was not excommunicated.

"Kansas Abortion Clinic Operated by Doctor Who Was Killed Closes Permanently"

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/10/us/10abortion.html>

"The Kansas abortion clinic run by the doctor who was shot to death in church last month has closed permanently, his family said on Tuesday. The clinic of Dr. George R. Tiller, in Wichita, had been one of a few in the country to provide abortions to women late in their pregnancies, and for decades, women had traveled there from all over the nation and overseas. The office, Women's Health Care Services Inc., was also the state's only remaining clinic, even for abortions performed early in pregnancy, outside the Kansas City area."

"Jailed Afghanistan rape victim Gulnaz is freed"

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-16179236>

"An Afghan woman jailed for adultery after a relative raped her has been freed... The woman, known only as Gulnaz, was released on the orders of President Hamid Karzai, who pardoned [!!!] her earlier this month. Her lawyer told the BBC that she was released without precondition, dispelling fears that she may have to marry her attacker. The case drew international attention to the plight of many Afghan women. Gulnaz - who was sentenced to 12 years in prison after reporting that she had been raped by her cousin's husband - recently gave birth in jail to a daughter.... Human rights groups say hundreds of women in Afghan jails are victims of rape or domestic violence.... Initially she was sentenced to two years in jail, but when she appealed it became 12 years."

The religious ultras and extremists realize that women are the cement of society and that if they succeed in controlling women, their bodies, and their fecundity, society can be controlled and remodelled to their own design. Men who think that that it is nothing more than a gender issue, which does not directly concern them, cannot be more mistaken. It is a social issue of the greatest importance, one that concerns the entire society. Each battle that the religious ultras and extremists win will whet their appetite and encourage them to attack other groups and other freedoms. It has happened before, as Pastor Martin Niemöller reminds us in his scathing criticism of the silence of German intellectuals on the serial Nazi purges of targeted groups in the society, group after group, during their rise to power:

"First they came for the communists and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist.

Then they came for the trade unionists , and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews

and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew.

Then they came for me

and there was no one left to speak out for me."

The symbolic messages in Jasmine's exhibition, which remind us of the legendary achievements of

Amerindian and African-Caribbean women and, implicitly, of the tremendous contribution that Caribbean women could make to society if given the opportunity to do so, can be read as a challenge to the Caricom male power structure to accord women their rightful place in society, and a wake-up call to Caricom men to join the region's women in the struggle (both theirs and ours) for gender equality. We must not remain silent; we must speak out; we must act now. Otherwise, when our turn comes there will be no one left to speak out for us.

"And I was alive it's a feeling inside you, a kind of peaceful feeling, and yet it's like a flame." We must "Dare to be Brave", to take the first step in the Quest to recover control of our future from the hands of others in which we have placed it, who fashion it to serve their own interests. When we recover control of our future, we will then be able to mould it to serve our own needs and ambitions. We would have succeeded in our Quest and the flame of achievement that burns inside us will tell us that we are alive.

I conclude with another quote from C. L. R. James' 1959 UWI lecture: *"...if the threads of a tradition can be discovered among us and made into a whole, if we can be shocked into a recognition of what we are, and what we are not, with the power that this will bring, it is the great artist who will do it..."*