

# Other Places

by Hunter Drohojowska

I'd been to Jamaica five months before, on my honeymoon. My husband and I had indulged ourselves in the island's luxuries: the carnival atmosphere of Montego Bay, the strange, colonial atmosphere of Ocho Rios, and the hedonism of Negril, with its seven miles of white-sand beaches. We snorkled in the tepid Caribbean, following schools of yellow-and-blue parrotfish through forests of seaweed. We bought our drinks with "weed beads" at Ric's, the notorious Negril watering hole. We smoked ganja. We did our utmost to think of ourselves as tourists, not journalists.

But the reality kept sneaking in, like pools of oil bubbling up through the earth's floor, turning it slippery and unpredictable. Every day, the Jamaican dollar dropped in value. The poverty and anger of the people was impossible to ignore. We had wanted to go to Kingston, to find out more about this island than the status of its beaches, but we were warned that it was "dangerous" for whites. We returned to L.A. with ambivalent feelings, doubts that yearned to be resolved.

In November, the Jamaican Tourist Board offered me another chance by inviting me to cover the tenth-anniversary celebration of the National Gallery of Art. This meant five days in Jamaica, all expenses paid — four of them in Kingston.

Air Jamaica now flies direct from LAX. Most of my fellow passengers seemed ready to party; only a handful of beleaguered businessmen got off with me

# Jamaican Intuitions

*Kingston's National Gallery of Art celebrates its tenth anniversary*

in Kingston. During the drive into town, a tourist board representative waxed enthusiastic about the capital city's culture, its historic sight-seeing and its restaurants. I noticed, however, that many of the buildings had been halted in mid-construction, or were in the process of disintegration, with jungle vines crawling up their empty window sills. Graffiti on the crumbling walls instructed: "Seaga [Jamaica's prime minister] + Reagan = Death. Can the Poor Take More?" These pockets of desolation were separated by intersections teeming with people. (Kingston has a population of nearly one million.) The slogan on all the Jamaican souvenirs is "No Problem," but it looked as though there were plenty of problems in Kingston.

The National Gallery of Art is located

in a renovated department store in Old Kingston, the historic section of the city near the waterfront. The director and curator, David Boxer, is a slight man, 38, with a fox-like face, almond-colored skin and a fringe of gray beard. With pride, he escorted us through the galleries devoted to the art of Jamaica and the West Indies during the British colonial period, mostly European paintings of plantations and their owners. Since taking the post at the National Gallery in 1976, Boxer has built a substantial, respectable art collection dating from the 17th century, when the island was discovered. (There are no artifacts made by the original Arawak Indians, who were completely exterminated by the first Spanish explorers.)

Boxer told us about Augustus John, "perhaps the most famous English painter

of his time, who came to Jamaica in 1937 and used the ordinary people as his models. When they saw his pictures, they were quite upset to see they weren't depicted as white. They were used to European art, and it was a shock to see black figures in a painting. They still believed in a hierarchy of color — the darker the people are, the less important."

The establishment of the National Gallery and the efflorescence of contemporary Jamaican art is largely due to the efforts of artist and powerbroker Edna Manley. She is the wife and cousin of the late Norman Manley, statesman and leader of Jamaica's movement for independence (which the country received in 1962), and the mother of



Jamaica art/Is what it is... Be Still, by KAPO.

continued on page 43



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**Travel** *continued from page 41*  
 Michael Manley, prime minister from 1972 to 1980. She began her campaign for culture in the early 1930s, and in 1937, before sending her sculptures to London for an exhibition, she showed them in Kingston. *Negro Aroused*, a streamlined Deco-styled mahogany bust of a muscular black, his head thrown back in defiance, was considered controversial at the time, the embodiment of the blacks' demands for equality. Manley wanted Jamaicans to create their own art, and along with a few others, began teaching classes at the Institute of Jamaica. A great deal of her work is in the collection of the National Gallery, along with that of her proteges.

But much of this work is reminiscent of the selection at any regional museum. What cannot be seen elsewhere is the art made by Jamaicans without any schooling at all: the Intuitives. One of the earliest and most remarkable is John Dunkley, a Kingston barber whose nocturnal fantasies of horse racing, rabbits and mice in their burrows, swollen flowers, phallic plants, and endless roads winding toward dark horizons, invite a host of Freudian interpretations and Jungian speculations. He died in 1947, and most of his work is at the National Gallery.

It was Boxer — with his Ph.D. in art history from Johns Hopkins University — who coined the rubric "intuitive" to sidestep the derogatory implications of "naive" as applied to untrained Haitian painters, or "primitive" as used to describe African art. Many of the Intuitives live in the hills outside of Kingston, are illiterate, and find their inspiration in religion. Boxer claims their work demonstrates "African retention" that comes from the "collective unconscious."

For centuries, Jamaican slaves were forbidden to carve or paint images, so the only African art forms to survive were music and dance. Now, many of the Intuitives are re-discovering their history as adherents of revival cults that meld African religious rites with their Christian practices. The Pocomania cult, for example, supplants the Christian altar with a table covered in white cloth and white food white being the African color for solemnity and mourning. Christian hymns are altered by an African beat for dancing and chanting in all-night rituals.

The best-known Intuitive painter today is Shepherd Malica Reynolds, or Kapo, leader of the Revival Zion sect, which practices Pocomania while clinging to its belief in Christian dogma. Two rooms of the gallery are filled with his paintings — rhythmic landscapes detailed with rows of blue hills over rows of dome-topped orange trees over wiggly rows of a stream. Wild, winged creatures practice revival-cult rituals. His wooden sculptures of elongated angels and Madonnas seem soft, as though pulled from Silly Putty. Boxer said, "That is the way Kapo sees things. He paints just what he sees."

Boxer has had to battle on behalf of the Intuitives. Trained artists and middle-class collectors are uncomfortable with these reminders of their African roots. "Some critics don't feel Kapo is art," said Boxer, gesturing at a painting of a Madonna and child. "They don't expect the mother and child to be black, even though they are in a black country. The older generation of blacks feel the way of their ancestors. They were brainwashed by the image of a white Christ."

**A**side from the National Gallery, the Bolivar Gallery in Kingston has the best selection of work by the Intuitives. Bolivar is a charming white

clapboard house that sells rare prints, books, knick-knacks and wildly colored paintings full of symbols and mystical mumbo-jumbo by Brother Everald Brown and his son Clinton. Father and son also make gourd-shaped guitars, with a leg attached to the neck so that they stand like tables, all of them painted with hearts, flames, pyramids and evil eyes in a psychedelic pattern of whorls. Albert Artwell paints scenes from the Bible, like *Judgment Day* with its saints, angels and worshippers, all black, neatly parading in horizontal bands, as in Egyptian drawings. My favorite artist, however, was William Joseph, a.k.a. Woody, who transforms chunks of wood into bulbous, charming characters that look a little like the painter himself — big, hard, flat

hands, squashed noses and round eyes. Their lustrous surface comes from being hung over steaming pots in Woody's kitchen.

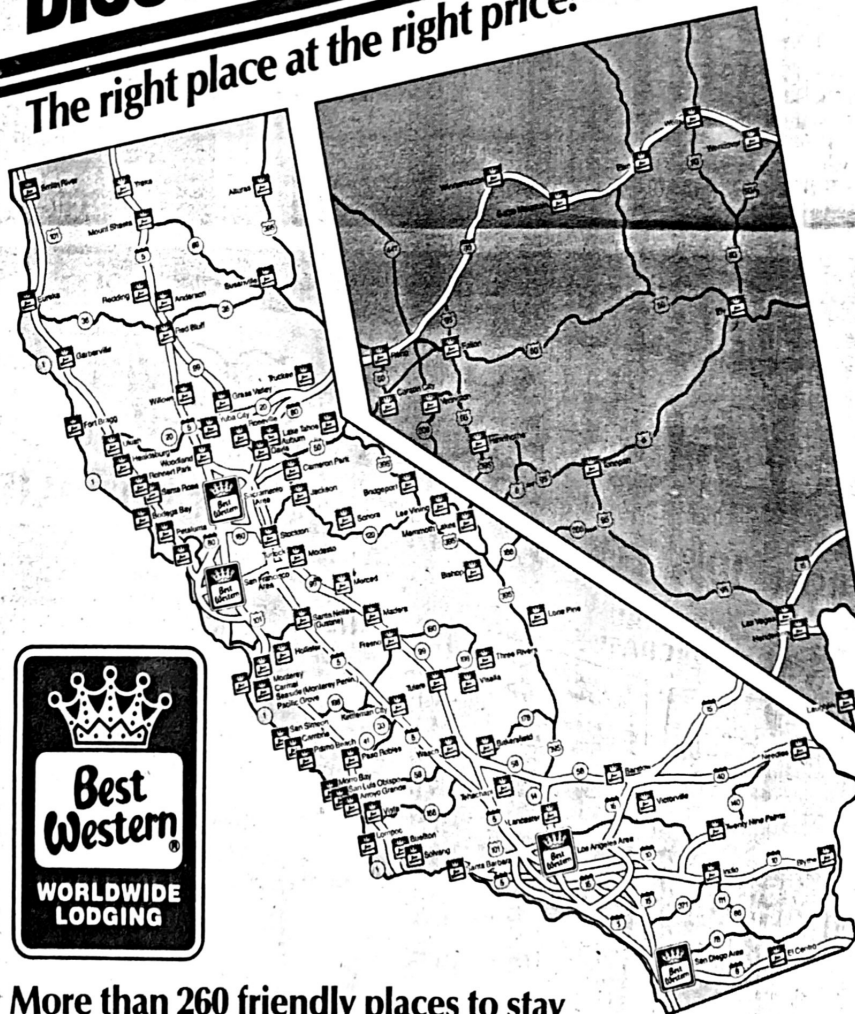
There is a sweetness and wit and honesty to the Intuitives' art that is like the soul of Jamaica. These artists have avoided the schizophrenia of the urban areas of the island. Michael Manley may have been a political chump, but he raised the consciousness of black Jamaicans and wanted them to live without depending on the white man's tip. He allied the island with Cuba and the Soviet Union, nationalized hotels and industries, scared away wealthy Jamaicans and nervous tourists... and nearly bankrupted the country. The Jamaicans brought in Seaga with a landslide, and his first gesture of friendship

was toward President Reagan, who was voted into his second term just a few days later. Now, the Cuban Embassy is closed and American tourism is up.

But the people haven't forgotten the independence that Manley promised. One afternoon we had lunch at the Conference Center, a cluster of modern white buildings on the waterfront. On the front of the Conference Center is posted the Jamaican creed: "Out of many, one people," a reference to the wholly immigrant composition of the population. Beneath this is an old Jamaican proverb: "Come, one coco, full basket," meaning that growth comes one step at a time. Only a few blocks away there are the ghettos, the nagging reminders of all that is troubling about Jamaica. ■

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