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## CARIBANA



From Left: Depictions Work by Asha Aditi Ruparelia, Izzy Ohiro and Sonia Farquherson

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### The big picture

What does the ROM's new exhibit say about the Canadian-Caribbean experience — and what does it leave out?

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BY REA MCNAMARA July 29, 2009 21:07

What does the ROM's new exhibit say about the Canadian-Caribbean experience — and what does it leave out?

#### Beyond the Rhythm: Caribana Art Exhibit

To Aug 3. Mon-Thu, Sat-Sun 10am-5:30pm; Fri 10am-9:30pm. \$15-\$22. Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park. 416-586-8000. [www.rom.on.ca](http://www.rom.on.ca).

"Oh, island art," said a curious couple at last week's opening for the Royal Ontario Museum's "Beyond the Rhythm: Caribana Art Exhibit," a juried collection of work by African-Canadian artists that coincides with this week's city-wide carnival festivities. The pair was standing in front of Ken Daley's First Day of School — an oil work of a headwrapped mother walking her crisply uniformed daughter to school, past lush, rolling green hills and pitched-roofed houses with pastel fronts — and their comment was followed by confusion as to whether or not the artist was from the Cambridge in England or Ontario. They read the title card more closely and found it was the latter. "Well," she told him with disappointment. "There you have it." One last glance, and they were on to the next work.

Perhaps this reaction is to be expected within natural-history and world-culture museum walls, at an exhibit produced by The Association of African-Canadian Artists, whose main goal is to "introduce

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[African-Canadian] art into the mainstream Canadian market.” There are 50 large-scale canvases devoted to processing and defining what came after the Middle Passage, from Savannah syncopation to old-school boom-bap beats. Curator Joan Butterfield — also a renowned artist whose patrons include Maya Angelou — has pulled together brightly coloured figurative celebrations of blackness: of cornrows, Afros and pickneys; of the picturesque, tropical pastoral; of Martin Luther King and, yes, Barack Obama.

“It’s important that we have a space at the ROM,” explains participating artist Nicole Peña. “It’s a renowned institution and to have our work in a museum is something we deserve and is long overdue.”

Peña is an established artist whose semi-realist work — which has been exhibited in the United States and the Caribbean — captures a spiritual entrancement that has Vodou and obeah roots. But she’s grown weary of being pigeonholed by the Toronto art scene, and of being told things like “maybe [we] could use [your] work during Black History Month.”

So why has this exhibit been defined as “island art”? At the height of colonialism, this was primitivism: African art was tribal, Western art modern. For so long, Caribana has been preoccupied with costume-making and music-playing. When Butterfield first curated up-and-coming African-Canadian artists 13 years ago, it was as a Black History Month exhibit in the lobby of the Canadian Human Rights Commission. By the time she joined the Caribbean Cultural Committee’s Board of Directors just before a Scotiabank sponsorship kicked in, the exhibit had been rebranded as “COLOURblind!,” and moved to the Distillery’s Blue Dot Gallery during Caribana.

“The ROM wanted to align themselves with Caribana due to all the people coming in,” explains Butterfield of the museum’s interest. “They appreciated the fact that people in our community don’t normally go to the ROM, so when they approached the Board, we immediately knew we had a product [in] the art exhibit.”

The partnership was set: the ROM became a Caribana Silver Sponsor, which begat the “Roots to Rhythm” exhibit Butterfield curated last year, involving noon-hour musical performances in the museum’s plaza. This year, visitors enjoy Caribbean-themed menus in the Food Studio restaurant, not to mention the soft strains of soca music piped into the exhibition space.

Such packaging might be blamed for not drawing attention to the complexities of the Caribbean diaspora, yet many of the artists have found a marketplace with it: Ingrid Pascal does illustrations for Our Image Greeting Cards; Asha Ruparelia has been commissioned by festivals like Just For Laughs for her Indian Rangoli floor art. The packaging remains true to the Association’s focus on the mainstream: in its 13 years, Butterfield has taken the exhibit throughout the GTA, from the Mississauga Heritage Centre to the Oakville Town Centre, connecting artists with non-gallery-goers. American universities have even taken the exhibit on and, most importantly, so have corporations like Johnson & Johnson and Purolator. (Butterfield notes that the exhibit has been a great complement to “Diversity Week” programming.)

As an artist who was introduced to the 1988 Artexpo New York by Essence magazine, Butterfield is pleased to be finally seeing the emergence of a Toronto African-Canadian art market, albeit one that still can’t compete with the United States’. “African-American art has been in the game for a long time,” she says. “Remember, we are new people in this country, still trying to get the house and the car. Art is not on the radar. But down there, my clientele — which is normally professional African-Americans — understand that art is life. We’re still learning [that] up here.”

While the exhibit has received much positive press, there have yet to be any reviews. When asked whether or not art councils have supported the show, Butterfield admits “they really haven’t helped... [but] they haven’t hindered either.” Peña acknowledges the difficulty African-Canadian artists still face in legitimizing their work to uninformed or indifferent academic tastes.

“There’s not enough talk of us,” she says. “But we don’t talk about ourselves, and aren’t critical of [our] art. We don’t have that kind of dialogue, [individually] or within the greater community. So I wish for this not to be seen as some black art show for Caribana. I want it to be seen as an art exhibit at the ROM.”

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