**ORIGINAL ARTICLES**

# Identity, Culture and Contemporaneity: A Vision from National Art Gallery of The Bahamas

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## Abstract

Bahamian art is characterized by its colonial past and its decolonial response, something that has evolved over the last 50 years. During the last decade of the 20th century, the National Art Gallery of The Bahamas (NAGB) appeared on the scene as a key factor in the growth of the Bahamian artistic environment. NAGB's development has been fundamental in generating consciousness about the history of visual arts in the country, as well as supporting the work of local artists. One of the most important developments of NAGB has been the National Exhibitions. From the inaugural exhibition in 2003, the National Exhibition has transitioned into a biennial event that gathers artists from across generations, expressing ideas about contemporary Bahamian identity, building a new society and focusing on the development of the artistic community.

doi: 10.15362/ijbs.v31i1.579

## Introduction

The beginnings of Western-canon visual arts in The Bahamas were linked to the presence of 19th century travelling artists. The imprint of these creators can be seen the predominance of urban and marine landscapes, as well as official portraits. Their paintings demonstrate the superficial treatment they gave to city scenes or scenes of commerce, without attempting to dig deeper into the culture of the native communities. Therefore, the first moment of historical visual artistic evidence responds to the external and romanticized vision of the territories, as constructed by the productions of the travelling artists and through tourism. As Thompson (2006) notes, "what tourism promoters often identified or pictured as 'tropical' reinforced the idea of the island as a place of wild, overly abundant, and even uncontrolled tropical nature" (p. 93).

In the 19th century, photography played "a central role in making and marketing the islands' unproductive and untropical landscapes into the Bahamas' most 'productive' commodity" (Thompson, 2006, p. 80), shaping the image of The Bahamas through depictions of the daily life of some of the inhabitants, and rendering the place and space exotic and attractive to other travelers. Once again, the art was a response to the economic interests promoted by the incipient tourism industry. Some photographers did settle on the islands and built photography studios, which became a starting point for local artistic consolidation and development.

The legacy of both foreign artists and local practitioners in the shaping of a national artistic sentiment and practice extended into the mid-20th century, with the emergence of Donald Russell's Academy of Fine Arts, David Rawnsley's Chelsea Pottery workshop, and figures such as Horace Wright who revolutionized arts education in the Bahamas (Glinton et al., 1992). In the 1960s, Wrights' students Hervis Bain and James Rolle organized the first Bahamian Art and Craft Exhibitions, creating foundational spaces for local narratives. These conditioning factors led a generation of artists to break away from the legacy artistic codes and begin the search for other symbols that responded to their identity as Bahamians (Glinton et al., 1992).

## The Founding of NAGB and National Exhibitions

Subsequent generations of artists were marked by independence in 1973, which began the process of social structuring and shaping with a marked interest in the cultural sector. Independence provided the government of the Bahamas tools to foster a germinating artistic climate in the last decades of the 20th century. The event that marks the institutionalization of art was the founding of the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas (NAGB) in the late 1990s. According to the NAGB (2025) this step demonstrated the intention of the government to value the artistic production that had developed in the country up to that time and to promote its advancement in order to insert itself into the Caribbean regional art scene.

Following the founding of the NAGB, successive directors realized the significance of showing the most contemporary creations and ideas from artists. The creation of the National Exhibitions (NEs) as a signature event surpassed other exhibitions hosted by small galleries or by private interests; they also energized both the institutions' collections and the promotional management of the arts, increasing the size of its collections and making trends and artists more visible. As a platform for art promotion, the NEs became a way to shift artistic production from the local Bahamian circuit into the wider Caribbean region. Former NAGB director Coulson notes that:

> Almost fourteen years after the institution's founding, it is noteworthy that now … local artists are responding with mature works addressing a broad spectrum of social concerns that surely meet the level of criticality that the institution's founding director found absent in the early open calls. (Minnis et al., 2016-2017, pp. 13–17)

NEs have developed a multi-disciplinary character that has extended the breadth of the visual arts in The Bahamas to include poetry, essays and fashion design, making NEs an extraordinary catalogue and a space to display the diversity and mixtures within all art manifestations. Further, NEs have encouraged critical discourse and academic engagement around Bahamian contemporary art, inspiring dialogues between artists, scholars, and the public by incorporating panel discussions, artist talks and curatorial statements. Their inclusive nature has provided talented emerging artists with a platform to showcase their work alongside more established figures, ensuring the continuous renewal and dynamism of the local artistic scene. As one contributor notes:

> I would say that over the last 20 years the NE has been a means for artist to negotiate what it means to be Bahamian … that tends to be a big thesis in almost

> every piece of art that comes here, and NE tend to focus on what contemporary art is like in The Bahamas now (L. Pratt, personal communication, May 7, 2024).

The NEs have exhibited, legitimized and circulated Bahamian art systematically for more than 20 years.

The curatorial concepts and criteria, although they have been readjusted over time, have favored the visibility of local artistic production and has been integrated into the national exhibition circuit of the Caribbean. A total of 174 artists have participated in the various NEs; its stamp has become the opportunity that many aspire to in order to promote their work within the Bahamas. According to Richardo Barrett, "as a result of the NEs, some artists have found a positive response to their work and aesthetics, making it possible to consolidate their careers both within the national and international circuit" (R. Barrett, personal communication, May 7, 2024) as exemplified by Cydne Coleby's breakthrough in NE8.

Through the various NEs, one can recognize distinct discourses and working methodologies that delineate the elements of Bahamian art, including: the syncretic identity negotiation visible in Antonius Roberts' wood sculptures (*Nine Angels*, 2004, NE2); the ecological consciousness in John Beadle's *Urban Harvest* (2010, NE5); and the social critique in April Bey's *Conchy Joe* (2014, NE7). NEs are also concerned with the rescue of artistic trajectories that preceded the inaugural National Exhibition (NE1; James, 2003). Notably, NE6 included a diverse range of traditional techniques such as watercolor, oil painting, and ceramics, as well as other techniques considered contemporary in terms of their languages, procedures and themes. For example, at NE6 Sue Bennett-Williams used the traditional technique of the Chelsea Pottery to create a dialogue about the history of the technique within the Bahamian context in contrast with what might be termed a more contemporary manifestation. The juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary is characteristic of Caribbean artistic production, making the NEs a nourishing cultural encounter that problematize the singularities of Caribbean visual arts.

A system of perpetual renewal is exemplified in three pivotal NE transitions: NE3 to NE4 (2006-2008) where Krista Thompson's anti-picturesque mandate provoked radical departures like Susan Mackay's *Society Stains-Dirty Laundry* (2006, NE3) leading to Erica James' gender-balanced interrogation in NE4 that featured Claudette Dean's hybrid *Duality* (2008). NE5 to NE6 (2010-2012), Holly Parotti's ecological focus inspired John Beadle's recycled *Urban Harvest* (2010, NE5) then evolved into John Cox's apocalyptic futurism in NE6 with Lavar Munroe's *Never Again Shall This Beautiful Land Experience The Oppression Of One By Another*, (2012, NE6). In NE7 to NE9 (2014-2019), Holly Bynoe's interdisciplinary *National Exhibition 7: Antillean: An Ecology* (2014) incorporated poetry, then culminated in NE9's garden installations, *Sculpture for Plants*, by Alex Timchula (2018).

These curated progressions forced artists beyond their comfort zones: Maxwell Taylor transitioned to experimental prints with *Ain't I A Good Mother?* (2003, NE1), while Blue Curry adopted video installations in *Repairwork* (2007, NE4). Public

engagement intensified through NE7's panels where audiences "directly contested identity politics" (R. Barrett, personal communication, May 7, 2024). The resulting discourse—formalized in catalogue essays for NE4 (James, 2008-2009) and NE9 (Bynoe, 2018-2019)—established three self-definition frameworks: creolized materiality (Bennett-Williams' ceramics), ecological vulnerability (Schmid's *Cloud,* 2010) and diasporic double-consciousness (Swaby's *I Learned in Passing,* 2016) and provided artists tools to navigate global Caribbean dialogues while engaging in local social debates.

While many of the founding generations of Bahamian artists, including Maxwell Taylor were self-taught, a large part of the subsequent generations of artists have studied art or design professionally, either at universities in England, the United States or at the University of The Bahamas. This points to an artistic cycle of return, in which there is an integration into the international art scene and then a reintegration into the Bahamian art scene; John Beadle (UK-trained) and Heino Schmid (USA-trained) exemplify this boomerang effect. Notably, artists like Sue Bennett-Williams developed distinctive styles without leaving the islands, cultivating local collectors.

The number of female artists featured in NEs has grown over time, with NE4 being the first to feature an equal number of men and women. NE6, notably, included more female than male artists for the first time, and NE9, in addition to having more women who comprised the majority but also showcased many young artists.

The curatorial management of the national exhibitions has been dominated by women, six of whom have been female and an important part of production teams. Erica James (NE1, NE2, & NE4) and Holly Bynoe (NE7, NE8, & NE9) notably shaped discourses: James' introductory essay to the NE4 catalogue, "Unbound" (2008-2009, pp. 9-13) centered gender perspectives (50% women artists), while Bynoe's *NE7: Antillean: An Ecology* (2014) integrated poetry to deconstruct colonial tropes. The management of the events, generally not very visible, involved artists who were already part of the lists of the exhibitions. Mention should be made of John Cox, who has been curatorial assistant and curator, Jodi Minnis, John Beadle and Dionne Benjamin Smith as the designers of the catalogues. These figures were able to contribute their creativity and expertise to the conception of the exhibitions, to perfect the structures for the reception of works, as well as promotion and organization. In the organization of each edition, levels of expertise overlapped, creating a dynamic exchange of ideas.

At the same time, emerging artists were featured alongside more established artists. Maxwell Taylor (b. 1939), Kendal Hanna (1936-2024) and Chantal Bethel (b. 1951), artists of the "first wave" and the "second wave" (Glinton et al., 1992), who had more consolidated careers, exhibited in the same space as Toby Lunn (b. 1972), April Bey (b. 1987) and Jodi Minnis (b. 1995). This environment repeatedly led to novel proposals for curatorship, whether through the intellectual and artistic exchange, such as media and techniques in Blue Curry's video installations in NE4. The NEs have been nourished by these exchanges, and in part, built a paradigm of future projection that contributed to diversified approaches.

Another characteristic of Bahamian artistic production reflected throughout the NEs are familial relationships. Generations of

families of artists demonstrate the continuity and significance of the tradition. Among them, the Burnside and Ferguson surnames stand out, who were members of the "first wave" as stated by Glinton et al. (1992) and bequeathed their artistic sensibility to generations of artists from different periods spanning more than 50 years and offering connections between them. Of younger generations, Parotti (b. 1972), Munroe (b. 1982), and Schmid (b. 1976) are examples of those who coincide in the same era, even in the same event.

The centralized nature of The Bahamas with New Providence as the locus combined with challenging connections between the islands generates obstacles that often inhibit the inclusion of artists working in the remote Family Islands into the processes that occur in Nassau. The NEs have worked to ensure the participation of artists from other islands in all their events, such as Dede Brown from Freeport, Edrin Symonette from Eleuthera or Clive Stuart from Cat Island, whose works often depict subsistence fishing and island ecosystems rarely seen in Nassau-centric narratives.

Bahamian diaspora artists are those who have moved abroad and then in their work address migration from position of their changed reality, adding a particularly distinctive approach. Giovanna Swaby's *I Learned in Passing* (2016, NE8) exposes this type of experience, pleasurable or not, of residing outside of The Bahamas where everyday life is radically different and the conflicts of diasporas are revealed.

The NEs, functioning as longitudinal case studies in Bahamian visual culture, have documented critical tensions through curated frameworks. These tensions have included identity negotiations in Roberts' *Nine Angels* (2004, NE2) and Bey's *Conchy Joe* (2014, NE7); ecological urgency in John Beadle's *Urban Harvest* (2010, NE5) and Claudette Dean's *Non-biodegradable* (n.d., NE5); and social critique of migration in Clive Stuart's *Work Permit: The Lawn Will Die Without Care* (2006, NE3). These curated investigations reveal how artistic discourses coalesce around three defining axes of contemporary Bahamian creation: syncretic identity formation (African heritage vs. colonial legacy), postcolonial agency (social inequality critiques) and island vulnerability (environmental precariousness).

The NAGB's intellectual ecosystem—fueled by artist talks like John Cox's NE6 keynote and diaspora roundtables in NE8—has formalized these discourses into an analytical framework for national art. As Barrett notes, "The NE dialogues created reference points for what constitutes Bahamian visuality" (R. Barrett, personal communication, May 7, 2024). This self-reflexive environment not only sustains the NEs' continuity but also enables paradigm shifts, as seen when Holly Bynoe and Michael Edward's NE7 curatorship that expanded beyond visual arts to include poetess Letitia Pratt's textual interventions.

Identity looms large as a reflective point in the work of many artists in the NE. Although The Bahamas achieved independence in 1973, which produced a nationalist feeling that persists in many of the policies and behaviours of the citizenry, Bahamian identity is a theme that continues to be constantly under construction within the artistic context. In particular, identity seen through art initiates a dialogue that complicates a single definition of identity through the inclusion of diverse cultural factors, which in turn creates ambiguity. In this sense, identity linked to established social structures becomes challenged when

it comes to recognizing oneself as Bahamian from the perspective of the conchy joe or the foreign other. In the NE7 catalogue, this confrontation emerges because of state guidelines that fail to encompass all individuals, and the artists—often part of these marginalized groups—express their positions through nonconformity, as demonstrated in Bey's *Conchy Joe* (2014, NE7). Bynoe and Edwards ask, "Are we then ready to confront the contentious relationship that we have with race and ethnicity?" (2014-2015, p. 8).

The generations of artists of the first NEs sought their identity from the cultural references of the last years of the 20th century and constructed the Antillean subject by eliminating the stereotypes established by the tourism market. However, after the first decade of the NEs, this approach had ceased and the focus shifted to constructing the West Indian subject from the historical and real experiences of individuals, creating a more direct link with contemporary conflicts, such as NE7's integration of personal migration stories.

Some key examples of this dialogue surrounding identity include Dave Smith, an artist who belongs to the group of the foreign other, who has exhibited in several editions of NEs. His work behaves as a way of contemplating the identity of the insular in contrast with the most popular; at the same time, he also considers commercial appearance, highlighting how the touristic codes/symbols point to the empty spaces of understanding, as demonstrated in his series *Caribbean Sunrise* (NE8).

Another artist who transverses this question of identity in every curatorship he has been part of (on nine occasions) was John Beadle. His ability to embrace different media allowed him to explore cultural references that helped to define himself as a Black Bahamian artist. Each of Beadle's pieces reflected on the heritage of his ancestors and the inheritance bequeathed from the creative subject to him; this is demonstrated in his work *Higher Goals* (2014, included in NE7) which used ritual objects. Similarly, Bey continues this line of identity interpretation through feminism and cultural globalization from the perspective of another generation within which she coexists, and depicts these notions in *Power Girl* (2018, NE9).

In line, identity is related to the will of exposing the feeling of changes in society. Art owes a debt to social processes and adds to the constant and dialectical process that constitutes the search for identity. In this sense, works at the NEs express the complexities of the reality in which artists and public live, echoing the experiences of the most vulnerable social groups, the effects of changes in policies or the introduction of global problems into the local social ecosystem. These notions are reflected in works from John Cox, which mixes momentous events in social-political history with the development of his identity; in writing of Ian Bethell-Bennett, who declares himself as an artist, denouncing the impact that official action generates on the communities and their descendants, often forcing them from their work, their home and ecosystem in favour of unrestrained tourist exploitation. As Bynoe and Edwards (2014-2015) warn: "The reconfiguration of our shorelines for tourist consumption has uprooted communities, forcing artists to abandon both their homes and the ecosystems that inspire their work" (p. 11). The way in which many artists review their social environment tends to be based on their own experiences that define their approach to gender violence, contact with feminine or masculine and spiritual satisfaction.

African roots, an indelible feature of the memory of Caribbean peoples, are addressed without the stigma of African religious connotations while inspiring material relationships with nature and the processes that converge in the environment. The legacy of their ancestors is based on the system of knowledge they acquired about the natural world, its benefits and the meaning it holds for island spirituality. One artist who tends to use natural materials to comment on African heritage is Antonius Roberts. In his pieces of local or imported African wood, he pays homage to his ancestors through the synthesis of the monument.

Nature is a fundamental element present in the artistic production of the NEs, both symbolically and as an acknowledgment of the literal geography of the island. Although the curatorship of NE5 was devoted entirely to the human footprint on the environment and the consequences of climate change, featuring seminal works like Claudette Dean's *Non-biodegradable* (2010) and Kendra Frorup's *Inflorescence/Influence* (2018), other events also demonstrate evidence of this topic. The ecological focus in the art of The Bahamas responds to the Caribbean approach to the issue, which is consistent with the intention of the visual arts "to design strategies from the space of culture and activate citizen awareness in the face of new climatic, ecological and social challenges" (Wood, 2017, pp. 120-140).

The artists return directly or indirectly to the ecological phenomenon, fundamentally using both visual and material resources that come from the environment. The condition of closeness to what is natural, from sea or land, is present in the act of artistic creation, sometimes externalizing a committed concern for the deterioration of the surrounding environment or as an actor in the historical tradition of the social habitat. This notion was illustrated by a group of artists from NE5 (2010), where they were aimed to "reduce our dependency on materials or processes that endorse and amplify the devastation of our natural resources. By understanding one's contribution one can begin to rectify the situation" (Parotti, 2010-2011, pp. 6–8).

The NEs have contributed to the cultural landscape of The Bahamas and have left a mark on the artists' development and policies towards the arts in general. The NAGB has managed to recover and update its art collection, and along with it, attract the artistic community within and outside of the territory. In the words of Richardo Barrett and Letitia Pratt, curators of NE11 in 2024, the NEs participate in the development of the visual arts in The Bahamas and remains the main event; Pratt states, "I don't think it will be cancelled in the future, I think it's the one exhibition that the community looks forward to, with great expectations" (L. Pratt, personal communication, May 7, 2024).

## Conclusion

From the very first manifestation, National Exhibitions have shaped the stage for Bahamian visual arts, offering creators the freedom to experiment and push their creative frontiers free from lingering market pressures. With each biennial gathering, these exhibitions have proven indispensable to the growth of the country's artistic practices. In tracing their arc, we witness not only the unfolding evolution of Bahamian art but its fearless engagement with pressing contemporary concerns—whether forging a postcolonial identity, sounding an ecological alarm, or amplifying diaspora voices. The NEs function as a crucible of visual ideas, where generations and media intersect to

forge spaces of artistic validation and cultural debate. In this sense, their continuity not only guarantees the visibility of local art but also presents the opportunity to rethink the Caribbean through its own narratives, moving beyond tourist stereotypes and drawing closer to its social and spiritual complexities. In doing so, Bahamian art stands as an active agent in the construction of citizenship, memory and the future.

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## List of National Exhibitions and dates

NE1 2003. *1973-2003 Inaugural national exhibition*

NE2 2004-2005 *NE2 National exhibition 2004*

NE3 2006-2007. *Third national exhibition: NE3*

NE4 2008-2009. *NE4: Fourth national exhibition 2008*

NE5 2010-2011. *NE5: National exhibition 2010 2011*

NE6 2012-2013. *The national exhibition 6: Kingdom come (NE6)*

NE7 2014-2015. *National exhibition 7: Antillean: an ecology*

NE8 2016. *National exhibition 8*

NE9 2018-2019 *National exhibition nine: The fruit and the seed*

NE10 2022-2023. *National exhibition 10: Mercy*

NE11 2025. *NELEVEN: Into the void*