

***A Land Where Other People Live***

Megan Baker – Paul Dash

2.3.2022

“For those of us ...  
who love in doorways coming and going  
in the hours between dawns  
looking inward and outward  
at once before and after  
seeking a now that can breed  
futures”

– Audre Lorde in *A Litany for Survival* (1978)

“There is a place here, where the Atlantic meets the Caribbean and it is very magical, and the first time I was there it was as if I was transformed suddenly to another place, another time, a synthesis.”

– Audre Lorde in *A Litany for Survival* (Dir. Ada Gay Griffin and Michelle Parkerson, 1995)

*A Land Where Other People Live* builds its narrative around the work of artists Megan Baker and Paul Dash. The intertemporal and nostalgic canvases of young British artist Megan Baker capture intimate moments in her personal history and, as they structure a generational dialogue about family, are met with dynamic pieces embodying nationhood by Paul Dash – a Barbados-born artist, educator and writer who migrated to Britain in 1957. In this postcolonial discourse, we witness pictorial investigations of individual and collective memory and the space both artists create in between.

The exhibition meditates on themes of belonging and identity, the subconscious and community, migration and memory of a common past. Two artists from different backgrounds and generations, united by a common land and time, exchange knowledge, experience and concerns in this intimate setting via eleven pieces placed one in front of the other, evoking a sense of 'walking down memory lane'.

The exhibition takes its name from a book penned by American writer, feminist, womanist, librarian, civil rights activist and self-described “black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet” Audre Lorde. Lorde (1934-1992) was born in NYC to Caribbean immigrants –her mother was from Carriacou, Grenada and her father from Barbados. The 1973 collection of her early poems takes on sexism, racism, colonialism, homophobia and class, exploring unmitigated pain while offering a message of hope that remains especially trenchant.

As part of Sixty Six's ongoing effort to support female artists, the exhibition presents the work of emerging painter Megan Baker (b. 1996), who depicts the enduring ephemeral in portraits that are as modest as they are monumental. Closely held family portraits from her personal archives converge through fluid vigorous lines, full of zigzags and hairpin turns, with her subjects, appearing remote and unknowable as if separated from viewers by a wall of mist. Their mannerist-like twisted gestures are nurturing and protective, reminding of Biblical scenes by the Old Masters. There is a crew-cut neatness to their hair, a certain fullness about their ears and mouths, their crowded settings are Baroque—but beyond that, little else is explicitly made known, despite the images being close-ups. Baker's superimposed family portraits invite us to witness stories without insisting on specific character arcs or narratives. Mothering as an act of revolutionary love is something that shines through when looking at Baker's deeply emotional pieces with Lorde's words: "We can learn to mother ourselves" also coming to mind. The pieces teeter between durability and disintegration, allowing for simultaneous existence in multiple realities: internally and externally, past and present, I and other, existence and disappearance. There is a serenity to these works—these objects of contemplation—that prove unexpectedly affecting. The subjects appear out of reach, unknowable, yet, in their family dynamic, present familiar scenes—a sense of remoteness qualified by a pervasive sense of empathy. Forming and vanishing simultaneously, Baker's work celebrates familyhood, creating a generational paradigm while exploring identity, the subconscious, belonging and the ephemeral nature of memory.

Windrush Generation member Paul Dash (b. 1946), an artist who migrated from Barbados to Oxfordshire in 1957, enters into this pictorial dialogue with Megan Baker. Dash suffered greatly from institutional racism: first with his older brother at Oxford secondary school, where they were "hated by the staff," and later at the Chelsea School of Art in London, where as the only black student, Dash was bereft of exposure to artists of a similar cultural background: "The staff at Chelsea didn't take kindly to my love of more traditional figurative art-making practices and I simply couldn't settle". Dash went on to explore culture and racism in art education and was awarded a PhD by Goldsmiths, University of London. He spent 20 years of his professional career as an educator, lecturer and senior lecturer at Goldsmiths.

Deeply affected by his 11-day journey from the West Indies and the experiences that followed in the UK, Dash began painting at 14—a practice that allowed him to "transmute hardship into salvation". His affinity for outdoor festivities and street gatherings comes from childhood, transporting him back to the Caribbean and allowing him to explore both his cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Local carnivals were often born as a means of rebellion against slavery, but have since transformed into some of the largest street events in the Caribbean. As Dash says: "Music is within the people, people are the music. And music is a metaphor for the celebration of life".

Dash, a member of the 1960s London Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), makes work that celebrates a sense of shared Caribbean nationhood, forging a new aesthetic in the arts. Pulsing with music and movement, the bold and mesmerising scenes in his figurative paintings and drawings shift between intimacy and ecstasy, focusing on his heritage, Carnival, the history of enslavement, colonialism, collective memory, spiritual dance, as well as the reality of the current refugee crisis in a series of pieces presented at *A Land Where Other People Live*.

Dash's work *Pick O' the Crop*, which dominates the space is a testimony to freedom and harmony within dichotomy, painted as a tribute to the people of Haiti. The laconic expression of its semi-visible figures, the generous, liberal, and dynamic brushstrokes on the vast surface of the canvas reflect upon the legacy of colonial history and the emancipation of enslaved people.

*A Land Where Other People Live* is a juxtaposition of two artists with a 50-year gap between them – both distinguished by a sophisticated sensuality and grace while producing work that strives to communicate with the public through the power of representation. Given the scale and apparent realism of their pieces, both Dash and Baker present figuratively expressive work with so very little of their subjects disclosed. Both artists depict faces blurred, soft-edged, dappled in their many colours, pulsing with energy yet carrying an oblique presence, bridging the gap between past and present. The locations of their images are unidentifiable, as both artists, in their unique way, create a synthesis between time and space, carrying a fragmentary nature of being through distant memories across history.

Farah Piriye, Curator