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Course: Caribbean Studies Project

Course Code: HUMN 3099

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Title of Thesis

A Tale of two visual culture mediums: Exploring the significance of Caribbean Contemporary Art to understanding ‘Caribbeaness’ as a Geo-Culture Construct through Christopher Cozier’s work and DCFA UWI’s The Old Yard

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TITLE OF ASSIGNMENT – A Tale of two visual culture mediums: Exploring the significance of Caribbean Contemporary Art to understanding ‘Caribbeaness’ as a Geo-Culture Construct through Christopher Cozier’s work and DCFA UWI’s The Old Yard

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Abstract

The intent of this thesis is to explore the significance of practice-based research in relation to the field of geo-culture and space and how the work of Christopher Cozier helps better understand the phenomena. The thesis focuses on visual culture's importance within the field of practice based research and the manner in which the study of images contributes to the development of new information. The thesis has established the linkages between differing place specific spaces and how artefacts can be reimaged to support one's research. It further acknowledges the lack of reference to visual culture and its scholarship within the Caribbean space and uses the work of the researcher alongside the primary artist as the discussion point to elaborate on art making's importance. The body of works present issues of Caribbean identity, economics, colonialism, and nationalism. These issues as well as theories on Caribbeanness and bordering are analyzed based on their relevance within the field of geo-culture.

Keywords: Practice Based Research, Visual Culture, Geo-Culture, Caribbeanness

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A Tale of two visual culture mediums: Exploring the significance of Caribbean Contemporary Art to understanding ‘Caribbeanness’ as a Geo-Culture Construct through Christopher Cozier’s work and DCFA UWI’s The Old Yard

Introduction

Scope and Aims of the Study

This project is a practice-based research exploration of the relevance of Caribbean Contemporary Art to better understand ‘Caribbeanness’ as a geo-culture construct through two distinctive mediums of visual art culture based in Trinidad Tobago. The overarching aim is to use the work of well-known Caribbean contemporary visual artist – Trinidadian Christopher Cozier along with the annual well-established Trinidadian carnival masquerade heritage space *The Old Yard* to examine how Caribbeanness is represented and replicated through visual art-making, which is a critical part of visual culture. To aid with this, the work situates Caribbean visual culture discourse, as part of the field of Caribbean cultural studies. The project aims to add to this body of literature by offering visual culture analysis as another suitable (con)text alongside written, documentary analysis to examining and understanding particular aspects of Caribbean contemporality.

The attention to the concepts ‘geo-culture’ and ‘Caribbeanness’ are borne out of a recognition that understanding Caribbean contemporary ways of being and seeing require an intrinsic appreciation of time and space modalities, including the transformation of space and time. Geo-culture can be described as specific geographic locations that are signified by particular common socio-cultural traits of their inhabitants by which they become known. The idea of Caribbeanness therefore extends from this context in that it speaks specifically to the geo-cultural region otherwise known as the West Indies, nestled between the two continents of North America and South America, that has become globally known for its arts, culture, customs, traditions, history, culinary practices, and diverse identities. ‘Caribbeanness’ can be succinctly described as Caribbean people’s ways of being and seeing (traditions, practices, experiences) that have emerged

through time (particular in its post-independence era) and space (in terms of its geographical positioning). While identity may be construed as appropriately describing Caribbeanness, as this work seeks to explore, the idea of Caribbeanness as a geo-culture construct may extend beyond this.

Among the predominant ways in which Caribbeanness has been expressed is through the region's visual arts practices such as fine art, art installations, design, fashion, carnival mas design and mas making, sculpting, photography, film and animation. It is for this reason that the project chooses to use particular aspects of Caribbean visual art culture to explore meanings of Caribbeanness. Visual Culture could be essentially seen as a vehicle by which Caribbeanness is represented. As with the construct of geo-culture, a visual culture is similarly informed by history (art history), practice (design and making) and experience (cultural anthropology/ethnography). The term "visual culture" first appeared in scholarly writing in the early 1990s, while the field of visual arts has been around for much longer. During that period the distinction between corporate promotion of visual arts and the uniqueness of the communities that developed then became blurred. (Clayton) Within the Caribbean contemporary landscape, a similar blurring has occurred in that Caribbean contemporary visual culture reflects the combination of arts practice and community ways of being and seeing. This makes it a useful lens through which to understand Caribbeanness.

Rationale of Study

Analytical notions of Caribbean and Caribbeanness have traditionally come out of Caribbean literature, musical lyrics and melodies, theatre and performance with relatively less

attention having been given to visual arts as a framework of analysis. Three key factors have been considered as reasons for this that underscore the importance of conducting this research.

First, literature and documented text have always been viewed as the main means by which analysis of Caribbean phenomenon is presented. Written genres tend to be seen as being superior as compared to the oral and visual culture traditions of analysis (Sindoni). This perhaps extends from the region's colonial past through which "Eurocentered literary paradigms based on writing that marginalized (other) genres" (Sindoni) have maintained traction in the region. Even where the form and style of writing became creolized, written texts came to represent the main forms of resistance to colonial cultural dependence in the crucial years of transition from British imperialism to the postcolonial age in the Caribbean (Sindoni). In Brathwaite's essays (Brathwaite), for example critical theory merged with indigenous cultural practices to produce new modes of inquiry and understanding of what it meant to be Caribbean.

Comparatively, visual arts tends to be accessed primarily for pleasure and has not been significantly considered as a frame of analysis for understanding what it means to be Caribbean. Within Caribbean societies people tend to access Caribbean art by way of art gallery attendance, watching film and documentaries, showcasing and performing masquerade which are all examples of Caribbean art being used for aesthetic pleasure. This even extends from pre-independence time. For example, Trinidad and Tobago's traditional carnival practices deriving from the cultural interaction between European and marginalized spaces within its colonial past have remained a staple in current Carnival showcasing and its capacity to be used as a platform for critical theorizing of Caribbeanness has been limited.

More recently, attention is being given to how visual culture can usefully inform and explain socio-cultural phenomenon whether historical or contemporary. Scholars such as Alexis

L. Boyan believe “visual culture represents a unique way of confronting the world and arranging and producing knowledge.” Studying visual culture focuses on how images and visual media influence cultural meanings and practices. It places a strong emphasis on the material and visual aspects of culture and admits that the formation of cultural identities and values can be influenced by visual and auditory media just as much as by written texts (Bondebjerg, 9). Studies of visual culture frequently look at how pictures and visual media are shared, appropriated, and modified in various cultural contexts and are slowly emerging as part of Cultural Studies discourse. Angelique V. Nixon’s *Troubling Queer Caribbeanness: Embodiment, Gender, and Sexuality in Nadia Huggin’s Visual Art* offers a useful discussion of how visual culture seeks to analyze and engage a contemporary aspect of Caribbeanness. There is therefore scope for looking at how other mediums of visual culture have similarly done so.

Research Question/Thesis Statement and Minor Research Questions

How does the work of Christopher Cozier and the carnival masquerade heritage space of *The Old Yard* aid our understanding of Caribbeanness as a geo-culture construct?

Minor research questions

1. What are the prevailing views on notions of geo-culture and Caribbeanness?
2. What are the main Caribbean perspectives on visual culture as a useful framework for understanding geo-culture?
3. How do Christopher Cozier’s work and *The Old Yard* reflect Caribbeanness?
4. What conclusions can be derived from the experiences borne out in the case studies presented on Caribbeanness in a contemporary Caribbean visual art landscape?

Methodology, Process and Parameters of Study

The study essentially follows the principles of practice-based research inquiry through a mixed methodological framework comprising visual culture analysis and ethnography. Practice-based research is the inquiry and analysis of “finished art objects and their relation to contexts in which they are created” (Rutten et. al). Candy similarly note that it is “an original investigation undertaken in order to gain new knowledge partially by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice”. Jolly further notes that this can also emerge from a process of art-making initiated by the researcher. Within the field of visual arts, practice-based research can effectively be accomplished through ethnographic inquiry and visual culture analysis (Al-yahyai).

Ethnography is particularly relevant where the researcher is also the visual arts practitioner engaging in art-making as a means of conducting research and analysis. (Foster) Ethnography’s unique characteristic of immersive study lends suitably to this process because the researcher as an art maker finds himself uniquely placed to serve in the role as Art Director for the UWI Department of Creative and Festival Arts *The Old Yard* 2023. Journaling as is the practice within ethnographic work took the form of photographs, sketches, voice recordings as he engaged in the process of art-making within *The Old Yard*. While the process being documented was primarily to ensure that the expected outcomes of *The Old Yard* were met it was observed that the nature of the space and the unique role of the researcher as art-maker provided a useful opportunity exploring the researcher’s own thoughts on Caribbeanness. Therefore, this dimension was added to the broader thesis project.

This research process relies on qualitative data gathering through two visual culture mediums to examine the meaning of Caribbeanness beyond written documentation. An interview was conducted with the artist Christopher Cozier to ascertain from the perspective of a Visual

Artist what it means to execute practice-based research and to document his articulation of geo-culture and Caribbeanness. The research gathering phase also relied on the researcher's field experimentation and experience from the *The Old Yard*. The researcher's documentation of his process is integrated here to offer another dimension of Caribbeanness by showing how the re-creation of space connects with the construct of geo-culture. The research also used secondary sources of information such as, articles, books, websites and online pdfs.

The data capture process was executed within two key parameters – a body of contemporary visual artwork and a traditional masquerade heritage space comprising visual art-making and art installations. The Trinidadian Contemporary Artist Christopher Cozier's work is considered a part of a diverse collection of visual culture (see Figures 1-3). Christopher Cozier, an administrator and curator of Alice Yard¹ is a Contemporary Artist born in Trinidad and Tobago. The aim of Christopher Cozier's work as an artist, writer, and curator is to examine and challenge prevailing societal perceptions based on language, culture and national identity of the Caribbean while presenting fresh perspectives.

¹ Alice Yard is a contemporary art space and network, based from the end of January 2020 at Granderson Lab, 24 Erthig Road, Belmont, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago.



Figure 1 Christopher Cozier, *Tropical Nightset (detail) Starting Blocks*, 2005-2015



Figure 2 Christopher Cozier, *Tropical Nightset (detail) open drawers*, 2005-2015



Figure 3 Christopher Cozier, *Tropical Nightset (detail) a-little-end*, 2005-2015

Juxtaposed to complete the analysis is an examination of a visual culture space that reflects the enactment and reenactment of traditional masquerade heritage of Trinidad and Tobago that is aptly titled *The Old Yard*² (see Figure 4). For this experience, visual arts and visual culture play a prominent role in bringing the space alive for its patrons. The Old Yard offers performance, music, celebration, participation, cuisine, and craft centered around heritage and cultural tradition that appealed to all age groups, many demographics, and a variety of interests.

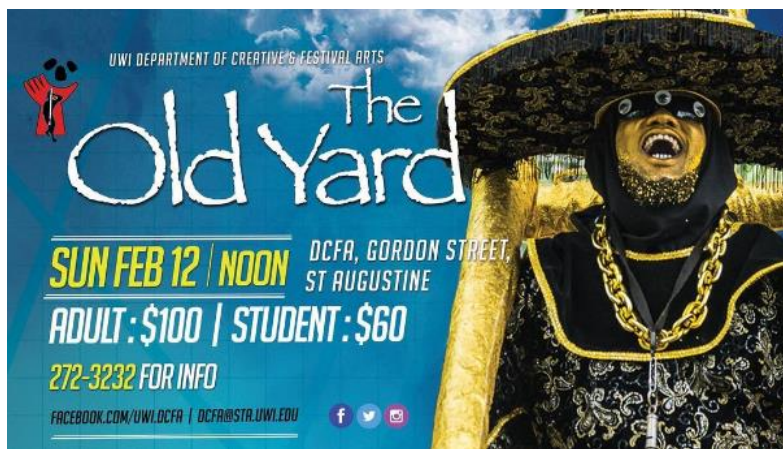


Figure 4 Promotional visual for 2023 edition of *The Old Yard*

Outline of Study

This project is organized into three chapters with an introduction and a conclusion. Following the Introduction, Chapter One '*Perspectives on Geo Culture*', *Caribbeanness and the Relevance of Visual Culture as a method of Inquiry*' explores the various conceptualizations of the main theme of the project, geo-culture and Caribbeanness and the interconnections with visual culture analysis. The chapter also explores the significance of visual culture within the region. Chapter Two *Christopher Cozier's Perspective of Time and Space and its relation to*

² The Department of Creative and Festival Arts, Faculty of Humanities and Education, University of the West Indies, revived *The Old Yard* after receiving an invitation from Val Rogers, Committee Chair of the yearly traditional Carnival hallmark event *Viey la Cou*, to assume management and operation of the space.

Caribbeanness explores how Cozier's work treats with geo-culture to render his understanding of Caribbeanness. Chapter Three *The Transformation of Time and Space: The Old Yard* continues the analysis through the lens of the researcher as a visual artist to demonstrate how studio practice contributes to an understanding of geo-culture and Caribbeanness in the context of physical space that also represents a particular time. The thesis concludes by giving some perspective on the insights gained and the implications for future research.

Chapter One Literature Review: Perspectives on Geo Culture’ and Caribbeanness and the Relevance of Visual Culture

This Chapter gives attention to the main theoretical discussions around the notions of geo-culture and Caribbeanness and the relevance of visual culture for understanding these interconnections. The purpose of the chapter is to show how these themes have been treated in the literature to offer a theoretical platform for the analysis coming after.

1.1 Geo-culture as a construct for understanding Caribbeanness

This study describes geo-culture as the study of how place and culture interact. Much of the work in the study of geo-culture gives attention to socio-political contexts and how geo-culture interconnects. In this regard, some studies in geo-culture have investigated cultural politics of various groups referencing issues of disability, ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality. (Rogers, Castree, Kitchin) Other geo-cultural scholars view geo-culture as the interaction between individuals of different cultures and how those differing cultures also bear similarities through architecture and traditional practice. (Marsh, Alagona 117) In this regard geo-culture can also be referenced as space that has the capabilities of changing due to various natural and manmade events. Some scholars therefore usefully inform on how culture and geography intersect and the impact of such interconnections on time and space, whether local regional or international (Nurse; Wallerstein). Guanguami notes for example that “geo-culture combines what is cultural and what is geographic by way of intercultural communication and international relations”.

It is believed that the Caribbean region is a pure example of geo-culture (time and space)

based on the study's description of geo-culture. The region possesses a diverse geo-culture due to European Colonialism. Languages, religions, economic and cultural activities of the colonized islands reflected those of the European colonizers rather than those of the native people who had inhabited the islands originally, notwithstanding that there are those who still continue the traditions of their ancestors. (*World Regional Geography: People, Places, and Globalization*) In the more contemporary time and space, the social development status of the Caribbean (in particular Trinidad and Tobago which serves as the primary space of investigation for the work), is characterized by the importation of goods and the heavy influence of foreign mass media. This continues to impact on the socio-cultural ethos of the region. Thus, the Caribbean's history and diversity has given rich experiences through which the ideas of space, place and time can be investigated.

Within the literature it is noted that while there is a general sense of Caribbeanness being akin to identity, there is notably a more nuanced approach to examining what this signifies when examined through the lens of visual culture. Angelique Nixon's work that seeks to examine Caribbeanness in the form of Indo-Caribbean feminism and feminist thought through the artwork of Pat Mohammed is one such example. Another, although coming from a slightly different direction, is the work of Michelle Stephens which proposes four approaches to understanding Caribbean identity - area studies, the trope of the isle, visuality and creolization, through an examination of the work of contemporary visual artists.

1.2 Connecting Visual Culture

“Seeing comes before words. The Child looks and recognizes before it can speak.”

John Berger

Visual culture refers to the ways in which images, artifacts, and media shape and are shaped by cultural values, beliefs, and practices. Berger’s “Ways of Seeing” is considered a pioneering piece of literature that describes and analyzes Visual Culture through art during the 90s and before. He concludes that visual analysis of portrayals of men and women elicit various "gazes", that are seen in a variety of ways.

Historically visual culture would have simply been seen as “art history”. which traditionally deals with issues in the imagery of paintings, drawings and sculpting that are focused on themes of religion. Alternatively, visual culture concerns itself with popular culture and the arts, and has come to be recognized as a distinctive method of organizing and producing information. As such, visual culture can be utilized as a method for analysis to comprehend how images and visual media influence cultural meanings and practices. It can provide new viewpoints on cultural issues normally studied through written materials, like literature and history.

1.3 Visual Culture in the Caribbean

Caribbean visual culture attempts to draw on a diverse range of topics beyond art-making and its significance to geo-cultural contexts to explore the interconnections with issues such as: Caribbean identities as they relate to the colonial past; cultural diversity; the meaning of Caribbean space and the transformation of space; economic security.

Caribbean cultural practices such as the carnival masquerade offer a rich example of visual culture as a means of presentation, representation, inquiry and analysis. The making of mas as a

site of inquiry is notably exemplified through the work of masman George Bailey which sought to offer new notions of what it meant to be Caribbean while questioning the existing status quo of that particular time and space, particularly for the Afro-Trinidadian. Kerrigan and Laughlin note that George Bailey's groundbreaking "Back to Africa," and "Bright Africa," both challenged prevailing stereotypes about African nations. His designs were inspired by the philosophy of Africanism which Mazi E. N. Najaka refers to as being "both a philosophy and science aimed at freeing the black man from bondage to a culture and values which have been forced upon him." His glorification of Africans sought to dispel the idea that Africans could reach no higher standard. His elaborate use of design, adhering to the different principles (space, colour, shape, form, value, texture and line) and elements (balance, unity, variety, emphasis movement, pattern and proportion) were all important to achieving this outcome. In doing so, Bailey inadvertently extended the lines of inquiry and analysis for Caribbean visual culture and broadened the dimensions of what it meant to be Caribbean at that time.

Other Caribbean scholars have also articulated themes of geo-culture to connect to Caribbeanness through an acknowledgement of visual culture. Carole Boyce-Davies sees borders in contemporary Caribbean manifested via the island topography that is, water and land boundaries. She contends that "space in this formulation is expansive, open and allows intellectual, cultural, social, familial extensions if not always executed via the nation-state and their attempts at limited political unifications." (Boyce-Davis Carole) In a recent round table *On Thinking and Being Caribbean: A Routable Discussion* between artists, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Christopher Cozier and Teresita Fernández spoke on the shoreline of being more than a concept of boundary and more of a space that is connected and disconnected, revealing, and concealing and a place of exchange.

Caribbeanness transcends the physical notions of the geographical context. “Caribbean spaces are clearly marked by their own self-identification” (Boyce Davies Carole , 2) Because of the Caribbeans’ concrete and transformative cultural interactions, it transports itself within other spaces preserving the culture of the Caribbean. Transformation of space describes the process of a natural or cultural event changing the landscape of a particular place. Both bear similarities in the sense of having an impact on people as well as the environment.

It is interesting to note that though carnival represents or is the epitome of the transformation of space, it would appear that anglophone Caribbean scholars have not given the attention to the idea of space in terms of the significance of its physicality as it connects to the very nature of Carnival (performatively, practice based, and also in the context of teaching and learning). And so, as Fernandes and Quintão explains the process of transformation of public spaces into emancipated spaces as being constituted of four phases: emancipatory occupation of the public space, public authority intervention, conquest of the emancipated space, and attempts to commercialize the emancipated space.

1.4 Concluding Note

The preceding analysis has sought to expand the discussion on Caribbeanness, with specific consideration to the relevance of visual culture as a conceptual frame as well as a framework of analysis. The chapter has shown that the idea of linkages between these concepts is not new and therefore usefully serves as a theoretical underpinning for examining the two visual culture mediums presented in the next two chapters.

Chapter Three – Christopher Cozier’s Perspective on Time and Space and its relation to Caribbeanness

This chapter explores how geo-culture (time and space) connects with Caribbeanness through the work of Christopher Cozier. Cozier maintains that he works ‘conceptually’ - “*I see myself as an artist. I may paint, draw, make videos, build things. I will never be imprisoned by my medium. I dislike being called a painter or any terms that refers to craft. I am a contemporary artist that simply makes 'visual things'*”³.

Cozier’s work is presented as a case study to illustrate how a visual culture in a given cultural setting communicates ideas and have meaning. The interview with the artist generated a conversation on practice-based research, the historical and cultural significance of visual culture, the artist’s understanding of geo-culture/space and how it has changed over time. The secondary data gathered focused on analysis presented by writers on the artist’s work as well as lectures conducted by the artist.

The chapter uses three pieces of Cozier’s work - *Attack of the Sandwich Men* (2004) an art installation; *gas men* (2014) a film; and *Home/Portal* (2017) which focuses on an installation of the ‘red steps’. The work of Cozier can be viewed as a type of visual culture that explores how individuals from many cultures interact and create a feeling of place over time. His work examines the complicated aspects of Caribbean identities, such as its colonial past, cultural diversity, displacement, migration and exchange.

³ In his formative years since childhood, as far back as he could remember, he was interested in drawing and painting. As a youth he underwent some training by M.P. Alladin and later studying graphic design at the John S. Donaldson Technical Institute now the University of Trinidad and Tobago.

3.1 Intersecting Cultures, Nationalism and *The Attack of the Sandwich Men*

The Attack of The Sandwich Men (see Figure 5) is an art installation⁴ work that consists of sandwiches wrapped in wax paper with the Trinidad and Tobago flag attached to sticks installed into them, in the same manner toothpicks are placed to neaten a sandwich. How cultures become intersected can be seen through the objects utilized in the work and their cross reference to other objects from another culture.

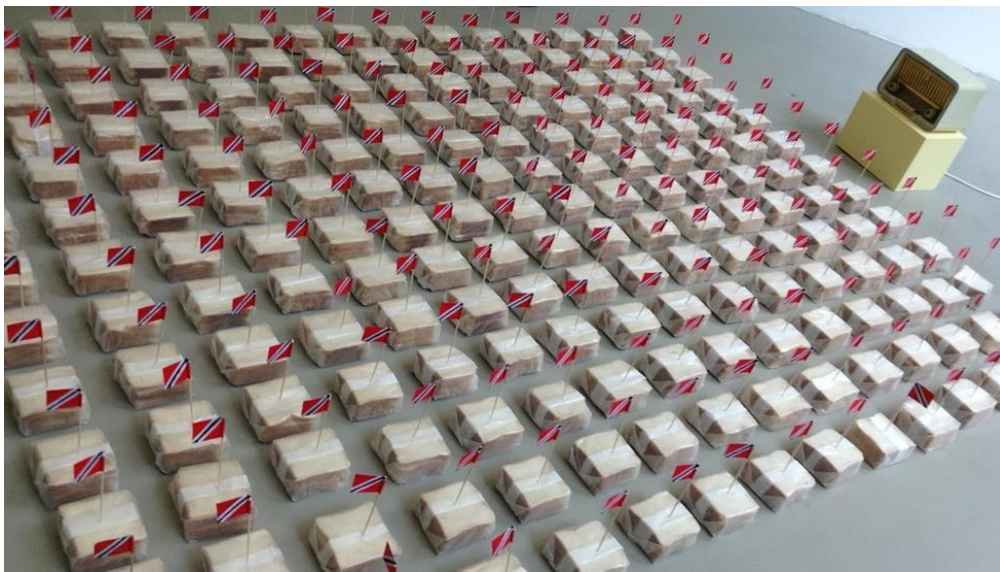


Figure 5 Christopher Cozier, *Attack of the Sandwich Men*, 2004

The commercially produced Wonder bread (see Figure 6) originated in the United States due “to widespread nutrition-deficiency diseases during the privations of World War II” (Miller) and gained widespread traction among the suburban and middleclass households through effective marketing targeting children with the tagline “strong bodies 12 ways”. Through his installation “*The Attack of the Sandwich Men*” Cozier seeks to relate the unrealistic marketing of the Wonder bread product to his notions of nationalism as being a mere promise that is not likely to bear

⁴ Installation artworks often occupy a whole room or part of space, as opposed to being traditionally hung on a wall like paintings, that the spectator has to go through in order to connect with the work.

fruition. The use of local bread in the installation provides the cross reference to the American product of promise – the Wonder bread.



Figure 6 Wonder Classic White Bread

Cozier further extends this line of discussion by offering variations of the installation to also examine the various ways that social, political, and cultural advancement are symbolized by the white bread sandwich. One such version, a film short featured at A Space Gallery, does this to present a tale of identity formation that is rooted in the unique cultural and historical context of the Caribbean. Here Cozier directly ties nationalism with intersecting cultures and at the same time offers a framework of analysis – which Cozier states he considers to be visual storytelling.

In the video the viewer is placed within a moving vehicle driving past a color variety of houses with the same architectural structure that appears like a recurring frame similar to a loop. While this occurs a broadcast which Cozier found in the National Archives plays with the speaker saying: *“This is the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education and Culture school broadcasting service”*, which is followed by another speaker greeting the audience with: *“Hello boys and girls,*

today you will spend some time thinking about our national anthem. What is a national anthem? It is a patriotic sound; the national anthem of a country is the official patriotic sound of the country...” And while the speaker teaches the listener of what a national anthem is the scene changes to two hands neatly wrapping three slices of white bread in the wax paper and finally being put together with the Trinidad and Tobago flag placed through the center. The video becomes disrupted from the abrupt cuts, switching from different scenes either showing the instance of wrapping, placing or even cleaning of the surface (see Figure 6). The recorded action becomes repetitive and ritualistic which ties the artist to his own observation and experience of a cultural practice that local children often participated in during the time of independence.



Figure 7 Stills from Christopher Cozier's Dartmouth College Lecture on the installation variation for *The Attack of The Sandwich Men*

3.2 Replicating and Transforming Time and Space to present Masculine Contention for Resources: *gas men*

The complexity of geo-culture with terms such as place and space calls for distinction in particular contexts. In this regard, Christopher Cozier believes in the transformation of the common place in that “every development in art is linked to a scientific or material shift”⁵. “In a lot of my work, I understand the Caribbean as a space more than a place in the sense that it manifests itself”, says Cozier⁶. He further believes that because of human (inter)action not only changes the conceptual framework of space, but also its tangible landscape. Cozier references the Carnivals situated outside of the Caribbean formed through Caribbean people as “trying to affect space through actions.”⁷ as an interesting example of this.

But the idea of space and place offers more than this for Cozier, particularly in the context of signifying Caribbeanness. “Place applies a tangibility, a one dimensional term describing, for example, a specific position on a map. Space is considered to be more open. No matter where you are geographically you can conjure something through geography. Space feels finite while place sounds territorial. Place has boundaries.”⁸ Whereas in works such as “*Attack of the Sandwich Men*” discussion on nationality is tied to Cozier’s feelings towards the pressure to be something that is forced on Caribbean people by their education system exposed to or passport given, the video installation “*gas men*” subtly reacts to these distinctions and presents yet another dimension to ‘on being Caribbean’.

⁵ Interview with the artist Christopher Cozier March 2023

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

gas men is based on Cozier's childhood memories and his experience within another geographical location and in this sense seems to replicate his observations about the carnival experiences occurring outside of the Caribbean region. Once more, Cozier intersects culture, but through this piece gives greater attention to space and its transformation both as a physical and geo-political-cultural construct. Cozier uses gas pump hoses swung in a similar manner to cowboys with their ropes in western films (see Figure 8). Both characters face each other at an angle both holding their individual gas pumps at one another. Their background consisted of a moderately cloudy background and aspects of the ocean which were seen from different screencaps of the film (see Figure 9). The pasture could be associated with any specific geographic location. The framed space shown to the viewer is abstract in the sense of its origin and can be related to anywhere in the Caribbean or even the world.



Figure 8 Still from Christopher Cozier *Itinerant Acts and Suspended Form Lecture*



Figure 9 Still from Christopher Cozier Itinerant Acts and Suspended Form Lecture

Cozier's experimentations of object and space in this film adds to the discussion of geo-culture on different levels (see Figure 10). The first level being the cross-cultural relation of gas within contemporary Caribbean society versus first world countries desire to control and access these resources. The second level being the action and performance of swinging the nozzles carrying similar characteristics to westerns and kung fu cinema which is a comment in itself about globalization and mass media infiltrating Caribbean societies. The third level being the place specific space and its obscure features hindering a coherent thought on where the location is because of its general landscape.



Figure 10 Christopher Cozier Video Installation: Gas Men for Monique Meloche Gallery at the Marshall J. Gardner Center for the Arts, Gary

His commentary on male contention in relation to co-operations and territory is reflected through the two characters who positionally oppose each other within the frame. This bears close similarity to that of the opening sequences to kung fu movies produced by ‘Gold Harvest’ a cinema company the artist was exposed to at the time of its significance (see Figure 11). In his lecture on "Itinerant Acts and Suspended Form," Cozier remarked, "Thinking about the opening scenes of these Golden Harvest Run Run Shaw movies and masculine contention for resources on the surface of the planet. "An example of this type of film is “the 36th chamber of shaolin” (see Figure 13) a large part of various popular culture events such as the release of Wu Tang’s “Enter the Wu Tang (36 chambers)” (see Figure 12). The use of the gas pumps gives the artefact “a second life” by removing it from its place specific space and using it to describe the persistent environmental and sociopolitical issues posed by commercial development and political opportunism.



Figure 11 Screenshot from *The Drunken Master* 1978 - Opening Fight Scene

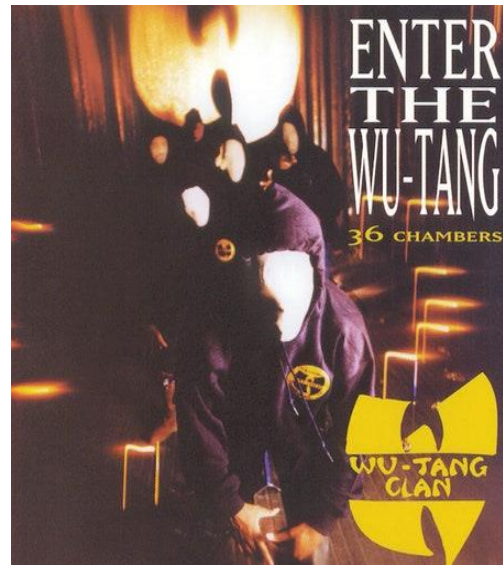


Figure 12 *Enter the Wu - Tang 36 Chambers* Cover,

Figure 13 *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* Cover, wikipedia

3.3 Transformation of Space Place and Time

to reinforce traditional and create new meanings of Caribbeanness: *Home/Portal*

How space is replicated and transformed is shown through the work of Christopher Cozier. *Home/Portal's* red step installation (see Figure 14) can be considered an artefact of Caribbean society that in its recreated form suggests a modern Caribbean aesthetic. This situates Cozier's notions of transformation of space, place and time.

In this regard, conceptually and visually, *Home/Portal* has an array of relations. First is within its name “*Home/Portal*” - home being described as a place where individuals are socialized through cultural practices and action - portal being a fictional artefact that can be identified for its ability to take something or someone from one geographical position to another. The title connects to the (dis)placement of the architecture having a dark connotation for those who recognize it. Cozier says, “...because it reminded them of the place they left but the place they could never return”⁹ The second instance is its architectural significance. The reference to “living conditions originating from chattel slavery, indentureship and workers’ housing in rural and urban settlements in the Caribbean.” Many areas in the Caribbean for example Barbados (see Figure 15) still have houses coming out of this era either transformed or in its original visual structure housing occupants.

Yet *Home/Portal* is a contemporary addition to the dialogue surrounded around the questions of space and diaspora. Another example is Trinidad, specifically in Port of Spain where barrack housing remains. The colonial past of the Caribbean region creates and overlaps the cultures of varying Caribbean countries. Geo-culture’s complexity becomes question through the creation and recreation of artefacts. *Home/Portal* also inspired the creation of The Old Yard’s ‘X’ patio design with it being a reference of the same architecture found in Barbados, New Orleans’ houses, a low-income urban community.

⁹ “Christopher Cozier Lecture: ‘Itinerant Acts and Suspended Form.’” *YouTube*, YouTube, 1 Sept. 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuyVwXi3hG8&t=3541s>. Accessed 22 Apr. 2023.



Figure 14 Home/Portal Berlin Version at Times Art Center Berlin Christopher Cozier in collaboration with Haishu Chen, mixed media, dimensions variable, photograph Haishu Chen. 2021



Figure 15 Chattel Housing in Barbados, photo take from Phil Levy 'Chattel Houses of Barbados', 2016

Chapter Four The Transformation of Time and Space: *The Old Yard*

The Old Yard is presented in this chapter to explore the transformation of time and space through the physical recreation of a space by way of art-making. It also shows how space like an artist's individual work can offer representations of geo-culture. The research for the chapter is premised on practice-based application in that the researcher engages the space as an art-maker and documents the process and his emerging experiences, with particular attention to how meanings of Caribbeanness are shaped. The researcher's experience and observations during the production of *The Old Yard* therefore serve as a primary source of data-gathering.

4.1 The Site of Analysis

In its current form, *The Old Yard* replicates the old barrack yard from carnival past of Trinidad and Tobago. "Overall, *The Old Yard* offers a dynamic mix of a journey into cultural history closely tied to the urban carnival experience and a showcase of traditional masquerade, using some elements of a heritage fair" (Tull forthcoming). The event adds to the masquerade tradition, through its own concept of living cultural history and the lived experience (Tull forthcoming), with significant use of visual arts application. A lot of what occurs on site is the removal of the modern architecture through temporary transformation using artwork for the sake of depicting and replicating aspects of old architecture. The physical and metaphorical attributes of space become intertwined within *The Old Yard* through the architecture as well as its artefacts. In this chapter the architecture and artefacts involved in this process of art-making are described using the characteristics of visual art making.

4.2 Visual Culture within The Old Yard experience

Overall the visual culture of *The Old Yard* comprises three elements: the materials used to engage in art making; the actual art forms produced; and the process of art installation. The meanings derived from the analysis of these elements represent the visual culture of the space.

4.2.1 Materials Used

The use of fabric is an integral part of carnival and is reflected in *The Old Yard*. Its transformative capabilities extend to shape mas visually via color and aesthetics (Figures 16 and 17). In *The Old Yard*, fabric is similarly manipulated to create fencing (Figure 18), lattice work (see Figure 19) and balusters (see Figure 20). Brown cotton, commonly used for quilting, crafts, and utilitarian purposes, plays a fundamental part. It is first transformed from its original purpose through painting with brushes as well as a roller. Transformation occurs within the perimeter of the brown cotton itself to facilitate ‘blocking’ to conceal the installation and production of *The Old Yard*. The lattice work shows how fabric becomes more than a flat surface with fibers as it seeks to imitate the fretwork conventionally placed around roofs of the houses of the time period (Figures 22 and 23).



Figure 16 Traditional Mas Character Fireman, Photo courtesy the Carnival Institute of Trinidad and Tobago



Figure 17 A section leader for the Washing. Richard Lyder for The Lost Tribe 2023



Figure 18 The Old Yard fence, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023



Figure 19 The Old Yard Lattice Work, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023



Figure 20 Balusters created from brown cotton, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023



Figure 21 Example of Lattice Work Trinidad, Sharon Camille Harding



Figure 22 Example of Lattice Work in Space, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023

Another use of fabric within the space was for the transformation of the modern architectural features such as windows, balcony railings and doors (Figures 24-25). Visual Arts and Visual Culture perform a physical manipulation of artifacts and space to bring cultural traditions of Caribbean Carnival outside of their physical origins to create and experience

community. Questions of ‘what geo-culture looks like’ (what does it mean) is visualized through the correlation of various cultural practices and ideas throughout The Old Yard process as well as individuals of different cultural backgrounds interacting and exchanging experiences.



Figure 23 Covering of Windows at Open Campus, St. Augustine. Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023



Figure 24 Covering of Open Campus Railings, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023

The collective themes around Trinidad and Tobago masquerade such as recycling and color contribute to the creation of the project. The traditional practices of the then becomes relevant now by working with what is available.



Figure 25 The Old Yard Fence Color Focus, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023



Figure 26 Lattice Work Color Focus, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023

4.2.2 *Artforms Produced*

The visual art-making deployed for the 2023 *The Old Yard* sought to evolve it into a site of interacting cultures from different geographical contexts. The transformed wooden pallets efficiently showcases this vision. In the case of the wooden pallets they were initially dismantled and put back together to be represented as the conventional picket fence (Figure 29). The purpose of the picket fence was not only for its historical significance within the yard, but also an aesthetic and for a fundamental feature of The Old Yard - to help with the blocking off restricted areas. The contrasting of cool (green and blue) and warm (yellow and pink) colors created a visual of comfort for the younger demographic that experience *The Old Yard*. (Figure 30). Until recently the wooden pallets were not only used for the creation of the picket fences and individual supports for structures but for a new fence edition that replicated the Caribbean patio design.



Figure 27 Wooden pallets dismantled and transformed by carpenters and carpenter assistants, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023



Figure 28 The Old Yard Picket Fence Colour Focus

Different areas of The Old Yard require filling and the decided use of the wooden pallets reinforces a particular idea of Caribbeanness that is tied to an architectural style of the time and a reference to the scarcity of resources of the time where use had to be made of whatever was available to improve one's home. In this instance reference was made to Barbados (Figure 29) during this production to solve the issue of empty space.



Figure 29 Example of Chattel House in Barbados, BarbadosBarbados.com



Figure 30 Investigation of empty space with the space, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023



Figure 31 Placement of 'X' design Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023

4.2.3 Process of Art Installation: Production and Installation of the ‘X’ design

Throughout the process of creating the ‘X’ design, the principles and elements of design were called in to action. Issues of balance and space were analyzed and solved through color and emphasis. The first iteration of the X followed design elemental issues of form. In an attempt to adhere to the concepts of recycling, cardboard was the first material sought out to create the ‘X’ design. Because of the cardboard’s fragility it was deemed unsafe on account of the form’s lack of width which correlated with its strength. Due to this the wooden pallets were deemed suitable material.

A problem that arose within the process was the variety of wooden pallets available so there were inconsistencies with shape and size. Figure 32 shows for one of the first iterations of the ‘X’ design. The double X was considered in an attempt to compensate for the negative spaces¹⁰ within the design structure. The hope of the ‘X’ design was to be able to replicate the dismantling and reconstruction process similar to that of the coloured picket fence. However, scraps of 1x4 pine found within the space were utilized to form the ‘X’ shape as well as to retain the emphasis of its character.



¹⁰ In art, negative space is the empty space surrounding and between the subject of an artwork.

Figure 32 'X' Design first iteration, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023

Keeping with the simplicity of the 'X' design three colors were utilized, two neutral features being white and brown accompanied by a sky blue. As a result of the complexity of lines overlapping one another enclosed by the square frame brown being a neutral color acted as a dark value compared to the intensity of white shown from the 'X' shape and its frame.



Figure 33 Color Experiment on 'X' Design, Xavier Kistow - Davis 2023

The Galvanize, though only utilized in one particular segment of The Old Yard this year, is another artefact that has historical reference to Caribbean carnival culture in two different lights. The first reference is to the 'barrack yard' motif because of its service "as a meeting place for Trinidadians since the mid 19th to 20th century" as well as an estate dwelling for indentured workers and former slaves. The idea of "the old yard" can therefore accept several histories and designate locations in an architectural story. The second reference relates to the theme of recycling and its involvement in Caribbean mas. The galvanize like many other instruments of 'blocking' contributes to the yard's conveyance of home further developing towards ideas of being enclosed

within this communal and creative space. Transformation begins to evaluate to questions of development and its impact on space relative to size.

4.3 Researcher/Artist's view of Caribbeanness based on The Old Yard experience.

The insertion of this researcher into *The Old Yard* as an art-maker provided an opportunity to contemplate meanings of Caribbeanness as it relates to time space and place. The Forms of visual art, within a particular view, can be seen as Eurocentric and those Eurocentric practices were then taken and transformed to suit our narrative of culture and art. The initial contact between the researcher and the process of the event had unknowns similar to that of Caribbeanness, forcing those involved to delve into concepts of memory giving them a second life within the space. This researcher having strong cultural ties to Barbados helped to develop the character of the event. The 'X' design highlights how architecture and place can mean more than its conventional purpose once situated into another context. The researcher was already placed into an established position due to the intuition of Sharon Camille Harding. Most of the direction of the process involved the installation of work but having direct involvement in the conceptualization of the X design made it personal for the researcher now having association on two different fronts.

The value of creativity from makers who are not specifically artists was placed into these artefacts. This was encouraging to this researcher and art maker. The complexities surrounding Caribbeanness were learnt through materials used and manipulated. Collaborations between practitioners of different cultures and fields of study helped to create installation work that effectively characterized the essence of The Old Yard. Caribbeanness is connection and resistance.

Conclusion

The research shows that Practice Based Research can and has already begun contributing to existing literature within critical Caribbean studies discourse. The research has clearly acknowledged the importance of written documentation as it also plays a part in the practice.

This expansion of knowledge should be recognized for its capabilities of analysis within the process of; observation, thinking and making which can be referred to as Visual Culture. Visual Culture provides a new approach to cultural issues normally looked at through the method of written documentation. The encouragement of experimentation and research within the art practice can also bring about new ways of learning in the education sector. The research on visual culture has highlighted the importance of the studying of images and other forms of media including sound (to produce audio-visual) to critically assess Caribbeanness in its complexity.

Questions of what it means to be Caribbean is constantly developing but can only continue if new approaches to the field of study are used. Christopher Cozier for example believes the constant development of “medium and methodologies”¹¹ contribute to theories such as the idea that you can take tangible objects and change its cultural place and conjure analysis on the occurrence. Cozier referred to this as the transformation of the common place¹². The reference to colonial history and its ties to the Caribbean is deemed important as it plays a part in the complexity of the Caribbean identity. The significance of visual culture throughout history has played a large part in the process of art making due to human perception. Based on what is made or being made inspirations are drawn and the making continues. The researcher has applied these ideas of practice-based research within the field utilising ethnographic research. The DCFA’s ‘The Old

¹¹

¹²

Yard' not only aesthetically relates to the history of the Caribbean's colonial past but also conceptually. Based on objects repurposed with the certainty of giving them new roles outside of their place specific space 'The Old Yard' study of the transformation of space supports ideas of geo-culture and space.

The researcher has learnt that because of human (inter)action not only does it change the conceptual framework of space but its tangible landscape. This therefore provides scope for future inquiry..

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Bio short of Christopher Cozier

Among Cozier's international presentations and exhibitions are Forecast Form: Art in the Caribbean Diaspora, 1990s–Today (2022), Documenta 15 (2022), Home /Portal, a conversation with ds4si and Intelligent Mischief, Boston, Kingston and Bogota (2017); Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago, MOLAA, Los Angeles (2017); Where Is Here, MoAD, San Francisco (2016); Entanglements, Eli & Edythe Broad Museum, Lansing, US and TEOR/ética, San Jose, Costa Rica (2015); In Development, David Krut Projects, New York (2012); The Global Africa Project, Museum of Art and Design, New York (2010–2011); Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic, TATE Liverpool (2010); Trienal Poli/Gráfica de San Juan: América Latina y el Caribe, Puerto Rico (2009); Contemporary West Indian Art, Rockstone and Bootheel, Hartford, US (2009) and Biennial de Cuenca, Ecuador (2009), among others.

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

1. What do you understand by the term “practice based – research”
2. What role does visual culture play in historical/cultural documentation compared to written forms?
3. What does geo-culture mean to you (and your work)?
4. What was your initial concept of space and how has that changed?
5. Through research I’ve noticed an overlap with the use of geo-culture and space. (make sure that your definitions of the two terms are tight, be able to define the overlap, note what in their definitions lies within the intersection and what lies without. refine geography, then geo culture, then space) And I’m of the opinion its due to the geographical context. Do you think geo-culture and space have two different meanings.
6. What other conceptions of space have you interacted with that have notably helped to transform/inform your own
7. I was reading an article by Jane Stadler called “CONCEPTUALIZING AND MAPPING GEOCULTURAL SPACE” And in it she drew the distinction between physical places with geographical coordinates and this “abstract notion of space” in order to define or conceptualize geocultural space. And I’m having these issues with how the language is constantly changing throughout literature.
8. . Do you believe as a practitioner these distinctions aren’t necessarily made but rather the “physical” influences and works with these abstract notions alongside the research and practice

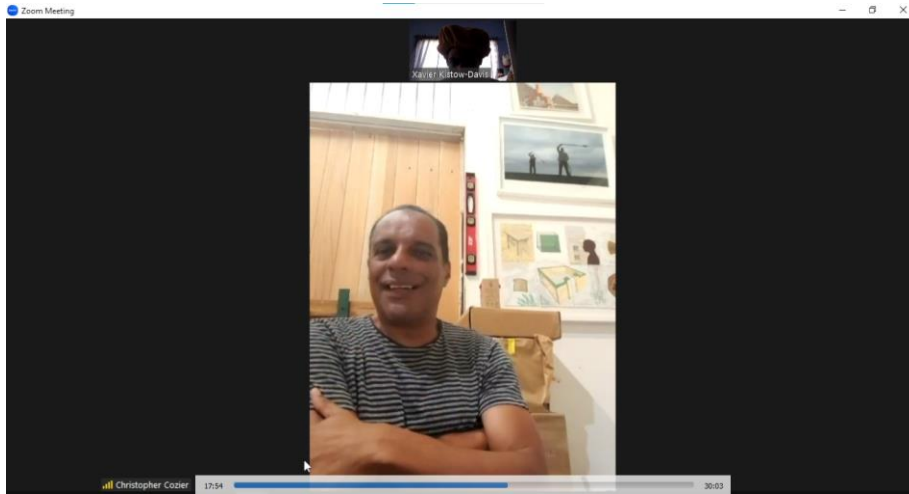


Figure 34 Screenshot of Interview via Zoom, March 2023



Figure 35 Xavier Kistow - Davis during The Old Yard Process, 2023