

ABSTRACT

Free-Dum, Dum-Free. Utterances: The Ideoscapes of Grassroots Muralists in Post-Independence Trinidad

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Who will re-chart the ruin?

That is basically the question in terms of the Afro-Trinidadian expression. I think that is what should be centre to his mind: who are we, where are we, what are we doing and what do we have in mind for our future. These are the fundamental questions.¹

Murals are social art forms which commemorate, deify, beautify, inform and record. For the artist Makemba Kunle, grassroots murals are produced “when people who have little bents, say let’s do something to bring the place alive to them, to make the place more meaningful to them ... These things remind you, well look, this place belong to me”²

LeRoy Clarke, another prominent artist reiterates this view with his statement “Any expression has some degree of relevance to the conduct in

¹ LeRoy Clarke. Personal interview. 28 Mar. 2006.

² Makemba Kunle. Personal interview. 15 Mar. 2006.

a particular space. When we look at the images as expressed, they give us an idea of the people, how the people are thinking, how they live and sometimes their aspirations.”³

This dissertation investigates murals (post-independence) in the grassroots communities of Laventille, Morvant, Quarry Street (East-Dry-River, Port-of-Spain), Bournes Road (St. James), Lady Hochoy Circular Road ‘Waterhole’ Cocorite and on the vending carts, shops and walls in the Port-of-Spain district. David K. Berlo’s Communication Theory, Perception Theory, interviews with prominent artists, grassroots muralists and residents of the communities are used to examine their cultural relevance and the use of public art to encourage resistance against oppression and foster pride in oneself and one’s community.

These grassroots communities are selected because of the influence of African symbolism, the representation of the art response to the 1970 Black Power Movement, the depiction of Black empowerment philosophies and Afro-Caribbeanness. The murals are an accumulation of African, Black Power and Rastafarian imagery which rest on a fundamental concept that group solidarity is necessary before the group can operate effectively from a position of strength in a pluralistic society or on the global stage.

Factors which affect the visual expressions of the muralists in the

³ LeRoy Clarke. Personal interview. 28 Mar. 2006.

grassroots communities are the receipt of primary and secondary education, the experiences of receiving inadequate job opportunities, involvement in the arts and the country's transition from colonialism to independence to neo-colonialism. The muralists choose this art form because it frames their landscape, marks territorial boundaries and creates a social space. It is a medium of self-expression. They use their artwork to force the viewer to participate in the process of self-analysis, to become more conscious of who he is in this landscape. The grassroots muralists emphasize the importance of social visibility and self/ collective expression.

Expression of self, that is the main thing.
 I am here and I want to leave my mark,
 I want to express something of me while I am here.
 People are saying I am here not only I am here, I am proud,
 I am proud to be here, look at me.⁴

Keywords: grassroots communities; continuum of African consciousness; nationalism; David K. Berlo's Communication Theory; Perception Theory; Black Power Movement; Rastafarian Movement and Afro-Caribbeaness.

⁴ Makemba Kunle. Personal interview. 15 Mar. 2006.