Identity and Politics in Caribbean Art
Art book exhibit at Fine Arts Library

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Summary: Major artists from the larger Caribbean islands including Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti and more are featured in this art book exhibit in the Fine Arts Library in Tappan Hall.

While each Caribbean island differs from the others with its own cultures and traditions, each has a shared experience that sets it apart from the mainland of the United States and South America. Each island saw its native people become extinct within 100 years of Columbus’ arrival. “Each shared their natural resources and agricultural commodities to a world market, and all have been affected by the worldwide economic trends,” Jan Rogozinski writes in A Brief History of the Caribbean, “All were once slave societies to an extent never seen before or since. The peoples … practice similar social forms and habits although sometimes with different names.” While at different times, each was emancipated from slavery and each achieved political independence.

The region’s long and complex story is best understood from within -- the people and the artists. The Caribbean should not be seen as an extension of the United States, Europe, or Africa, but as its own, independent entity. Unfortunately, the Caribbean has not been recognized on the world stage since the transatlantic slave trade. It is only in the past couple of years that Caribbean art coupled with Latin American art began gaining attention in the United States, but that interest is only growing.

Caribbean people are not shy about using the water as a highway. They first used the water to island hop and later traveled to different countries with the intention of returning to their homelands. Even in this exhibit, this fierce homeland loyalty emerges in the artwork. Some of the major artists and their works from some of the larger islands of the Caribbean including Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, Dominican Republic, and more are featured in this art book exhibit. Cuba is the main focus of many of the display cases. However, each of the display cases deals with the issues of how each artist identifies with his or her culture or religion, and how they visually have commented on or depicted historic political events that affect the people of the islands.

In the first display case, identity is discussed through spirituality of the native Indians of the Caribbean islands and aspects of the Afro Cuban religion called Santeria. In the second display case, Cuba takes center stage, and different artists present alternate ways of seeing the people of Cuba. In the third display case, contemporary Cuban artists take on politics and how it affects the people of Cuba in the aftermath of historical events. In the fourth display case, politics are covered again, but from the perspective of some of the larger islands in the Caribbean. Envision each display case as an island and follow the metaphorical highway to each. Discover their stories.

“Break a vase and the love that resembles the fragments is stronger than that love which took its symmetry for granted when it was whole ... Antillean art is the restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent.”
- Derek Walcott, Saint Lucian poet and playwright, Professor of poetry at the University of Essex, and Nobel Lecture, 1992