The present document is a compilation of 20 reviews and 36 images of the visual-art exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* that is being held between June 12, 2012 and January 6, 2013 at three cooperating museums in New York City, USA.

The remarkable fact that *Crossroads* has (to date) merited no fewer than 20 fairly formal art reviews in various US newspapers and on art weblogs can be explained by the terms of praise in which the reviews describe the exhibition: “likely the most expansive art event of the summer (p. 20 of this compilation), the summer’s blockbuster exhibition (p. 21), the big art event of the summer in New York (p. 15), immense (p. 34), big, varied (p. 21), diverse (p. 10), comprehensive (p. 20), ambitious (pp. 19, 21, 22, 33, 34), impressive (p. 21), remarkable (p. 21), not one to miss (p. 30), wholly different and very rewarding (p. 33), satisfying (pp. 21, 33), visual feast (p. 25), bonanza (p. 25), rare triumph (p. 21), significant (p. 13), unprecedented (p. 10), groundbreaking (pp. 13, 23), a game changer (p. 13), a landmark exhibition (p. 13), will define all other subsequent Caribbean surveys for years to come (p. 22).”

*Crossroads* is the most recent tangible expression of an increase in interest in and recognition of Caribbean art in the Caribbean diaspora, in particular the USA and to less extent Western Europe. This increase is likely the confluence of such factors as: (1) the consolidation of Caribbean immigrant communities in North America and Europe, (2) the creative originality of artists of Caribbean heritage, (3) these artists’ greater mobility and presence in the diaspora in the context of globalization, especially transnational migration, travel and information flows, and (4) the politics of multiculturalism and of postcolonial studies.

Here is a list of other Caribbean art exhibitions in the USA and Europe and related publications since 2007:

1. *Infinite Island: Contemporary Caribbean Art*
   Brooklyn Museum, New York, USA
   Approximately 80 works by 45 artists from 14 Caribbean nations
   Curated by Tumelo Mosaka
   Review in the *New York Times* by Holland Cotter,

2. *Rockstone and Bootheel: Contemporary West Indian Art*
   Real Art Ways, Hartford, Connecticut, USA
   November 14, 2009 – March 14, 2010
   Work of 39 artists from the Anglophone Caribbean
   Curated by Kristina Newman-Scott and Yona Backer
   Review in the *New York Times* by Benjamin Genocchio,

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1 The reviews were found online and the images of the artworks have been downloaded from the official websites of the exhibition, from the webpages where the reviews appear, and from image searches on [http://www.google.com](http://www.google.com).

2 The title of the *Crossroads* exhibition refers to the fact that the Caribbean has always been an international crossroads, as waves of people of diverse origins have constantly moved (freely) or been moved (forcibly) into, through and out of the region, significantly determining the fabric and the dynamics of Caribbean societies.
3. **Global Caribbean/Global Caraïbes: A Contemporary Art Exhibit**  
   Curated by Edouard Duval Carrié  
   Work of 23 Caribbean-born artists from 11 countries  
   Little Haiti Cultural Art Center, Miami, Florida, USA: December 4, 2009 – March 30, 2010  
   Musée International des Arts Modestes, Sète, France: June 12 – October 17, 2010  
   Museo de Arte Contemporáneo, San Juan, Puerto Rico: February 11 – May 15, 2011  
   Fondation Clément, Martinique: May 11 – July 15, 2012  
   Official Website [http://theglobalcaribbean.org](http://theglobalcaribbean.org)

4. **Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions**  
   Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, DC, USA  
   January 21 – March 10, 2011  
   Work of 36 artists from 12 Caribbean countries  
   Curators: Christopher Cozier and Tatiana Flores  
   The catalog can be downloaded at [http://www.artzpub.com/content/special-publications/wrestling-image](http://www.artzpub.com/content/special-publications/wrestling-image)  
   Review by Marta Fernandez Campa in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* at [http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol9/iss1/12](http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol9/iss1/12).

5. In 2011 the French art magazine *Art Absolument* issued a special bilingual (French-English) edition dedicated to Caribbean art, titled ‘Art Caribéen, l’heure de la reconnaissance/Caribbean Art: Time for Recognition.’  
   The magazine can be viewed online at [http://media.artabsolument.com/flipbook/caraibes2/index.html#/1](http://media.artabsolument.com/flipbook/caraibes2/index.html#/1).

6. **Who More Sci-Fi Than Us: Contemporary Art from the Caribbean**  
   Kunsthall KadE, Amersfoort, the Netherlands  
   May 26 – August 26, 2012  
   Work of 37 contemporary artists from 17 Caribbean countries  
   Curated by Nancy Hoffmann  
   A catalog is available.  

Elvis Fuentes, the Project Director of *Crossroads*, emphasizes that the exhibition is not so much a show of Caribbean art, but a show that explores the Caribbean through art, a show that uses art to tell a multiplicity of stories about the Caribbean (pp. 5, 12). *Crossroads* offers a “visually philosophical look into the Caribbean” (p. 23), seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the region, and ultimately celebrates the Caribbean through art.

The rationale behind the present compilation of art reviews and images of *Crossroads* is that visual-art exhibitions indeed provide a window for the study of the Caribbean region. Although physical exhibitions are bound to place, they can also be seen as extending the space of the Caribbean, in particular when they are situated in the Caribbean diaspora. From a critical engagement with (a series of reviews and images of) an exhibition such as *Crossroads*, which comprises a large and diverse collection of visual-artworks through which artists represent and interpret Caribbean reality, emerges a dialogue between the Caribbean world, the artists, the curatorial team, art reviewers and students of the region that enables a multi-layered investigation and appreciation of the region.

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3 Besides the (visual) arts there are of course many other ‘windows’ for studying the Caribbean, e.g. music, literature, and oral history.
Experienced students of the region know that the Caribbean is a space that defies facile description. It displays tremendous diversity and rich complexity. Silvio Torres-Saillant, a comparative-literature scholar from the Dominican Republic, forewarns students of the Caribbean to “start from a recognition of the complexity of their subject . . . [as] the story of the human experience in this particular part of the globe admits of no simplification.” Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot confirms: “It is as a complex package that the Caribbean presents such stimulating challenge to Western social science and anthropology in particular.”

Yet there is also a notable likeness across the region. One might speak of a complex, fragmented regional unity. US anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz talks about “the [historical] processes by which Caribbean societies were simultaneously given their distinctive, individual character on the one hand, yet made importantly alike, on the other. That likeness, the consequence of a diverse yet homogeneous colonialism, is the basis for the historical integrity of the region.” Meanwhile, Jamaican historian Franklin W. Knight asserts that “the sum of the common experiences and understandings of the Caribbean outweigh the territorial and insular differences or peculiarities.” He speaks of differences “in degree [rather] than in kind,” such that local characteristics are “merely variations or components” of regional features.

The diversity and complexity as well as the unity of the Caribbean are clearly reflected in the region’s visual art. At least, such would appear to be the joint conclusion surfacing from the following citations from the Crossroads reviews in the present compilation:

- “art museums take on the complex topic of the Caribbean” (p. 12)
- “as much as we tried to be organized and rational, the [chaotic and fragmented] Caribbean took over in the process” (pp. 12-13)
- “a valiant effort to convey the cultural diversity of the region” (p. 11)
- “the [three] museums . . . fittingly reflect [the] richness and variety [of the Caribbean’s cultures] in their survey of the region’s vibrant art” (p. 20)
- “amazing creativity” (p. 23)
- “Such a diverse array of styles would make it impossible to group the art by any sort of ‘-ism’” (p. 29)
- “the dizzying array of visual impressions characteristic of the show” (p. 17)
- “a rich potpourri of serious artwork” (p. 34)
- “[the exhibition’s selections are] both complementary and divergent [and] reach something of a synthesis” (p. 21)
- “although few interpretive labels accompany the more than 500 objects assembled . . . the show still makes sense” (p. 15)
- “these [six] separately themed shows cohere” (p. 21)
- “the exhibit in its entirety can be regarded as a cogent whole.” (p. 30)

So, while attempts to define the Caribbean and classify its art are decidedly futile, from the chaotic system of Caribbeanness emerges what Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo calls “the repeating island”: there are “common dynamics that express themselves in a more or less regular way” across the Caribbean space. One can discern deeply shared socio-structural and aesthetic patterns that are remarkable in their proliferation and persistence and that make the serious study of the Caribbean, including its art, a most enlightening and satisfying experience.

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The ambitious and trailblazing exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* is the culmination of nearly a decade of collaborative research and scholarship organized by El Museo del Barrio in conjunction with the Queens Museum of Art and The Studio Museum in Harlem. Presenting work at the three museums and accompanied by an ambitious range of programs and events, *Caribbean: Crossroads* offers an unprecedented opportunity to explore the diverse and impactful cultural history of the Caribbean basin and its diaspora. The show features more than 500 works of art, by 379 artists from 39 countries and spanning four centuries. The works include paintings, sculptures, prints, books, photography, film, video and historic artifacts. Transcendent in scope, *Crossroads* illuminates changing aesthetics and ideologies and provokes meaningful conversations about topics ranging from commerce and cultural hybridity to politics and pop culture.

Margarita Aguilar, Director of El Museo del Barrio, notes: “El Museo del Barrio is very proud to be leading groundbreaking research into the artistic heritage of a region that scholars have too often overlooked. With our visionary collaborators, we are expanding our understanding of the region. The rich history of the Caribbean and its global impact is astonishing, and we look forward to celebrating this with our communities through the arts.”

“We’ve employed a polyphonic perspective to deal with a huge archipelago that it is as diverse and complex as New York City, which is, to many, the largest Caribbean city,” reflects Project Director Elvis Fuentes. “For the first time ever, this project will examine the impact of Africa, South Asia and Europe on the visual culture of the Caribbean, including painters that were part of the Impressionists and Surrealists in France, to homegrown schools recovering popular traditions and developing original styles . . . the public will realize how intertwined the Caribbean and American experiences truly are.”

“It’s not a show on Caribbean art,” says Fuentes. “It’s a show on the Caribbean that uses art to talk about many, many issues.”

*Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* explores six distinct themes; each institution focuses on two.

http://www.elmuseo.org/en/event/caribbean-crossroads-world

**Counterpoints** reflects on the economic developments of the Caribbean, focusing on the shift from plantation systems and commodities such as sugar, tobacco, and banana to the energy and tourism industries, which have had tremendous aesthetic and social impact while proving to be a source of wealth and conflict.

**Patriot Acts** studies the central role that creole culture and notions of hybridity, supported by newly empowered local economic forces, play in the configuration of national and regional discourses of identity, and how artists and intellectuals often pitted traditional, academic aesthetics against the “authentic,” indigenous and African heritages of the Caribbean.
http://www.queensmuseum.org/9724/caribbean-crossroads-of-the-world

**Fluid Motions** examines the complexities of the geographical and geopolitical realities of a region made up of islands and coastal areas, connected and separated by bodies of water, where human and natural forces collide, and commercial routes have often camouflaged foreign imperial ambitions.

**Kingdoms of this World** considers the amazing variety of visual systems, languages, cultures and religions that co-exist in the Caribbean, and their role in the development of popular traditions such as syncretic religions, popular music genres, newly created languages, and the carnival.

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**Studio Museum in Harlem**, June 14 – October 21, 2013
http://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/caribbean-crossroads-the-world

**Shades of History** explores the significance of race and its relevance to the history and visual culture of the Caribbean, beginning with the pivotal moment of the Haitian Revolution in 1791. Race is analyzed as a trigger for discussions on human rights, social status, national identity, and beauty.

**Land of the Outlaw** addresses the dual images of the Caribbean as a Utopian place of pleasure and a land of deviance and illicit activity, and how they intertwine in a myriad foundational myths and mediatic stereotypes (from pirates and zombies to dictators and drug smugglers) that are now part of global popular culture.

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This landmark project has been over seven years in the making. Research visits and meetings with scholars from all over the Gran Caribe region have been essential to establishing its scope and themes. The resulting intellectual exchange of culture, artistry, and vision will illuminate the Caribbean region like never before.
El Museo del Barrio

Pacification with Maroons
Agostino Brunias (Italy)
c. 1801

Crop time
Albert Huie (Jamaica)
1955

Untitled (Barbados)
Gwendolyn Knight
(USA/Barbados) 1945

Paisaje de lluvia
Darío Suro (Dominican Rep)
1940

Éxodo cubano
Asilia Guillén (Nicaragua)
1963

Simbolismo de la cristalizacion
Yeni y Nan (Venezuela)
1984/2010

Bloki 2
Yubi Kirindongo (Curaçao)
1990

Mulata cartagenera
Enrique Grau Araújo (Panama)
1940

Untitled
Toton Quandt (Aruba)
1974

We Have to Dream in Blue
Arnaldo Roche-Rabell
(Puerto Rico) 1986

Queens Museum of Art

Merengue
Jaime Colson (Dominican Rep)
1938

Cuban Carnival
René Portocarrero (Cuba)
1953
La plena
Rafael Tufiño (Puerto Rico) 1967

Spirit of the Carnival
Tam Joseph (Dominica/UK) 1986

Procession Ra-Ra
Charles Obas (Haiti) undated

The Undiscovered Amerindians
Coco Fusco (Cuba/USA) 2012

Pavo real del mar
Leo Matiz (Colombia) 1939

Veerpontje
Charles H Eyck (Netherlands) 1952

Mermaid [ironwork]
Gabriel Bien-Aimé (Haiti) undated

Sirene
Rigaud Benoit (Haiti) 1965

Dentro-Adentro [video]
Oscar Leone-Moyano (Colombia) 2005

Studio Museum in Harlem

Le General Toussaint enfumé
Edouard Duval-Carrié (Haiti/USA) 2003

Jean-Baptiste Belley
Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson (France) 1797
In honor of Caribbean-American heritage month, art from the islands is taking over New York in June. A new exhibition titled *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* is bringing 500 works of art from over 400 years and 39 countries to three museums in one city. Whew!

Some works are Eurocentric representations of encountering difference, such as Augustin Brunias’ 18th century painting titled “Pacification with the maroon negroes in the island of Jamaica.” This work presents British power at its apex, although the inhabitants seem unimpressed by these “properly dressed” white gentlemen before them. In Brunias’ eyes, Jamaicans and Europeans are polar opposites, and they stare at each other in disbelief before the lush Caribbean landscape.

In other works, however, difference is not something experienced with another group or person but inside oneself. Albert Chong’s 1987 piece “Throne for the Ancestors” presents its subject in a ghostly state of in-between. Although his hand and feet are relatively defined in the silver print, his face and body are deliberately obscured, fading into the drape behind him.

The unprecedented exhibition is as diverse as it sounds, juggling the historical, the mythical, the traditional, the subversive, the critical and the celebratory all at once. We see artists take on Carnival, slavery, pop culture, powerful women, and Castro through multiple lenses. As a result, these pieces present radically different understandings of difference, identity and art throughout time, and it’s a great opportunity to compare these views when the opportunity arises.

More than 500 works of art are showcased at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing Meadows Park, El Museo del Barrio and the Studio Museum in Harlem to celebrate June, Caribbean-American Heritage month.

The exhibit, dubbed *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, includes books, paintings, sculptures, photographs, historic artifacts and videos, which span more than 400 years of history, deriving from countries in the Caribbean, Europe and North America.

“It really examines the full Caribbean basin,” David Strauss, director of External Affairs at the Queens Museum of Art, said. *Caribbean: Crossroads* is diverse in that it represents a large part of the Caribbean. Strauss said the exhibit is not restricted to the islands everyone thinks of, but [includes] other countries like Panama, Nicaragua and Colombia.

The scenes analyze how aspects of the nations’ economies, race relations, geography and interactions with other countries affected their history and development.

The exhibit is divided into six scenes, two for each museum, that highlight different events in Caribbean culture and history. The two scenes featured at the Queens Museum of Art are called “Fluid Motions” and “Kingdoms of this World.”
“Fluid Motions’ addresses the significance of water in the history of the Caribbean and how new developments in transportation have reshaped commercial routes, migratory movements and communications within the region and beyond,” Strauss said. “‘Kingdoms of this World’ considers the variety of people, languages, art forms and religions that co-exist in the Caribbean.”

Go see: ‘Caribbean: Crossroads of the World’
*The Root* recommends: A sprawling exhibition that spans 500 artworks and three New York museums


Considering the large Caribbean demographic in New York City, it is appropriate that a three-museum exhibition displaying the island region’s art and history would take place in one of the most diverse cities in the country.

*Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* — an exhibit that the *New York Times* called “the big art event of the summer” — presents more than 500 works that explore Caribbean culture and politics in a trio of concurrent displays at the Studio Museum in Harlem, the El Museo del Barrio and the Queens Museum of Art. The exhibition features images and paintings by modern artists and those trained in the 18th and 19th centuries, from Jean-Michel Basquiat, Renee Cox and Hank Willis Thomas to Isaac Mendes Belisario and Camille Pissarro. The breadth of the pieces is sure to get people talking about their own identities and relation to the region.

‘Caribbean: Crossroads of the World’ at Museo Del Barrio

*The New Yorker*, date unknown

In a valiant effort to convey the cultural diversity of a region that encompasses more than seven thousand islands and at least six languages, the museum errs on the side of over-inclusion in a crowded salon-style installation that ranges across four hundred years and allows very few works to stand out. Those that do run the gamut from the modernist (a hazy landscape from 1940 by the Venezuelan painter Armando Reverón) to the conceptual (a printout of Magellan’s itinerary by Paul Ramirez Jonas, an American artist who was born in Honduras) and from sculpture (an upholstered bench that suggests a contortionist by the Nicaraguan Patricia Belli) to performance (a riveting photograph of the collaborative Venezuelans Yeni y Nan posing nude on salt crystals in the surf). The exhibition continues at the Queens Museum and the Studio Museum in Harlem.
The first thing to understand about *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, the cluster of exhibitions opening concurrently at El Museo del Barrio, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the Queens Museum of Art in June, is that these aren’t shows of Caribbean art. They’re shows of art about the Caribbean.

That distinction is crucial, says Museo del Barrio curator Elvis Fuentes, a driving force behind the landmark project. In the planning for more than five years, *Caribbean* is an unprecedented collaborative effort to consider the multiple historical, cultural, and social forces that shaped not only 28 countries but also their diasporas in North and South America and beyond.

In its multidisciplinary approach, and its focus on how the movement of peoples and products around the globe created new, hybrid civilizations and artifacts, *Caribbean* is part of a wave of recent scholarship on American cultures that includes studies such as Charles C. Mann’s *1493: Uncovering the New World Columbus Created*.

But *Caribbean* tells the story entirely through art. Natives, newcomers, slaves, revolutionaries, plantations, tobacco, coffee, Carnival, merengue, Toussaint, Trujillo, Castro: all of these and more are rendered, or represented, in objects.

The shows offer a large selection of what might be described as Caribbean art as traditionally defined. There are portraits, religious scenes, and landscapes, by figures such as Puerto Rico’s José Campeche, Haiti’s Hector Hyppolite, Jamaica’s Edna Manley, and Venezuela’s Armando Reverón, among many others, reflecting the meeting of native and foreign cultures and the emergence of new creole societies. And since the project is concerned with how the outside world sees the Caribbean, the exhibitions feature images by well-known foreigners, such as John James Audubon, Paul Gauguin, Camille Pissarro (a Saint Thomas native), Walker Evans, and Jacob Lawrence.

Contemporary artists bringing a more conceptual and metaphorical approach to the project include Nari Ward and Renée Cox (born in Jamaica), Janine Antoni (Bahamas), Pepón Osorio and Enoc Pérez (Puerto Rico), Edouard Duval Carrié (Haiti), Abel Barroso, René Peña, and Sandra Ramos (all from Cuba), and Hank Willis Thomas (from the United States), to name a few.

The project was launched when staff members of El Museo and the Queens Museum discovered that both institutions were considering shows on contemporary Caribbean art and decided to join forces. They then approached the Studio Museum, and so began the collaboration. As two of the original museum directors and many of the original curators moved on, the team pondered a strategy to use the medium of art to “make order out of chaos,” bringing perspective to a region smaller than the United States but “much more fractured,” as Queens Museum director Tom Finkelpearl puts it.

As curators’ ideas coalesced, they became aware that the story they wanted to tell had not been told anywhere before, within the Caribbean or outside it. And they realized that the contemporary era alone doesn’t contain the whole story. For this reason, they decided to start in the late 18th century, around the time of the Haitian revolution. Then they abandoned their chronological approach in favor of individual exhibitions based on themes. They also determined that they would have to go beyond the Caribbean to properly explore the subject, and so they included coastal regions and diaspora cities like New Orleans and Miami.
“There’s a common history — and at different times very different histories that are fascinating in their differences,” comments Julián Zugazagoitia, who ran El Museo del Barrio when the project was conceived and now directs the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri. “The life of the project itself reflected life in the Caribbean — as much as we tried to be organized and rational, the Caribbean took over in the process.”

Fuentes was largely responsible for determining the themes of the individual exhibitions. “Kingdoms of This World,” the Queens Museum show examining popular traditions and religious practices, is named after Cuban author Alejo Carpentier’s novella The Kingdom of This World, set in Haiti around the time of the revolution. The exhibition focuses on subjects including Santeria, Rastafarianism, and the idea of Carnival, which has become a form of visual art in itself. “Fluid Motions,” also at Queens, looks at the geographical and political realities of a region whose components are separated by water.

Fuentes conceived “Land of the Outlaw,” slated for the Studio Museum, when he searched for the word “Caribbean” in the New York Times. Examining the results, he says, “70 percent of the things related to some kind of crime” — though, he adds, that crime was usually chronicled in some kind of fiction, ranging from books to music. The show, about “dual images of the Caribbean as a utopic place of pleasure and a land of deviance and illicit activity,” explores the role of iconic figures ranging from pirates to missionaries. A companion show, “Shades of History,” addresses the significance of race in Caribbean culture, past and present.

“Counterpoints,” at El Museo, taking off from studies by anthropologist Fernando Ortiz on the impact of sugar and tobacco on Cuban culture, looks at the role of plantations and international trade. “We have a love/hate relationship with sugar in the Caribbean,” says Fuentes, who was born in Cuba. Using art objects commissioned by plantation owners for their mansions — among them the first landscape images painted in the region — the show also explores the culture of tobacco, its workers, its marketing, and its associations with modernity. The sixth segment, also at El Museo, titled “Patriot Acts,” examines how artists and intellectuals contributed to the identity of nascent Caribbean nations.

With an accompanying publication that covers music, literature, and other arts not addressed in the exhibitions, along with extensive educational initiatives that were conceived hand-in-hand with curatorial programs, the project is considered a game changer by the leaders of the three institutions, each of which is expanding its mission by engaging in the collaboration. “The historical aspect is very new for us,” notes Finkelpearl, whose museum has focused on the era from 1939 (when its building was constructed) to the present.

For El Museo, it is a foray into the non-Spanish speaking Caribbean. And for the Studio Museum, it offers a new model of presenting shows rooted in anthropology and history — not to mention the collaborative aspects of the curatorial and educational planning.

“It’s not just the exhibition, it’s the way it’s being formed,” says Studio Museum director Thelma Golden. “It will impact the way we think about the institution.”

Too Many Paths Leading Every Which Way at ‘Caribbean: Crossroads of the World’

Emily Colucci, Hyperallergic, June 14, 2012
http://hyperallergic.com/52853/caribbean-crossroads-of-the-world

Spending all day being party-bused between the three museums — El Museo del Barrio, the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Queens Museum of Art — who are hosting the self-proclaimed landmark exhibition Caribbean: Crossroads of the World, I was repeatedly told by the museum directors, curators and artists just how significant and groundbreaking the exhibition is. However, I left the final museum feeling confused by the jumbled mix of artistic styles and periods shoved together.
Organized thematically with two themes per museum from “Fluid Motions” at the Queens Museum, focusing on the importance of water and coastal areas on the Caribbean’s art and culture, to “Shades of History” at the Studio Museum, studying the impact of race and race relations, the exhibition seemed to fall into the same trap many identity or location-based exhibitions do — by attempting to show every single work that could fit into the exhibition space without a thought to how they might translate to the viewer.

By trying to stick to a strict thematic structure without explanation of individual works of art, I came out of the day-long viewing not knowing anything more about Caribbean art, which is unfortunate since my knowledge of the topic is sparse. The museums are also joining together to create a 500-page catalogue, which would reputedly be the first major survey publication on Caribbean art yet, but the book was not available for the opening of the exhibition and there was little to offer insight into the art on display.

Beginning at El Museo del Barrio, the exhibition focused on the effect of the economic development in the Caribbean from the sugar, fruit and tobacco trade and the impact of Creole culture. In both of these thematic rooms, the curators placed historic images next to contemporary art that reflects on the state of the Caribbean today.

While the importance of Caribbean art and its diaspora in art history from Impressionism with Camille Pissarro, who was born in the Caribbean, to Jean-Michel Basquiat, who was of Haitian descent, cannot be denied, I’m not sure that there is a real reason for both these artists to be placed next to each other in an exhibition.

Similarly at the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Queens Museum of Art, their thematic rooms were overhung, organized salon-style in both museums, making it near impossible to view visually and contextually. The only explanations given were the small wall texts presenting each thematic portion of the exhibition, each individual work remained unexplained. This lack of clear explanation for the general viewer leaves Caribbean: Crossroads of the World best suited for school groups, educational tours and other groups that may have a concise lesson plan related to the show or a tour guide.

Even though I found the exhibitions organization overwhelming, I still found many works that illuminated the state of Caribbean culture and identity today without any need for explanation. I particularly liked Coco Fusco and Paula Heredia’s hysterical film “The Couple in the Cage: Guatinaui Odyssey” (video, 1993) and Fusco’s related etchings “The Undiscovered Amerindians” (2012). Dressed up as unidentifiable natives in cages placed in art galleries and other locations, Fusco and Heredia played on viewer’s interactions and cultural assumptions of them as savage natives. The etchings show some of the more notable reactions that are documented in the film, including the fact that a viewer offered to pay $10 to feed the artists a banana at the Whitney Museum.

Leaving the press-party-bus, which was by the way not much of a party, I felt frustrated that the exhibition revealed little. The curators and directors are clearly proud of bringing together this many works but they forgot to create a clear, understandable way for outsiders to access the presentations. Rather than attempting to create the biggest exhibition on Caribbean art in history, I wish that the curators at all three museums had focused on making an exhibition that could be understood and appreciated by a general audience.
In size, cultural scope and freshness of material, the three-museum exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* is the big art event of the summer season in New York, itself one of the largest Caribbean cities.

To take in the entire thing requires traveling between the Studio Museum in Harlem and El Museo del Barrio, both in Manhattan, and across the East River to the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing. If you’re short on time or patience, any single segment is dense and vivid enough to give you the flavor of the whole. But if you can see all three, absolutely do.

Each tells a hugely complex story from a different thematic angle — collectively, a telling that has been long in the planning, and is long overdue. (Caribbean material has thus far not shared in the aura of glamour that has gathered around Latin American art.) While not strictly speaking a masterpiece show, it’s like won’t be attempted again on this scale and in this depth for some time.

The story is woven as much from questions as from answers, from intangibles as from facts. Is the Caribbean a place? If so, what are its boundaries? Are Florida and Colombia as much part of it as Cuba? Is there a Caribbean culture, and how do you define it, given the mix of African, Asian, European and indigenous elements that blend, in quite different proportions, on some three dozen islands in the region?

And even if the Caribbean is defined, loosely and poetically, as a state of mind, a mood, how do you capture that in an exhibition, when so much of that mood has, traditionally, been expressed more in music and performance than in static visual forms?

A team of nine scholars and curators — Gerald Alexis, Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, Deborah Cullen, Hitomi Iwasaki, Naima J. Keith, Yolanda Wood Pujols, Lowery Stokes Sims and Edward J. Sullivan, led by Elvis Fuentes, curator for special projects at El Museo del Barrio — has pondered these matters, produced a book that is sure to become a staple reference, and shaped an exhibition so crowded with unexpected sights as to appear at times practically shapeless, absorptive rather than expository.

It says a lot that although few interpretive labels accompany the more than 500 objects assembled, many of which cry out for elucidation, the show still makes sense. Even as you puzzle over the details — What’s this? Why is it here? — you get the big picture.

Historically the picture starts at the Studio Museum, late in the 18th century. By this time indigenous peoples throughout the Caribbean had been suppressed; masses of captive Africans had been imported; a white population, largely mercantile, had settled in. From a European perspective the region had become the subject of myths — pleasurable, fearful and often centered on race.

For decades émigré painters to the Caribbean, many working for colonial estate holders, had depicted life there as a sequence of serene multicultural picnics set in parklike tropical gardens. All imagined idylls were decisively shattered, however, in 1791, with the slave rebellion in Haiti that led to that country’s independence from France.

The uprising coincided with the French Revolution, when the ideal of the brotherhood of man was ascendant in Europe. In that spirit a leader of the Haitian struggle, Jean-Baptiste Belley, a former slave born in Senegal, was elected to the National Convention in Paris. There’s a remarkable chalk drawing of him in the show, by Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, a student of Jacques-Louis David.
Dated 1797, it depicts him wearing a stylish European waistcoat and posed like a classical Apollo. At the same time his fastidiously detailed Negroid features and provocatively sexualized body make him look less a Romantic political hero than a well-dressed New World wild man.

Racial difference, as an alien and threatening reality, formed the fundamental view of the Caribbean — as it did, and still does, of Africa — in the eyes of much of the rest of the world.

A second gallery at the Studio Museum, labeled “Land of the Outlaw,” is filled with European images of the Antilles as a nightmare of ravenous beasts, hostile natives and monstrous phantoms associated with indigenous religions.

But monstrous is in the eye of the image maker. Race, or the perception of it, can function as a social unifier; it can also be approached as an unstable and alterable condition. The exhibition includes an amazing sculpture, pieced together almost entirely from matchsticks by the contemporary Jamaican artist Dudley Irons, of Marcus Garvey’s fabled Black Star Liner, conceived as a trans-Atlantic slave ship in reverse, bringing former slaves back to Africa from America.

And there’s a knockout collage portrait, finished last year, by Ebony G. Patterson, who divides her time between Jamaica and Lexington, Ky., of a young black man with a masklike white face. The image refers to the often-against-the-law world of Jamaican dance-hall culture, and specifically to its fashion for skin-bleaching as a cosmetic means of both attracting attention and — playing around with the idea, dating back to slavery and forward to Michael Jackson — determining social status based on skin color.

Ms. Patterson’s glitter-encrusted portrait, part monument, part mug shot, suggests the double-edged potential of radical identity transformation. It pays off with immediate rewards, but you may not like where it takes you, and there may be no going back. Applied to other, broader subjects, this is also the theme of the section of the show installed at El Museo del Barrio.

In the first gallery we find 18th- and 19th-century paintings, by European artists and Caribbean ones trained in European styles, of the colonized islands as an earthly Eden. Yet there is subtle evidence that we’re seeing a labor-intensive profit-making paradise, with sugar and tobacco as early export commodities, and oil coming later.

And it becomes increasingly clear, as idealized views of Caribbean life recede in art, that the producers of these commodities not only derived little benefit from them but also incurred direct harm. Working conditions were harsh; the drive for productivity was ruining land. In Albert Huie’s 1955 painting “Crop Time” black smoke pouring from a processing-plant chimney darkens the Jamaican sky.

In recent decades offshore oil drilling, which can pollute water and contaminate beaches, has endangered the one major cash-generating resource Caribbean residents can claim as their own: tourism, with its vision of island life as state of natural purity and innocence. That vision has been in wide circulation throughout the West for centuries.

We see it in an 1856 painting by Camille Pissarro of St. Thomas, where he was born; in exuberant prints Paul Gauguin made after visiting Martinique; in art by sojourning European Surrealists; and in work by Caribbean artists who chose not to join the international Modernist mainstream but rather to seek what felt like a truer foundation in their native or national cultures.

But there is no pure state, no unblemished source, no unburdened goal, as the show repeatedly emphasizes. That’s the message in William Blake’s dolorous poem “The Little Black Boy” from “Songs of Innocence and of Experience,” seen in a hand-colored 1789 etching. And it’s the reality implied in a 1990s sculpture called “All-Stars” by the Jamaican-born artist Nari Ward, which consists of a baseball bat —
contemporary Caribbean emblem of heroic aspiration — wrapped in medical tape, bristling with nails and coated with raw sugar, on which bits of cotton are stuck like fungal growths.

Reality itself — social, economic, spiritual — is in a constant state of flux, and this is the theme of the portion of the show at the Queens Museum of Art, where the dominating images are of change and interchange, embodied in the movement of water. In painting, photographs and videos we see it sluicing among islands, washing against shorelines, penetrating interiors, carrying trading ships and battleships, fishing boats and ferries.

Its flow is even echoed in the flow of air currents that carry aloft a fabulously absurdist wooden airplane designed and built by Charles Juhasz-Alvarado, an artist based in Puerto Rico of irrepressible imagination.

And, of course, where there are boats and planes, there are people coming and going. For centuries the Caribbean has received, and sent out, streams of them: Africans, Americans, Arabs, Chinese, Europeans, Sephardic Jews, South Asians, all bringing art, attitudes, cuisines, languages and religions with them. They’re all represented in the large second part of the Queens installation, built around the theme of carnival. And here the dizzying array of visual impressions characteristic of the show overall becomes almost overwhelming.

Paintings are ganged together on walls. Figural sculptures teeter across the floor. Masks pop up in 19th-century prints, in paintings by Ada Balcacer, Minnie Evans and René Portocarrero; in collages by K. Khalfani Ra; and in sculptures by Peter Minshall. The great Everald Brown supplies unearthly musical instruments; there are rituals, religious and secular, and festival dances everywhere.

If you’ve come this far — or even if you’ve seen only one of the show’s three segments — you will have encountered histories you never knew and artists you have rarely, if ever, heard of.

Isn’t telling us what we don’t know part of the job of museums? In this case three small institutions with limited staff and resources have cast their nets wide and dug deep, and come up with something big.

It’s a summertime vision of worlds within worlds. And one of those worlds is the crossroads that is our city.


‘Caribbean: Crossroads of the World’ Opens a Window on Art from the Islands
An Extravaganza of Visual Art Comes to New York

Mona Molarsky, Examiner, June 18, 2012
[http://www.examiner.com/review/crossroads](http://www.examiner.com/review/crossroads)

With the pushcart men roaming the streets, selling icy piraguas and the sound of congas reverberating through many neighborhoods, summer in New York is always a Caribbean experience. This year, thanks to three wonderful city museums, it’s a Caribbean extravaganza.

El Museo del Barrio, The Studio Museum in Harlem and the Queens Museum of Art have teamed up for Caribbean: Crossroads of the World, a far-ranging art exhibit, parts of which are installed in each of the three locations. If you can make it to all three, you’ll get an eyeful of colors and textures, not to mention a headful of ideas and questions. But even if you only make it to one museum, you’ll still be provoked and delighted.
From oil paintings, etchings and sculptures to carnival costumes and video installations, the shows remind us what a vast variety of histories, cultures and attitudes the Caribbean encompasses. For the purposes of Crossroads, the relevant history begins with the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) — when the first Caribbean island abolished slavery and gained its freedom from Europe — and continues to the present. The cultural influences range from Spanish, French, English and Dutch to African and Amerindian.

This isn’t a show that offers much in the way of historical context via wall texts. There is little explaining. So, unless you have your own private scholar to guide you, it’s best to simply respond to whatever images, colors, designs and textures grab you. The names of the artists and their countries of origin will suggest how culturally diverse the Caribbean actually is.

**The Studio Museum of Harlem**

The Studio Museum’s exhibit offers some gorgeous pieces. “Seven Brothers,” a large wood carving by Jamaican Mallica Reynolds (1911-1989) shows seven boys’ heads all emerging — literally — from the same tree. “Goyita” a powerful, close-up portrait in oils by Puerto Rican Rafael Tufiño (1922-2008), drew me like a magnet from far away. Later, in the Queens Museum, I saw his poster “La Plena” (lithograph, 1967) of a black man in a red shirt playing a tambourine against a yellow background and realized Tufiño was a brilliant graphic artist too.

A room in the Studio Museum, devoted to the theme “Land of the Outlaw,” presented images of the exotic and frightening Caribbean of the popular imagination. The fascinating “Murder in the Jungle” by Haitian painter Wilson Bigaud (1931-2010) depicts machete-wielding men attacking peasants on a path through the woods. Three huge, denuded trees tower overhead. With their neon-green trunks and stubs instead of branches, the trees themselves seem like dismembered figures, eerily embodying the carnage of the scene.

The sensuous yet mystical “Baquini y la Ciguapa del Camú” (1949), a gouache by Dominican Jaime Colson (1901-1975), looked like something William Blake might have done, if he’d retired to a tropical island with a pack of tarot cards. With its intense reds, blues and greens and beautifully drawn figures from island folklore, the piece made me want to jump right into the artist’s magical world.

Hanging nearby is the textured and evocative black and white etching “The Death of Chimbonbó,” by Panamanian Julio Augusto Zachrisson (b. 1930), another take on local lore, which conjured something like the Victorian fairy tale world of illustrator Arthur Rackham mixed with the darker realms of Goya.

**El Museo del Barrio**

The works in El Museo del Barrio include early pieces that highlight the islands’ European influences. “Pacification with Maroon Negroes” by Agostino Brunias (1728-1796), who was born in Rome and lived in England before traveling to Dominica in the Antilles, is a standard British historical painting of the period, depicting a group of scantily clad, liberated slaves standing beside British officers in full military regalia. Still lifes, of bananas and coconuts, by Puerto Rican painter Francisco Manuel Oller y Cestero (1833-1917), display European painting style of the period applied to Caribbean subjects.

But the standout works are contemporary pieces. A large painting of a coal black child in an emerald green dress playing marbles on a tile floor by Curacao artist Arlette Da Costa Gomez (1957-1995) has a flat look that evokes Matisse and Milton Avery, yet presents a bold and unique perspective.

Puerto Rican artist Arnaldo Roche-Rabell’s “We Have to Dream in Blue” (1986), a large painting of a dark face that seems to be sprouting tropical vegetation and stares out at us with electric-blue eyes, is compelling and unforgettable, a fitting symbol for the whole show.
The Queens Museum of Art

From “Spirit of the Carnival” (1986) by Tam Joseph to “Mermaid/Sirene” by Haitian Rigaud Benoit (1911-1986), there are numerous intriguing works at the Queens Museum of Art in Flushing. Joseph’s carnival painting, on a big piece of brown wrapping paper, is an Expressionist take on a masked and raffia-clad carnival dancer menaced by white-faced policemen and a vicious attack dog. Although born in Dominica in 1947, Joseph now lives in Britain, where police violence at London’s Notting Hill Caribbean Carnival inspired his piece.

In Haiti, Le Sirene is a water goddess from the Vodou pantheon, and as such her image is loaded with symbolism that’s hard for non-initiates to understand. Still, there is something seductive about Benoit’s image of a brown woman with a red fish’s tail, riding in a phallic canoe through the fish-filled sea. We sense her power, even if we don’t completely understand it.

“Procession/Ra-Ra” by another Haitian, Charles Obas (1927-68), is an evocative night scene that shows ghostly celebrants with flags and torches dancing through the narrow streets of a dark town. The poetry of the image is so much greater than the few lines and dabs of paint on Masonite that the artist laid down, you have to scratch your head at the age-old mystery of art. Now how did he do that?

The same might be said for a group of lithographs by Nicaraguan Armando Morales (1927-2011) that offers shadowy figures engaged in mysterious activities. In “The Women of Puerto Cabezas,” a group of naked women stand with their backs to us in near darkness. A stack of rifles is piled next to them and a searchlight shines — perhaps from a boat — in the distance. What are the women doing? And why are they naked? Are they prostitutes? Are they arms smugglers or revolutionaries? Without any wall text to explain the significance of the image, we are left wondering. Yet the image remains powerful even as it perplexes.

An untitled black and white print (1996) by the Cuban Belkis Ayón Manso (1967-1999) works in similar ways, provoking curiosity at the same time that it keeps secrets: four silhouetted figures, three black and one white, stand in ambiguous poses against a symbolist background that suggests a jigsaw puzzle of figures and patterns. There is a rich sensuality to the image, at the same time that its’ meaning remains opaque.

Belkis Ayón Manso, I discovered after doing some research, was a female artist whose imagery grew out of Afro-Cuban religion and an all-male secret society, called Abakúa. She committed suicide at the age of 32. Her one print in the show was striking enough to pique my interest in seeing the larger body of her work.

Caribbean: Crossroads of the World is an ambitious show that offers up a tastings menu from many dozens of islands and genres, perfect for a festive summer in New York. I hope that some of the fine artists introduced in this overview will have their own solo shows here in the years to come.

Island-Hop through New York’s Multi-Faceted, Multi-Museum Survey of Caribbean Art

Alanna Martinez, Blouin Art Info, June 20, 2012

In what is likely the most expansive art event of the summer, El Museo del Barrio, the Queens Museum of Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem co-host a tri-institutional exhibition to conclude over a decade of collaborative research on the Caribbean, its people, nations, and artistic currents.

Spanning two boroughs, Caribbean: Crossroads of the World has over 500 works on display including painting, sculpture, artist books, photography, video, and historical artifacts from Caribbean countries, Europe, and the US. Accompanying programming at each venue takes place each month, from artist talks to film series, throughout the run of the show. A complimentary publication on the history, art, and culture of the Caribbean has also been released, edited by El Museo del Barrio’s Associate Curator Special Projects Elvis Fuentes and its Director of Curatorial Programs Deborah Cullen. Several other institutions have concurrent shows in conjunction with the exhibition and June’s Caribbean-American Heritage Month, including the Americas Society, Bronx Museum, and Nathan Cummings Foundation.

The museums take a comprehensive look at the region and its Diaspora through the visual creations of its artists, and those inspired by the culture and scenery of the region’s islands. The exhibition’s time-line spans the period from the Haitian revolution to the present, and incorporates an impressive set of pre-modern, modern, and contemporary artists, including Janine Antoni, John James Audubon, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Paul Gauguin, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Ana Mendieta, and many more.

The work is separated according to six distinct themes, which are divided between the three venues. El Museo del Barrio displays “Counterpoints,” mapping the complex economic and political plantation systems that made the islands prosper, and their major produce industries, such as sugar, fruit, tobacco, and coffee. “Patriot Acts” focuses on the artists and intellectuals who helped shape notions of identity in each nation, through contrasts and comparisons between indigenous practices, African histories, and modern aesthetics.

The Queens Museum of Art shows works in sections dubbed “Fluid Motions” and “Kingdoms of this World.” The first tackles the geographic hurdles and geopolitical positioning of the countries in the region, while the second includes work about the range of cultures, languages, and people that populate them, and the important role of carnival for all of the Caribbean’s inhabitants.

The Studio Museum in Harlem covers the last two sections. “Land of the Outlaw” unpacks the two divergent ways the area has been portrayed historically: as a utopia, and as a tropical Wild West where crime and illicit activity run rampant. Meanwhile “Shades of History” looks at the significance of race in the history and culture of Caribbean identity, as well as the milestone of the Haitian Revolution of 1804 — which made Haiti the second independent country in the Americas, following the US, and the first black republic.

This citywide exhibition underlines the island nations’ history as melting pots for a broad range of cultures. The diverse museums of what is considered to be the largest Caribbean city in the world fittingly reflect that richness and variety in their survey of the region’s vibrant art.

The Impressive ‘Caribbean: Crossroads of the World’ Spans New York


No city is really an island, and that goes double for New York, arguably the most cosmopolitan metropolis in the world. Gotham, instead, is a port — a point of entry for goods and ideas and peoples from near and far. A center of convergence connected to millions of other hubs, the five boroughs sometimes serve as a key aerie for arriving cultures to assay their places of origin. *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, the summer’s big blockbuster exhibition, is one such encyclopedic appraisal. A fresh new effort at clearly seeing there from here, it also speaks volumes about present-day New Amsterdam. After all, an exhibition as big, varied, and ambitious as this rare triumph could only really have been dreamed up in the Big Mango — er, I mean the Big Apple.

That New York is the world’s biggest Caribbean city might be news to some, but likely not a surprise to NYC residents who recognize it as filled with the sounds, smells, and influences of the islands and rim nations that line the Caribbean Sea. Trinidadian roti joints, Panamanian travel agencies, Guyanese cricket matches — all of these and more make up what it means to live at this bustling intersection of otherness and normality. The Caribbean — its identity, culture, and visual art — is also an evolving condition. This partly explains why it’s so difficult to avoid identifying closely with this remarkable show. As happens sometimes in portraiture, the Caribbean’s colorful likeness appears at once shockingly different and eerily familiar.

A three-museum effort a decade in the making, *Crossroads of the World* is impressive merely in terms of its vast size. A historical compendium of more than 500 works by some 350 artists, the show’s full scope requires travel from Manhattan’s Museo del Barrio to the Studio Museum in Harlem, and across the East River to the Queens Museum, in Flushing. (Note to art lovers: Although the complete tour is highly recommended, any single museum visit offers beaucoup rewards.) This treasure trove convincingly demonstrates that museum ambition need not be tied to costly physical expansions. The institutional equivalent of the recent trend toward artists’ collectives, *Crossroads of the World* illustrates that most savvy of recession-era principles: There’s strength in numbers.

A visual history of the Caribbean as the original juncture between Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas, *Crossroads of the World* is an exhibition that raises as many questions as it answers. What are the conceptual and geographical boundaries of the Caribbean? Is it possible to conceive of these polyglot nations as sharing a common visual heritage? When, in fact, does the history of the region even begin? The answer to this last question, according to the show’s nine curators (captained by Elvis Fuentes, curator of special projects at El Museo del Barrio), is the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804. A watershed event like the 1789 French Revolution, this successful slave uprising set in motion the complex story that these three museums visualize today. The added fact that these separately themed shows cohere without turning textbook didactic proves yet another strength in this capacious, gem-filled history-as-art-exhibition.

Less an exhibition of Caribbean art than a show of art about the Caribbean, *Crossroads of the World* kicks off at El Museo del Barrio with a visual exploration of the region’s racial and cultural mix as established by successive economic and political forces. A painting like Agostino Brunias’s “A Planter and His Wife Attended by a Servant” (1870) illustrates the genteel front behind a colonial ideology that resulted in centuries of slavery and the area’s ruinous plantation monoculture. A set of prints by Jacob Lawrence examines the Haitian slave revolt from the charged point of view of the 1930s Harlem Renaissance. Five black-and-white photographs by Leo Matiz capture the region’s vast oil wealth and its human and environmental devastation. Both complementary and divergent, the exhibition’s selections — which also include prints by Paul Gauguin, photographs by Ana Mendieta, and paintings by Camille Pissarro — reach something of a synthesis with a ravishing painting by the Colombian master Enrique Grau Araujo. Titled
“La Mulata Cartagenera” (1940), this orange-hued portrait of interracial womanhood is rife with associations about the lush beauty engendered by this new mixed culture.

Discussions of race and the Caribbean’s multiple identities acquire a sharper edge uptown at the Studio Museum. There, a 1797 black-chalk portrait of Jean-Baptiste Belley — an African-born slave who became an elected representative to France’s National Convention — exemplifies the Haitian patriot as a swashbuckling (not to mention well-endowed) superhero. A nearby diorama from the same period fashioned in Suriname, an ex-Dutch colony, represents African slaves as merrymaking musical savages — proof that historical periods are hardly synchronous when it comes to human liberty. While a mere few feet away, a highly contemporary irony plays out that encompasses the representational history of these and other pieces. Titled “Ode to CMB: Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” (2006–2007), Hank Willis Thomas’s gold- and-cubic-zirconium rapper’s medallion razzes black identity in a way that would make most of his artistic predecessors squirm. (Generational confrontations regarding evolving ideas of blackness and representation, in fact, give the Studio Museum chapter of Crossroads of the World both its frisson and swing.)

A water motif dominates the final chapter of this fulsome exhibition. Introduced by a gorgeously simple video of artist Janine Antoni literally tightrope walking across the Caribbean’s horizon line, the Queens Museum appropriately underscores the oceanic flow of generations of tropically inspired talent. Fittingly, this last leg of Crossroads proves both the largest and most democratic. A Romare Bearden collage sprinkled with Matissean accents sits cheek by jowl with Sandra Ramos’s riff on Robert Delaunay’s concentric painting. Newcomer Sheena Rose’s streaming animation shares wall space with a luminous waterscape by Armando Reverón, Venezuela’s late answer to J.M.W. Turner. Surprisingly, even the museum’s famed Panorama of the History of New York gets into the act. A tourist attraction turned found canvas for Puerto Rican artist Melquiades Rosario Sastre’s installation “The Fleet” (1985), its model waterways serve as the perfect staging ground for the artist’s floating immigrant islands.

Arguably, Crossroads of the World, and the book that accompanies it, will define all other subsequent Caribbean surveys for years to come. A popular, intergenerational, and entertainingly historical show, it lets artists talk to one another across the ages. Interested viewers, most especially kindred New Yorkers, should rush to listen in.

Discover the Caribbean World at Queens Museum

Alan Krawitz, Times Ledger, June 28, 2012

Coinciding with this month’s celebration of Caribbean-American Heritage Month, the ambitious and comprehensive exhibition Caribbean: Crossroads of the World opened June 16 at the Queens Museum of Art as hundreds of art patrons from New York City and beyond viewed diverse works spanning more than 400 years of Caribbean culture.

The pioneering collaboration, which represents more than a decade of research and is accompanied by a range of programs and events, was organized by El Museo del Barrio, in the Upper East Side, in partnership with Queens Museum of Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem to explore the diverse history of the Caribbean and its people. Exhibits are hosted in all three museums.

The multimedia exhibition, which features 379 artists taken from collections around the world, uses the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) as its starting point and includes paintings, sculptures, prints, books, photography, film and various artifacts from the Caribbean, Europe and the United States that spotlight topics from commerce and culture to politics and popular culture.
“We’re living in a city with one of the largest Caribbean populations in the world,” said Tom Finkelpearl, executive director of the Queens Museum of Art. “As a region, I think the Caribbean is not given enough attention... There is amazing creativity and we want people to come out, relax and enjoy the 500 or so works of art that will be on display.”

The exhibition explores six distinct themes that are split among the three museums comprising Counterpoints, Patriot Acts, Fluid Motions, Kingdoms of the World, Shades of History and Land of the Outlaw.

“I liked how one country related to works in the other countries,” said Carmen Saldana, a resident of Tarrytown, who attended the exhibit’s opening. “We need to support these artists and let their talents grow.”

Fluid Motions highlights the importance of water in the history of the Caribbean and how developments in transportation have shaped commercial routes and communications in the region. Kingdoms of this World looks at the array of people, languages, art forms and religions co-exist in the region.

Nicolas Cruz, a student from Mexico City, said he liked the Mexican exhibits best. “I think it’s interesting how the artists managed to integrate the different Caribbean cultures,” said Cruz, who was visiting New York for the week.

In an effort to encourage people to visit the entire exhibition, a single “passport to the Caribbean” paid admission to any of the three museums will include a ticket good for complimentary entry to the other two sites.

“The Caribbean was a cultural hybrid,” said Hitomi Iwasaki, director of exhibitions for the Queens Museum of Art. “Since we’re located in the most ethnically and racially diverse place in the world, we are the museum to deal with diversity and hybridity.”

**Visiting the Caribbean in New York City**

http://www.arts.gov/bluestarblog/?p=1750

It may be a debilitatingly hot, humid summer in New York City, but one exhibit has continued to bloom with color, contradiction, and infectious energy. Partially funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* takes a visually philosophical look into the Caribbean — its history, its realities, and what it means to construct a single regional identity out of 7,000 different islands. With more than 500 paintings, the exhibit is a collaboration between El Museo del Barrio, the Queens Museum of Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem. Each museum focuses on particular themes, such as the diversity of the region’s populations, the complexity of race, and the fallacy of a mythical, pristine paradise. We spoke via e-mail with Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and Margarita Aguilar, director of El Museo del Barrio, about this groundbreaking exhibit, which runs through January 6, 2013.

National Endowment for the Arts (NEA): Why was the decision made to show this exhibit across three museums? What have the challenges and benefits of this collaboration been?

Thelma Golden (TG): The *Caribbean: Crossroads* project was initiated by El Museo del Barrio, whose team invited the Studio Museum and the Queens Museum to have the honor to participate in this expansive
project. It was a great joy to be part of this groundbreaking project and to work with a passionate and committed team, including my fellow directors Margarita Aguilar and Tom Finkelpearl.

Margarita Aguilar (MA): The decision was made for many reasons, such as the large scope and amount of works we wanted to show. We also saw great potential in the themes that could be explored at each institution. All three museums serve vibrant and diverse Caribbean communities in New York City, and so the partnership made total sense.

**NEA:** Many people call New York “the largest Caribbean City.” How can this backdrop enhance, or at least inform, the exhibit?

TG: New York City provides an inspiring and energizing location for this exhibition. The rich Caribbean culture in the city places this project in a unique context and opens up wonderful opportunities for dialogue.

MA: The whole “region” of the Caribbean is represented in New York. With *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* it was our intent show that rich history and reflect the region’s vitality and culture through a larger artistic perspective.

**NEA:** As is noted in the exhibit, the Caribbean has always been a place of shifting cultures, empires, power-holders, even waters. How have these transient elements impacted the region’s ability to form an enduring artistic canon?

TG: The brilliance of this exhibition is the thematic construction created by project director Elvis Fuentes along with the curatorial team of Edward J. Sullivan, Lowery Stokes Sims, Gerald Alexis, Yolanda Wood Pujols, Deborah Cullen, Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, Hitomi Iwasaki, and Naima J. Keith. Instead of attempting to impose an overarching narrative, these thematics foreground the artists and artisans whose work is influenced by and at the very heart of the many diverse cultural traditions in the Caribbean.

MA: The Caribbean landscape has shaped ideas about nationhood and art in the region. Out of so many remarkable events and the mixing of many groups of people an intrinsically “Caribbean” culture was born that is diverse, rich, and complex. These influences and cultures have contributed to nation-building and notions of identity, nationalism and national art schools, which is part of what this exhibition explores.

**NEA:** What misconception of Caribbean art, or the Caribbean itself, do you hope this exhibit will help dispel?

TG: I think the major misconception around Caribbean art, and the Caribbean itself, is the portrayal of a fantasized, projected image as a reality. This exhibition features images that capture the breadth, depth, and complexity of many aspects of the region.

MA: That there is only one particular view — that the entire region can be seen through one lens.

**NEA:** What is your personal favorite piece or aspect of the exhibit?

TG: In an exhibition with this many amazing works I am not sure I can pick a favorite! However, two aspects of *Caribbean: Crossroads* are particularly thrilling to me. I love seeing work by young artists for the first time, and *Caribbean: Crossroads* has introduced me to some exciting new voices, including Sheena Rose from Barbados, whose video is on view at the Queens Museum. At the same time, I love that *Caribbean: Crossroads* offers the opportunity to view iconic artists in new light. In particular, we have over the past year been part of the celebration of the centennial of Romare Bearden’s work, and it is wonderful to see Bearden’s work in this exhibition and delve more deeply into the work he created during and inspired by his many years in St. Maarten.
MA: I love that we have so many works in the exhibition. Each institution has gems, and many works in the exhibition have rarely been shown in public.

**NEA: Why did you decide to join Blue Star Museums this year?** [Blue Star Museums is a collaboration among the National Endowment of the Arts, Blue Star Families, the Department of Defense, and more than 1,500 museums across the USA]

TG: The Studio Museum is tremendously lucky to serve a broad and diverse community locally, nationally and internationally. The Blue Star program is an opportunity to honor and recognize the incredible contributions our service members make to our community.

MA: El Museo del Barrio is more than a museum — it is a cultural institution with a strong connection to the local community. We have participated in Blue Star Museums since 2010, and are thrilled to continue to welcome active duty military personnel and their families to El Museo!

**NEA: Is there anything else you’d like to add?**

TG: *Caribbean: Crossroads* is such a wonderful addition to our summer exhibition season and provides a great counterpoint to our other exhibitions, *Primary Sources: Artists in Residence 2011-12* and *Illuminations: Expanding the Walls 2012*.

MA: Don’t miss the opportunity to see this remarkable show! The publication that accompanies the exhibition, titled *Caribbean: Art at the Crossroads of the World* and published in conjunction with Yale University Press, will be an important component not to be missed. It will be available shortly at all three museums and will become a critical resource for any serious scholar, or really anyone interested in the Caribbean.

**One Voice of the Caribbean, Many Accents**


[http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304388004577529051014723134.html](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304388004577529051014723134.html)

Coconut water, reggae and one week in Cuba. Until now, this has been my relationship with the Caribbean — which is to say, I haven’t had much of one. That’s what spurred me to visit the three-museum bonanza of an exhibit, *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, a visual feast of more than 500 artworks exploring the region’s history and culture.

But seeing as I’ve not even taken a tourist-y vacation to Jamaica (a situation I’m keen to correct), I wanted to visit the museums with people who are connected to the region and could absorb the art work with richer impressions and observations than I could. To that end, I visited each of the participating institutions — El Museo del Barrio, the Queens Museum of Art and Studio Museum in Harlem — with artists of Caribbean descent. Today and in the following two weeks, this column will recount those visits, one at a time.

To start things off, I turned to author Oscar Hijuelos, for whom nostalgia about “the Cuba that was” ("la Cuba que fue") has been inescapable. Born in New York to Cuban parents in 1951, he grew up on West 118th Street and was surrounded by a vision of Cuba conjured by relatives who had left. He went on to
write novels inspired by the mixture of memory, culture and imagination, notably *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1990.

With that in mind, Mr. Hijuelos and I headed to El Museo del Barrio in East Harlem. A fast talker and big thinker, he took a millisecond to address an issue that simmers in all three exhibits: “Latin American art is often ethnographical and representational in an effort to preserve the ideas for the future,” he said. “There is a mission — to remember the history of the struggle.”

That sentiment was particularly clear in “Exodo Cubano,” a 1963 painting by Nicaraguan artist Asilia Guillén. The colorful work depicts Cubans leaving the island on barrels, rafts and small boats while a crescent moon shines above. In this depiction, there are no cities on the island — only farms and fields. There are, however, detailed scenes, including that of a firing squad.

According to the exhibit’s project director, Elvis Fuentes, the artist was likely prefiguring the Cuban exodus. “A double flag featuring the symbols of piracy and Communism implies an early critique of Cuba’s often idealized 1959 revolution,” he said.

Politics have evolved over time, but restrictions on travel have meant that many Cubans who left the island live only with their memories and ideas of home. “The island became a psychological place of desire, the impossible dream,” Mr. Hijuelos said. “Given that Cuba is only 90 or so miles away, it seems particularly absurd, but that taunting distance is one of the things that separates most Cubans from other Latinos, who for the most part always have a homeland to return to.”

Elsewhere in the exhibit, Mr. Hijuelos noted a multiplicity of viewpoints, including a strong selection of abstract art. “It’s like 20 singers trying to find one voice, while contributing to the massive narrative of Caribbean-Latino history,” he said.

The contrasts were at times stark. One wall captured the imagery of death and mortality, as in an untitled work by Jean-Michel Basquiat depicting a skull. “Death,” Mr. Hijuelos said, “was a huge fact of life — slave populations, war, revolution — and the awareness of another world.”

And yet not too far away, Amelia Peláez’s “Fish with Baroque Columns,” a painting with bright, rich color, celebrated aspects of daily life in Cuba, though with a modernist’s touch. Among the most interesting examples of Cuban art was a portrait of the 19th-century poet and freedom fighter Jose Martí that, as Mr. Hijuelos described it, looked “Rembrandt-y.” It was painted between 1955 and 1960 by Angel Acosta León, a surrealist, though its crackled finish made it look much older than it was. His work often included wild, creative shapes, but this portrait is deeply traditional and creates a halo effect around its historical subject — a hero of Cuba’s other revolution, the one that achieved independence from Spain.

By the end of our tour, I was grateful that I hadn’t visited the exhibit alone. My favorite painting was probably Olga Albizu’s “Alla Africa,” mainly because it was used as the cover art for one of my favorite jazz albums, “Getz/Gilberto.” Even with reams of great works to inspire great thoughts, I would have spent too much time with the various paintings of palm trees, daydreaming about the beach.

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http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444330904577537311478112438.html

One of the most striking images in the three-museum exhibit *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* is Leo Matiz’s 1939 shot of a man casting a huge circular fishing net from the bow of a boat. The net ripples and...
swirls against the sky just before it will be plunged into the water. “That is really hard to do. I’ve tried it,” said my museum companion for the day, the Barbados-born modern dancer Sean Scantlebury.

Mr. Scantlebury and I went to the Queens Museum of Art as part of my effort to see all three shows in the Caribbean exhibit — an expansive look at the region containing more than 500 works — with artists who have a connection to that part of the world. (This column is the second in a series that took me to El Museo del Barrio with novelist Oscar Hijuelos, who is of Cuban parentage; next up will be Jamaica-born choreographer Garth Fagan at the Studio Museum in Harlem.)

Mr. Scantlebury, 31 years old, came to America at age 4 and grew up on the edge of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights surrounded by friends and family of West Indian descent; he returned to Barbados for a lengthy visit as a teenager. “No matter how long it’s been, you’re still influenced by the food, the music, the accent,” he said, adding that his plan is to end up back on the island. “I always say it’s going to be my last stop. I’m going to go to Barbados and stay there for a long time.”

Perhaps it was that sentiment — or maybe it was our journey on the No. 7 train — but somehow our conversation kept coming back to travel, which emphasized the “crossroads” theme within the exhibit. As a member of the TriBeCa-based Battery Dance Company, Mr. Scantlebury has toured the world with the company’s offshoot Dancing to Connect, an initiative that engages young people in creativity and team building through dance.

In May, the program took him to Suriname, the former Dutch colony on the northern edge of South America. Though not exactly top of mind in terms of the Caribbean, the low-profile nation came up twice in this exhibit. First, we spied detailed watercolors from the late 19th century, depicting scenes such as a riverside sugarcane plantation. If the pictures were intended to sell the folks back home on relocating, they probably did the trick — what with all the clear water, blue skies and tall palm trees.

Later, we spent some time examining a 1938 cruise-line advertisement that illustrated Suriname’s proximity to the Caribbean. A series of red lines showed where the lucky folks on the cruise ship would stop, and in doing so, it led to talk about the less tangible links between the Caribbean islands and nearby countries.

“In Suriname, and also in Brazil, the weather was so hot and the people were so nice, I felt like I was at home in Barbados,” said Mr. Scantlebury. “It made me homesick. I really want to go back.”

But it was his travels through Africa — to Tanzania, Namibia, Nigeria and more — that made him feel at home rather than homesick. “There was a sense that we’re all from Africa. Half the time, people thought that I was African. When I was dancing with the students, they were like ‘Are you sure you’re not from here?’ I guess the spirits and influence were there.”

Depictions of spirits and religious influences are captured in a thematic section called “Kingdoms of This World.” Haitian painter Hector Hyppolite — who was also a voodoo priest — held our attention with a painting that evokes Africa and female divinity, “Queen of the Congo,” but various depictions of the carnival tradition brought out the celebratory side. “Cuban Carnival” (1953) by Cuban artist René Portocarrero stood out as both abstract and representational with its vertical shapes in bright colors.

Masks pop up in spooky ways throughout this portion. Photographer Héctor Méndez Caratini has a 1979 shot, “Plena callejera, Loiza, Puerto Rico,” of a happy young man, possibly dancing in the foreground, but your eyes can’t help finding the masked figure just beside him. In “Milatoni Mask” (1944), the Haitian artist Simil (Emilcar Similien) evokes an erotic sensibility: the silhouette of a female figure wears an eye mask with red feathers and covers her nose and mouth with her arms. The most unsettling covering, however, was a sheer black veil with sequins and beads titled “This Is Hell” that completely disguises the entire head and face.
For Mr. Scantlebury, the idea of carnival — or “Crop Over,” as his Bhajan family referred to it — was a no-go while he was growing up in Brooklyn. “Someone was always getting shot and killed. My mom told me not to go,” he said.

Whatever dancing in the streets he missed, he has made up for onstage. (Battery Dance is in the Downtown Dance Festival, Aug. 11 to 17). At age 8, he made it into Eliot Feld’s Ballet Tech, a tuition-free ballet and academic school open to New York City students. “I was lucky to come to the U.S. Now I get to go abroad and teach people to dance. Sometimes we work with troubled youth. I tell them I am living proof that you can make it,” he said.

Which makes his travel all the more important.

The Choreographer’s Eye on Art

http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444226904577557054092527004.html

Garth Fagan does not mince words.

This I learned when the Jamaican-born choreographer — famous for his work on “The Lion King” and beloved for his humane, unaffected approach to modern dance — joined me at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The occasion was a walk through its segment of the three-museum exhibit Caribbean: Crossroads of the World, which looks at the history and culture of the region by way of about 500 works of art.

“Just look at that abuela,” he said, using the Spanish word for “grandmother” while captivated by Rafael Tufino’s oil portrait titled “Goyita” (1953). “You see all that she has done and will do — to survive, to keep her family going. She’s had no spring-chicken life.”

Then, looking at a nearby painting of women, he said: “Those are just regular grannies.”

Standing in front of the abstract bronze sculpture “Giniguano” (1947) by Cuban artist Agustín Cárdenas, he considered a smooth, oblong shape that appeared to be giving birth to a man. “What the hell is the upside-down man doing?” he asked with a toss of his hands. “I don’t know!”

A comic moment, yes, and also one that embraced — rather than dismissed — the obscurities in art. Which Mr. Fagan is well acquainted with. Born in Kingston, Mr. Fagan, 72 years old, studied art at home in Jamaica with the painter Albert Huie (whose work is in the El Museo del Barrio’s portion of this exhibit). “He got me going. I thank my parents for that,” he said.

In 1960, Mr. Fagan came to the U.S. for college and launched a successful career in dance; his Rochester-based company, Garth Fagan Dance, tours regularly and is celebrating its 40th anniversary season.

Along the way, he has become a major art collector who owns pieces by artists included in the Studio Museum exhibit, such as Jacob Lawrence, a Harlem Renaissance figure who painted scenes of African-American history, and the self-taught artist known as Kapo (Mallica Reynolds), the sculptor and painter who was a leader of Jamaican art.

“I’m a big fan of Kapo,” said Mr. Fagan, directing me to “Seven Brothers,” a 1966 wood sculpture depicting seven men. “It’s the faces of all the people who came from Africa — the lips, the eyes, the nose and not trying to make it look European. And he used the wood that he had.”
Watching Mr. Fagan admire the sculpture was a lesson in how a choreographer sees the world; what he noted in the composition was the positioning of the bodies — looking up, out and all in different directions. “The focus is ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR,” he said, snapping his fingers upward. “Only two are looking down.”

His quick eye for bodies was also evident when we tried to unravel the bloody and demonic figures in Jaime Colson’s 1949 “Baquín y la ciguapa del Caribe (Child’s Wake and Mythological Creature of the Caribbean).” Mr. Fagan noted immediately that one figure’s feet were in ballet’s first position (heels together) but the lower legs were facing backward, whereas the torso and thighs were facing the viewer.

And he brought his sensitivity for casting to bear while looking at “Redcoat,” a 2004 photograph by Jamaican-born Renée Cox, who uses her own body to create images that comment on society and history. In what is a keynote image of the Studio Museum show, Ms. Cox stands for a military-style portrait in a bright red colonial uniform while gripping a machete. “I see the same commitment in her eyes with the machete as in the grandmother,” he said, referring to Tufino’s “Goyita.” “These are women who will not be defeated.”

Such women are also to be found in his company, Garth Fagan Dance. “I want my women to be strong, to be able to do all the jumps,” he said, adding that they’re not so tough as to be without emotion. Which also goes for the men. “I want my men to be masculine and vulnerable. Not macho.”

He’s currently at work on a new piece — set to music by Wynton Marsalis — that will have its premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Sept. 27 to 30. While his choreography does not shy from the serious, it often connects to the uplifting and inspiring.

As he said while we were looking at the Kapo sculpture: “We dwell too much in the realm of the negative.”

‘Caribbean: Crossroads of the World’

Berkley Todd, CUArts Blog (Arts Initiative at Columbia University)

Part 1: El Museo del Barrio
July 20, 2012
http://cuarts.wordpress.com/2012/07/20/caribbean-crossroads-of-the-world-part-1-el-museo-del-barrio

When we hear the word “Caribbean,” many of us tend to think of blue waters, warm sun, and summer cocktails. America’s favorite vacation spot, however, is home to many distinct cultures of its own. A new city-wide exhibit, Caribbean: Crossroads of the World, seeks to give us a taste of that culture and history, with artwork that highlights the uniqueness of the many peoples of the Caribbean. In the first of three blog posts on each segment of this multi-museum exhibition, we’ll take a close look at the gallery on display at El Museo del Barrio.

The exhibit is aptly named. The many different influences found amongst the artwork here clearly shows the Caribbean to be a “Crossroads of the World.” Such a diverse array of styles would make it impossible to group the art by any sort of “-ism,” so the curators have elected to layout the museum in terms of the themes which each work explores. One segment, labeled “Patriot Acts”, showcases art which grapples with the constant influence of Western Europe and the Americas on the cultural identity of the Caribbean natives.

This mixing of cultures and identities through art gives the exhibit here a strong sense of postmodernism. Sometimes through integration of style, and sometimes through direct artistic representation, these
artworks play with the multi-faceted and complicated world in which they were created. For example, a sculpture titled “Racional” by Yoan Capote features an aesthetic similar to the marble carvings of the human male made by Roman artists of the classical era; however, this male figure lacks a head, and in place of his genitals is a brain. “Racional” is a work of art that gets you to think. What are the dangers of a world where sex dominates a person’s thinking? Is there anything rational about sexually dominated thinking or discourse? My engagement with the piece left me feeling that the artist was attempting to convey a clear message: western art (and by extension, western thought) may be derived more from our instincts than a place of true rationality.

“Racional” is postmodern in its engagement with classical sculpture, but its placement in the multicultural landscape of the Caribbean also makes it a commentary on where culture crosses with gender, sexuality and the influence of so many different world powers. All of the works in the exhibit engage with these ideas in some way. Some only do so peripherally, reflections of the world in which they were created, while others like “Racional” are obvious statements about their world. That this world is truly a “crossroads” of the larger global community charges all of these works with a tremendous amount of meaning.

This exhibition is not one to miss. The diverse array of art ensures that there’s something to see for everyone here.

Part 2: The Studio Museum in Harlem
August 1, 2012

A Columbia [University] student’s museum experience most typically takes place south of Morningside; we easily forget that the northern half of this fabulous island has just as much to offer. This week, I paid a visit to the Studio Museum in Harlem on 125th and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard to check out its new installation. In the second of three posts, we’ll take a look at part two of the city-wide exhibit Caribbean: Crossroads of the World on display there.

The works on display are small in number, but substantial in content. The Studio Museum’s exhibit offers two themed sections: “Shades of History” and “Land of the Outlaw.” “Shades of History” is an exploration into how artists across history have perceived race’s role in the development of Caribbean social, cultural, and political life. This translates into a gallery with a diverse array of works, spanning centuries and styles. This is the kind of art which is designed to provoke discourse and reflection.

A centerpiece of this section is Cuban artist Alexis Esquivel’s installation titled “Autopsy.” It presents a poignant look into the racial tensions of the sports world. The work features a makeshift basketball hoop. On the backboard is a faint black and white photograph of working-class Cuban men. Painted over this photograph are the backboard’s boundary lines, as well as a centrally-placed “Nike” logo. The effect created by this is subtle but chilling, as the workers almost appear to be jailed by the backboard itself. The artist seems to be suggesting that behind every corporation or manufacturer are forgotten workers, enslaved by their own jobs. The Caribbean’s history of race enslavement continues, only in a different way. Furthermore, in place of the net is a piece of cloth, tied off at the bottom and keeping the ball from returning to its owner. This hoop isn’t for basketball, but for a different kind of game: a cruel one in which the player doesn’t get a return on what he puts into it.

The works featured in the second section of the exhibit, “Land of the Outlaw,” attempt to tackle issues surrounding the outside world’s perception of the Caribbean and its people. These pieces examine the dualistic notions of the Caribbean both as a utopian paradise and as a region with a rebellious streak. The entrance to this section of the exhibit is marked boldly with a life-sized photograph titled “Redcoat”. Taken by photographer Renée Cox, it features a stern-looking Caribbean native woman standing with her
arms crossed, but she wears a redcoat uniform and is wielding a machete. The photograph is imposing, embodying a real sense of power. It could easily be viewed in this way, as an image promoting female or black empowerment, but the opposite is also true. That she is wearing a redcoat uniform and holding a weapon is significant — though she might be empowered by the weapon, the uniform suggests that she is ultimately held back by the colonizing European forces who originally settled in the Caribbean. This could suggest subordination or rebellion.

If you’ve got a taste for art that’s socially and culturally aware, then this part of the citywide exhibit *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* at the Studio Museum in Harlem is for you.

### Part 3: The Queens Museum of Art
August 16, 2012

Manhattan might be one of the world’s greatest arts centers, but some of New York’s best cultural landmarks lay in the far reaches of the outer boroughs. This week, I made a trip all the way out to Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Flushing, Queens, which proved to be one of the most interesting places in New York that I’ve been in my five years here. The park is also home to the Queens Museum of Art. In the final post of this series, we’ll take a look at part three of the city-wide exhibit *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World* on display there.

Much like the museums before it, the exhibition at the Queens Museum of Art is split up into two main thematic sections: “Kingdoms of this World” and “Fluid Motions.” “Kingdoms of this World” focuses on the variety of people, languages, art forms, and religious influences that co-exist and intermingle in the Caribbean, resulting in a sort of “carnival” aesthetic; both protection and transformation of the self amidst so many cultural identities becomes necessary. The artists in this section attempt to represent this, interpreting the ways in which people living in this multicultural region use both transformation and camouflage as an expression of their own cultural identity.

The following section, “Fluid Motions,” takes a geographical approach to its look at the Caribbean region. The works here examine the significance of water in the Caribbean’s history and how it has shaped the geopolitical structures of the area. No doubt, island nations face particular political challenges due to their geography. The exchange of goods, services, as well as travel must occur by sea, and until the invention of the wireless signal, the same could even be said of information. Water becomes a primary source of revenue, making it something worth defending.

In his work “Waiting for the Enemy,” artist Glexis Novoa explores the political realities created by having a border surrounded by water. A drawing of graphite on marble slate, it features a shoreline observation tower, topped with communication antennas. Across the water in the distance sits a city skyline. Where the viewer’s attention is immediately drawn, however, is the lens of this tower. Instead of a camera or viewing window, inside sits a giant eye, staring directly back at the viewer. The effect is eerie, and in looking at the work I was torn between looking away and staring back. The work forces you to consciously make this decision, coercing you into interacting with it; whatever you decide though, you can’t shake the feeling that you’re being watched. This, of course, is the intent when considered in context of the work’s setting. This is a nation keeping constant watch over its borders, and the suggestion seems to be that the water border fosters a sense of big-brother paranoia — the interesting geographical position of these countries makes them particularly vulnerable.
**Art of the Islands on Display at Studio Museum, El Museo and Queens Museum**

‘Caribbean: Crossroads of the World’ explores issues of identity, colonialism, race, legacy of slavery


Is there such a thing as a “Caribbean identity?” If so, is it defined by a mentality, a landscape or a shared experience of colonialism?

The Queens Museum of Art has partnered with the Studio Museum and El Museo del Barrio in Harlem to explore that question. The museums are showcasing works from Trinidad to Puerto Rico, spanning centuries of artists both established and emerging, in the exhibition *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*.

“We realized museums were tired of doing Caribbean shows that didn’t matter, that had no real result,” said Elvis Fuentes, associate curator at El Museo del Barrio in Harlem. “We thought if three museums can’t do a historical show that’s never been done, then who will?”

Fuentes spearheaded the project, which took several years to complete. What has emerged is an eclectic show that features craft pieces, such as costumes and oars, along with serious works from painter Armando Reveron and photographer Leo Matiz.

“There is this discussion of, ‘What is the Caribbean?’” said Tom Finkelpearl, the executive director of the Queens Museum of Art. “Is it the ocean, or a sensibility? We ended up with a broad definition.”

To delve into the many components of Caribbean identity, the exhibit abandons traditional linear concepts of organization. Instead, rough intuitive sketches of eels, fish and conch shells are displayed alongside more traditional landscapes featuring crashing waves and cloudy skies.

By grouping disparate pieces, the curators said they were trying to help tease out the similarities that make these works distinctly Caribbean.

Likewise, though each museum focuses on distinct aspects of Caribbean life, the exhibit considered in its entirety can be regarded as a cogent whole.

El Museo’s exploration of “Counterpoints” traces the legacy of the region’s slave plantations, exploring their impact on its social hierarchy; works under the rubric “Patriot Acts” address themes of Caribbean identity.

Works on display at the Studio Museum speak to the idea of the Caribbean as a Land of the Outlaw — one occupied by pirates and treasure seekers. Works grouped under the rubric “Shades of History” explore the region’s deeply complicated constructs of race.

The Queens Museum of Art is highlighting the “Fluid Motion” that seems omnipresent in a region composed of islands in the sea; “Kingdoms of the World” will trace the development of Caribbean religious traditions.
A wholly different, and very rewarding, view of the Caribbean awaits those energetic art troopers willing to tackle *Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, the ambitious and sprawling trio of exhibitions on view at El Museo del Barrio, the Queens Museum of Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem. As a compelling reminder that New York may be the world’s most populous and diverse “Caribbean” city, the exhibitions also provide fascinating geopolitical lessons. But despite each museum’s focus on two of the six themes that serve as general organizing principles, this valiant attempt at arranging works by 379 artists, borrowed from an impressive range of lenders and spanning more than two centuries, is most satisfying as an opportunity to see a great many first-rate yet unfamiliar or seldom-displayed artists.

That’s partly because the geographic areas covered aren’t simply the venues for your winter holidays or the destinations for your offshore banking. Sure, we’re looking at art from the islands, but there’s also plenty from all the other countries in Central and South America that touch the Caribbean Sea. And aside from various political histories — the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) is the starting point — we’re confronted with the reality of racial and ethnic mixes of great variety. Indigenous populations were supplemented and sometimes supplanted by African slaves, as well as by Europeans and Asians from many countries. So the linguistic and cultural mélange is evident here.

We are also exposed to the lure of tropical places for outsiders, such as Paul Gauguin, who visited Martinique, and a different kind of outsider, Camille Pissarro, who was born of Jewish heritage on the island of St. Thomas but spent most of his life in France. While such famous artists make their appearance in these shows, they really seem incidental to the general sense of what’s on view. It’s also fascinating to see work by American artists we don’t automatically associate with the Caribbean, from an example of Haitian-born John James Audubon’s gorgeous “Birds of America” (1840-44), to works by Walker Evans, Robert Gwathmey, Rockwell Kent and Jacob Lawrence. Artists such as the Cuban Wifredo Lam and the Venezuelan Jesús Rafael Soto are more familiar to us from the world of modern art, but not necessarily in this context.

The tendency to view artists in relation to their countries of origin makes this Caribbean regional approach frustrating at times. Perhaps such viewer reorientation is one of the goals of this ambitious project, 10 years in development, which also includes several months of interdisciplinary programs across the New York area. Both El Museo and the Studio Museum trace their origins to serving a specific ethnic audience, while the Queens Museum resides in one of the most ethnically diverse counties in the U.S. Yet these exhibitions wisely don’t pander to viewers’ pride of birthplace.

At the Queens Museum, where the significance of water is one of the themes, several competent, if mundane, marine paintings compete with Winslow Homer’s superb 1888 etching, “Perils of the Sea,” whose presence here is puzzling, since it was inspired by the artist’s stay at an English fishing village. On the other hand, a delicate linocut, “The Flood” (undated) by Barbadian Golde White, easily surpasses larger and more ambitious sea canvases. The carnival theme is especially strong here, and perhaps the most emblematic and powerful of these works is “Spirit of the Carnival (The British forces of law and order in confrontation with an ancient African Spirit)” (1982) by Tam Joseph, an artist from the tiny island of Dominica. The Cuban artist René Portocarrero is represented here by an exuberant, Klee-inspired gouache, “Cuban Carnival” (1953). The QMA’s installations are inevitably interrupted by the spectacular and immense Panorama model of New York City that upstages almost everything shown there; nevertheless, it’s always well worth the detour.

The Studio Museum provides the most interesting historical fare, including a wonderful pair of 1816 portraits of Haitian princes by the British painter Richard Evans. A fine black-chalk drawing (c. 1797) of...
Jean-Baptiste Belley, attributed to the French artist Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson, depicts the Senegalese former slave and Haitian freedom fighter as an elegant member of the post-Revolutionary French National Convention. For contrast, several ironic contemporary comments play off these traditionally rendered heroic figures. Among the most interesting are “Le General Toussaint Wreathed in Smoke,” a mixed-media work by Edouard Duval-Carrié, and “Redcoat” (2004), a large photograph from Renée Cox’s series “Queen Nanny of the Maroons.”

While issues of race are inherent to all three exhibitions, they seem to play a greater role at the Studio Museum — but generally in ways that are engaging rather than politically strident. “The Assault, or Fencing Match, which took place at Carlton House on the 9th of April 1787” is an engraving (c. 1787) by the Frenchman Victor Marie Picot (after Charles Jean Robineau) that depicts a confrontation between the Chevalier d’Eon (dressed as a woman) and one of his African slaves.

El Museo has an exceptionally polished installation that emphasizes a sense of place and issues of colonialism, including problematic questions of exoticism and otherness. And yet here, too, the thrust is not especially political. A number of beautifully rendered lush tropical scenes suggest that simply being enchanted by the tropics doesn’t necessarily constitute voyeurism. That’s especially evident in the work by Agostino Brunias, an Italian artist who painted in the West Indies; his “A Leeward Islands Carib Family outside a Hut” (c. 1780) is an especially sympathetic recording of native people.

The noted Puerto Rican artist Myrna Báez is represented here by two fine works. These include the silk-screen print “Georgia O’Keeffe in Puerto Rico” (1980), hinting at the ties between and among artists. That’s also engagingly reflected in “Prayer at the Museum” (2008) an assemblage by the Colombian Alvaro Barrios that is an homage to Marcel Duchamp.

This immense Caribbean project suggests that just because an enterprise is too ambitious it doesn’t mean that it’s not worth the risk. This is such a rich potpourri of serious artworks — from many eras and places, in many media and styles — enabling us to compare and contrast such a range of issues, that it takes a bit of effort to plow through its many treasures. But there’s a huge payoff in pleasure and new perspectives. Project Director Elvis Fuentes worked with a large team of colleagues to assist us in celebrating these shared histories, thus moving us toward a better understanding of the Caribbean as having its own significant and complex identity.