



Graham Fagen, *Scheme for Consciousness* (2014),
India ink and enamel

TRAVELS IN THE REPUBLIC OF ARTISTS: With Graham Fagen in Barbados

By Therese Hadchity

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In this era of incessant travel and cultural crosscurrents, it is often assumed that people across the world – despite the flagrant setbacks of particular moments – are advancing towards a global common sense, a universal package of cultural and historical references, which inevitably must inform our perceptions of the world, and how we go about living in it. In the visual arts, a set of cosmopolitan codes certainly infuses the contemporary scene and has produced, if not an outright state of global homogeneity, then at least agreed ways of expressing cultural difference. But are these codes equally well understood everywhere, or are they in themselves contingent on geo-political “situatedness”?

This year's external examiner for the BFA exam in studio art at the Barbados Community College, was the well-known Scottish artist Graham Fagen. As the record shows, the Barbados Community College warmly welcomes such high profile guests, who, as programme coordinator Ewan Atkinson notes, "inspire confidence through example" and help "assess the programme in comparison with other institutions." Fagen's visit, which was sponsored and facilitated by the British Council, also encompassed a public lecture, a workshop for the graduating students, and a series of studio visits.

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When asked to accompany Fagen on these studio visits, with a view to writing something about them, I was keen to put the notion of "glocality" to the test between the Barbadian artists, Fagen, and myself, and to find out which "cracks" would appear in our supposedly shared, but locally grounded understanding of each other and the art that would come before us. Less than halfway through our programme, however, I realised that these quick, and largely one-way exchanges (since the Barbadian artists were unfamiliar with Fagen's work), would at best offer very tenuous "evidence" of any such dynamic. Nevertheless, the tour did offer Fagen a glimpse of a generational dynamic, which suggests stronger ties between his own artistic disposition and those of younger Barbadian artists, and the exercise was therefore indicative of other, but no less significant global processes after all.

One of the premises for Fagen's oeuvre does indeed appear to be a strong notion of cultural formation. In conversation and interviews, he often returns to an early and (no pun intended) formative piece titled *Former and Form* (1993) – a simple conceptual piece consisting of a brick and its mold (tightly held together with large clamps). The "former", of course, refers to a given culture, and the "form" to its products: you and me.

When I picked Fagen up for our introductory meeting, the question at the forefront of my mind was, therefore, how he thinks culturally determined perspectives could affect the reception of *The Slave's Lament* (2015) – one of the works he submitted to the 2015 Venice Biennale.

In this video installation, he has three screens showing string musicians from the Scottish Ensemble performing a gentle composition by Sally Beamish, while one screen shows the UK-based reggae artist Ghetto Priest reciting



Graham Fagen, *The Slave's Lament* (2015), 4-panel video-installation

“Your man Burns was born to write that poem, and I was born to sing it.”

—Ghetto Priest

Robert Burns’ poem “The Slave’s Lament”. The work was prompted by Fagen’s astonishment at the historiographic silence that, until recently, has surrounded the original connection between Scotland’s prosperity and the slave trade, and (especially) by his discovery, that the great poet himself – notwithstanding his apparently abolitionist and culturally open-minded writings – at one point in his life nearly took up an administrative position on a plantation in Jamaica.

I was keen to ask Fagen what exactly had been his intention with the piece, and whether he ever hesitated to ask a reggae-artist to perform Burns’ poem – Rastafari, after all, being one of the most thoroughly subversive cultural movements of all time. Did Ghetto Priest have any qualms about participating in a project, which arguably could be seen as equally redemptive for the black diaspora and for Scottish national culture? Fagen’s response was extensive and surprising. Starting with his teenage love for reggae, his peer-group’s immersion in counter-culture, and their identification with “sufferation”, he diligently explained the process and considerations that went into the making (and re-making) of the piece, which has gone through several incarnations. One of the most perplexing moments was indeed that of approaching the music studio, and he did so with a tremendous sense of risk. Visibly stirred by the memory, he told me of his initial confusion by Ghetto Priest’s behavior at their first meeting (when Fagen arrived, the latter stood by himself in a corner, rocking and singing, but backing everyone, as if refusing to acknowledge the newly arrived) – and his infinite relief, when the singer finally turned to him and said, “Your man Burns was born to write that poem, and I was born to sing it.”

So it would appear that I, like Fagen, could put aside any concerns about the “co-optation” of Rastafari, but I still wanted to know more about his intention with the piece. Was it meant as a concession, an apology of sorts, or perhaps, I mused, as an expression of transcultural, working-class solidarity? The answer was neither. Rather, Fagen explained (in slightly different words), it was a deliberate effort towards cultural hybridisation. Having grown up in Scotland on a forced cultural diet of “Robert Burns” and a chosen one of reggae and punk, it seemed logical for him to open Burns’ poem up to a black Caribbean interpretation. Fagen, as I understood him, simply wanted to “loosen the clamps” on the Scottish “former”!



Katherine Kennedy, *Burst* (2010),
mixed media

Prior to our conversation, I had made a mental connection between Fagen and a number of Barbadian artists, who likewise have addressed the issue of colonialism, centre margin relations and history's impact on the present. For many such artists, the Caribbean (and the nation state) remains an ongoing "project". Younger Barbadian artists, however, tend to be more interested in dismissing cultural stereotypes, than on asserting a collective identity. Among these is Katherine Kennedy, who was the first artist I went with Fagen to meet.

Not unlike that of Fagen, and yet in entirely different ways, her work has been centered on "cultural baggage" – a topic that, understandably, started to preoccupy her when she went to university in the UK and suddenly found herself and her cultural references to be considered "exotic". This started a series of works, which humorously play such preconceptions off against her own – homesick – projections of the Caribbean. A recurring feature of these works is an innovative use of "trivial" objects. In the two versions of *Diametric Accord* (2016) we thus find a fan-like arrangement of kitchen sieves, where the "head" of each sieve offers connotations of travel and mobility through references to famous cities and excerpts of maps. The most compelling feature of these pieces is, however, the shadows they cast on the wall. This foreground/background effect evokes a duality between the immediately visible and the indirectly visible, for example metropole and margin (in another variation of the piece, the connotations are domestic and gender-related). Elsewhere, Kennedy's preoccupation with cultural stereotypes has elicited a parodic strategy of "overkill". In *Tropical Gilt* (2012), her take on the Caribbean as a region of tropical splendor and carnivalesque excess is thus a palm frond meticulously covered with colorful beads to produce an entirely hybrid product – both natural and manufactured, authentic and stereotype – as a visual metaphor for "Caribbeanness". The piece echoes previous works, like *Burst* (2010) (made in the UK), where Kennedy manufactured a series of "tropical plants" (using shredded cloth and wire) and "grafted" them onto English trees to great photographic effect.

It was no coincidence that Fagen responded with particular interest to these works, for he too has been in the business of creating plants(!). One of his social practice-works thus involved the breeding of a new hybrid rose for a low-income community, whose members were



Graham Fagen, *Rope Tree* (2015), bronze



Versia Harris, *Still from They Say You Can Dream a Thing More Than Once* (2013), animation

invited to come up with a name for it (it was eventually called “Where the Heart Is”, and a cast of it, by the same name, was later made in bronze (2002)). His Venice exhibition likewise featured a large bronze sculpture titled *Rope Tree* (2015). Here, the “tree-trunk” is a thick rope, which splits at both ends, thus producing roots and branches. While the piece has both positive and sinister connotations (of trees and nooses), it exemplifies the fascination with the nature/culture intersection, which is a recurring theme of Fagen’s work.

The foisting of “unnatural” events, creatures or objects upon a “natural” landscape also occurs in certain works by Versia Harris (for example in *Merely a Chimera and Parataxic Distortion* (both 2015)), and once again offered an entry point for a conversation with Fagen. Since graduating from the Barbados Community College, Harris has been noted for her surreal and poetic animations. Drawn in painstaking detail, these short and engaging visual narratives – which follow a lonely “swan-girl” bicycling through landscapes, forests and villages – reflect on how we absorb and aspire towards externally imposed ideals and success measures. Even though Harris’ primary reference are the blockbuster Disney movies that were spoonfed to her generation, and even though her expression of existential

despair may be connected to being an artist on a small Caribbean island, it strikes me that these narratives often stop just short of the political allegory. At a particularly memorable moment in *They Say You Can Dream a Thing More Than Once* (2013), for example, the swan-girl approaches a number of open doors in the middle of a landscape. Each door opens in turn and reveals a tantalising view of “elsewhere”, and each, but one, slams shut, when she comes closer. Walking through the only remaining door, she realises that there is no difference between the new landscape and the one she came from – that, for her, there was never going to be a “better place”.

While I contemplated the combination of slightly surreal narratives with oblique social commentary, which I think Harris and Fagen have in common, he picked up on the “beautiful sense of place and pace” in Harris’ animations and told her about the importance of timing in his own video works. At times quite comical, at times virtually

Kafkaesque, these include *Peek-a-Jobby* (1998) and *Theatre* (2000), both of which evoke a sense of shifting perspectives, contingency, and communicative uncertainty. Very reminiscent of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, *Killing Time* (2006) and *In Camera* (2014), however, take this uncertainty to another level in their portrayal of seemingly mundane situations interrupted by grotesque, but oddly symmetrical (and therefore seemingly inevitable) acts of violence.



Graham Fagen, *Scheme for Consciousness* (2014), India ink and enamel

With a few decades behind him as a professional artist, Fagen's oeuvre is, of course, made up of very many works and alternating methodologies, and in the *Scheme for Consciousness* series (2014), he approaches the question of what it means to be "human" in an entirely different way. A selection of these works accompanied *The Slave's Lament* in Venice and complemented its "hybridising" efforts in what seems to me a touching and thoughtful way. All we see

in each of these, at first slightly frightening and off-putting drawings, is a strange morbid grin – a set of teeth in a loosely rendered cranium. But these works do not, as one might presume, allude to the staggering death toll of the Middle Passage and all that followed – rather, as the artist pointed out in his public lecture, they represent an attempt to make the human consciousness visible. Each and every tooth is the externalisation and visual translation of what the artist felt with the tip of his tongue. This is a sensed rather than observed knowledge – an elementary exploration, which commences inside the body and only gradually works its way through the intellect to the artist's hand and brush. Fagen reminds us that "teeth" are one of the few things, that are both universal and unique to each individual (dental records are often used in forensic identification). The concept was further developed in the installation *Scheme for Conscienceness* (2014). Here, ceramic imprints of faces and teeth, as well as pieces of clay merely squeezed by hand, are displayed on contraptions that look like bottle-racks or Christmas-trees. Rather than trying to convey emotions or outrage – expressions which will somehow always fall short – at the reminder of slavery, which *The Slave's Lament* of course primarily is, Fagen seems to explore what it means to be human – what it means to have a consciousness, a self-consciousness, a conscience, and then, impossibly, leaves it up to us to reconcile what we have seen.

Like Fagen, the British/Barbadian artist Nick Whittle, whose studio was the next stop on our tour, has had the moral courage to address the issue of colonialism from an inherently “white” perspective and often in quite provocative ways (though provocation never has been an end in itself). Since arriving in Barbados in 1979, he has tried to understand how colonial history has shaped (and misshaped) Caribbean and British identities, and how this fraught dynamic has impacted on his own life. Whittle’s symbolism has, however, been rather more complex and opaque than Fagen’s, especially as it has been incorporated into a dense, and perpetually evolving, personal mythology.

If there is a more than superficial kinship between Whittle and Fagen, it therefore lies not so much in their preoccupation with British/Caribbean history, or intersecting references (both were, for example, early followers of Linton Kwesi Johnson), but in their use of sensory impressions as a gateway to the cognitive self. In Whittle’s case (especially in the last decade), this has come about through a stream-of-consciousness technique, where the more conceptual approach and symbolic references of his previous work is replaced with fragments of pictures, texts and material, with rapidly drawn images and, sometimes, with found or made objects. The process is one of constant adjustment between visceral impressions, memories and feelings and their visual representation, and therefore a little like the exchange between Fagen’s sensation of his teeth and the marks he put on the paper. Occasionally, these works are arranged into symbolic shapes (which subsequently become their titles, for example *Big Fish* (2009) and *Open-Ended* (2010)), but the primary method is one of emotive “channelling”.



Nick Whittle, from the series *This is not my land, is not my island or Esaki no ta mi tera, e no ta mi isla* (2013), mixed media

With their rhythmic or symmetric arrangement of large paper boats (a meeting between the matryoshka doll and newspaper origami) on backgrounds of brightly patterned fabric, Whittle’s most recent mixed media works (including the series *This is not my land, is not my island, or Esaki no ta mi tera, e no ta mi isla* (2013)) have foregrounded tactile qualities even further. With their compounded, and often clashing formal and thematic connotations (Middle Passage, poverty, children’s games, genitalia, cultural assimilation, bricolage etc.), it is impossible to reduce the meaning or effect

of these works to a single statement – and yet, they remain quite firmly anchored in a specific world-view and do not offer themselves up for any and every interpretation. They are, in other words, acts of both cultural and personal resistance, and very deliberately demand a certain amount of labor on the part of the viewer.

In Fagen’s case, conversely, I believe the indeterminacy of certain works is strategic – that they, on the contrary, indicate a reluctance to insist on a particular world view. Our visit was, however, far too short for such subtleties to be explored. Instead, Fagen and Whittle talked and reminisced about Scotland, Britain and Barbados and the merits of the recent Glasgow exhibition “Rum Retort”!



Ras Akyem Ramsay: *Horsemen and Chariots* (2004), mixed media on canvas

The final stop on our route was the studio of the painter and sculptor Ras Akyem Ramsay. Needless to say, I was keen to sit in on the meeting between the author of *The Slave’s Lament* and one of Barbados’ most established Rastafarian artists, keen to see how Fagen would respond to Ramsay’s four-decade-long engagement with history, imperialism, and social injustice. But,

sadly, Ramsay greeted us with profuse apologies for being unable to show Fagen much of his work. A while ago, he told us, the studio had been raided and vandalised. Not only were his tools and several works-in-progress gone, but the trauma had left him almost unable to work in the space.

Fagen did, however, take an immediate interest in the kiln Ramsay had built on the terrace, and the two were soon engaged in a discussion of ceramics and bronze-casting methods. As we sat down to talk about his work in general, however, it was to his early life and inspirations that Ramsay turned, and it was here, in the personal domain, and in memories of their early idolisation of “great artists” (Picasso for Ramsay and Henry Moore for Fagen!), that the conversation took off. It was lively, but never broached the enormous issues that have preoccupied them both and yet elicited such vastly different responses. As the afternoon wore on, the mood was too mellow for me to push my own agenda by confronting the two with the issues that possibly set them apart – perceptions of human agency, spirituality, the notion of redemption, Ramsay’s absolute and political worldview, the primarily ethical tenor of Fagen’s work.

If any point about “glocality” rang home to me that afternoon, it was the fact that, as artists, Fagen, Ramsay, Whittle, Harris, and Kennedy all belong to the “world republic of pictures” (to paraphrase the title of Pascale Casanova’s wonderful book). Through their practices, they already occupy common ground, to the point that my questions about cultural baggage become secondary in their interactions with one another (though this may still be relevant when it comes to these artists’ audiences). As ordinary citizens, however, they are surrounded by crucially different material realities. The fact that there is no public access to a representative selection of works by Ramsay, an artist whose contribution to Barbadian art by any measure is enormous, and the fact that he, in his mid-sixties, essentially has to “start again”, because his studio is unsafe and uninsured – these are the things that really sets his reality apart from that of Fagen, or any other well-established Scottish artist.

My lasting memory of Fagen, and the two days I had the privilege of touring Barbados with him, will be of someone determined to reach across borders and comfort-zones, intent on finding common ground and affirming a shared humanity. During our studio visits and conversations, he frequently – and with unmistakable glee – remarked on the unexpected connections he’d found between his own work, and those of the younger Barbadian artists and students. His outreach to the graduating students during the public lecture was especially heart-warming and, on the whole, they seemed highly energised and encouraged by his handling of the examination, the workshop and, indeed, by the example of his work. I believe one student spoke for them all, when she proclaimed Graham to be “one chill dude”!



Short Bio

Therese Hadchity (PhD) was the founder of the Zemicon Gallery in Bridgetown (2000-2010). She is a freelance critic and curator and teaches art history at the Barbados Community College. Her doctoral dissertation was on the emergence of a postnationalist hegemony in visual arts criticism and practices in the Anglophone Caribbean.