



Where the Vibrations Occur

Critical Reflection
by Katherine Kennedy

THE WORD “PROLIFIC” does not feel adequate to describe the career of Alison Chapman-Andrews. Her indomitable presence in Barbados’ art community has been a fixture for over 50 years, as an artist, activist, educator, writer, patron and collector. She has wholeheartedly shared her views of the island and world around us in a way that is distinctive yet ever shifting, consistently creating works which “plead with us not to be passive observers, but to acquaint ourselves with our land through firsthand experience and to cherish it for future generations.” (Nick Whittle, 1997)¹

One BIG Painting marks occasions such as the artist’s 80th birthday, 60 years of artistic production, 56 years of Barbados’ Independence, and our first anniversary as a Republic; milestones for Chapman-Andrews, and for the country whose journey she has witnessed, recorded and reinterpreted using her innate ability to capture the evolution of its physical and social landscape. The exhibition has been lovingly crafted through her own eyes, taking ownership in the framing and contextualisation of her oeuvre and legacy. It was humbling to be asked to be involved in its coordination, while supporting the artist’s vision and celebration of a lifetime dedicated to the creative arts. In this way, my contribution – while not that of a passive observer – is an act of curiosity, using the opportunity to mine this vast collection of work and offer not a framework for the show, but insight as someone who understands the privilege of being given an inside look into all that surrounds a project of this magnitude; to be able to make linkages between what is shown and what orbits the final presentation.

It is a well-known fact that part of Chapman-Andrews’ process involves extensive keeping of sketchbooks, often referenced in critical texts or even showcased alongside her finished works. It was one thing to have known this in theory, but quite another to be confronted in person with meticulously labeled piles of black-bound books that spanned from 1964 – seven years before her migration to Barbados in 1971 – all the way through to present day. I found myself addicted to leafing through these volumes, taken with the studies, paintings and written notes. One such musing in a sketchbook from 1976-1977 included:

“The ideas must be grasped quickly and not left ... The gap between things, the fine gap between objects where the vibrations occur, and the escape to the other side can be experienced and must be explored.”

This quotation stood out to me, in a career this prodigious, because it draws attention to not only the artworks themselves, but the moments in between; the “vibrations” or intangible energies that tether all of the elements of an art practice together across subject matter, motif or date produced. What else might connect 60 years of explorations of internal and external landscapes, lingering in the fine gaps?

There are early drawings from 1964-1965, predating the move from Chapman-Andrews’ native England to her move to the Caribbean, as evident in the style of clothes and posture of people, or a rendering of the interior of a living room rather than a sprawling gully, that in many ways feel removed from what is to come... Yet there are hints, echoes in aspects of colours, lines and patterns that seem to bridge the divide. Warm tones of yellow and tan, with blues, pinks and purples as seen in sketches of clothes, seem almost familiar in the highlighting and shading of later works such as

The scene ~~changes~~ ^{rapidly}
The things started must be finished
The ideas must be grasped quickly & not left.
So that the two visions of this week. The gap between things the fine gap between objects where the vibrations occur and the escape to the other side can be experienced must be explored. Also the non slow side of night & moon bows attempted to be made visible. Magritte shows its possible/impossible, to paint the light. The moon, electric light, fireflies, and drops of water make it visible the nature of painting makes it invisible.
Sylvester that cannot be you. The face is black.



Blackman's Gully (1978), Revolving by Moonshine or Cosmic Border (1994). The colours and tints, having crossed the ocean along with the artist, have become acquainted with the landscapes that she has fallen in love with. They have transformed and come alive. When we see sketches that were done not long after the move, we see examples of the gullies and royal palms – trees so intricately linked with the artist that she somehow knew them before ever physically encountering them – and we see evidence of that transition in subject that later merges with colours, patterns, lines and shapes that would go on to define an iconic stylistic approach.

'The High Eye Level' is another signature of many Chapman-Andrews' pieces, one whose origin she also cites from her childhood in the UK, but that translated into the sweeping views from hilltops or beaches in Barbados as outlined in her text written for this section of the catalogue:

“...looking up at Chalky Mount, the landscape hung like a curtain from the high horizon - this and childhood memories, became over time, a recognizable feature of my work.”

A note taken directly from a sketchbook dated 1979-1981 reiterates this reverence through the same metaphor of a grand curtain sweeping the skies. The description of the landscape's inhabitants, from the “sky reaching” palms to



hung like an elaborate curtain from the cushions of the clouds, in an upside down reflecting world. From the seasonal changes comes each tree at its typical time. While the perpetual sky-reachers only decay eventually. From cows' nests to grazing herons each thing encroaches, and ripples spill over from one ~~world~~ ^{world} to the next, adapting or entwining. But overall a calm of bird song and wind.

the wildlife below as “encroaching” or “spilling over from one world to the next” could almost be its own metaphor or parallel, for the meeting and reconciling of two experiences, lives that are distant geographically but beginning to find ways to inevitably blend, filling the fine gaps like water or sand as the artist’s glossary of visual vocabulary was in its early stages of development and cohesion.

Sometimes, vibrations move through artworks as non-linear, unexpected threads that both reinforce and contradict the original impetus behind their creation. Of the piece **Burnt Hillaby** (2013), the artist has previously said “In producing Burnt Hillaby I remembered a film seen as a student, of a volcano erupting, wonderful colour and full of the life force. This contains neither, a dying world.”²

Several distinct, seemingly unconnected periods across Chapman-Andrews’ extensive career begin to align and overlap in my mind; she could not have known then that this pre-Barbados memory from her time as a student would lead to **Burnt Hillaby**, which is included in this exhibition under the section ‘Heightened Colour’ to represent a monochromatic study of the primary colour yellow, embodying the intensity of heat and barrenness it can exude. Nor could she have imagined that, decades later, the eruption of a volcano would not be most closely associated with a distant memory from a film, but with the eruption of the La Soufrière volcano in St. Vincent and the Grenadines in 2021, which blanketed Barbados in darkness and ash. This is an altogether different view of a “dying world,” further explored by Chapman-Andrews in her **Ash Plume** series of works (2021-2022), their aesthetic leaning into her interest in shape and tonal considerations rather than representational portrayals of this almost indescribable event.

Encapsulating the societal aspects of the island, landmarks that occur not just in the environment but in interactions between people and events that settle themselves firmly within Barbados’ history also vibrate with their own frequencies in the artist’s





portfolio. Portraiture and the figure have been important to Chapman-Andrews' from the early days of her training, and a respect for technique and discipline comes through in the careful studies of bodies, faces and expressions gracing her sketchbooks and artworks. There is a simple sketch from 1975, done during her time as an art teacher at The St. Michael Secondary School, annotated 'Queen's visit'. The subject of the piece not Queen Elizabeth II herself, but scores of Barbadian school children with matching uniforms, hats and youthful hairstyles, lining the side of a winding road. The anticipation is there, for the fleeting moment that the Queen of England will pass, and the students will wave dutifully to commemorate the occasion. Looking back at this day from 2022, one year after Barbados has become a Republic and short months after Queen Elizabeth's passing, the fleetingness of the moment and the empty road carry different weights, and something about this sketch manages to transcend past and present, showing the layered cultural and political shifts that have taken place.



In a similar vein, we are also left to fathom varied takes on 'royalty' within her repertoire: the 'Queen's visit', the recurring Royal Palms and, in a recent painting of a familiar and cherished subject, the piece **The Queen Mother gets a Haircut** (2022). This portrait of Catholene Weekes, a longtime friend and artistic muse, possesses a quiet regality, a confidence and presence radiated by the woman seated with hands clasped on her lap. The whisper of the Benin ivory mask on the wall, the eponym for the painting's title, introduces a cultural complexity as well – the unfinished sketch of 'Queen's visit' is entrenched in coloniality and imposed tradition, versus the exalted depiction of Catholene as 'Queen Mother' bolstered through ties to African heritage. It draws another line that traces the growth Barbados, an upward journey that reaches skyward like the palms, unfurling, shedding, and renewing in cycles along the way.

Motherhood and femininity reveal themselves in many of Chapman-Andrews' other pieces, in title and in spirit. **Mother of Trees** (1984) does this through personification, the heavily patterned leaves and trunks carefully composed to resemble all-seeing eyes and caressing hands, the muted colour palette placing all the more emphasis on forms



and shapes. We also have a nod to the maternal in pieces such as **Fan Palm and Earth Mother** (2006), colour and vibrancy reintroduced, with essence of the divine feminine contrasted with the masculine sensibility emanated from the phallic nature of the tree trunks. As with so much of her work, the sense of balance, composure and ideation that every action has a corresponding reaction somewhere along the line seems to guide my interpretations.

Pages from a 1994-1995 sketchbook, one side adorned with phallic cutouts of her own artwork, and the other containing two reference pictures of a woman leaning nonchalantly against a column and a piece by René Magritte – a black and white procession of people merging with heavily lined trees – feel like a background glimpse into these dynamics: masculine and feminine; social and environmental; intuitive and intentional; playful and complex. In her introductory essay for another major exhibition of Chapman-Andrews' work titled '**Landscape Revisited**' (Punch Creative Arena, 2013), art historian and curator Therese Hadchity said "[the artist's] subject matter, no matter her motif, always is the encounter itself."³ There will never be a singular approach to encountering eight decades of experience and six decades of artwork, thought processes and experiments, at once laid bare in sketchbooks and still shrouded in the mystery that comes from streams of consciousness,

overlaid personal moments and concepts that reflect the wider world.

Modern Expressionist painter Marc Chagall said "Colour is all. When colour is right, form is right. Colour is everything, colour is vibration like music; everything is vibration."⁴ We have had the honour of experiencing and re-experiencing Barbados through the gaze of Alison Chapman-Andrews over the epic trajectory of her career, as the colours and forms she has mastered and adapted to this context have filled our cultural space with literal and figurative foliage and lifeforms, permeating the art scene like a well recognised tune. The seeds of unique visual language she has planted and tended have taken root deeply in the fabric of our nation, and even as we take a moment to celebrate a momentous feat, she is by no means finished making her mark, continuing to create and share her work unrestrictedly. If everything is "vibration," then her work has immortalised our landscape, our heritage, and a unique way of seeing that will reverberate, resonate and find new ways of being revisited and understood for many more decades to come.

I would like to wish Alison Chapman-Andrews a happy 80th birthday, congratulate her on her phenomenal career, and thank her for opening her legacy up for me to delve into. I know that the vibrations of her work – past, present and future – will reverberate indefinitely.

KATHERINE KENNEDY, Co-Curator
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END NOTES

1. **Nick Whittle**, *Sugar Hill Gully – Alison Chapman-Andrews* (Barbados: Queen's Park Gallery, 1997)
2. **Alison Chapman-Andrews**, *Landscape Revisited* (Barbados: Punch Creative Arena, 2013)
3. **Therese Hadchity**, *Landscape Revisited* (Barbados: Punch Creative Arena, 2013)
4. **Marc Chagall** in *Envisioning Art: A Collection of Quotations by Artists*, ed. William C. Mackay (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003)