

Beyond Nostalgia: Artist Akilah Watts Reimagines Barbados

By: Katherine Kennedy

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"If many of these images served formerly as quintessential souvenirs of the tropical, the picturesque, and "civilised savagery" for colonists and tourists, what do such objects mean for contemporary residents?"

– Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*, Duke University Press Books, 2007

Cultural symbols have always intrigued Barbadian artist Akilah Watts; their origins, why they are in place, and – perhaps most importantly – why they have largely not changed over time.

In our studio visit, she cited two points about creativity in the Barbadian educational system. On one hand, if humanities are at risk of becoming stagnant or removed altogether from our curriculum, this will inevitably halt the development of culture. Conversely, an obstacle at the tertiary level, where hypercritical thought is par for the course, is being your own worst critic to the detriment of your process – itself a type of stagnation.

Finding the balance between creativity and critical thinking can take some time to navigate. For Akilah, it was her series 'Beautifully Braided' that solidified her direction, using intricate hairstyles as a way to reclaim joy in making, while maintaining conceptual integrity.



Black women's hair is a socially charged subject, rooted in historical and contemporary identity. 'Beautifully Braided' celebrates this identity, at the same time questioning what shapes it by incorporating imagery from Barbadian life. It always portrays the backs of heads, not only to display the hairstyles, but to comment on the saturation of 'selfies' in today's fast-paced society. Facial features can almost blur together as we scroll through social media feeds, and anonymity is somewhat of an anomaly. Being confronted with the back of the head makes the images stand out, while also making them universally relatable.

Historically, portraiture was a status symbol, which omitted many communities from the narrative. The artist's documentary-based ethos captures items that resonate culturally in a particular moment, creating a visual archive that feels even more poignant in the wake of the devastating fire at the Barbados Archives Department earlier this year. Multiple avenues are needed for us to tell our stories and create legacies on our own terms, and art is hugely important in this journey.



The series 'Moments From My Island Home' sees Barbadians as an extension of our space, skintones replaced with palatable patterns of consumable or decorative objects. This challenges the docile nature of "nostalgic" imagery, revealing it to be more nuanced, complex, and potentially harmful despite its aesthetic appeal. If we allow it to become the entirety of our identity, we run the risk of losing ourselves.

Subjects here are real people from the artist's life, and unlike 'Beautifully Braided', you can tell who is featured in the pieces. This highlights the role of interpersonal relationships in the formation of identity, alongside the cultural influences that mould a person. This is why children below a certain age are never fully engulfed by the patterns; Akilah waits until strong personality traits emerge, but the creeping presence of the patterns on infants' limbs suggest susceptibility to influences from an early age.

Using family pictures as the inspiration for postcards is another element of this series, replacing the idealism of a postcard with something real. Postcard and landscape imagery has gone through various iterations in our history, from exploitative photos of the population, to a tendency to exploit our environment. While their content is not completely irrelevant, it does not reflect the depth of the space, or what matters most from a human perspective.

Postcards, souvenirs and what we value/find marketable feed into Akilah's latest commercial venture, Greedy Gift Shop, offering merchandise that connects with locals, yet still appeals to tourists interested in seeing Barbados as it exists today.



Greedy Gift Shop's concept percolated in the artist's mind for nearly a decade, but funding was an initial barrier to its realisation. It was the invitation to the inaugural FUZE Art Fair, presented by The Current Art Gallery at Baha Mar, the Bahamas, that finally fuelled its launch. She describes the experience of being in the Bahamas as a bit jarring. It is a space that is not totally foreign – Barbados and the Bahamas share many similarities, including colonial histories. However, there seemed to be an inspiring level of respect and understanding for contemporary arts that she hopes can be cultivated in Barbados over time, with more attention given to arts appreciation and a reassessment of our value systems.

By producing limited editions of high-quality, unique souvenirs, Akilah marries the conceptual and commercial sides of her practice, diversifying revenue streams as well as providing an access point for the public into contemporary art. From a production standpoint, she has a hybrid strategy of getting some things produced internationally, while the fabrics of her cushions are printed locally – indicative of the globalised reality of functioning from our remote location in Barbados, and how to make that viable.

Recently, the brand has made its way into a physical location in Haymans Market through a partnership with the store Sweet Limón, whose mission of transforming the way we perceive local accessories aligns with Greedy Gift Shop. This opens up the possibilities for product collaborations one day, which are essential to building solidarity and prosperity in the creative industries.



Partnering and supporting fellow artists is not new for Akilah – she has a healthy history of collaborating with fellow artists and former classmates Alanis Forde and Anna Gibson on several projects. More difficult for her, has been learning to delegate certain responsibilities, taking a step back and learning to slow down. Burnout is a pervasive and inadequately discussed issue amongst Caribbean creatives. In constantly filling countless roles, alongside repeatedly asserting your work's significance, the likelihood of getting overwhelmed is high, and Akilah has reckoned with this over the last two years.

The 'Absent' series gives voice to this struggle. It is a body of work about the invisible labour that can leave one feeling empty, transparent and unseen. For a long time, the artist compartmentalised these feelings to the point of exhaustion, but practicing self-awareness and recognising the extent of the problem allowed her to address it in her lifestyle and artwork.

The lack of negative space, where a checkered or pixelated appearance dominates part of the image – becomes a metaphor for that moment of "checking out" mentally, while still feeling the need to be productive and fill every void. In some ways, these works are the inverse of earlier series', which were all about visibility. Visibility has been replaced by vulnerability, examining the hidden parts of an individual's life and experiences; unsung but potent parts of our culture.

Via layered meanings, Akilah Watts looks inwardly and outwardly at Barbadian culture; what informs and defines our sense of identity. In this way, she ensures that the imagery associated with Barbados continues to be reinvented – making sure to document her process and findings every step of the way.

Word count: 1150

Image Captions:

1. Akilah Watts' studio. Photo credit: Katherine Kennedy.
2. Akilah Watts, *These Fields and Hills* (Beautifully Braided series), Acrylic on canvas, 20" x 20", 2022. Photo courtesy of the artist.
3. Work in progress from the 'Beautifully Braided' series. Photo credit: Katherine Kennedy.
4. Akilah Watts, *Provenience* (Moments from my Island Home series), Acrylic on canvas, 31" x 42.5", 2021. Photo courtesy of the artist.
5. Work in progress from the 'Lineage' postcards series. Photo credit: Katherine Kennedy.
6. Printed cushion covers from the 'Greedy Gift Shop' merchandise line. Photo credit: Katherine Kennedy.
7. Akilah Watts, *The Sea Ain' Got no Backdoor...And!* (Absent series), Acrylic on canvas, 24" x 36", 2024. Photo courtesy of the artist.
8. Work in progress from the 'Absent' series. Photo credit: Katherine Kennedy.