

“Mad Cowboy”

# WRAY BANKER

## A HUMOROUS MAN WITH SERIOUS TALENT

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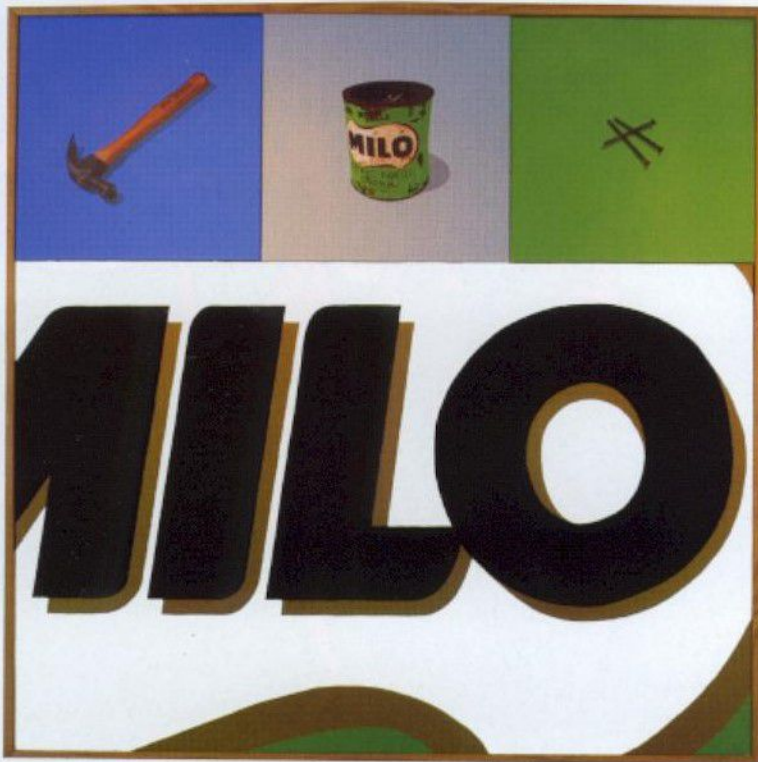
In the artist's palate of life, a wide spectrum is needed to create a picture of Wray Banker. An original 'Native Son', Wray is a humorous man and a serious, passionate artist with an individual conceptual style that comes from great talent and a drive to pursue and uphold his Caymanian culture. Wray is well known in Cayman for his amusing documentation of Caymanian life, a life, he feels, that is vanishing fast and needs to be pushed to the forefront, lest it gets lost altogether. *Cayman Executive* caught up with this unique artist during his first solo exhibition, as he gets 'Serious 'Bout Mekin' fun'.

Over the last few weeks Wray has been a busy man. Aside from working fulltime at the National Gallery as their exhibition designer and graphic artist, he has just returned from a trip to Havana, Cuba, where he studied print making at the Taller Experimental de Grafica, as part of the gallery's 'Artist Away' project. This took him off island for three weeks, leaving him only 19 days to

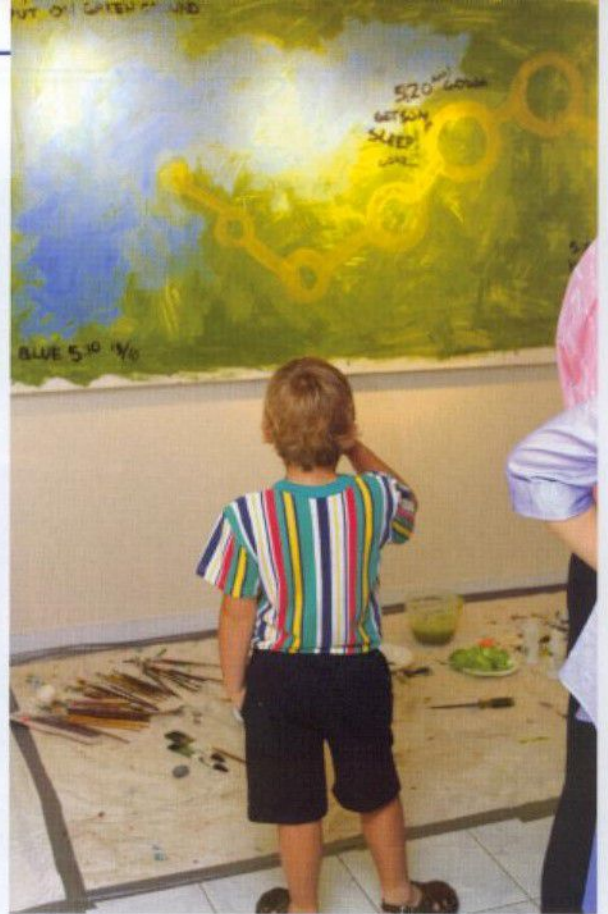
prepare for his first solo exhibition on his return. An exhausting schedule. Yet, when we talked previously he seemed pretty laid back about the whole thing. "I'll probably cram most of my work into the two days before the show," he had said, "I always work best that way."

I have arranged to meet Wray at the National Gallery. It is a rainy Saturday morning and the gallery is unusually quiet

in comparison to the previous evening, the opening night of his solo exhibition. He is in the middle of cleaning out Milo from a coffee urn, the not-so-glamorous aftermath of the previous evening. "It seemed like a good idea to serve Milo at the time, but no one warned me that these things would be so hard to clean!" he says with mock seriousness. Still, he seems pleased with yesterday's event. He received a



"Pass me sum dem nails"



A young art enthusiast views work in progress

tremendous amount of support from the public as well as friends and family. The gallery was literally bursting with people.

His exhibition is entitled 'Serious 'Bout Mekin' Fun' a phrase which describes the artist in a nutshell. All of his works to date have an element of humour in them. Wray says, "Humour is a vital tool for expression because it makes your work approachable to a wide variety of people. It takes the elitism away and helps them to feel at ease. There is a misconception that if something is funny then it can't be serious but I disagree. I make fun of many things but all my work has an underlying seriousness to it. I use humour to raise issues, to make people question what lies behind a painting and to make them approach a subject in a different way." This accessible style has made Wray's work popular throughout the island, but achieving recognition as an artist in Cayman has not been easy.

Wray was born in George Town and raised in West Bay. His childhood memories are etched in his mind and are a recurrent theme in his work. At high school he followed his heart and opted to study art and technical drawing. He says with characteristic honesty, "it was the only thing that really didn't bore me at school." The following two years were both inspiring and frustrating. "I remember getting an A in art at school and

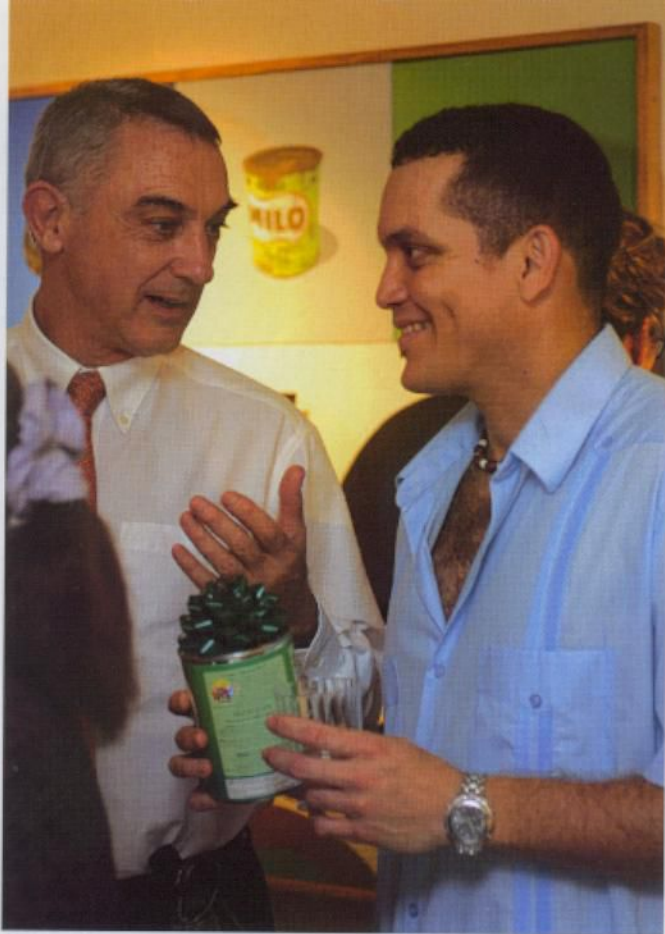
people laughing," he muses. "I felt restrained by the type of art that I came into contact with, namely watercolours of Caymanian cottages and beaches. There wasn't much of a market for other types of art and you certainly weren't encouraged to pursue art as a career."

A lecture by visiting artist Bental Hydes changed that however by reconfirming that there was a need for other types of art in Cayman. Wray explains, "Bental's work used Caymanian themes and titles which reflected a mix of traditions that shaped his early childhood. Unlike many of his contemporaries he executed his work in an abstract way. It was unlike anything I had seen by a local artist and it left a lasting impression on me." Bental's visit proved to be instrumental. Wray went on to study commercial and graphic art at the Houston Art Institute. Although marginally more 'secure' career-wise than fine art, studying commercial art was a brave choice at a time when most students were encouraged to pursue 'safe' careers in the financial and tourism industries. His parents were supportive however. "They might not always have understood the work that I do, like why I painted my cousin yellow, but they encouraged it anyway," he smiles. "In that regard I was lucky." An interest in Andy Warhol and his work, which challenges preconceived notions about the nature of

art and erases distinctions between fine art and popular culture, also laid the foundations for Wray's singular style.

Since returning to Cayman, Wray has received critical acclaim as both a commercial and fine artist. Several of his pieces hang in private homes and galleries throughout the island and four of his paintings, two from his Warholesque 'Ode to Milo' series and two from his 'O Ma Toe' series, reside in the permanent collection of the Cayman Islands National Museum. In 1996 he won international prestige when the pin he designed for the Cayman Islands Olympic team was voted 'Best Pin' out of all the represented countries.

He now exhibits his work publicly with Native Sons, a group comprised of like-minded young Caymanians. "Native Sons was formed to put a face on Caymanian art," he explains. "We wanted to consciously give our work a Caymanian edge, by using our history and personal experiences as Caymanians to create art that has a distinctly local feel and real sense of how Caymanians perceive themselves. Each of us is unique but our work draws on the history, culture and spirit of the islands. It is long over due. That is not to say that there is no room for picturesque watercolours. There will always be a market for that kind of art but it only represents a small element of our culture. There are several sides of our



Wray talking with National Gallery board member Martin Bould

heritage that have been misrepresented, our African roots for example, and slowly these are becoming recognised."

True to his word, most of Wray's work is inspired by his experiences in Cayman. He is an insightful communicator, telling a story of the world as he sees it in a unique style, which he contributes to his commercial arts background and Neo-Pop influences. In his 'O Ma Toe' series, for example, Wray uses experiences that he feels, "every Caymanian can relate to." The original painting, a life-size mixed media piece entitled 'The hunter is hunted' depicts a figure attempting to catch crabs. A crab has attached himself to his toe and the figure looks both irate and confused. Other pictures in the series include 'Thersty Fa Limonade', 'Dem Dam Big Rocks!', 'Dis Fa Wilks?' and 'Com Get Ya Ole Dawg' and in each, the subject's toe falls victim to some calamity or another. They are a comic documentation of life in Cayman, scenes that have been played out time and again; scenes that the artist feels are overlooked and rapidly disappearing.

The titles of Wray's work also play on traditional Caymanian language. "I try to make sure that my titles sound Caymanian," he explains. "We seem to be losing our language and this is one of the last things we have left culturally. Language is so important; it's what makes

us different. Kids today are constantly corrected when they speak but it is important to make them proud of their heritage." He even has plans to design t-shirts with the phrase, "We talk lik dis but we ga cense ya nah" and others like this.

This current exhibition features a diverse collection of new and old works. Three pieces from his 'Ode to Milo' series, which pays tribute to the popular chocolate drink and the many uses of an empty Milo tin, dominate the gallery's central room. This series has virtually become Wray's trademark (hence the Milo served at the opening night) but he swears that he'll only do two more. These large paintings are attempt to 'Caymanise' Pop Art, says the artist. "For the most part these pieces are snapshots of my childhood memories, as I am sure they are for other Caymanians and West Indians. I wanted the pieces to be 'quiet' and to reflect on seemingly mundane memories a la Warhol soup cans."

Along with sculpture and photography the show will demonstrate a completely different side to his art which most people have not had the opportunity to see before. These new pieces, Wray tells me, were developed from a collection of phone doodles and ideas that pop into his head, sometimes at two o'clock in the morning, which he scribbles on Post-it notes. "It is quite different from the work that people

## Play

*I want to play  
What?, no... did you really think?  
Think I meant a roll in the hay?  
No no no them's really serious matters*

*When the little ones have had their nap  
Let's place them in the padded room with carpet  
And all those delicate breakables well put away  
Let's just lay and watch them.  
Is there a better way of going?... Okay maybe one  
Than killing ourselves laughing?*

*Boy! from NOW you see their 'way'  
Look in them eyes, not a care in the world  
Not even "is this night or day?"  
I wonder how they can see?  
I mean further in time than you and me?  
Yes us the high and mightys*

*I have seen the wisdom in children  
And the babe in elders who are in their healthy nineties  
So I say to all of you...for god's sake hurt no one!  
And just...Play, Play, Play!*

*Give Wray:  
Go!*

are used to seeing but I find that I am most comfortable working in pencil. Most of the images are figurative. They come from fragments of conversations or images that get stuck in my head and can develop into some pretty strange, dream-like images. There are some stylised figures and then some that are completely just... well I don't know where they come from!"

So what's next on the horizon, I ask? "I have ideas and designs for everything from thatch baskets, to uniforms to photographic studies and sculptures, and I have started writing poetry. Also, I want to use the computer to design my work. I think that on the island we suffer from the narrow misconception that art must be painted to be good and that tracing is cheating. You still have to prove that you can draw. I think that we've past that stage now. My work is more conceptual, starting with the idea and working from there."

And ideas are something this artist is certainly not lacking in. CE

'Serious 'Bout Mekin' Fun' runs from October 19th to November 24th.

