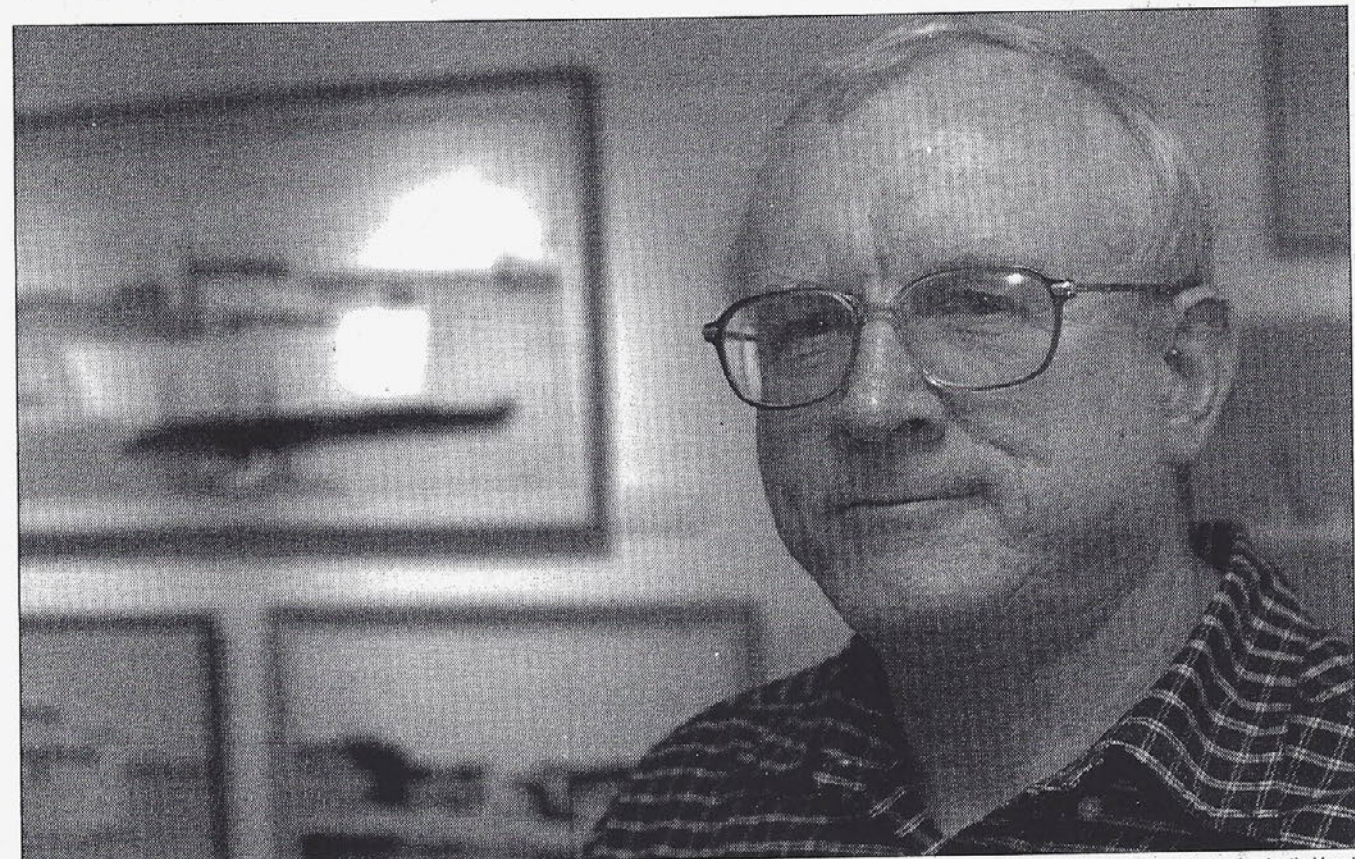


LONG time artist, chronicle



Charles Long, with some of his work at the National Gallery's exhibition.

Photos by Justin Uzzell

ART IN REVIEW

by Natalie Coleman



By now most people on the island will be familiar with the work of local artist, Charles Long. His 'Retrospective', currently in its third month at the National Gallery, has met with great success on all levels, receiving continuous media coverage, record attendance and inspiring several lectures and discussions on its content. Natalie Coleman recently caught up with the artist to learn more about his unique style and the inspirations behind over 30 years of work.

Although this is Charles's largest exhibition to date, his name has been synonymous with art in Cayman for decades. He began exhibiting his work soon after arrival in 1969 and went on to become a founding member of Cayman's first artistic organisation, The Visual Arts Society. As early as 1974 his contribution to the artist development of the islands was recognised by fellow artist Bendal Hydes in an interview with the *Nor'wester* magazine, which read, "The island has been greatly influenced by local artist Charles Long, who embodies a totally expressionistic portrayal of island life." This recognition was further cemented in 2000

when Charles was awarded the National Cultural Foundation award for his role in bringing local arts to the forefront.

The National Gallery's current exhibition traces this contribution, while at the same time communicating through the artist's work a rich narrative of Cayman's past.

I met Charles at his home in Savannah where he lives in a modestly sized house surrounded by tall Red Birch trees, Silver Thatch and Coconut Palms. It was peaceful, quiet and away from the hustle and bustle that has developed elsewhere in the island, a lifestyle all but forgotten. Scenes like this one

are central to the retrospective of his work.

Talking over coffee on his porch, we discussed his unique style, which is the result of 30 years of development. Comparisons are often made between Charles' work and that of the French post impressionists, Henri Rousseau and Paul Gauguin. "Ever since I was at art school I was greatly impressed by the work of artists like Gauguin and Rousseau," explains Charles. "My earlier work was more realistic and three dimensional in style which was a conscious decision made in order to familiarise myself with the technique and medium that I was working

with. However the more I developed my painting the more apparent these influences are." Clearly over time his compositions have become heavily flattened and 'decorative' with figures occupying an unrealistically shallow space, technique made famous by the aforementioned artists. However, while terms like 'naïve' and 'primitive' are often used to describe the work of these two great masters of modern painting, Charles shies away from applying the terms to his own work, as it is often used to refer to untrained artists. Each of his paintings, says the artist, is the result of careful draftsmanship and balance.

er of Cayman's past

Charles explains that the curator of the exhibition, National Gallery assistant director Nancy Kirkaldy-Barnard, took great pains to demonstrate this stylistic progression in the way they grouped the paintings. By assembling the paintings into sections:

Architecture, Domestic Life, Seaside Life and Trees and Nature, and including work from each decade, viewers are able to follow the artist's development over the years. The sculptural, three dimension forms of the 60s and early 70s contrast with the flattened two-dimensional style of his more recent work. This stylistic development is not always clear-cut and there is some contextual ambiguity in several paintings from the late 70s and early 80s, when Charles was in the midst of changing his style. In Cayman Heritage from 1980 (from the collection of Jerry and Joan Apt) for example, there is a flat frieze-like quality to two of the figures in the picture and a very decorative quality to much of the foliage. However the central figure's careful shading suggests depth, as does the careful placing of the central palm

tree and flowers in the foreground that create depth of field. These works make up some of the most interesting in the exhibition as they give the viewer the opportunity to really watch artistic evolution in process.

Style aside, it is the subject matter of Charles's paintings that often receive the most discussion and earned him the title of 'Chronicler'. The paintings document familiar scenes of island life in both past and present times: women hanging out washing, courting couples, busy waterfronts, architectural landmarks, people pursuing daytime chores or enjoying Cayman's nightlife. He often focuses on the small things, congregated iron roofs, chicken wire and fretwork, that are fast becoming symbols of Cayman's past. Rather than offering the viewer a complicated symbolic narrative, Charles records literally what he sees. As one collector, Ark Joseph pointed out, "He is a chronicler of our times. He is responsible for creating a pictorial history of the Cayman Islands and its progress over the last 30 years - no more complicated than that." Although he insists that he

didn't start out to create a visual record of Cayman's history, it has simply "worked out that way because the island has changed so rapidly." This honest approach to his subject matter has won Charles a large following of collectors both on the island and abroad. "Scenes of life in Cayman have a great appeal to both locals and visitors," says Charles, "People can relate to it."

For this very reason the artist has stuck to what he does best ("and to what puts bread on the table", he adds) painting his home territory rather than scenes from abroad. He does however occasionally dabble in abstract painting, several examples of which are part of the retrospective. He is extremely happy with the exhibition and is, according to Ms. Kirkaldy-Barnard, a frequent visitor. "Visiting the gallery and seeing the progress that you have taken as an artist over such a long period is very rewarding and it has inspired me to put all my energy into creating new work," concludes Charles.

There is no better way to measure the success of the exhibit.



Cayman Heritage, 1980. From the collection of Jerry and Joan Apt