

Listen

Soundings, on display now at the National Gallery, whispers one artist's vision and proclaims a country's potential.

By Searlina Bodden

Over forty years ago, Bendel Hydes of West Bay took his first trip abroad. At six years old, he was sent to New Orleans – a new country with different customs and cultural orientations. It was at this tender age that the acclaimed artist feels his destiny was decided.

"New Orleans was an incredible experience and it remained with me throughout my adolescence until I went to university," he says.

The polar differences of Cayman and New Orleans greatly affected young Bendel. Cayman in the late fifties, he states, was "simple and totally uncomplicated"; New Orleans on the other hand was a hot bed of newness and diversity. One would think the experience would traumatise such a young child. Bendel's answer challenges this assumption.

"I was reluctant to come back," he says. "I didn't want to return. I didn't

want to get off the plane."

But Bendel *would* get off the plane. He would even follow the beaten path and pursue a standard education in his native island - residing in West Bay with his family. After school, however, the 16-year old would outgrow the confines of the island and the itch to explore would return. At 18, he was right back on that plane – destined for college in Europe and, later, a lucrative career as a visual artist.

The fruits of this career are on display now at the National Gallery. *Soundings* encompasses 12 years of Bendel's work and gives art enthusiasts a glimpse of how he has evolved both as a person and as a professional artist.

Part of this evolution, Bendel says, is a renewed appreciation for his native country. As a young person, a frustration with Cayman's lack of artistic opportunity prompted him to seek his career elsewhere. Recognition of Cayman's excitement,

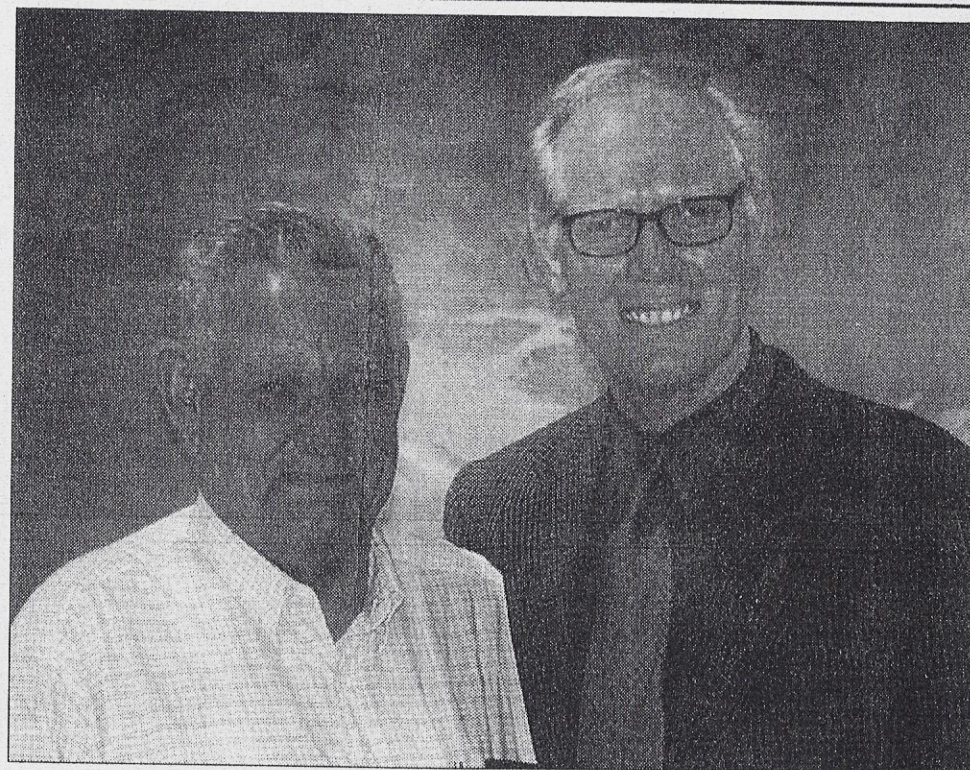
developing art scene and "static pleasures" is now consistently bringing him back home to share his work and see what is being locally produced.

"Cayman stands to be a strong entity in the realm of small nation players," he says.

Bendel, who counts Picasso and Goya among his influences, began producing the bulk of his work abroad and his early pieces reflect a fresh recollection of Cayman's landscape and aesthetic beauty. Although he has made a conscious effort to move past this "physicality" in more recent years and into looser, more abstract work, Cayman remains a theme that routinely manifests itself in Bendel's paintings.

"Whenever I am trying to represent something or create something in my work, it will evoke a feeling of Cayman in the form of a seascape or aerial view. I don't do it overtly, it just happens," he says.

Bendel's repeated



Bendel Hydes with his father Captain Shelby Hydes. Photo: Maggie Jackson

references to Cayman do not seem irreverent; there is no sense of bitterness towards the fact that a lack of local recognition of and appreciation for art drove him to work and live elsewhere. He admits feeling a sense of alienation in his homeland but insists that he is not unique in that – although "many would choose to think that way". That said the artist maintains a benevolent tone and refers to Cayman as if its naiveté was innocent and unfortunate.

"I have changed from someone who considered Cayman a place that was just very beautiful and good natured and devoid of art to someone who perceives Cayman as a

place where people are aware of the potential of the arts and of their own competency. I feel that producing a body of work for Cayman is not only meaningful but constructive," he says.

With this growing "awareness", Bendel says, Cayman's art scene is developing and changing. This he attributes to a change in the social climate. The art is changing, he says, because the people are.

"The art scene tends to flow out of the life scene – here it's no different, he continued. "It is definitely evolved to the point where you have people being more adventurous in their idiom, in their subject matter."

optimistic, Bendel feels the forward progression of Caymanian artists hinges on their ability to create with truth – producing art not only to please the heightened expectations of visitors but that shows a sense of worldliness and a knowledge of trends.

"Most people come here for pleasure, to take part in Cayman's tropical splendour and party atmosphere. Like everything is perfect. That doesn't change the fact that we should still represent that perfection with intelligence. Truth helps us grow and be stronger."

Bendel voices hopes that people will leave *Soundings* with more than

Bendel Hydes

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EA14
his
and for
Cayman's obvious
influence on his artistic
vision. He hopes to pass on
a larger lesson.

"My aim is to create
work that can make
people more subtle in
their expressions," he
says. "More

concentrated on the
moment, the now -

getting out of it the
utmost gratification and
sustenance possible."

For someone who has
gleaned such an
advanced philosophy on
life, society and purpose,
Bendel's goal is almost
alarmingly straightforward.

"I wanted to create great
paintings. And I hope I
have."

If only everything else
were so simple.