

Changing face of fibre art

Innovative, irreverent and irresistible; fibre art is increasingly recognised as a dynamic art form and given Cayman's affinity to this medium, through a strong thatch craft heritage, the public should welcome the National Gallery's new exhibition 'Merging Cultures. Merging Arts', reports Natalie Coleman.

In this engaging display the work of seven prominent British fibre artists, who are shaping the future of their craft, is featured with seven traditional Caymanian thatchers, whose work continues to uphold our time-honoured tradition. Seven renowned local artists, who have created contemporary art works composed primarily of fibrous materials, are also represented.

A concept of the National Gallery's acting director, Nancy Barnard, this unique show explores the similarities and differences between the work of artists from these two cultures and the timelines in which they were created. The results are not only pleasing to the eye but offer an insight into new design possibilities for our silver thatch industry.

"I wanted to explore the possibilities of introducing our strongest and oldest craft, thatch plaiting, actually a form of fibre art, into a new context," explains Nancy when discussing the exhibition's origin. "When art forms start to blend and artists meet and gain insights and inspiration from each other, the cultures merge also."

She continues, "There is very little in the way of contemporary fibre-art coming out of Cayman and, as curator, I was interested to see the results of merging the old and the new, and to explore, along with the contributing artists, new possibilities for thatch."

Researching this exhibition took several months as the curator wanted to ensure that the work by the selected

British artists complimented the Caymanian contingent. Nancy confirms, "This is one of the most interesting aspects of exhibition curation, in seeking a small group of artists you have to rule out so many more."

As the definition of fibre art covers such a wide range of materials - natural or manmade elongated matter of fine substance - she chose to include a diverse array of selected work. Silverthatch is represented of course, as well as coconut husk, metal fibre, string, horse hair, feathers, computer print-out paper, leaves, cane, bamboo, clay, acrylic paint, straw, to name but a few.

The art work in this exhibition is also as diverse as the materials themselves. British artist Lucy Brown's 'Wedding Cage' for example reflects upon the connotations of femininity and purity that underlay a traditional wedding dress that signifies. "It is a dress that holds personal and social history, and normally is an item of clothing that is kept, cherished and handed down through generations. It is possibly the first item to be discarded if the marriage breaks down. The idea of life changing after marriage is reflected in the reconstruction of the original wedding dresses used for the work," explains the curator. The hip area is exaggerated suggesting material instinct. Although it is not possible to wear, the zip still functions and acts as segregation. The work takes on the form of an uninhabited container of memories; the texture imitates plumage of young birds. This is enhanced by the placement of ostrich feathers on the floor.

Anna Lewis' 'Trace' is another work to seek out. The artist, who makes jewellery and also larger one-off wearable art pieces, is inspired by a body of research into the theme of memory and its importance in preserving personal identity and history. She uses white feathers that are printed with traces of imagery that "evoke delicate, ghost like qualities alluding to the fragile and transient nature of memory," says Nancy. "The sensitivity and lightness of the feather contrasts with the idea that

memory is often heavy with meaning."

Among the contemporary Caymanian artists is Leslie Bigelman, founding director of the National Gallery, whose piece entitled 'Whirlwind' was made as a demonstration piece in a National Gallery outreach programme. The red earthenware pot has been fired in turtle grass, and strung with silver thatch, cleverly combining various elements of our natural heritage in a contemporary way. Nickola McCoy, John Doak, Luelan Bodden, Merle McGann-Burke and John Broad.

The Caymanian traditional thatch-plaiters represented are Annalee Ebanks, Colleen Gibson, L. Rosafine Ebanks and Rosemae Ebanks. Their intricate and exceptional weaving techniques proudly remind the viewer of a craft form that

was a fundamental part of our heritage.

Nancy hopes that visitors to Mergings will be reminded that creativity has many different guises. "I want people to see another example of the fact that art is not just about painting and sculpture. Fibre art is inherent to Caymanian culture. Through this exhibit we want to underscore the fact that we need to keep up the preservation and teaching of our traditional craft onto future generations. Simultaneously, we hope it will inspire local artists to explore this medium in contemporary ways."

'Merging Cultures. Merging Arts' runs from 27 March until 28 May at the National Gallery, Harbour Place. For information call 945 111 or email director.ng@candw.ky



National Gallery's acting director, Nancy Barnard with a fibre art piece