

Al Ebanks



Image: Al Ebanks, *Stand*, 2019.

“I create art for the satisfaction I get from going beyond the normal way of seeing things. The gratification I get from people enjoying and acquiring my work. It’s a feeling I can’t explain.”

The Artist

Born and raised in George Town, Al Ebanks is a self-employed Caymanian artist. Ebanks studied art at the Cayman Islands High School and over the years has developed a style that is uniquely his own.



“In high school they teach you to paint within the lines, but that was too structured thinking for me,” he says. “My rebellious mind wanted to think outside the box even though most people in this community expected an artist to paint realistically. I painted realistically for a while, but it was torture. I wanted to go beyond.”

Although successful in his career as an interior designer, Ebanks made the decision to begin painting seriously in 1989. Having built his own studio in 1990 he has dedicated the greater part of his time to art. The space also doubles as a gallery.

Ebanks has continued to develop artistically, drawing from many workshops hosted by the local Visual Arts Society, the National Gallery (NGCI) and other visiting professional artists. In 1995 he was fortunate to receive a scholarship from the Cayman National Cultural Foundation (CNCf) to study stone and clay sculpting. Shortly thereafter, as part of NGCI’s Artists Away Programme he studied bronze sculpture in Florence, Italy. This added to his already mature style, which Ebanks typically conveys using charcoal, acrylic and oil on canvas.

Ebanks was one of the founding members of the Native Sons and he has exhibited with the group since its inception in 1996. He has also participated in solo and other group exhibitions both locally and abroad.

His numerous accolades include CNCf’s Artistic Achievement award in 2001; C.I. Government’s Silver Medal of Merit for the Arts in 2010 and NGCI’s Certificate of Excellence in 2014.

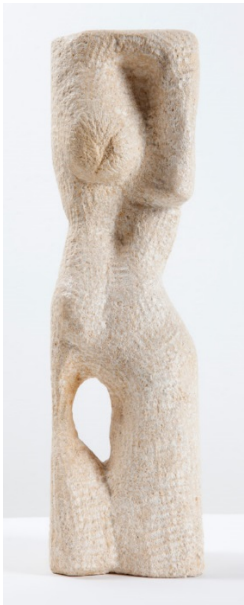
Ebanks was commissioned by the Cayman Islands Government to create a sculpture to capture the essence of the Caymanian woman, and celebrate the 50th anniversary of voting rights (suffrage) for women in Cayman. His work is featured in the permanent collections of the Cayman Islands National Museum, National Gallery of the Cayman Islands, the Griffin Gallery in Chicago, the Ritz-Carlton, Grand Cayman, the Sherry Frontenac Hotel in Miami and many private collections.

The Artwork

The strength and power of the women of the Cayman Islands has always been admired by Al Ebanks, having been raised by a strong Caymanian woman: his mother. Growing up with a large family, he was frequently surrounded by women. The driving force for the development of modern Caymanian society was the role its women played, not least in the frequent absence of its menfolk, who were often away at sea for long stretches of time. In their absence, women did many of the everyday tasks and labour involved in building the community— from constructing and maintaining homes to raising their families. This continues in many respects to this day. Ebanks always tries to reflect aspects of this in his art.

In much of his work, he continues to show women and their seemingly endless struggle in standing up for equal rights. Historically, Caymanian women came together in different ways: organising, marching, and standing against bullying and abuse.

Proficient in painting, sculpting and photography, Ebanks comfortably alternates his time between these three art forms. In many of Ebanks’ works, the female form woman can often be seen; usually overtly in photography, and often abstracted in sculptures and paintings. The hidden strength of womanhood is an important theme in many of his paintings, and reflects the historical importance of the woman figure in Cayman’s past.



Photograph: The Cayman Compass

First exhibited at the National Gallery in 2002, *Figure of a Woman #2* is one of a number of clay figures representing women that Ebanks has created over the years. These sculpted forms appear seemingly abstract and amorphous, yet on closer inspection are distinctly figurative, recalling the style of modernist sculptors such as Henry Moore. The artist's use of clay also harks back to biblical creation stories, in which the creator God molds the first humans from clay—acknowledging the Christian foundations that underpin Caymanian society.

Discussion

- Sculptors primarily use four basic techniques. The processes are either subtractive (material is removed), e.g. — 1) carving — or additive (material is added), e.g. — 2) casting 3) modeling or 4) assemblage. Discuss which process Ebanks likely uses for his sculptures.
- Consider if the other techniques may be used as alternatives to complete the sculptures.
 - Do you think the size of the sculpture makes a difference or impacts the symbolism the artist is trying to express?

Making Comparisons

- Visit <http://www.wikiart.org/en/henry-moore> to view the sculptures of British artist, Henry Moore.

- Compare Moore's biomorphic sculptures to those created by Al Ebanks. Note any similarities and differences you may recognise.

To see more Caymanian sculptors visit:

www.nationalgallery.org.ky

Follow Up Activities

- Create a sculptural artwork (single piece) similar to Ebanks' work by carving a bar of soap.
- Use a wire clothes hanger to create an abstract human figure. Here is a site to help show you how: <http://www.wikihow.com/make-a-panty-house-sculpture>.
- Using clay, model a copy of one of Ebanks' sculptures. (make your own clay at home using the following instructions: www.familyeducation.com/fun/clay/homemade-clay-recipes)
- When permitted, visit Heroes Square in George Town to view the bronze sculpture designed by Ebanks.

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