

## Caribbean Contemporary Poets and Artists Moored at the Venice Biennale

Margaret Spencer Matz

(New York Institute of Technology, New York School of Interior Design,  
Pratt Institute, Saturday Program of The Cooper Union - Schools of  
Architecture and Design)

**Abstract** The Teatrino del Mondo of Aldo Rossi, a performance space set on a barge that could be reached by boat (1979-80), became an iconic metaphor for the first Venetian Biennale of Architecture. At the Venetian Biennale of Architecture 2018, this metaphorical representation was engaged by Caribbean contemporary poets Lasana M. Sekou and Charles Matz II and visual artists Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera and Jean-Ulrick Désert. In exploring ties that link the vessels of Caribbean contemporary literature and art to Venice, witness is the audacity of their opera, created while confronting intensifying natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes, and recalling horrifying unnatural conditions of Slavery and war. The artists participated in collateral events in which poetry or visual art intersected marvellously with Venetian idioms.

**Keywords** Caribbean. Venice Architecture. Poetry. Art. Biennale 2018.


The Teatrino del Mondo, designed by the distinguished architect Aldo Rossi in 1979-1980, a temporary performance space set on a barge and reached by boat – a new island added to the archipelago of extant Venetian islands – became an iconic metaphor for the early Venetian Biennale of Architecture. The Teatrino still represents the Biennale metaphorically, and recently this metaphorical representation was engaged with Caribbean contemporary poets and visual artists participating as embodied vessels who intrepidly arrived at this new Venetian utopia. An unsusceptible temporary world tourist presence at this utopia sharply contrasts with a vulnerable permanent citizen inhabitation within the city of Venice; most inhabitation is marginalized at the periphery of the lagoon instead. This momentary juxtaposition of fiction to actuality, belying the existential threat posed by mass-tourism to Venice, is startling to those who become aware of its imbalance.

In exploring the invisible ties that link the vessels of Caribbean contemporary art to the island of Venice, to related aspects of Venetian culture, one discovers their existence and persistence. An insular landscape generates a visceral rapport, between humankind and the sea, and prompts experiences, of trade and travel, which constitute the essential affinities

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225



Figure 1. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskeya* (274.32 × 182.88 cm, composed of 9 panels each 91.44 cm by 60.96 cm), acrylic and ink-embellished xerography on vellum, 2017

between these cultures. The adoption and adaptation of Venetian idioms by these artists in their works most poignantly expresses the unseen ties. Witness the audacity of the artists' works created as these individuals confronted intensifying natural disasters, like earthquakes and hurricanes, ushered in by human artifice; the audacity of their *opus* engendered while recalling horrifying unnatural conditions of slavery and war.

The performance art and poetry of contemporary poets, such as Lasana Sekou and Charles Matz II, and graphic and new media art of artists, such as Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera and Jean-Ulrick Désert, express identity and resilience, values which address challenges of epic proportions currently faced by both the Caribbean and Venetian communities. These artists were invited by Venetian citizens to participate in events surrounding the Venetian Biennale of Architecture 2018 and Biennale of Art 2019 because their work resonates with Venetian culture and with its present vulnerability. Some of the authors had previously been summoned to present in Venice in the context of other cultural forums: symposia such as Incroci di Civiltà at Ca' Foscari, presentations at the Casa Carlo Goldoni, residencies at the Emily Harvey Foundation and collaborations at the Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani. Returning to *Veni Etiam*, these artists arrived with poetry or art compositions that intersected marvellously with Venetian idioms.



Figure 2. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *The Waters of Kiskeya* (detail of panel 8 of 9), acrylic and ink-embellished xerography on vellum, 2017

The works of these artists, specific to the *Dimension: Two Venetian Scole* exhibit, a collaborative event that will be described later, are examined here as well as in the context of earlier works by the same persons. The literary and visual genres of the exhibit’s contributors are compared to one another to explore their consonances. A transient paradigm, re-appropriating identity through cultural belonging, is a connection among these pairings of author/artist. This correspondence bridges cultural and generational difference and informs the chronological arrangement of the works in this essay.

The Atlantic World epic *Columbus, the Moor* (2015) by poet Charles Matz II, and the artist Jean-Ulrick Désert’s *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya* (figs. 1-2) are paired here to demonstrate affinities between their artistic endeavours. The collage of contemporary images/words applied upon a vellum/text of a historical narrative is one correlation between these two works - the art of Désert and the poetry in the book by Matz. A conception of a comprehensive multi-dialectical and multilingual region, the Caribbean with references to Middle-Atlantic passage/Middle Passage, is another. The assumption by the authors of another identity and/or idiom(s) with which to convey artistic significance is one more.

The poet Lasana Sekou’s *Book of The Dead* (2016) is paired with artist Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera’s illustrations (figs. 3-4) reaching for synergies



Figure 3. Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera, *Man and Woman* and *Man and Technology*, monochromatic scratchboard, circa 1990

found in their cooperative works. Creativity as protest through printed mediums of poetry and illustration is a correspondence between the author's and artist's works. The honouring and memorialising of the dead or the ancestors described and depicted in the poems and portraits is another. The reclamation by the creators of an identity and/or idiom(s) with which to convey artistic significance is yet another one.

What drew them to this project was the reanimation through poetic and visual arts of the nearly abandoned Venetian *scole* (schools) spaces of the Scola del Cristo and the Scola dei Mercanti, in the Cannaregio sestiere of Venice. The exhibit's curator, together with its Venetian collaborators, invited these Caribbean artists because of their experience with and knowledge of Venetian culture as well as for their themes, which resonated with the original activities of the adaptively reused spaces. For example, the original purpose of the Scola del Cristo, beginning in the Late Renaissance, was to provide burial for drowned persons; therefore, poetry by Matz and Sekou evoking this funerary theme was read. The original purpose of the Scola dei Mercanti, during the Medieval and Renaissance periods, was to procure





Figure 4. Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera, *Woman with Knowledge* and *Woman with Marine Preservation*, monochromatic scratchboard, circa 1990

and manufacture silk; thus, poetry aligned with its former use was explored there instead. The work of these artists as cultural corollary to the exhibit is distinctly identified as Caribbean, and their adoption of Venetian idioms, relative to the sea, travel, trade, and cultural reclamation in their works, makes them authentic interpreters, cultural explorers even, of Venetian culture.

Charles Matz II's past poetic performances included *I Sonnambuli Giocosi* (2013), published by Editrice Universitaria, in Venice, Italy, in 2013, as well as *Columbus, the Moor*, published by House of Nehesi Publishers in St. Martin, Caribbean, in 2015. *I Sonnambuli Giocosi*, a *commedia*, is based on Goldoni's brief stay in Feltre, Italy, in 1729 and his eventual exile in Paris, France. It was written primarily in Veneto dialect by Matz with occasionally interspersed words and sentences in French and German (though the author's original languages were English and German). The multi-genre performance narrative was presented at the Casa Carlo Goldoni in Venice, Italy, in March of 2014 and at a book salon in Belluno, Italy, in August 2014. Matz had taught and lived in Venice and Feltre from 1962 until 1984, a period during which critics note his writing had matured while being profoundly

influenced by opera and by its Venetian precedent, *Commedia dell'Arte*.

*Columbus, the Moor*, on the other hand, is a tragic and redemptive piece, which, centred on the uncertain identity of Columbus and on his unexpected voyage to the Caribbean in 1429, had emerged from a lengthy inquiry by Matz. This research was sparked by the author's visit, together with a Contemporary Language muse from the Veneto, Mariagrazia Fia, to a place in Genoa, Italy where Columbus may have once lived:

The *Saturnia*, a ship of the Italia Lines, was where I met Columbus in person, or so I thought, in the 1960s... ..“Do you always sail on the *Saturnia*?” I asked... ..“No,” he said quietly. “I flew back across the ocean once.” The other passengers had been listening. We all looked suddenly at the waiter. “It was after the sinking of the *Andrea Doria*. I flew home. Just the once.”

Mysteriously, secretly, I remembered Columbus, our waiter. For many years, this meeting with Columbus, as I thought it, made me want to celebrate him as a mysterious person, real, though elusive, courageous, despite stories blaming him for the travails of the Western Hemispheres where I was born. They were many stories; they were not history. These were mythical and heroic and, yet, they were real. Slowly, I passed through my own good and bad voyages...

... Once in lands believed to those of the beginning of a historic Columbus, I began to use my poetic performance experiences. Dramatic signs of him would explore the past by entering the past. Several languages with slightly different understandings of the legend, of the man, and of the heroics of all in the gales and currents of bravery created a memory of my own mystical encounter with Columbus. New World and Old, could be finally discovered in their grandness. Memories of earliest life recalled, as Montaigne rejoiced. Grand human spirits now recognized and praised when human cousins reunited after the sundering by mysteriously haunting events.<sup>1</sup>

The voices that the *Columbus, the Moor* text projects are heard by its audience in Arawak, the language of the native Taino islanders, in English, in Latin, and in Spanish. The script is primarily conveyed in English, and then translated into in Spanish, French, and Italian. *Columbus, the Moor*, was premiered in 1992 by an Italian and Spanish *équipe* at the Calderon de la Barca theatre in Valladolid, Spain. This city is where Columbus settled after his voyages, and where he died. Subsequently, *Columbus, the Moor*, was re-staged by the Historical Society and Museum of Art as well as broadcast via radio by a Spanish network, in Las Vegas, Nevada, in

1 Charles Matz II, email to Author, August 19, 2018.

1992 – before ultimately being published by House of Nehesi Publishers as a four-language volume in St. Martin, in the Caribbean (both Matz and Sekou are known for the stylised use in their poetry of multiple languages as well as idioms and idiomatic expressions from various languages). The “Sepulchral Voices (Death Calling the Role)”, part of *Columbus, the Moor*, was read by poet Lasana Sekou, who is described later in this essay, during the exhibit staging for *Dimension: Two Venetian Scales*.

A recent work by Jean-Ulrick Désert, titled *The Waters of Kiskeya/Quisqueya*, was displayed in the *Dissolving into Consciousness: The Work of Caribbean Art* exhibit at the Museum of Latin American Art (MoLAA) in Los Angeles, California, in 2017. It exemplifies an acquired idiom of cartography, which was inspired by Venetian maps studied by the artist during his residency at the Emily Harvey Foundation in Venice. A version of this map was also recently on view at the S 12 gallery in New York City from June 21 through July 12, 2018. An architectonic element in this drawing consists of a nine square grid that is overlaid upon the overall map. The grid alludes to and recalls the Venetian art of printing, a medium shared by both poetry and art, and its inherent role in disseminating knowledge. Tatiana Flores, curator of the MoLAA exhibit, described these maps:

Yachts and seaplanes replace the caravels of yore, and ‘water-territory-lines fracture the region,’ akin to ‘glass or ceramic shards,’ articulating ‘visual violence.’ These lines are painted in red, and the sea they divide has been left colorless, signaling that the unnatural divisions created by colonialism were not only a humanitarian disaster but also an environmental one. Fish skeletons and dead coral reefs allude to the destruction and exploitation of the region, wrought not only by the early settlers but also by industries such as big oil and tourism... (Flores 2018, 1)

Two visual devices found in the maps focus on identity: the cartouche and the rainbow. The cartouche, shaped as the continent of Africa and outlined by aural frame, is a genial device which acts simultaneously on many different levels. Cartouches represented the artist’s mark upon the artworks thus this specific one could be interpreted as a literal signature as well as an implied identity of its author. The rainbow, striated with bands of colour and inscribed with names of Caribbean literary figures (Edouard Glissant, Reinaldo Arenas, and Maryse Conde) is another device. Here, allegories of the forces of nature express godly elements so these names could be interpreted as implied influences as well as mystical presences.

Then there is Désert’s “GLORIA”, one part of a new media triptych consisting of videos, titled *BLING-ECHO-GLORIA*. *BLING* (Figure 5) critiques identity that is based on preconceived formulations whereas “GLORIA” (Figure 6) skirts identity favouring theatrical roles instead. The artist explained influences upon “GLORIA”:



Figure 5 (up). Jean-Ulrick Désert, *BLING*, still from video, 2018

Figure 6 (bottom). Jean-Ulrick Désert, “GLORIA”, still from video, 2018



inspired by the maxim 'see/hear/speak no evil,' attributed to the wise/mystic apes... *GLORIA* begins and ends in the Venetian water, the Adriatic, which by extension becomes the Mediterranean Sea. The video ostensibly presents hunger, as embodied by the lips; it alludes to... ..a tactic where dignity is traded or relinquished as a strategy of survival... ..The theatre of want and poverty, where roles are sharply defined... ..Hidden or exposed, the personal cost of refuge offers a certain capital.<sup>2</sup>

Désert's trio of allegories, also developed during his artist residency in Venice, are delivered through the video frame delineating the proscenium of a theatrical setting. These allegories and settings were likely influenced by actors and streetscapes of *Commedia dell'Arte*. "GLORIA" juxtaposes the artist's own identity to the stereotype of the moor. The refugee theme manifested in this video and, respectively, in Sekou's and Matz's poems from *Book of The Dead* and *Columbus, the Moor*, was suggested by the Venetians collaborating with the *Dimension: Two Venetian Scole* exhibit, owing to its currency that is directly impacting the Venetian community.

"GLORIA" was screened during the exhibit staging as part of a sequence, after a video of the reconstruction of the Scola del Cristo by various international architects, including Francisco Alba and Isaac Howland, and before the final video, named *Atlantide*, by Spoleto architect Fabio Fabiani, which is a composite of renderings that speak to the existential threat to and communal vulnerability of the City of Venice. Fabiani's *Atlantide* was also on view from July 7 through July 29, 2018, at the Carispo Foundation in Spoleto, Italy, on the occasion of the 61st Festival dei Due Mondi. The videos were projected adjacent to *Holocube* sculptures by Blake Carrington and Grayson Cox, devices that televised holograms that the participants could interactively recombine into new images.

The poet Lasana Sekou was first invited to read his recent poetry from *Book of The Dead* as well as poetry from an earlier critically acclaimed book, *The Salt Reaper: Poems from the Flats* (2005) as part of the *Incroci di Civiltà* (Crossings of Civilisations) and Poetry Vicenza. The literary events took place in Venice and Vicenza respectively in 2017. On those occasions, the poems that Sekou read had, significantly, also been translated into Italian by a team led by Caribbean Literature scholar Dr. Michela Calderaro. Sekou explained his acute perception of the essence of Caribbean and Venetian cultures:

What I did feel compelled to read in Venice, because of its provenance as a city of islands and water, were poems that somehow reflected aspects

2 Jean-Ulrick Désert, email to Author, June 17, 2018.

of water or sea, and the aesthetics of salt linked to the Great Salt Pond, cradle of the St. Martin nation.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond the poems read and translated in Venice (*Children of Man*, *Judgement, in Season, of Heritage and Fruit*, and *Sweet Lil' S'matin*), *Book of The Dead* also includes *Saltern*, a poem that is envisioned as an insular landscape, expressing its origins, and its salt monuments, addressing their oracles for divination of the island's future read through its past. This poem connects natural context to human existence demonstrating political activism as well as environmental consciousness. One also encounters Kiskeya in *Book of The Dead*, in this instance it is Kiskeya as the subject of a timely poem *RECONOCIDO en QUISQUEYA*, a poem formed as an immediate protest confronting resurgent racisms and genocidal tendencies in the Caribbean and throughout the world, including the Veneto region of Italy. These matters are the pressing issues of our contemporary times that concern Caribbean and Venetian audiences and communities alike thus Sekou's poems *For/closure*, *Children of Man*, *The Angel of Death* and *LIBYA UNFINISHED* were translated into Italian and read during *Dimension*.

"This is an important new work of world literature", wrote the Hong Kong/New York author Xu Xi in her foreword to *Book of The Dead*. Indeed, the contemporaneity of issues for Sekou, whether he is writing or performing from a metaphorical anchorage in St. Martin's Great Salt Pond or in the *Laguna Veneta*, is a constant. This is evidenced by the select poems from his forthcoming collection "Hurricane Protocol", which have recently appeared in the literary journal, *Tripwire* (2018, 171-6), reluctantly according to the poet himself. There is a raw urgency to these poems. All of the pieces within the 'protocol' set bear the same subtitle, "Hurricane Protocol", along with a different date as the name of each poem (9.8.17, 9.14.17, and 9.18.17), which echoes marine distress-calling, a plea to humanity as a whole. These poems recount the travails experienced by the St. Martin community during the devastating super-storms Irma and Maria. These disasters occurred in September of the Atlantic hurricane season in 2017, and garnered global news attention because of the unprecedented level of destruction on record that the storms brought on the poet's home island of St. Martin, and on neighbouring Caribbean countries and territories. As with previous collections, the message of hope of this poetry set is about prevailing over adversity and about resiliency to disaster. In his artist statement in *Tripwire*, Sekou briefly describes elements of the "Hurricane Protocol poems" that appear relative and intersectional to issues of mass-tourism impact on nature, vulnerability of inhabitation spaces, and marginalization of citizens - arguably a momentary juxtapo-

3 Lasana Sekou, email message to Author, July 9, 2018.

sition of actuality to fiction, belying the Caribbean paradise as much as the Venetian utopia:

The images that tenant these poems are of a cyclonic provenance that has generated the loss of human life and ongoing displacement; destruction to homes and livelihood, to what was already a largely fragile infrastructure, an even more sensitive domestic food production and practically non-existent reserve, and to a highly stressed natural environment.

Sekou was born in Aruba in 1959, to St. Martin parents. He grew up in St. Martin before being taken by his mother to New York, USA, in 1972. After his studies in New York City and Washington, DC, Sekou returned to St. Martin in 1984.

The author/artist pairing for *Dimension: Two Venetian Scole* matched Sekou's poetry with the artwork of Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera. Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera's print-like scratchboard etchings for Sekou's *Book of The Dead* have a tradition of graphics that protested racism, which is presently the focus of an emergent history of art. The mono-chromatic technique was informed by bold prints that were designed and issued by early civil rights protests which initially started in New York City and later continued in other parts of the United States of America. This tradition of graphics, as a form of engraving, also stretches from its ancient roots and includes artwork of worker rights struggles, national liberation and anti-apartheid movements of the 20th century.

Although Sanchez Cabrera has yet to visit Venice, she was inspired to create these images that illustrate *Book of The Dead* while observing sculptural details of buildings throughout New York City that, much as the *patere* of the edifices of Venice, communicated symbols that were re-appropriated from other cultures imparting antiquity and deflecting misfortune. The statuary poise of the figures portrayed reinforces the epic narratives of the poems in *Book of The Dead*. Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera distilled the equivalence of printed literature and fabricated architecture through her illustrations that were projected as video accompanied by audio of Sekou's reading:

I chose to entomb the figures in ovals and shade them with the dimensionality one might find in an architectural frieze or low relief. A few of the figures or *accoutrements* seemed to 'leak' out of their prescribed places.

The reliefs, sparse in comparison to the text, are a nod to the permanence of edifice - expression common to all civilizations - neutral figures reflecting the builders, makers and stewards of the spaces we inherit, built to outlast an individual's lifetime.

The dark figures ('black, blacker, blackest' as noted in the foreword by Xu Xi) are strong, earthy, earnest and African - at times kneeling, yet unapologetic. They represent a glimmer of a 'new' reflection, true to the insistence of survival and redress of misplaced identity. A reminder.<sup>4</sup>

Sanchez Cabrera's more recent work includes illustrations for the book, *My Hair is a Garden* (2018), which she authored. This children's book was reviewed in an article in *The New York Times* of June 14, 2018, headlined *Why Do Kids' Books About Black Hair Draw So Much Attention - and Controversy?* These illustrations as well as Sanchez Cabrera's handmade *muñecas* or dolls are intended to reshape preconceived visualisations of Caribbean and Central American women. This multimedia artist also makes quilts, which have a long narrative tradition especially among southern African-American women, such as the celebrated Gee's Bend quilters. Before her artist residency (2017-2018) at the prestigious Lincoln Center would be over, Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera's work was the subject of a solo exhibit at the Art Museum of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina in early 2017. The exhibit showcased her famous dolls, quilts, and over 20 of her illustrations from Patricia McKissack's children's book *Stitchin' and Pullin' a Gee's Bend Quilt*. By the year's end, the Lincoln Center Education Gallery in New York City exhibited a collection of *muñecas* entitled, "Cozbi A. Cabrera - Threads that Bind".

"The art of Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera has held an indelible fascination for me for over 30 years", said Sekou to New York University professor Jacqueline Bishop in a literary interview in the *Jamaica Observer* of May 6, 2018. While describing her own development as a Caribbean artist, Sanchez Cabrera recalled challenges in explaining the value of ephemeral designs, versus concrete fabrications, to her community. She recalled her acceptance into The Cooper Union Saturday Program, an art and architecture program which is preparatory to an exclusive merit-based scholarship at The Cooper Union itself. Attending the figure-drawing course at this academic institution is her bittersweet memory resulting in a controversy that ensued upon her community's awareness of the course's live modelling. The materials employed by this artist, as well as the processes followed by her, reflect a profound sensitivity towards resource sustainability. Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera, who left successful careers as an art and design director respectively at Atlantic Records and Sony Music to, in her own words, "discover, create and share pockets of grace and beauty", identifies herself as being of Caribbean descent, a native of Honduras, grew up and studied in New York City, and continues to live in the USA.

Concepts of identity and resilience that are manifested in the work of these Caribbean Contemporary artists resonate in Venice. A conceptual

4 Cozbi Sanchez Cabrera, email to Author, August 11, 2018.



affinity between Caribbean authors and Venetian audiences was evident leading up to and present in events surrounding the Venice Biennale of Architecture 2018 and extending into the Biennale of Art 2019. The artists share with Venetians similar cultural concerns, like dialectical language, insular landscape, maritime economy and societal diversity. Concordant interests prompted Venetian citizens to invite the authors and artists to return again to Venice. This utopian community participated in lively discussions and multimedia performances during corollary happenings including those about effectively reanimated dead persons and spaces. These Caribbean authors' *oeuvre* is equally compelling to Venetians for the shared existential threats currently experienced by both Caribbean people and Venice citizenry.

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