

Four Islands: Contemporary Art in Suriname, Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao

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From a Dutch perspective Suriname and the three Leeward Dutch Caribbean islands are often considered more or less the same, all four being ex-colonies of the Netherlands. From an art perspective the connection or a comparison between Suriname and these islands is hardly ever made. The respective art historiographies of Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean are still young, but they are expanding relatively quickly. However, a comparison could be very interesting. For instance, what is the role of having had the same coloniser? Does Suriname's almost half a century of independence make a difference given the Dutch Caribbean is still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands? What is the relationship between their respective art worlds and the nation? What is the role of tourism and art in nation-building and nation-branding mechanisms?

"It is not easy to be an artist in Suriname"

In 2009, after an intense period of exchanging ideas with three artists living in Suriname, three Surinamese-Dutch artists living in the Netherlands jointly presented an exhibition in Fort Zeelandia, Paramaribo. The project was called *Wakaman* (urban wanderer) and was followed by the publication of a book of the same name that expounded on the exhibition.¹ The exhibition attracted a large audience, so when one of the participating artists stated, "It is not easy to be an artist in Suriname," it aroused some surprise. However, the artist was right.

A country's political and economic climate is important for the support and development of the arts. Politics in Suriname, independent since 1975, has often failed in this area. Even a minister of culture such as Robin Ravales (a.k.a. Dobru), himself a writer, musician, and poet, or a culture-friendly president such as Ronald Venetiaan, also a poet, were unable to find the money and create facilities to advance the arts substantially. There was no interest in the arts whatsoever under President Desi Bouterse (2010–2020), or rather there was negative interest, given the destruction of an art gallery in the town of Moengo when its projects were considered to be too critical of the state as well as the church. Because Bouterse

left the country bankrupt, the current president also has no opportunity to turn the tide.

The lack of good infrastructure for art is largely related to political unwillingness and its financial consequences. Suriname does not have a museum of modern and contemporary art. The (private) national Surinamese Museum is primarily a cultural-historical museum. Creating an art museum has been mentioned by many people over many years, but never beyond an article in a newspaper or magazine, and any plans ended up in the bottom drawers of the responsible ministry. Artist Marcel Pinas founded the CAMM in Moengo, Suriname's second town after its capital Paramaribo. This Contemporary Art Museum Moengo is meant to introduce the residents of northeastern Suriname to Pinas's art in particular, but also to the work of artists whom he invited to be in residence there. Because resources are lacking and the local government is anything but cooperative, CAMM remains limited to having good intentions. It cannot act on them.

Paramaribo has one mature gallery: Readytex Art Gallery. This private gallery is housed in a beautiful historic building with many possibilities, located in the heart of the city. It mainly serves older artists, from the time "when Surinamese art only hung on the wall,"²; however, it recently embarked slowly on a new policy according to which space is made available to young artists. Their concepts and ideas correspond to international developments and experiments, and although their work is not yet commercially attractive, it may become so in the future. The gallery's collection is limited to Surinamese art, has no international contacts through art fairs and the like, and, due to insufficient funding, is not (yet) willing or able to launch an international program. Because the gallery cannot represent its artists internationally, reasonably successful artists such as Marcel Pinas and George Struikelblok drop out.

There are some smaller gallery initiatives such as G-Art Blok and Sukru Oso, but they only have occasional exhibitions and therefore play a small role in the national art scene. The same goes for the Surinamese Museum, as well as the Hall, a multipurpose exhibition centre, both of which host a brief art exhibition only once in a while.

For a gallery circuit to be viable, there must be a market for contemporary art. Suriname is a large country with few residents, most of whom have little money. Moreover, there is no database of foreign collectors and other international buyers, because no gallery presents itself abroad, and art tourism is very limited. Taken together, these circumstances explain why, generally speaking, artists cannot make a living from their art in Suriname. Every artist has a job on the side. The same applies to the aforementioned galleries: each has a secondary activity through which they make money. This does not benefit the concept of art as a profession. What does help to a certain extent is the still strong connection to the Netherlands,

where some 350,000 people of Surinamese descent now live, who remain closely linked to the almost 600,000 inhabitants of Suriname. The former sometimes serve to support the work of Surinamese artists in the Netherlands.

Most artists have been trained in the Netherlands, often after having attended Paramaribo's Nola Hatterman Art Academy, which is an easily accessible art school that stimulates youngsters six and over and young adults to explore their talents under the supervision of established Surinamese artists.³ The academy is monitored and funded by the government's Culture Department. However, this might be more of a curse than a blessing, since finances are scarce, and the politics surrounding the academy is a snake pit. For a number of years the academy collaborated with Amsterdam's Rietveld Academy, but that was not enough to help build a solid base, and now the Nola Hatterman's existence is rather meagre. It had at one time, supported by the government, sent a number of artists for one or two years to the Edna Manley Art Academy in Jamaica. These artists, who are now established and often teach at Nola Hatterman, include Marcel Pinas, George Struikelblok, and Kurt Nahar. The Edna Manley experience stimulated their artistry and careers.

Paramaribo also houses an Academy for Higher Art and Culture Education, which offers BA level education. It has three departments: journalism and communication, social and cultural formation (also called community work), and the smallest, visual arts. It seems to offer art teacher training more than artist education. Few established artists completed any training there. Its only full-time lecturer stated that one of the main struggles is preventing students from copying work from the internet.⁴

Many large contemporary art projects—including *Wakaman* (2009), *Paramaribo Span* (2010),⁵ and the Kibii Foundation's Moengo project—owe their existence largely to funding from the Netherlands.⁶ With the exception of the last, these projects were incidental. Their influence has not endured, and the only permanent part of the Moengo project lost its headquarters owing to political conflict. It remains to be seen whether project managers will be able to rebuild Moengo's art and culture complex somewhere else in town. As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the yearly Moengo Festival has not been organised for two years now, although the art produced by Surinamese and foreign artists under the Kibii Foundation umbrella is exhibited in the public domain all over Moengo.

Artistic connections with neighbouring countries such as Brazil and Guyana are relatively exceptional, despite quite a number of Guyanese and Brazilians living in the country. Contact with French Guiana is closer thanks to its Surinamese Diaspora, particularly Maroons, but also to others such as visual artist John Lie A Fo. As a result, exchanges with this country have increased, often on the initiative of visual artist Marcel Pinas, the founder of Kibii Foundation, CAMM, and the Moengo Festival. Moreover, Moengo is not far from the border with French Guiana.

All in all, it is not hard to conclude that the majority of Surinamese artists seem to live on an island surrounded by a world with which they hardly interact. Only with the Netherlands are they continuously in touch and, therefore, the former coloniser seems to be the closest neighbour, much closer than the diasporic motherlands with which most of the population is historically linked: West Africa, India, China, and Indonesia.⁷ Of course, Surinamese artists are all connected to the internet, but international influences, or artistic trends do not seem to be important incentives in the Surinamese art world. Shared histories and diasporic connections with faraway countries and continents or the surrounding region are apparently no motivation for Surinamese artists to seek out others in whom they might discover much about themselves.

This rather gloomy story could easily give the false impression that contemporary artists in Suriname are not able to live up to international standards. That is not the case. Artists such as Kurt Nahar, Ken Doorson, Dhiradj Ramsamoedj, and Ruben Cabenda, to name a few, have proven that they are no less talented than many foreign colleagues. However, they often lack the means and opportunities to develop, to reflect, and to present themselves outside Suriname. Implicit proof of this is the status of artists born in the Netherlands, or who moved there at a particular moment in their lives, such as Michael Tedja, Patricia Kaersenhout, Iris and Natasja Kensmil, Remy Jungerman, Charl Landvreugd, Jaasir Linger, Xavier Robles de Medina, and Sara Blokland, to give some examples. They are now successful in the Netherlands and also further abroad. The only artists of the younger generation living in Suriname who have been successful abroad are Marcel Pinas⁸ and George Struikelblok.⁹ Kurt Nahar recognised the uninspiring island situation of Suriname when he stated, “Anyone who wants to reach a higher level will have to travel abroad from time to time. If you should stay forever in Surinam, you’ll find that ‘the situation’ and the economic state of affairs have a tremendous impact on you. You’ll go out in search of work in order to earn some money. But often the kind of work you’ll find is not worthy your talent.”¹⁰

There may be other factors in the lower visibility of Surinamese artists, particularly in Europe. On the one hand the Dutch art world has long considered Suriname an artistic backwater. In 1995, for example, when the director of Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum organised the first-ever exhibition of Surinamese art in the Netherlands, he stated, “Suriname is mud ... What will be shown in the Stedelijk is a variant of Dutch painting slowly stuck in that mud,” and added half-heartedly, “I admire that struggle, I admire the courage it requires. That may be seen.”¹¹

On the other hand, artists of colour practicing their profession in a predominantly white environment, for instance the Netherlands, is different from working in the home environment of Suriname. Diaspora artists are much more challenged than their colleagues in Suriname to prove that they are as good as anyone in that



Natasja Kensmil, Self portrait with cross, 1999

white world. They are often more inclined to make that struggle part of their work, raising issues like slavery, colonialism, racism, identity politics, Black Lives Matter, and the fight for recognition as a human being and also as an artist. This to a certain extent imposed challenge is lacking in Suriname. Art criticism is not a fully developed phenomenon and people are quite easily considered professional artists. There is, nonetheless, a professional and up-to-date website presenting everything professionally worthwhile that is going on in the Surinamese art world, run by professionals applying critical standards of quality. They also disseminate the digital newsletter *Sranan Art Xposed* once or twice a year.¹² This private initiative is closely linked to Suriname's main gallery Readytex.

The yearly National Art Fair in Paramaribo, organised since 1965, on the other hand, despite a selection committee, shows a much broader interpretation of professional art.¹³ Recently renamed the International Art Fair, it includes what elsewhere would be categorised as amateur or folk art, with a lot of flora, fauna, and house and yard paintings presented next to the work of established artists

such as Paul Woei, Reinier Asmoredjo, Cliff San A Jong, Soeki Irodikromo, Wilgo Vijfhoven, Johan Pinas, and Juhnry Udenhout, or young emerging artists such as Razia Barsatie. Many of the work's titles refer to the local situation and are either social or politically critical or praise the country's beauty. The art fair is also a private initiative funded by local enterprises and stimulated by the Suriname Rotary.

The two largest art collections in Suriname are the property of two banks. De Surinaamsche Bank (DSB) is a private enterprise that started collecting art many decades ago. When the bank celebrated its 140th birthday in 2005 and a catalogue of their collection was published, the bank's president stated that Suriname has "a rich culture that, in my opinion, is still too often not perceived at its true value. Our institution has always valued art. Not only because of the fact that a type of economic activity is supported, but even more, to instil into our banking community the significance and awareness of artistic appreciation. Our bank is at the center of Surinamese society."¹⁴

The other collection is in the hands of the state owned Central Bank of Suriname.¹⁵ This is separate from the State Collection of about 330 works, owned by the state, managed by the Culture Department, distributed over a number of government buildings, and generally not much cared about. The Central Bank's collection is carefully collected and well-kept. In its fiftieth anniversary catalogue, painter Aanand Binda is approvingly cited for stating: "Artists are pioneers of the nation; they feel instinctively where a nation should be heading." And the editors continue: "Once it is understood that artists can contribute significantly to a healthy society it becomes clear that it is very important to encourage and promote talent ... In the international world Surinamese artists also play an important role. Often they are the ambassadors of their country."¹⁶

The editors' statement makes clear that, despite a blatant contradiction between rhetoric and practice, in particular levels of the state apparatus there is an awareness that art could or even should be instrumental in nation-building and nation-branding.

The next question is whether that other ex-colony of the Netherlands, Curaçao, is affected by the same circumstances and shows comparable developments.

Curaçao

"While the stereotype images combine clear blue waters, sandy beaches, palm trees, cool cocktails, tanned bodies, drum beating musicians, carnival parades and attractive dancers into a picture postcard view of the Caribbean, the population is struggling with unemployment, low income, political indecision as part of post-colonialism, as well as drug, gambling and alcohol addiction" (Tony Monsanto).¹⁷

If there is one thing in which Suriname differs from Curaçao, it is the role of tourism. Before the coronavirus threw sand into the engine, Curaçao attracted over a million tourists per year, two-fifths of whom stayed over while the remainder were cruise ship tourists who spent (less than) a day on the island.¹⁸ Suriname tourists numbered half that. Moreover, in Suriname perhaps up to fifty percent of “tourists” are actually not tourists exploring a strange country but visitors in their country of descent. The same occurs in Curaçao, but they form just a small percentage of the visitors. In part, Curaçao’s differing position has to do with natural circumstances and marketing. Suriname has no tourist beaches nor a natural harbour for cruise ships. Its unique selling point is the Amazonian rainforest with its “exotic” nature and Native American and Maroon inhabitants, as well as to a certain extent colonial architecture. So those who are not visiting relatives in Suriname are mainly ecotourists going for a jungle adventure and/or history and culture aficionados. Airfares and jungle tours are relatively expensive, so it is the more well-to-do tourist who visits Suriname. Curaçao, on the other hand, sells itself as a carefree tropical paradise, it has white beaches and a blue sea. This suffices for the bulk of diving, snorkelling, and sun-worshipping tourists. In addition, it has sufficient and relatively cheap air traffic and hotel accommodation. Furthermore, Willemstad’s waterfront has the same effect as canal houses and windmills in the Netherlands owing to its architecture. The picture sells. For cruise lines, that is enough to dock their sailing skyscrapers at the island.



Tony Monsanto, Welcome to paradise, 2009



Tirzo Martha, Sin miedo/without shame, 2022

It is telling that there is probably no Surinamese piece of art referring to the tourist industry, whereas well-known Curaçaoan artists such as Tirzo Martha and Tony Monsanto (see above) made it one of their themes. Tourism here is all over the place and the number one source of income for the country. This could be a serious incentive for a thriving art market. The downside of that, of course, is the temptation for artists to make money by adapting their work to the paradisaical image of *dushi Kòrsou* with which Curaçao tourists are presented. For instance, the Curaçao Tourist Board's new "Feel It For Yourself" global branding campaign states, "Drawing inspiration from the island's vibrant aesthetic."¹⁹ This is not a reference to the reality Curaçaoans live in, nor to the work of serious artists. Here the gift shop and the tourist gallery enter into the equation for which the picturesque and the exotic are produced in series.

For artists such as Tirzo Martha such a development is a horror. For him, this tourist branding image and its resulting art have nothing to do with the real Curaçao; he takes his audience seriously by showing his creative process and making the end result into a mirror for the viewer. To Tirzo Martha, Jean Girigori, or Sharelly Emanuelson, just to name a few, working for the tourist market would be like sacrificing one's identity and creativity to commerce. Nonetheless, it is happening all around them.

There is, however, another side to this phenomenon: mural or street art. In street art mainly young artists express themselves in public spaces and often

address society with social, political, or aesthetic statements and questions, meanwhile making that same public space more interesting for tourists to whom this kind of glocal art form is not unfamiliar. Since around 2015 a movement has developed in Curaçao in different neighbourhoods, which links artists and inhabitants to social themes, while embellishing their *barrios* through art. Windows, doors, or walls of run down houses are decorated by paintings, for example by Art Skalo, Punda Window Art Project, and IBB students (see below). In the Otrobanda neighbourhood a so-called *Kaya Kaya* (street street) party is organised every year by the cultural and social entrepreneur Kurt Schoop, resulting in a total clean-up of the area, enormous murals on houses, sculptures in the streets, and a weekend of feasting. Artists contributing to these projects include, among others, Jhomar Loaiza, Garrick Marchena, Avantia Damberg, Francis Sling, Carlos Blaaker, and Roberto Tjon A Meeuw, the last two originally from Suriname.

This kind of public art has nation-building and nation-branding dimensions. Local residents are invited to join in the project, including the art-making; they look at their environment with new eyes, and their pride in themselves and at least this part of the nation is stimulated. At the same time it is a new form of nation-branding to outsiders, including tourists. It tells them: “We are proud and we can take care of ourselves.”

The first art museum in the Dutch Caribbean was the Curaçaosch Museum, founded in 1948.²⁰ It started as a museum of mainly contemporary art—European, Dutch, and Antillean, from Picasso to Willink to Boskaljon—hung in typical Curaçaoan period rooms. There were intensive relations and exchanges with the Stedelijk Museum, particularly with its director Willem Sandberg. Over time the museum’s material cultural heritage dimension expanded at the expense of its contemporary art dimension. The museum historicised. It has a rich history of exhibitions to the present day, but it is less important for contemporary art. Only the retrospective exhibitions of Jennifer Smit and Felix de Rooy, *Antepassado di Futuro* (2010) and *Exploring the Past to Envisage the Future* (2014), were successful attempts at connecting past and present.

A few private galleries showcase local and Caribbean art: Herman and Lusette Verboom’s Alma Blou, established in the late 1980s, and Landhuis Bloemhof managed by sculptor May Henriquez’s daughter Nicole Henriquez. Both galleries are housed in nineteenth-century plantation mansions on the periphery of Willemstad and are frequented by often well-to-do and certainly art-loving locals as well as tourists. In 2016 photographer Don Marco founded Project 3, a gallery presenting photographs, paintings, and sculptures by Curaçaoan artists. That same year Uniarte opened its doors in a former store, Casa Moderna, as a sort of pop-up gallery and art platform in the heart of Willemstad’s historic centre, Punda. Its initiator is visual artist and filmmaker Sharelly Emanuelson. Recently, Uniarte

moved to the Otrobanda neighbourhood, where it is housed in a three-story building with exhibition rooms, work spaces, and a residency room. Uniarte's goal is to "strive for a dialogue between local, regional and international professionals and projects that share ideas and skills related to art production" and therefore it "provides a platform for artists, curators, cultural agents involved in research, experimentation, production and dissemination of contemporary artistic practices from and about the Caribbean."²¹

Next to these art spaces there is an interesting sculpture garden developing as part of the Blue Bay Resort, with at present about forty works by Curaçaoan artists such as Yubi Kirindongo, Norva Sling, and Giovanni Abath a.k.a. 7.1.²² One of the founders of this art garden is entrepreneur, collector, and art columnist Jan Gulmans.²³

Finally, the Instituto Buena Bista (IBB), led by the artists Tirzo Martha and David Bade and housed in a complex of buildings that form an integrated part of a psychiatric clinic, was created in 2006. Patients can and do walk in and out as they please. IBB organises exhibitions once in a while but is mainly an offspring of their core business, which is stimulating and training talented creative young people of all social classes and cultural backgrounds. The slogan on their website sums up their work: "Instituto Buena Bista (IBB) is *the* centre for contemporary art on Curaçao providing creative youth with a two year creative and/or artistic preparatory course, and a residency spot for international artists."²⁴

Young people are broadly educated at this institution, with the intention of preparing them for art academies in the Netherlands or elsewhere. International artists using the residence facility participate in the training process so that students can become acquainted with international developments in art. The underlying goal is to attract artists who have progressed to academies abroad to return to their home country to strengthen Curaçao's art and art scene. That does not always work out. Artists such as Dustin Thierry, Kevin Osepa, Timothy Voges, and Quentley Barbara became successful in the Netherlands and will probably continue to live and work there for the time being. Others have returned, however, some of whom are now teaching at IBB, such as Johanna Zapata and Omar Kuwas.

It is not very hard for IBB to attract artists for a residency, because the names of the founders and still acting directors, Martha and Bade, are well known in the Netherlands and abroad. Moreover, IBB is a sort of art and social hub in Curaçaoan society. Its objectives correspond to those of Uniarte: both act as artistic platforms and initiate and stimulate conversations concerning the sociocultural Caribbean context. Martha's performances as Captain Caribbean, who questions the status quo, have become famous, and not only in Curaçao.

Street art is often an indicator of what is going on in society and is increasingly integrated in the art practices of contemporary artists. IBB recognises this and therefore encourages its students to participate. Actually, this form of art is not so different

from the street projects of the duos of David Bade and Tirzo Martha and of Ruben La Cruz and Karolien Helweg. They are also committed, critical, and close to “the street.” And Yubi Kirindongo, by taking waste material as the starting point for his sculptures—automobile bumpers for example—touches upon this tradition as well.

By preparing dozens and dozens of young talent to study abroad for many years now, IBB has created a basic attitude that differs from that imparted by most education in Curaçaoan society. Talent alone is not enough, making money is not sacred. IBB stresses that the imagination is given ample room, that social engagement is expressed, that urgency counts, that the means of expression are unlimited and must match the content, that it is not only important to be aware of the immediate environment but to look literally across borders. Uniarte calls for the same engaged attitude. Both institutes produce artists with open, while critical minds and a wide range of skills. Their social impact goes way beyond the walls of their institutes. And what’s more, they do it with almost no support from the Curaçaoan government, which is in dire straits but has in any case never shown much interest in the arts. The available figures show that in 2019, 0.015 percent of Curaçao’s total budget was invested in “culture, archaeology and museums.”²⁵ Galleries survive by offering other services such as printing and/or selling frames and/or cheap art made in series for tourists. The other art and heritage institutes rely heavily on Dutch funds and a few local private funders.

Finally, Curaçao has two main institutional players in the art scene, which are, as in Suriname, banks. One is the over century-old Maduro and Curiël’s Bank (MCB), the other the state-owned Central Bank of Curaçao and Sint Maarten (CBCS). Their art activities may be less visible to outsiders, let alone tourists, but their doings are crucial for the local art world. They both have built up vast collections, make donations, and sponsor and support local initiatives. Works from the MCB collection, for instance, are used to decorate its more than thirty branches, including those in Bonaire and Aruba. In their own words: “We strongly believe in preserving and promoting our island’s art, history and culture, as they contribute to social cohesion and nation-building.” Therefore, they supported for instance Alma Blou Gallery when its owners bought the old plantation mansion in which the gallery is housed today.²⁶ The CBCS also has a solid collection of high quality Curaçaoan art. Works can be seen in its offices as well as on its Facebook page, where a work from the collection is highlighted every month.²⁷ Moreover, the bank has its own Money Museum, which is dedicated to the history of (Antillean) coins and banknotes, and where there is a permanent space reserved for art exhibitions. These exhibitions present Curaçaoan artists such as Jean Girigorie, Ellen Spijkstra, and Nel Simon, but also artists from the wider region such as Francisco Salazar from Venezuela or K’Cho from Cuba. As in Suriname, these banks employ a curator, in this case Marlies Schoenmakers, who also serves other banks and is also an artist.²⁸

Aruba and Bonaire

People go to Bonaire for the beaches, diving, and sailing, not for its art. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the population of about twenty thousand received approximately 160,000 stay-over tourists, and over 400,000 cruise ship passengers. It is, therefore, not surprising that there is quite a lot of tourist art for sale. The main genres engaged in by artists, often of Dutch descent, are (underwater) landscapes and portraits, usually applied in a traditional, realistic way. In no way can Bonaire compete with the art worlds of Curaçao or Suriname. The only two local artists who are also known outside the island are Nochi Coffie, who specialises in a stylised symbolism, and Winfred Dania, who died in 2012 but whose magic-realistic work is still popular. Locally well-known are Henk Roozendaal's portraits in which a certain street art style is never far away, which is no coincidence since he has created murals in Bonaire as well. Recently, the young Bonairean artist Tatiana Nicolaas, a.k.a. TXN, returned to the island after pursuing art education in the Netherlands. Other, mainly Dutch artists have settled in Bonaire as well. There is one more or less permanent, but small, venue for contemporary art exhibitions, which is a space in a history museum, the Terramar Museum.²⁹

Aruba is again another story. Thanks to the flourishing tourist industry, which is two to three times larger than Curaçao's,³⁰ the economy thrives. Nonetheless, this is not reflected in its art world in the sense of high-end art galleries or an art museum. Entering the island through its international airport, however, one might get a different impression from the colourful art and design on the walls of the arrival hall. Even the official Aruba website states: "Discover why in the art world our island is considered as the emerging art centre of the Caribbean."³¹ And actually it is true. However, one should not look for mature contemporary art in conventional hot spots like galleries or a museum. Once in a while there are contemporary art exhibitions, for example in the island's cultural venue Cas di Cultura (House of Culture). A number of artists have their own gallery or exhibition space, such as Elisa Lejuez, Ciro Abath, and Osaira Muyale; others exhibit in shops and banks, as is the custom in many Caribbean countries. When one of the authors of this chapter visited Osaira Muyale's (public) studio and saw her *Paradise Park* installation, he was overwhelmed: "It looked like a dreamland populated with blue sculptures, a mixture of human figures and animals (e.g. horses), sometimes mixed together in one sculpture. Body parts were popping out of the walls or they were 'flying' above my head."³²

Aruba has actually given birth to quite a number of professional artists with qualitatively solid reputations, as well as a well-known art historian, Dr. Adi Martis. Many of the artists have studied abroad and returned to home. Their names are known beyond the borders of Aruba, including Ryan Oduber, Elvis Lopez, Stan

Kuiperi, Osaira Muyale, Glenda Heyligers, Ciro Abath, Alida Martinez, Alydia Wever, and others.

There is one important venue for art as well as art education, which is Ateliers'89 Punto de Beyas Arte Aruba. This initiative by Elvis Lopez, who is the director, is actually *the* art platform of and for Aruba. It has exhibitions, workshops, the Barrio (neighbourhood) project with and for local youth, and an artist-in-residency program called Caribbean Linked that focuses on artists from the wider region. With its staff of two professional (Dutch) art historians/curators, the institute, apart from presenting contemporary art, has set itself a clear mission: "Firstly, we want to introduce our children to Contemporary Art and exposing them to a diverse range of techniques we are allowing them to ask an important question, would I like to pursue a career in the Arts? Secondly, we strongly believe that social cohesion can be achieved through art. Art successfully crosses the young and old, rich and poor divides."³³

Aruba also has an Academy of Fine Arts and Design, which was founded in cooperation with the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. It is an academy structured on the Dutch model: a four-year program driven by the specific directions students have to choose after the first year. It also aims for involvement with local society and the environment. However, this involvement in many cases also has to compete with the urge to make a career in the Netherlands, or elsewhere.

Despite all this activity the words of artist Stan Kuiperi still hold. In 2001, he stated that the arts in Aruba were blossoming but working conditions were bad. He attributed this to a political climate in which interest in the arts was nonexistent and to what he called "the absence of a democratic cultural policy."³⁴ The governmental investment in culture is a bit more substantial than it is in Curaçao, at 0.31 percent of the 2020 total budget, but a large part of that is not going to art.³⁵ The aforementioned initiatives such as Ateliers'89 are for the large part sponsored by funds from the Netherlands.

Yet there is one other art space where artists, the private sector, and the state actively meet and that is most certainly part of nation-branding: San Nicolas. This second town of Aruba has become a centre for street art with an internationally recognised mural culture. It was more or less born of necessity. After the oil refinery in San Nicolas closed in 2012, the town was at risk of turning into a ghost town. In 2016 the Aruba Art Fair was established in San Nicolas by private initiative and has since been organised yearly. Thanks to the efforts of various art organisations in Aruba, such as Art Rules Aruba and, of course, Aruba Art Fair, the multiple day event has turned into something massive with more than 150 art exhibitors, many from abroad, and over ten thousand visitors in 2019.³⁶ In addition, a number of local and international artists have left their aesthetic traces on walls and buildings on San Nicolas's Main Street. Now San Nicolas has become a tourist attraction of



Mural art in San Nicolas, Aruba, 2017 (photo Alex van Stipriaan)

sorts thanks to the murals, which expand and multiply every year. Aruba Mural Tours capitalises on this most Afro-Caribbean part of the island, while public authorities have stimulated investment. Among other things, they supported the building of a museum of industry in the town's former water tower, with a state of the art exhibition on Aruba's industrial history.

Furthermore, the government supported the opening of a community museum on Aruba's cultural history, with a space for contemporary art and a café. The expanding mural art, which is actually an aesthetic makeover of the town, is, however, the main attraction of San Nicolas, which as well as pleasing on the eye tells stories of the island and its inhabitants. Just like in Curaçao the murals appear to be an effective form for involving all parties—artists, the (international) audience, governmental and entrepreneurial infrastructure, and funding sources—to make art part of a nation-building as well as nation-branding process. It is an investment in local pride as well as in international visibility.

Comparing and Concluding

Now the question is: How do the art worlds of these four “islands” compare, what does their common background as former colonies of the Netherlands mean to their art practice or local art worlds, and how do their art worlds relate to the nation—in the form of the state—and vice versa?

Obviously, country size plays a decisive role. Because of its small population Bonaire cannot be compared to the other three countries: just a few Bonairean

artists produce autonomous art beyond the level of the tourist market, there are no mature art venues, hardly any serious collectors, and no professional art training.

None of the four islands have an art museum. Maybe the Curaçaosch Museum comes closest, but it is a cultural-historical museum as well. In any case, it is the only more or less national museum with art that is structurally funded by the state. This is, however, no indication of a state that uses art to help build and brand the nation. In this Curaçao differs very little from the other countries. Art is not a state priority when the economy is in dire straits, financially as well as politically. The most negative example of this is Suriname, where the state even became a destructive force under the presidency of the former military leader Bouterse. Not only did he launch a plan—which fortunately never came to fruition—to turn the Suriname Museum in the historic Fort Zeelandia into a festival and amusement space, he also obstructed the work of Moengo's Kibii and CAMM art platforms. The most positive state approach to art and culture can probably be found in Aruba, which is also the state with the relatively most flourishing economy. Thanks to state support San Nicolas has two new (historical) museums and is the town being promoted internationally as an up-to-date centre of mural art.

On the other hand, Aruba's Central Bank does not play the important role the central banks of Suriname and Curaçao play in the arts with tax payer money. Though central banks are state institutions, these operate quite independent of the state and assume a responsible role towards society. They recognise that art contributes to the cohesion of the nation and that artists can function as ambassadors for the nation. The Central Bank of Suriname's art catalogue even stated that artists "feel instinctively where a nation should be heading."³⁷ That might be overdoing the artist's importance and wisdom, but it is at least a welcome recognition. It seems that in Suriname and Curaçao the state has transferred its role as a stimulator and protector of the arts to the main state-owned and private financial institutions. They form the local life lines of the art world.

Next to those examples, the dynamic role of private art platforms in Suriname (Kibii), Curaçao (IBB and Uniarte), and Aruba (Ateliers'89) are quite telling. All operate more or less independent of the state, were initiated and are directed by artists, host residencies that keep them connected to the international art world, and most have a stimulating role in training young talent even if they don't have the "right" educational background. Actually, they have created infrastructure one would expect the state to create but that it economically or politically cannot or will not do. Remarkable is the role of the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam, which is connected to institutions in all of these countries except Bonaire. It has deliberately assumed this role as part of its mission to be truly international.³⁸

One or two artists might be considered an art platform in themselves, working in the space that once formed the Kingdom: the Dutch Caribbean, Suriname, and

the Netherlands. One of the most remarkable of these is probably Mo Mohamed. Born in Aruba of Surinamese parents, he moved to the Netherlands, where he became a self-made artist in the wild 1960s and 70s, worked for long periods in Suriname and Curaçao, and is now back in Aruba. Wherever he lives and works, he is part of the local art scene in his own way, as well as a bridge between art worlds.³⁹

The bright side of institutionalised private initiatives is that they can apply for and accept funds from abroad, when this is often not possible for a state apparatus. That is the other, if not main, life line for the respective art worlds. And that line runs straight to the Netherlands. A number of Dutch funds have almost structural relationships with art institutes in the Caribbean including Suriname, and the Dutch embassy in Paramaribo is said to have invested for years much more in the Suriname arts and culture sector than has the Suriname Culture Department. This might be perceived as a sort of postcolonial compensation; it is also at the very least a sort of neocolonial nation-branding by the former coloniser.

In all countries concerned only a small group of artists can live reasonably well on their work. Most have other activities on the side to support them. The same goes for the very few commercial outlets for these artists. Even the two top galleries, Readytex in Suriname and Alma Blou in Curaçao, are dependent on other sources of income. In all these countries there is enough talent: artists can compete artistically with their colleagues in other parts of the world. What they lack is a solid infrastructure, opportunities, exposure, and governmental support, particularly when international connections are concerned. The artists can hardly do without such connections, as their societies are too small and too poor to pay artists a living wage, as well as too isolated to guarantee an inspirational and innovative art climate. International connections with the region are much fewer than would be expected. If artists wish for a serious and substantial career, they go abroad, temporarily or permanently. And for most, “abroad” means the Netherlands. Even the diasporic connections with other countries and far away continents—Africa and Asia—or in the surrounding region are apparently no incentive to seek each other out internationally. In that sense colonial relations seem to be reproduced in postcolonial times. However, that is not the full story. Decolonisation has started here too. For some of the international working artists the Caribbean region is part of their focus, with the Havana Biennial as an important space of reference. Residencies all over the world and a focus on the Americas are now becoming part of the picture.

Finally, there is street art, most developed in Aruba, least developed in Suriname. Although street art is still not seen by some experts as “high art”, murals by urban artists have conquered a serious place in the international art world and the Caribbean has its share. It plays an important role in Curaçao and Aruba and seems to be a keen indicator of the pulse of the nation. On the one hand it refers to urgent sociopolitical issues—in Curaçao more than in Aruba, it seems; on the

other, it portrays the aesthetic beauty and exoticism that make people proud and that certainly tourists love to see. It is the most democratic art form: free entrance, visible and accessible to everyone, with comprehensible themes and forms, and embellishing parts of society where traditional art lovers do not live. Moreover, it doesn't necessarily require formal art training, but rather mainly talent and much practice. It speaks an artistic language that today is known all over the world, while its themes can be particularly local. This is an ideal mix for building a diverse nation, which can be branded locally as well as internationally: Look, this is us!

