

WHITE SKIN, BLACK KIN, SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE  
Panel Discussion at the BMHS, May 19 2004  
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“The shaman is the person, male or female, who in his late childhood or early youth has an overwhelming psychological experience that turns him totally inward. It’s a kind of schizophrenic crack-up. The whole unconscious opens up, and the shaman falls into it.... The artists are the mythmakers of our day...they are today’s shamans who communicate myths for contemporary society, recognizing and rendering the “radiance” of all things, as an epiphany showing forth their truth.” Taken from Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers in *The Power of Myth*.

Tonight, I would like to speak about this exhibition as “an epiphany of showing forth” our truths and to suggest that Joscelyn Gardner is a contemporary Barbadian shaman and that this exhibition represents a watershed in our ongoing and fractured development of cultural production.

First I would like to speak about the show from the point of view of this work being a creative body of work. These ideas are presented to us as art as opposed to any other format. Secondly, I would like to speak about the idea of schizophrenia as it relates to the work. And finally I would like to address the idea of wholeness. I am speaking about schizophrenia and wholeness both within the context of what we deem to be unspeakable. It would be remiss of me as an artist not to address the technical expertise that Joscelyn so beautifully and proficiently displays. The process of physically making the work is something that Joscelyn enjoys as she very carefully renders, embroiders, writes, draws and prints these ideas into a form that is accessible to us – the thirsty audience. You should be aware that the pillow cases are made by Joscelyn, the embroidery is sewn by her hands, as are the topsy-turvy dolls. The photocopies of the prints that are hanging in the hallway pale in comparison to the limited edition, fine art lithographs that are on display at the Zemicon Gallery. Those carefully rendered drawings of black hairstyles are lithographs which are printed on frosted mylar. They are exquisitely beautiful and one should not miss the opportunity to see these works in the flesh.

I particularly appreciate the idea of Joscelyn using the Museum’s galleries as her canvas. I think it is a bold and daring venture to take what is a hallowed national arena and dance around the icons that reek of status, privilege and puffed up patriarchal chests, and suggest a topsy-turvy plantation space that begins to create a language which defines this nation’s history. Instead of a static display of inanimate objects, we now have movement, sound, rhythm, and voice; we have an animated space which breathes life into our history and honours the fact, with compassion, that we are bound to the vein. The Caribbean has propagated centuries of shame around our stories. We have been taught to be uncomfortable when history shows up at the back door, stating claim to our blood line. But now, thanks to Joscelyn’s careful words and works, we have a creative language that is starting to fall from our lips, we can begin to speak about the unspeakable.

As a result of this exhibition, the BMHS has become an even more provocative space and it might be interesting for the BMHS to actively involve artists in engaging with the space on a regular basis, to allow the cultural producers of this country to respond to the displays so we can continue to speak the unspeakable.

Secondly, I would like to speak about schizophrenia as it relates to the works on display.

Schizophrenia is a mental disease marked by disconnection between thoughts, feelings and actions. The word makes me think about madness – a disordered mind, as well as it makes me think about schism - a split, rupture or division.

This show allows us to explore the tangled threads of history in an attempt to unravel the postcolonial mess we have inherited. Barbados, like the rest of the Caribbean, has been part of one of the world's largest experiments in hybridity and its resultant creolisation. An innate part of this experience is the schism, schizophrenia or madness Joscelyn references in her catalogue by mentioning Jean Rhys' character, Antoinette Cosway. I wanted to extend this schizophrenic schism to Joscelyn's exhibition and suggest several areas where the splits can be seen in the works.

1. In a formal sense, the juxtaposition of what is on the surface with what is underneath – the schism between the beautifully and carefully rendered braided hair with the brutal torture implements.
2. The schism between the fixed portraits of the white Creole mistress and her children versus the fluid movements of the ghostly house slaves.
3. The division in the female sound works which talk about the various forms of oppression to which all women at this time were subject - .hearing in a ruptured way, the snippets of monologues and dialogues that are connected by circumstance but disconnected by hierarchy.
4. The schism of the topsy-turvy doll – a single doll divided at the centre of her being – a sweet, soft, cloth doll demonstrating an unresolved, split identity.
5. The schism of Pinky – the young white Creole girl who was sent to England to be civilized, who needed to perform as dictated by the colour of her skin, who then came to represent, ironically the epitome of civilization, this White Creole. Joscelyn repatriates this girl by placing her in a Barbadian pastoral landscape, extending the schism even further.
6. The schism of how we see ourselves versus how others see us. The division between how a white Creole artist who sees herself as Barbadian; a native with the right to speak as a cultural producer about things of national significance, but who is often seen by others as an other. (Every one of us seems to have an other!)
7. The schism between an elite academic language versus the experiences to which we refer and which are lived by the average Barbadian. The division between the arenas in which these common experiences are written about and thought about versus the relative inaccessibility of these thoughts and words for the average person.

And finally, I would like to speak about the idea of healing as it relates to wholeness.

In the catalogue, Joscelyn states that the white postcolonial Creole woman “is charged with actively negotiating the re-construction of her own identity...”

I would like to extend this mandate to every member of our society, on both an individual and a collective basis. Healing is about making a choice. Reconstructing, or rebuilding our identity puts us in a position of power. This exhibition provokes us to think about the construction of our future in relation to our past, and some of the questions that we may ask are; how do we move forward, what is our next move? What steps have been taken by our postcolonial government to heal the wounds and move beyond the cycle of guilt and the polarity of superiority/inferiority complexes? How different or similar are we as a society today from the society to which Joscelyn refers in her work?

Nations can make steps towards healing which recognize at the national level that there has been rupture and we need to heal. Some examples of this at the national level are seen by

the USA who created Affirmative Action as a healing mechanism. South Africa had their Truth & Reconciliation effort. Many Caribbean islands have become independent and some have become republics. Free education for all, is another step towards healing. Barbados formed a Committee for National Reconciliation in 1999 which has produced a report with suggestions for ways in which we can heal as a nation and move forward. This exhibition is an individual effort at healing which has been offered as a national gift for others to heal as well.

I wonder if the notion of healing, becoming whole beings who are healthy, happy and successful is a choice that is truly unspeakable.

Are we willing as individuals to heal and to become whole? Do we have a government that can choose to heal the wound and close the gaps?

I would like to close my presentation by recalling an article I read a few years ago when South Africa was undergoing their Truth & Reconciliation exercises. There was a story about a poor black SA woman from one of the townships who was in court at the trial of a white SA policeman who had brutally murdered her husband and only son in the most heinous way. The judge asked her to offer her comments about how this man should pay for what he had done to her family. She stood in the courtroom and she said; firstly, I want to forgive you. Secondly, I want you to come and visit me every month, because you have taken away my entire family and I need someone to spend time with me. And thirdly I want to adopt you as my son, because I have none left. The policeman fainted at the stand.

That woman, on that day, as an individual, demonstrated wholeness. And her leader, Nelson Mandela was a national example to her, as a whole person.

This is the unspeakable truth. To be whole is unspeakable. In a society that is heavily rooted in values which are oriented towards an external saviour, it is a challenging notion for many to think about taking the responsibility to claim a power to save themselves.

To affirm;

I am whole.

I am complete.

I am happy.

I am healthy.

I am the other.

The other is me.

I am.

This is speaking the unspeakable.

Thank you.