

PUBLISHED 02/07/2011 The Nassau Guardian Arts & Culture

GET READY FOR THE 'INVASION'

By Sonia Farmer

Guardian National Correspondent

sonia@nasguard.com

PHOTOS:

Front page:

“Landfall” by Lavar Munroe

Page 3:

“In Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” (Detail) by Lavar Munroe

“LX-4989” — one of Lavar Munroe’s “specimens”

(PHOTOS: Courtesy of Lavar Munroe)

Lavar Munroe considers his work as an artist to be “an examination of the human experience.” In his upcoming exhibition, “Invasion”, which opens at Popop Studios this Wednesday, July 6th, Munroe takes on this abstract and unfathomable aim and channels it into a breathtaking body of work that functions on several levels of history and reality.

Initially, Munroe started thinking about “Invasion” in contemporary terms. He noticed what are called “invasive species” were really just unfortunate byproducts of human development — that they were, in effect, the ones suffering from human invasion. Soon, he began to shift his focus onto the many ways human societies invaded and changed each other throughout history.

“Again it’s the same kind of principle,” Munroe explains. “Beings who are thought of as having less intelligence are disregarded at the hands of the invader. Either the beings that are there first have to change their ways of living to accommodate these superiors or else be killed or punished. That’s where the whole notion of invasion began.”

The most obvious point to start, and which viewers will respond to first, was the historical invasion of the indigenous Lucayans on The Bahama islands by Christopher Columbus. Indeed, the show functions as a dismantling of the over 500-year-old myth fed to schoolchildren and a shot to our celebration of the beginnings of this historical massacre during Discovery or Columbus Day.

His images come at us in pieces, symbols appearing through the fog of washed out drizzles and drips of color in deceptively warm and “romantic” pinks — indeed, much of what we learned about this time in history came to us in pieces, in vague romanticisms, and soon from this rosy childhood depiction of Europeans helping the Lucayans to become “educated” and “trading fairly” with them comes forward — perhaps through a gradual melting away — the more discernable horrors of slavery, social corruption and displacement. In his surreal pieces, the Lucayan people are paired with symbols of captivity (chains and locks worn as necklaces, blindfolds) and also with symbols of animals hunted for game (deer, boars), and while a despair is evident in this subject matter, so too is a defiance and the spirit of resilience.

Munroe could have just let the show become a testament to these people as many Bahamian artists before him have depicted the injustices of the Lucayans and Arawaks in various paintings, but in a fascinating twist he introduces a new level of invasion with his dozen or so “specimen” pieces. Those who may have read Jared Diamond’s book “Guns, Germs and Steel” know how invaded societies are disenfranchised, and surprisingly the most devastating consequence lies not in the violence of weaponry and imagined superiority but the surprising effect of foreign germs into the population. Here, Munroe creates abstract monsters with strange forms and even stranger names — the sinisterness of such forms coming from its unrecognizable mash of barely discernable species found in the animal kingdom. The result is a bizarre array of an imagined frontier that stands in for a reality that human societies again and again underestimate — in the face of disease, we are all disarmed.

Such a twist shows Munroe’s show operates not only across history but also across language, culture, place and subject.

In fact, though the show levels strong criticisms at Columbus, he hardly appears in the show — instead, the subjects are the people history has overlooked, giving them voice, Munroe believes.

“Human experience can tend to be one-sided,” Munroe says. “A lot of injustices tend to be overlooked or simply ignored. If you’re not of a certain class or race in many instances your story cannot be told. So I found it important to use that as a catapult to tell the truth, be as real as I could in how it relates to human existence.”

Yet the show operates in a contemporary landscape as well. It’s no mistake that “Invasion” opens near the anniversary of our Bahamian Independence, just as it is no mistake the Lucayans depicted in his work appear less as historical anthropological depictions and more as everyday Bahamians, bringing the historical dialogue through the invasion of African populations to the current day invasion of Bahamian culture by British signifiers, making the country a leftover assortment of a history of violent invasions.

In essence, what Munroe is pointing out here too is how invasions are ongoing — they put into motion histories and subjects changed forever by violence. His portraits of Lucayans in European bonnets and ruffs, reminiscent of traditional European portraits of royalty, point out that beyond people-to-people invasions,

culture-to-culture and language-to-languages invasions occur as well, and last beyond any corporal matter.

In what is arguably the centerpiece of the collection — a six-paneled strip titled “In Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” — the strange landscape of the show comes together. Columbus sits at the center of Lucayans alternatively helping him along and facing him in defiance (Do we honor this man with a holiday? Do we fight this perspective?). Boats frame the scene at either end — the elaborate figureheads of his ships at one, and at the other, canoes. Yet as soon as we decide this is firmly rooted in history, we find beach balls rolling along next to the canoes, a disinterested Lucayan focusing on relieving himself nearby, and we are brought instead to the contemporary day, for nothing in the stark white background places us in a moment of under- or over-development, not even in on a beach.

Are the Lucayans Bahamians? Is this a criticism of tourism — are we making the same historical mistakes, allowing our land to be invaded used and abused and left by a constant rotation of visiting people? And if so, is this the origin of our learned violence that continues today in ripple effect? Such is the ripe potential for debate in Munroe’s body of work, which he hopes viewers will cultivate as they pick apart the layers of symbols and time he so meticulously tied into each piece.

“I think it is very important for not only myself but any visual person to bring issues like that to the forefront. What I want to do with my work is present it in a way where it would make the viewer think or spark some conversation about what’s being said, the potentials of change, all of that,” he explains. “I hope it would make people think outside of the box, spark some serious discussion. I would like to change people’s perception of the whole thing.”

Munroe is aware his version of history operates from his own perspective — and viewers should be aware too that the land they are entering is neither here nor there, a landscape that pulls in us with the familiar and alienates us with the unfamiliar, that includes us historically and doesn’t include us historically; a body of work that is, in effect, like his specimens, a close examination of our ugly Frankenstein-ness as a society built on the backs of historical half-truths, a society that, in the end, is only as destructive as it has learned.