

INVASION - A Deconstruction Of Christopher Columbus In The Work Of Lavar Munroe
by Ja A. Jahannes

Artist Lavar Munroe deconstructs the 500 year old myth glorifying Christopher Columbus in the Bahamas in his exhibit **INVASION**, demonstrating that art can transcend historical, cultural, anthropological, and psycho-social analyses.

Fusing aspects of modernism, and motifs indigenous to the Bahamas, Munroe presents in **INVASION** an inventive creative visual vocabulary, original style and symbolism to create a narrative in contrast to the traditional misrepresentations. Using his own visual vocabulary, he depicts the inhumanity of Columbus' incursion into the islands, expands the viewers' consciousness by unraveling a controversial, sacrosanct theme with a ruggedly independent mind. He dispels the glorification of Columbus, and shows his horrific exploitation of enslaved natives of the Bahamas as well as Africans imported to the islands.

In **INVASION**, Munroe creates images of peoples who inhabited the Bahamas when Columbus and his sailors arrived, as well as scenes from the period of the colonization using interconnected, interrelated iconographies. He makes us see what we have not seen by declarative visual power.

Joining the list of artists who have successfully engaged in examining human exploitation through their art, Munroe opens an ever broadening oeuvre for himself. He follows the legacy of Harlem Renaissance artists Aaron Douglas and Romare Bearden in expanding the view of disenfranchised people and showing a world heretofore overlooked or marginalized. He continues the legacy of a line of artists like Diego Rivera who doggedly exposed the exploitation of Mexicans. He follows the boldness of deconstruction by contemporary artist Kara Walker whose work shows the horrific sexual degradation of enslaved Africans in the United States. He advances in the tradition of fellow Bahamian artist Maxwell Taylor, whose **Immigration** series presented a cogent commentary on the migration of African Americans. There is the power of Picasso's illumination of the horrors of war in *Guernica* in Munroe's work.

Munroe takes real life issues that impact him in an emotive way and then translates them into visual statements. He had expressed the devastation caused by the Haitian earthquake to the people and the ecology in his exhibition **Yes We Can**, and with the dramatic tragedy in George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess* in his exhibition **Life after Life**. In **INVASION**, Munroe takes on the genocide of a forgotten people because of Christopher Columbus' incursion into the Caribbean in the 1490s. To make the visions of the world of that time that we cannot fully know, Munroe uses objects and images alchemized in the laboratory of his mind. Through him, we see the spirits of the people and the pathos of the era in which Columbus brought death. Some artists make us see the familiar through their work and we are fulfilled. Other artists make us see what we have never seen and we appreciate these artists for the new realization. Munroe makes us see what we could not have imagined, and become grateful to him for the gift of creative wonderment.

In **INVASION**, Munroe uses created faces to explore the rhymes and rhythms of the lives of the native people of the Bahamas. There is humanity in the eyes of the children and adults. We wonder about the people's relationships with Nature, seeing the ways they display themselves in their dress, adornments, and body markings. What are their stories before Columbus and what are their stories during his sojourn among them, we ask. We engage Columbus' adventure, his voyages and his habitation in the Bahamas. We see how human nature is realized in Columbus' actions and interactions. The larger question posed in **INVASION** is "What is civilized and what is savage?" Munroe deftly, elegantly and masterfully lays open the answer to this question by contrasting the evils perpetrated by Columbus and his men and the welcoming of the people of the Bahamas.

The work, "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," is, perhaps, the crown jewel of this exhibition. It's a symphonic work with five distinctive movements. It has elements which appear in some of the other works in **INVASION**, such as innocence, upheaval, turmoil, disquiet, discord, and a cacophony of identifiable disturbances. In "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," Columbus, the harbinger of horror, is the embodiment of the Devil. Subjugated native figures represent overturned humanity. Munroe also uses images that seem incongruous or out of time to illustrate the violent and destructive nature of uninvited change. The beach balls represent a now lost native ball game the inhabitants of the Bahamas once played. The urinating man may be a commentary on the historic period as well as a reaction to the intrusion as he expels impure contaminating waste. The elements of the work provoke thought, invite questions, challenge ideas, and incite a commitment to thinking new thoughts.

INVASION should make viewers rethink the idolizing of Christopher Columbus through holidays and places named in his honor, and even the demarcation of historic time periods based on his arrival in the Western Hemisphere. This is an important work, not only as art, but because it lays bare a period in human history in which imperialistic exploitation of people was commonplace under the pretext of serving God. The world must be constantly vigilant so the same machinations of exploitation and annihilation do not continue to occur. All people must ward off any future threats of genocide.

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