

...conversations with Eugene Palmer...

I MET WITH EUGENE PALMER in his studio on a disgustingly wet rainy afternoon. One of those occasions when you curse yourself for living in this country yet simultaneously take pride in your own sense of fortitude. Feeling damp, but none-the-less determined, we settled down to discuss his life and his painting; in that order. As children of the same immigrant 'fall-out', it seemed important to first explore the inevitable points of commonality within our childhood experiences and to establish links with his present-day painting via the past.

History, collective and personal, are essential to an understanding of Eugene's work, and the act of painting, (despite doing it well), is almost secondary. Perhaps for this reason it did not bother either of us then, that his many canvases were turned into the wall and although the hidden faces were often referred to, their dates and titles were not allowed to intrude on our narrative. After all, (as Eugene was to remind me later, holding his thumb and forefinger close together), despite their grand manner and the monumentality of their subject matter, "they're only paintings, they're only that thick."

At this stage the dates we were more interested in were watershed ones, such as the series of years between the fifties and sixties when family members were first separated and then reunited, and the logistics of relocating three generations of a family within five years, into a new culture. Predictably, Eugene's account of his grandparents and parents leaving for England, followed by his own departure from Jamaica, aged ten, was far from unique. Retold, his parents are unwitting heroes and their decision to come to England although pragmatic, was also a great feat; one which required a real leap of the imagination.

To be part of that wave of blacks who participated in the 'second crossing' of the Atlantic, was to be part of a great adventure,¹ one which was not without a sense of trauma and loss; a trauma which suggests an interesting parallel with the forced migratory experiences of slavery. Insufficient has been written about either of these 'crossings', yet Eugene is obviously concerned with what he terms 'recovering' the memory of these journeys and he recalls detail with authority, aware that it is the very collective nature of the experience, which gives the narrative strength.

Together, we attempted to reconstruct the atmosphere of those early days. As Eugene described his feelings while making that significant journey towards the unknown, I too could relate to the fact that he cried throughout the 'plane journey to England. It evoked a memory of my sister who, aged three, cried continuously, and would not take comfort from the woman who said she was her mother, but instead had to be hushed by my older sister. These are painful memories to 'recover'.

¹ For an interesting discussion on the subject of interpreting photographic images of black immigrants who arrived in England during the 1950s and 60s, see Stuart Hall 'Reconstruction Work', *Ten* # Vol 2, No 3, Spring 1992, pp 106-113.

reference to slavery, black immigration, or his own family's experience of dislocation. Nostalgia and memory play an important part in keeping his imagery acute. He refers to such ideas through the use of the term 'recovery' which he sees as:

"... 'remembering to remember', all the dead at the bottom of the ocean. They are all my ancestors and acknowledging that, all that is a part of me. They are not actually all my memories, rather they are part of my collective memory. I need to and want to participate in the collective memory of slavery to fill out the experience of what it is to be black. 'Blackness' can be perceived and defined in very narrow and impoverished terms, but it isn't like that ... This idea of 'remembering to remember', I see for example in the picture of my mother which I call 'fighting fit', since it is not just speaking about her particular life history, but is referring to a much longer history about our being fighting fit."

Scouring picture albums, journals and magazines he searches for appropriate images which might suggest resistance. The recent painting of his mother which he privately refers to as 'fighting fit', epitomises this sentiment. Rendered from a photograph taken in the 1960s, she appears well dressed, defiant and determined to take on the rigours of her new life in England. Interestingly the females in Eugene's paintings can be at once, tender, feminine or Amazon-like and bear none of the sulky truculence of his males, and although this distinction may be historically accurate, his acknowledgement of it is clearly a mark of his respect for black women folk.

It is because of this awe for black women, that Eugene rarely problematises them in the same way as he might interrogate his use of European women, children and black men. In paintings of the latter he seems to be able to explore their vulnerability by employing methods of juxtaposition, distortion and dissection within the composition. His reading of childhood is as difficult as other 'pasts'; his children are often isolated and vexed, or awkwardly thrown up against painterly white flesh or a thunderous landscape, in a manner which is devious and disturbing.

Such methods of subversion rest easily with Eugene's personality. He is no radical black propaganda painter, rather, he is in the business of undermining, quietly questioning and gently eroding interpretations of the past previously forgotten or taken for granted. Hence it is important for him to be able to master his tool of deception, the art of painting.

"Painting for me is like exploration or little journeys, finding out what it feels like to create sensation. I think it's also a process of demystification. Sometimes I go to the National Gallery, and now, I'm more excited by the works because in some ways I feel more able to decipher what I'm seeing ... I'm really interested

subject, black-body/white-body, are all explored and clarified through Eugene's painting. Each vie for control, and whereas in the 1980s his work achieved an uneasy balance of black and white images juxtaposed against one another, more recently Eugene appears to be deliberately subverting his paintings in favour of his blackness. Blacks are not used in his paintings as mere props or foils to the white image, rather they are the subject of his painting; larger than life-size heroes.

"I have never seen myself as being in a position to treat the black image as a tool in painting ... as in Manet's 'Olympia' for example. If anything I want my paintings to bring to mind those other paintings and to give to those black figures an identity, because their identity is my identity. I don't have an inferiority complex and if anything this kind of unquenchable anger is not to do with jealousy but to do with an injustice that is also my story ... I too am the subject of brutalisation."

Hence Eugene will not paint what he does not know or feel and each new painting reveals another aspect of his coming to terms with, and as a result, conquering his own 'colonial schizophrenia'.

The anger he refers to is not something immediately apparent in his work, but smoulders within the sitters' composure, concealed beneath an innate sense of dignity which all of his portraits of blacks exude. Fanon has discussed the inevitable consequences of colonialism in terms of personality disorder.² In many ways Eugene's painting is a visual rendition of the discomfort of blacks as they interact with Western culture. This unease is particularly poignant in his depictions of the male image, always in a slightly ill-fitting suit, at pains to identify with urbanity, yet looking decidedly awkward against the backdrop of an impressionistically painted European landscape. As in the photographs of Ingrid Pollard, Eugene strives to articulate the sense of alienation and displacement blacks feel when confronted with the countryside.³ He is also at pains to claim and convey the pain of the past through the painted image. The late Aubrey Williams, Caribbean painter and writer, has described this same containment of anger in terms which verbally approximate Eugene's visual expressions.

*"I'm talking about the thing that I have in my work as well, the fire in the belly; this anxiety ... It's the smell of old blood. I think so. It's the smell of the presence of the conquistadores. It's the smell of a loss, and a replacement of less than what was destroyed. It's a quality coming out of forced change, a displacement of identity. Violation and yet new growth asserting itself, but never profoundly, never being able to overcome what it's up against."*⁴

Like Williams, Eugene has no desire to forget the past, whether with

² Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London) 1986.

³ For examples of Ingrid Pollard's photography see 'Pastoral Interlude' *Ten 8*, Vol 2, No 3, Spring 1992, pp 102-3.

⁴ Anne Walmsley *Guyana Dreaming* (New South Wales) 1990, p 46.

in the idea that one puts all this effort into painting, you know, your head, your heart ... yet by contrast, I also like the idea that there is so much nothing to it, it's only painting ... so useless. So there is this paradox that it can be something and nothing. Painting is just so utterly passive while at the same time it can be magnificent, and it's that weirdness about it that I really do like ... it's like a little puzzle. It's like passive aggression, being assertive, without shouting."

More recently Eugene has begun exploring the 'dark' in his paintings, experimenting with the concept of 'darkness' as presence rather than absence. His is a diligent process of recovery inverting these once 'negative values' and treating them as positive. The impressionist painter Manet attempted a similar exercise when painting the black servant in his composition 'Olympia'.⁵ Yet, despite Manet's own subversive intentions, the very nature of the juxtaposition forced the maid into the background and suggested a reading of her presence which was far from positive or flattering.⁶

Eugene's execution of this exercise is far more satisfying, perhaps because his exploration of this newer palette is as much to do with a deeper and more personal commitment to colour as it is to do with technical proficiency. He wallows in browns, purples and degrees of blackness, without becoming murky or morbid. He wades into the muddy palette and retrieves streaks of orange, emerald and violet.

That afternoon, the few canvases which remained open to inspection in Eugene's studio, resonated a maturity and richness echoed in the artist's own narrative. One sensed that Eugene's vision had been sharpened rather than dulled as a result of the experience of living in this country and already he had begun to see his way 'home'.

Presently, Eugene's work is a celebration, not only of paint, but also the self, and despite a lurking 'duppy shadow' in his compositions, he demonstrates eloquently that he is not afraid of the dark.⁷

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⁵ Edouard Manet *Olympia* 1863, Paris, Musée D'Orsay.

⁶ For a reading of Manet's *Olympia* and the maid's presence as 'sexualising' see Sander Gilman, 'Black Bodies White Bodies' Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, *Medicine and Literature' Critical Inquiry* (Chicago, Illinois) Autumn 1985, pp 204-242.

⁷ 'Duppy' is a Jamaican synonym for ghost or spirit. It is a term which Eugene has used when describing a painting he informally titles 'Duppy Shadow'.