Convergence: Image and Dialogue

Conversations

with Alexander 'Skunder' Boghossian

Valerie Cassel

When asked to interview Alexander 'Skunder' Boghossian, I felt both elated and dismayed. How could one person penetrate such complexity and emerge with a single story?

In our meetings I decided to let Skunder speak, to shape our conversations and construct the image. As in his paintings, there are many layers and textures that have been pasted and sewn together to create the landscape. It is a landscape which is continuously evolving. Skunder is a contemporary African artist living in many dimensions — physical, mental, and spiritual. His dialogue suggests that there are, in essence, many portraits of a life that continues to weave its totality. The following is an edited text of our conversation.

FROM ETHIOPIA TO EUROPE

I was tutored in art. Because there were no art schools in Ethiopia in my time, I took special courses in painting from Jacques Goudket, a Canadian philosopher and painter who later became a filmmaker in Canada and sits on the National Canadian Film Board. Before I went to study in Europe I had an exhibition in Ethiopia, and then I won the second national prize in painting. The prize was a fellowship to study in London.

I enrolled at St. Martin's School in London in 1955. I also studied at the Slade School of Fine Arts and at Central School, but they were all too academic. I needed a school that would teach me the fundamentals, but also allow me to expand and develop. It was the advice of various artists and professors that I should go to Paris where I could find my own age group and do research. At the time all that I wanted to know was the craft.

In Paris I attended the Ecole Nationale Superiore des Beaux Arts. I enrolled in mural painting and Professor Gardin was my advisor and tutor. There were other professors also who tutored me, but I soon found out that life outside school was a much more interesting place to learn. I met Brazilian guys who looked as
black as me. I thought they were Africans from some place like Kenya because of their curly hair. I had no concept of any black people other than the Nigerians and Ghanaians in London.

I was in Paris when the Negritude Movement was at its peak during the mid-1950s; and its journal Presence Africaine had been striving in the 1940s to get a publishing house. That was where I used to hang out. My French started to improve, and I got to meet big guys like Aimé Césaire and Leopold Senghor. In 1959, I was among three artists chosen to participate in the Second Congress of Negro Artists and Writers held in Rome. The First Congress was held at the Sorbonne in 1940-something. I was very young. I didn't know what was really happening, its significance. All I knew was that I was exhibiting in Rome, with Sekoto from South Africa, an elder; Tiberio from Brazil, a devout socialist; and Ibrahim Papa-Taal from Senegal, who was a student at L’Ecole des Beaux Arts.

While in Paris, I entered for an annual exhibition for young artists. At the time, Paris was a cultural centre, a place where cultures intersected. It was a part of one's normal growth to go there to get caught in these currents, and they would in turn bring you to other currents, and so on. One could make out a definition for oneself, the world, and the universe right there in Paris. You had the brightest minds from Africa and the diaspora at the time. There they would come together and talk for the first time about their various experiences. It was a vehicle for the Negritude Movement. And there were allies of the movement who were lower
in profile than the likes of Sartre. One person who really taught me everything about African dynamism, the concept of the vital force and Dogon cosmic religion, was Madelaine Rousseux. She was an elderly lady and very much a revolutionary. She lived behind Notre Dame in the Latin Quarter. She was a collector of classical African art and had the best of everything. Merton Simpson introduced me to her.

Merton is one of the most fantastic human beings that I know. He was a genius. He would sit in with big boppers like Sunny Stitt, who was his best friend, and swing all night long. He was a painter, a connoisseur of classical African art, and an anthropologist. He was a renaissance man. He now owns a small gallery in New York.

He helped a lot of people throughout the world to form their collections of African art. He himself has some fabulous pieces. I was introduced to Merton by the Harmon Foundation, and it was through him that I met all the leading

The Ceremony 1989, acrylic on paper
African American artists of the day. I met artists like Jacob Lawrence, those in the Spiral Group at Cinque Gallery, along with many more who lived in New York. They were like big brothers. They were my American mentors.

AN ARTIST IN NEW YORK

I came to New York in 1961. I witnessed the beginning of the riots in Harlem as I was coming from 125th Street. There were a lot of Ethiopian students studying at Columbia University. They would meet at the West End Bar. That was July, 1961.

The Harmon Foundation had corresponded with me in Paris. They were mounting an exhibition of Contemporary African Art which would be the first of its kind in the United States. It was done in collaboration with the Phelp Stokes Fund. They already had a tremendous amount of work from African and African American artists. William H. Johnson’s work was there. Everybody’s work was there. They found out that I was coming from Paris and asked me for my work.

I went to New York on a chartered flight from L’Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. In those days, a lot of American students, professors and researchers would go to the Sorbonne to study. The plane would return empty from Paris to America. It was a cheap flight, only $150 for the return trip for one month. Even then, it was a lot of money for me. So, I borrowed five dollars, ten dollars here and there, and sold a few pieces. I sold the best stuff that I had for very little, nothing almost. I needed to be on that plane to New York. It would begin another chapter in my life.

I will always cherish the very thorough training in drawing, which I had in London. It gave one a sense of structure, a lesson in how to put one’s feelings together, how to deal from your heart without struggling with proportions.

In 1958, I was doing a series of drawings that I began after seeing an exhibition of murals from India. They even held semblances of Ethiopia for me — volupitous shapes, bodies, translucent faces. Those images became my Venuses. They were the Venuses of Africa and I painted them in that manner. They were like angels for me. I was trying to find some form of art that related to that of Ethiopia’s churches, the many murals in Ethiopia and images from the Guez.

FEAR OF THE WORLD

A writer friend once said that I was afraid of the word. It is true. I speak with my canvas.

I have a notebook. Of all the things written, there are only two or three sentences that are bottom line thoughts; prophetic, or rather, pathetic thoughts. The poet said to me, Skunder, when you speak sometimes, laugh on it, write it down, and think on it. He was a New York poet and I would make him laugh at the way I would express emotions, the way I would invent words to describe things. It was descriptive and Quincy [African American poet and critic Quincy Troupe] liked that. He use to say, “damn”, stop in the middle of the street, take out his book, and write.

Idioms. When they are expressed by the poet, the bottom line is a very close description of a moment. Poets can place emphasis on a shape. They can emphasize a colour or anything to make the moment clear. They think of words as metaphors. Emphasis and intonation can change the whole meaning of the word. Intonation happens in painting, too. For example, I took the grammar I
learned from London and applied it to the Ethiopian form with its mystery. I was trying to understand my heritage through other mechanisms.

**THE ARTIST AND POTATOES**

That was when I found the potatoes. They had germinated with each other in the dark. I had forgotten that if you leave them in the dark a for a long time they will continue to live. It was reality, a scientific departure that was linked to this metaphysical world that Madame Rousseaux was constantly telling me about. It was an example of the African belief in the vital force, the cosmic force. There it all made sense for me, right there in front of the potatoes.

I related to them as natural things coming from the earth and being put away some place from the sun for millions of years. They were bound to grow and change. That was the synthesis that I found for my personal thesis in Paris. But, at that point, I had contained the. I had contained everything, I had contained Africa and the diaspora Nigeria, Brazil, the Islands, Aimé Césaire and Senghor.

I was heavily influenced by Césaire. His imagery, the graphicness of it, was puncturing. I was a surrealist and he formed for me a stronger vision. He introduced me to more surrealism in poetry. He made me read Édouard and Appollinaire. Cubism became clearer to me in its departure of thought, its ideas and mannerisms. I could feel it, but I did not know how to do it. I did not know how to translate the idea. I had wrestled with this in Ethiopia, with Goudbet.

**ST GEORGE AND THE DRAGON**

I was fifteen when Goudbet began introducing me to other types of painting. He use to show me books from various art movements — the Impressionists, the Post-Impressionists and the Germans. He had Skinner’s book of 20th century art. At the time, that book was like the Bible. He familiarized me with all that was there. That was the universe and if I was to become a painter I had to understand it. In other words, I had to feel the impulse. I had to have an identification with whatever was on that page. He was trying to liberate me, introduce me to new things. He asked me to do *St. George and The Dragon*, a popular Ethiopian theme, but he did not want me to paint the dragon as a dragon, the horse as a horse, or St. George as St. George. I said what do you mean, not paint St. George or the horse?

He was teaching intuitiveness, that anything goes provided you think of a horse in the back of your head. So I did a circling of things. I captured how the dragon was always depicted knotted in our manuscripts. The concept was to use cultural aesthetics as a common language for the viewer to understand.

He had given me a lot of paper. He wanted me to use as much as I could. The abundance released me. This was my freedom to experiment for the first time and to do so without having a subject, but an idea. He was not using the word ‘abstract’, but he was talking about feelings and showing me abstract paintings. It was a new way of doing things. It was change.

In Paris I was learning again. Artists cannot grow if they limit themselves. That was what Goudbet was trying to teach me. I understand it now, because this is what I teach. If you are young and do not liberate yourself from certain structured values, then you will always find it difficult to come to conclusions for your own problems. You must get rid of the fear of self expression. Many
artists are afraid, they feel something, but suppress it because they think that someone will not think it cool. They fear that their family or their teacher will not like it. But do you like it? That is the question that artists should ask themselves. And if so, then they have to do it, even if that requires a certain audacity. One thing that has always stuck in my mind is the French saying; Deux choses, l'un, l'autre c'est le soleil — of two things, one; the other is the sun. What it means is, it does not matter what it is you want, because often you do not have a choice. In the sentence, l'un means one. However, if you heard the phrase spoken, you could mistake l'un for lune, moon. In other words, moon is implied, but if you really investigated, looked closer, you would find that the choice did not exist.
It is so vast, the word, its imagery, and its possibilities, you can arrive at new philosophies. We look for purposes and create meanings for words on other levels. These are the things that the artist automatically gravitates to. He wants to get close to feeling a particular moment, and he goes through many processes to arrest the moment for a week, a year, or for eternity. His consciousness moves to a higher level at that moment. It is through this consciousness that an artist arrives at things. The moment manifests from him, from his own experience.

**POETRY, AND ALL THAT JAZZ**

I was initially influenced by literature which helped me to form imagery. The way the night was described in a poem became a night in a painting. There was also music, but it did not have the influence of literature on my work.

I was exposed to jazz for the first time in Ethiopia by an American jazz programme which was relayed from Morocco. I was about seven or eight years old when I first heard Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith, and Charlie Parker.

To tell you honestly, it never came to my mind to paint music or to paint anything that I could not immediately grasp. Music is always flowing around you. You are part of it, but to paint it you must know that feeling that musicians are developing. I have never caught that moment. To me, it is a moment for the musician. When you see a musician composing and you are in the same room, you have no idea what he is writing because the song is in his head. There is something inside him which comes out in the music. It is another force. So, I just let myself be enveloped by it. It is a companion. Silence, too, is a companion.

*Harvest Scrolls 1983, acrylic on canvas*
I have heard musicians talk about measures, but I have never intentionally
adopted that methodology of composing a painting. I do however realise that
there are many parallels. Tones can be arranged into patterns. It is like how the
traditional carver uses rhythm to carve. You can look at a carved piece and hear
the sound. When the artisan carves, you can hear the work coming out. He has
to know where to hit the wood to get the shape.

If you understand this way of creating, then you can see how very rhythmic
a painting can be. It may not have been done in measures, but you can measure
it. Sometimes it has many layers, but rhythm is its foundation. Music and painting
are parallel artistic expressions. I don't know which came first, the song or the
visual image. I call them parallels, but for me, they are really investigations.

Music creates a mood, a state of mind. My state of mind can be altered by the
kind of music that surrounds me. If it is compelling, I may not paint the music,
but I am taken by its ability to facilitate my work. I use it as a vehicle to paint,
although I have never tried to paint it. It is assumed in the painting, provided
that I have allowed myself to be enveloped by it.

**PROCESS AND THE PRODUCT**

Some paintings are ideas, others are experiences or imaged landscapes from actual
experiences. Some paintings are recurring images and themes. Paintings also
project social occurrences and political philosophies. They are all parts of the life
I have lived, am living, or am surrounded by. While I am working, my state of
mind either accepts or rejects them for its own comfort. Once settled in that
comfort, it continues to rediscover, invent, or re-invent those experiences.
Eventually, because things are guttered in life's vocabulary, the artist is not
constantly conscious that he is recycling his own ideas and experiences. Just like
when you recycle a piece of paper, once you have the pulp, you can then create
any kind of paper. But, in the process of creating new paper, you have to get
the press, remove excess water, reshape the pulp, and make it thinner. In the
end, it may not be recognisable to you, but it is still the same piece of paper.
The process of recycling an idea is a long and varied process, but even if an idea
is recycled, it has to be lived in a different time and place.

I deal with human preoccupations. Human concerns come into my work,
voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or unconsciously. It has at one time been
extreme, but it is necessary in order to re-link or relate to it again. This is very
important. I've heard that some artists do not want to think about process. For
them, the value is in the finished product. For me, the finished product is not
as important as the process. Where I want to go with an idea is actually more fun
for me because the finished product, most of the time, I am not happy with. What
makes me want to create is the changing process or strategy. I try to get involved
with the inner mechanisms without altering the feelings, the primordial feelings.

Primordial feelings are those feelings that make me want to paint. I get up in
the morning and I want to paint. Before I go to bed, I am either painting or am
tired from painting. Even when I am relaxing, watching television or listening
to the radio, I am doing a third thing that is more important. People walk in and
wonder how can I watch the TV and listen to the radio simultaneously. It is
because I am doing a third thing, I am concentrating on painting. I get used to
the noise. It does not bother me. It makes me focus internally. I move in and
out of it, but my mind is always still. It is like being in a trance where thinking
is not disturbed. Noise, also, is a companion.
**A SUITABLE GIRL**

My first visit to the States was in 1961. I returned to America in 1964 to get married. My wife was from Tuskegee, Alabama. Although she studied drama at Spelman, she was studying cinematography at L'EIDERC, the national film institute in Paris. We met in Paris, and I said to myself, this is mine. That was the idea we had in those days. Anything that we thought was ours, we immediately had to have it.

She was one of those rare Black students you saw in Paris. She was doing research on Black women in the Civil Rights Movement and Black writers in Paris. She was constantly thinking about the revolution and what was going to take place, what had already begun.

So, I met her in Tuskegee. I left the work that I had brought with me from Paris with the Harmon Foundation in New York. I asked Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Brady if they would consider purchasing them. I, eventually, borrowed money from them, about $500.00. I was broke. All I had was a wife and my work. So I took the loan and repaid it from their sales of my work. One year later in 1965, my wife became pregnant. We decided to go to Ethiopia and have the baby there.

*We lived in Ethiopia for a while, but then she wanted to go home.* The revolution was taking place and she definitely wanted to be a part of it. But at the time I could not leave. So, she went back alone. She got involved with the Nation of Islam.

The movie *Malcolm X* (Spike Lee, 1992) does not show the indoctrination that was part of the Nation of Islam. I know about that indoctrination. I lived and suffered from it. I lost my family and Maureen to it. I was in Ethiopia. I did not know what was going on and when I found out I cursed her father. I felt it was wrong that he would let her go to Atlanta, to join in that movement. In Ethiopia we had traditional structures, but this was a different culture. She was an adult, she was free to make those decisions. Her parents did not want to get involved.

She was aware of the times. The Muslim philosophy dispelled a lot of the ingrained myths that she had lived with. She divorced me because of her change in religion. I felt as if she had deserted me. She was baptized in Ethiopia. She had my child, how could all of this be dispelled by a philosophy? My father-in-law would tell me not to worry, time was on my side. But, at that moment time was nothing to me. It had nothing to do with what I was seeing and hearing. I can see now that he had great strength and clairvoyance. She is no longer a Muslim, nor is her husband who was a minister in those days.

It was a turning point for me and I never went back. It was a heartfelt humiliation. I could not go home and listen to, "Oh, we hear that your wife is Muslim". In Ethiopia, there was only the Orthodox Christian religion. We were at war because of our religion. It was ironical that the Muslims conquered Christianity in the battle over my marriage. It took me a long time to realise that it was no one’s fault. It was the times. Islam was only an idea, a counter-idea that held things together at that time. However, in the end, people got exploited.

I got a job in Atlanta at the Center for Black Art. A.B. and Karen Spellman introduced me to Atlanta institutions. In those days, Atlanta was the Paris of African and African American culture. I had, again, found myself in the centre, but it was a different energy. Atlanta positively affected my state of mind. It gave a sense to my life and I held on to it, because emotionally, I was torn apart. I had just undergone one of the most painful experiences of my life. I would get drunk. The following day I would have a hangover and the pain would still be there. I had to get it out of my system and had it not been for my mother and father-in-law, I would not be here. They consoled and encouraged me. Whenever
I have had to endure something, it has always been for my own growth. I had to learn to survive, to continue.

**IN ATLANTA, BLACK WAS BEAUTIFUL**

Nothing in my life has been inconsistently woven. I realised that I had not left the thing that I started in Paris and continued in Ethiopia. It was an effort to do something for the youth.

In Atlanta Black was Beautiful, and they accepted me, which was a very heavy thing. In Europe, I was accepted because of my intellectual capacity. In Atlanta, I was accepted as a brother from Ethiopia. They would say, "that guy’s from Ethiopia. He is a real brother". It would come later that I was a painter and then they would say, "Oh, you are a painter, I want to see your work". They thought that since I had Ethiopian eyes, they saw differently from Georgian eyes, or Alabama eyes, or Mississippi eyes. It was good for me, it gave me a sense of something, of direction and acceptance.

All of these experiences had come at a very transitional period for me. It allowed for a continuation of my own efforts in finding my heritage. I was in another part of the world among African people who were experiencing self-discovery.
It gave me an understanding of my people here. I became closer to the ways of life, the extension of family and the warmth of the community. I became comfortable in Atlanta. I saw that those whom I was around were again painters and writers. Some were very young and some older than I. I saw that the elders were encouraging the younger ones to start forging a life and a destiny of their own. That was one of the things about the Center that I enjoyed the most. It was a family. Most of the professors were artists and musicians and I found myself there among them. I got to meet a lot of people. Through the Center I also got a chance to travel.

At one point I was in Nebraska in the middle of the winter. I had never seen snow in my life, not like that. It was knee deep. I went to Creighton University, a prestigious Catholic University. The African American students invited me there as a resident artist. I was to come for a week, mount an exhibition of my works, talk with them, live amongst them. I stayed in a guest room between two dormitories. One door opened to the corridor of the girls’ dormitory and the other to the boys’. It was a small group, 100 black students among 10,000 white students. It was a cold place. I painted that place a long time after I went to Washington. Six or seven years after that visit, I started painting blocks of white. That experience kept coming back to me. I remembered pushing on the outside door of this guest room. The snow had piled up against it. The students saw me trying to get out and came with their shovels. I also remembered this guy with a shovel.
He was walking around carving images or so I thought. As it turned out he was looking for his car.

So, those were images that I had never in my life seen. Things like that are very important for a painter or any creative person. You constantly see things that you take for granted, but in your subconscious there is something that makes you remember the first time that you saw it. It happens because those moments that have touched the senses are forever registered in your mind. Those moments are registered well. You keep thinking about them and when you sleep it is deposited in the back of your memory. This is how I always learned. What you see remains and what you imagine, well that is an altogether different thing. When I am painting, I see the image in my head. It is all in my head and I slowly recreate the image. Sometimes it is from a real experience and sometimes, it is all imagination.

**THE CHICAGO CULTURAL REVOLUTION**

After three years of working in Atlanta, I got a letter from Jeff Donaldson, who was Chairman of the Department of Art at Howard University. I had met him in Chicago during a Black arts conference. It was at that time that I met a lot of the Chicago artists.

The conference was in the late ’60s, maybe early ’70s. Some of the leaders of the Black Arts Movement were there. Many of the Chicago artists later founded AFROCOBRA. The conference was extensive. It was based upon Black pride and a claiming of one’s cultural legacy. It was the flip side of the political revolution. It was the cultural revolution, a movement of cultural nationalism. They were talking about technique, but they were also talking about a common philosophy. It was the first time that I had attended a full-scale conference. There were lots of young people. They had the same energy as those older people in Rome, their thoughts were the same — cultural identity and pride. But, in Chicago, the youth had the reins in their own hands. It was different from the Congress in Rome, and it was different than the African American art movements before it.

The Spiral Group primarily reached those artists living in New York. The movement in Chicago involved artists from everywhere. It was more of a popular movement. Spiral was a much smaller, more elite group of artists. Both groups, however, were founded on philosophies, a certain sameness in ideas, thoughts, and work. The Spiral artists all agreed that they would experiment in black and white. Although they agreed upon this limitation, the departure was always the same. It was all about getting to that common denominator. Each artist brought their own way of thinking, their own perspective or experiences. That was the commonality. Each voice became a component of the chorus. If you really look at the components of Spiral you will find people like Charles Alston, Charles White, Hale Woodruff, Ernest Chichlow, Romare Bearden, and others. I met Charles White and Hale Woodruff during my first trip to the United States in 1961. It seemed that summer they were all there. There were other artists there, many of whom you have probably never heard of. Their way of moving forward was very similar to mine. We did not belong to any type of conscious effort, group, or movement. Yet, we somehow went through an avenue with everyone else. We all evolved together, collectively without any consciousness of being a group. We did, however, have a consciousness of each other. We were artists evolving simultaneously. I don’t know how many of these artists are still around. In 1971, Ed Spriggs compiled a book which acknowledged those artists working at the
time. I was at Howard as an artist-in-residence when the book was published. Spriggs was then director of the Studio Museum in Harlem. A year later, he asked me to do an exhibition at the museum.

**ON MODERN AFRICAN ART**

Modern African art has undergone so many evolutions. New generations are evolving. Each generation brings with it a new perspective, but the issues are always the same. Yet, the art has always been a living thing. Now, I feel it is being eclipsed by airport art.

As for what is happening in contemporary art in Africa, sculpture is happening. I see a lot of Zimbabwean artists coming to the States. In our days, African artists went to Paris because they had no contacts in America. Today there are a lot of cultural contacts for these artists. Our generation was very instrumental in creating this. Howard University has been very important in terms of bringing students from various parts of Africa to the States to study. Yet, African and African American artists have not been embraced by the establishment.

When I got to this country in 1964, I had to start all over again. The African Americans did not know where I was coming from and I did not want to lose time explaining to them where I had been. Then I realised that I could not make it as a painter. There had to be a decision on my part. I could either teach or die in vain trying to prove my worthiness again and again to people. I felt like they were saying, “I don’t believe that you made that A, do it again”. And then they would say, “Oh, you did get an A!” and six months later it was all forgotten. It gave me nothing to move forward with. It gave me no protection. It did not better my life nor did it, in the end, validate me as an artist. I had to either accept this was life as a painter or teach, which I preferred to do.

**ON TEACHING**

I liked teaching because at least I got something back from the students. They essentially paid the other half of my salary. That is why I have stayed in this profession. It was not that I wanted a consistent salary. I could have survived doing residencies. I was meeting students, helping in their development and getting paid an honorarium without being under an institution. I could pay my rent and continue to paint and live. Maybe I could have done that and perhaps, it would not have worked. Maybe I would not have been happy with the residencies and would have said, “Fuck this, I don’t like it”. Perhaps I would have fallen into other things. My destiny could have taken me to more drinking and I would have probably become a drunk or a junkie, like some of my colleagues who are buried now. I don’t know why, but something pulled me toward teaching. Perhaps, my education pushed me to share what I had learned.

There are a zillion grants out there, but it feels good to teach. There are obstacles in being a professor. Institutions want you to do this and that. You have to justify your being there. So, each year I have a show here or there. It justifies for them that I am worthy of being a part of the institution. It is hard to be both a teacher and painter. I have managed to create a situation where I can work while teaching. That is important because in teaching you are also learning. Students see me working and at the end of the year the canvas is transformed. They learn from that process, my process.
THE ARTIST AS ADVOCATE

There is always a part of the artist that is an advocate. All artists indulge in rhetoric. Artists are independent, creative people who have beliefs and thoughts about what is happening around them. For those who lived through the Sixties, we have to remember that the struggle is not over. All artists must believe in something that comes from them. If it is propelled by the social or political climate then that is OK. The artist, himself, must recognize his need to be a part of social and political movements. It is a part of self-fulfilment.

Art as propaganda, however, is questionable. For example, during Mengistu’s revolution in Ethiopia, socialism was painted everywhere. It was all over the walls in whatever space was available. Art was incorporated to magnify the new government. In Uganda, there was the same fervour. One can always draw parallels to Hitler’s Germany. Art to magnify a government without the individual voice of the artist should always be questioned. And then there was the tragic story of an artist who was employed under the court of Haile Salassie. The establishment needed him because of his contribution to Ethiopian art, but he was miserable. He was a very outspoken artist and painfully aware of the gaps between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. It was a dilemma for him. He turned to drinking. In the end, he was terminated.

Art must move beyond being a tool for propaganda. The artist has to be his own observer. He has to give his own personal expression of what he sees and feels. I can never be afraid of things that I have never uttered. I have never looked at my achievements as being significant or worthy, but I have taken part and I have done so with so many other artists of my generation. For my generation, the Negritude Movement and Contemporary African Arts Movement were cultural movements linked to the political and social issues prevalent at the time. We were all coming together to listen to our stories and to find a commonality in ourselves and in our struggles. We found this in Paris. Paris was central to the movement.

AFRICA AND THE LATINO MOVEMENT: MEETING WIFREDO LAM

There are similarities between the development of Latin American artists and that of African artists. However, with the Latin Movement, Africa was central in their discerning of who they were. If you go to Brazil, you will find the ‘tom-tom’ as Aimé Césaire described it. He brought that commonality to poetry and Latin American artists did not deny but embraced it as part of their identity. The masters of the modernist movement for Latin Americans met in Paris. There was Wifredo Lam and Roberto Matta, two men from Latin America who found their commonality in Paris, just as the African artists did. After that, connections began to happen simultaneously throughout the world, based on that commonality.

Santiago Cardenas was another Latin American artist living in Europe. He was a sculptor who made organic totems in lead. I didn’t know what these things were, but when I came to the United States I began to see the landscape he was recreating. Those were images of cacti. It was the landscape of the American Southwest and of Mexico. I could not relate to it at the time, but I understood it as organic. When I went to Miami, I saw Cardenas again in the landscape and texture of the culture. I was able to connect the aesthetic with the man. I never met him, but I know well this landscape that never left him. It was a familiar
aesthetic vocabulary. I saw it often in the art of Africans living in Europe. But what was different for me, was the pointedness of the image. That pointedness also came in Matta's work, and above all in the work of Wifredo Lam. It was the same pointedness that I found in my own culture. It was something that I identified with. It was something in my own landscape which never left me.

I did not know people like Cardenas or Wifredo Lam. I did not know Lam was of African heritage. I discovered his work without the literature. It was hanging in a gallery in London. It was a drawing, but it was very powerful. It stirred something in me which enabled me to see my own landscape. It was a connotation of home, of the nature there. Yet, I had never seen nature rendered in the manner that I had seen in Lam's work. It gave me a clue, helped me to see differently the landscape that was so vivid to me. I remained there in that London gallery for a long time motionless. I was thinking of how he had rendered the image so easily, that was what I was absorbing. I left the gallery without even reading the name of the artist. At the time, his name was not of interest to me. The image was so great that I was only interested in it. It gave me a range of things to think about. It spoke to me. It could communicate. If it was done improperly, then I would not have been able to hear it. One must consider those things as a painter. But, the communication was there and there was an immediate linkage to my inner world. I had to find out how it was conceived. It became a new way of thinking for me. It was the only piece that had strongly affected my way of thinking. I have still kept that impact. It was an internal catalyst which has been constantly stimulated by my travels.

Last summer I went to Mexico. There it was, this large vastness right on the border. It was a completely different flatness. It was distinctly its own, but there was something familiar. Had they blindfolded me and taken me out there in that vastness, I would have found something to relate to. It was similar to a place that I had known near the Red Sea. The vastness sharpened and refreshed those senses that I had experienced before.

There are remembrances in every landscape. You can always recognize familiarities of what has been before. And, when you sit and figure out how far that landscape is, in terms of time and place, it is astounding. When I saw the invitation for Wifredo Lam's exhibition at the Studio Museum, I again thought of that moment years ago in a London gallery. Everyone can appreciate his work, but knowing how he has done it and how it has worked, is the real accomplishment in appreciating his work. As an artist, you can be influenced by his image, draw from it, but you can never create the same image. You find the strength in his manner of doing, that new perspective. It is a force that you are suddenly pulled by. It is a voice that you hear and you are captivated because you have never heard it before. You are happy to see it and you take it with you and work something with it.

Each artist goes through a journey of learning how to articulate what is inside of him. For me, it was this pointedness, for others it could be volume or colour. It could be emotions, feelings, graphic renderings of nature, or organic images. Whatever it is, the artist is struck by it when he sees it. If there was an artist that I would say that I was influenced by, it would be Wifredo Lam, for this very reason. That functioning agony in space has helped to shape me. Latin American artists have brought to me the same functioning agony. It is through them that I have found a closeness to the continent. Latin America became a synthesis of Europe, Africa, and America. What was synthesized was immediately recognizable to us as Africans, more so than Picasso or Giacometti. They were discovering Africa on another level.
ON STYLE

In terms of style, I remain a formal painter. I never became an informal painter because I have never understood it. I never grasped that way of thinking. For me, the work has to relate to self or to that landscape within. You can not create something outside of yourself. There are times when I was unaware of what I was creating, but I got good results. I had to appreciate the process. There is no right or wrong way to come to a conclusion. It becomes at some point a game that we play in our minds.

We can talk about the horizon, but what is beyond the horizon is in our minds. We can create images that are upside down and people will call it vivid imagination, but it has been proved that one can see upside down. The astronauts taught me to appreciate this perspective, this ability to have that sense of surrealism. It is sad that they endured so much training only to finally see the world as I saw it. It is important as an artist to be constantly aware of one’s vision and the phantasm of that vision. Art historians try to put things into categories to understand better. That is where I disagree with historians and people who like to collect information for the sake of classification. For me, all is a continuum. Things have to continue as a question mark. We as artists are a question mark. Five minutes from now, my thoughts at this moment may be questionable even to me. I may disagree with something I said an hour ago. It does not mean, however, that I was not sincere when I said it. How can one control change? I try to remain as close to my feelings as possible. With all the years of happiness and sadness, I would kill myself trying to control all the expressions that I move in and out of constantly. In my work, I have moved from one form to another in an effort to express, and sometimes out of necessity.

THE PERFECT BRIDGE

I am always trying to construct the perfect bridge. And how does one construct the perfect bridge? You can create an explosion either to implode the two sides or expand the central element, but that is cheating. You can look to someone or something to resolve those problems for you, but that conclusion does not come from you. Or, you can just push the problem away, but that creates another problem. The more problems you resolve for yourself, the closer you come to constructing the perfect bridge. I have not constructed that bridge, yet.

It is not a question of succeeding with a particular style or way, but rather the significance of building that bridge. I want to enjoy creating. If you have to say, “I am going to succeed,” then you must question for whom you are succeeding. If you are doing it for yourself then everything becomes easy because you don’t owe success to anyone except to your own integrity. You owe it to your own beliefs. There are times when you think that you are sinking and must save yourself, but there is always someone, something inside of you that pulls you out.

I believe that my spirits are always with me. I really believe this. They have been with me throughout this journey. And the more I believe in myself, the more plentiful they become, which is good in case I have to replace a few. Everybody has something that they believe in. It maybe their own intuition. We all have that antenna, but most of us do not acknowledge or develop it. Eventually, you learn to listen to yourself. I am not afraid of listening to my own voice. Not now, not any more.