



Detail of
The Sinner,
by John Cox.

▼
From left: Cabbage
Beach, on Paradise
Island in the
Bahamas; John Cox,
creative arts director
of Baha Mar's Current
Gallery & Art Center.

BEYOND THE SEA

Most travelers choose the Bahamas for its extraordinary beaches, but now the country's thriving art scene is poised for its own moment in the sun. JODI MINNIS reflects on how one ambitious gallery and work space is shaping the next generation of creators—herself among them.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MELISSA ALCENA





◀ From left: Nassau-born photographer Nowé Harris-Smith; her work *Water*.

▼ Student aprons hang below paintings by Bahamian artist Samantha Treco inside the workshop space at Current.



IN 2004, AT NINE years old, I decided I wanted to be an artist. That was the year my mother took me and my two siblings to the opening of a biennial exhibition at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas. I remember being overwhelmed by the works on display, and by my mother's pride in her colleague Dereck Paul—an architect like her, whom we had come to support. Seeing his vibrant mixed-media portrait, *Mangra Skin*, awakened a curiosity I needed to explore. In what order had he applied the bright colors of the woman's face? Why had he placed a pomegranate on the subject's head? Shortly after we left, I announced to my mother, "I could do that too!" My mother typically surrounded us with other artists and creative people, so I held a strong confidence in the viability of this career path. She didn't hesitate to encourage me to make it a reality.

Like most aspiring artists here, I studied fine art at the College of the Bahamas—and that's when I met the NAGB's chief curator, John Cox, who would become a recurring figure in my career. I couldn't have imagined that, 15 years after that museum visit, I would have the opportunity to work with Cox at one of the country's most prestigious new institutions: Current Gallery & Art Center, where he is now creative arts director.

The Current is located at Baha Mar, a 1,000-acre luxury resort complex that looks out over the pristine waters of picturesque Goodman Bay. The artist-run initiative is a commercial gallery, but more importantly it serves as an incubator for educational and professional development. Since it opened in the summer of 2017, it's given the community a sense of how much potential there is in the Bahamian arts scene.

Between its three hotels (Grand Hyatt, Rosewood, and SLS) and its meeting spaces, Baha Mar houses the country's

largest collection of Bahamian works, with 2,500 pieces from artists based across the archipelago. As such, visitors at Baha Mar are greeted with local art and culture at every turn—from Heino Schmid's immense mixed-media pieces in the Convention Center to Dede Brown's aluminum bird sculpture in the rotunda of the SLS.

"My goal is to show a much more complex picture of who we are," Cox explained in a recent conversation. "I'm trying to present Bahamian-ness to guests in a way that is relatable, dynamic, and progressive."

From the beginning, Cox has developed experiences that are not only forward-thinking and true to the nation's spirit but also approachable to a broad range of travelers—including those who may not automatically gravitate toward painting or sculpture. The Current participates in international fairs and hosts an array of events, from poetry readings and plays to on-site concerts and classes for kids. Cox clearly feels a deep responsibility to the artists he works with. "It's important to me to allow the Bahamian arts community access to the space, as well as to opportunities for growth and visibility," he noted.

Unlike more traditional galleries, where exhibitions can last anywhere from two months to two years, the Current favors pop-ups, each lasting just a week or two, so Baha Mar guests are met with different pieces on every visit. Between presentations, the staff routinely changes out artwork within the consignment space, which means a greater number of artists can be featured.



▲ From top: At the End of the Day by June Collie; the artist in front of her mural *Mindfulness*.



◀ Cox's sculpture Blessed Redeemer hangs inside the Current, in front of his painting Aunt Ethel Meets the Kennedys.

▶ From top: Painter Navarro Newton in his home studio; Newton's work Month, Moon, Man and the Continuum.

manager, came across his abstract mixed-media paintings during the gallery's rolling consignment call. With about 40 pieces completed, Newton met with Vazquez to discuss the work in person, and their conversation blossomed into "Synesthesia," an exhibition that ran for a week last February.

Two days after the opening, Newton joined Warp Trio, an internationally acclaimed contemporary classical group from the U.S., to perform two of his original songs at the gallery. The collaboration speaks directly to Cox's vision for the future of the Current. "The evolution for me, in terms of programming, is really trying to get Baha Mar to create dynamic connections to other cultural and artistic institutions, like universities and schools," he explained.

AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC swept the world last winter, lockdowns meant the Current was forced to cancel my show (and many other events). Still, our community has remained resilient. Musicians have held virtual concerts. DJs have hosted livestreamed parties. Actors have rehearsed and recorded plays via Zoom. Bahamian artisans even launched digital marketplaces to sell their work.

Last spring, the government of the Bahamas assembled an Economic Recovery Committee that has an Orange Economy Subcommittee. The inclusion of the creative industries is a testament to the work of institutions like the Current and the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas and organizations like Creative Nassau—all of which recognize the arts can be just as lucrative as our "sun, sand, and sea."

The magic of the Current is that it shows culture does not have to be fabricated, just highlighted, and that the people who make it happen should be given resources to help them evolve. Cox points out that access and community are necessary for any industry within a small developing island nation, and I agree—those factors allow someone like me to succeed. Although he and his team present a diverse depiction of Bahamian identity within the space itself, they leave room for visitors' curiosity. Each time I return, I wonder if any nine-year-olds will come through Baha Mar, see an artwork, and feel the same sense of awakening I did. ♣

At press time, Baha Mar (bahamar.com) plans to reopen in phases, beginning with the Grand Hyatt and the Current on December 17. In addition to welcoming hotel guests back into the gallery and studio space, the Current will host private outdoor workshops, lectures, and art classes. The gallery will also be launching an e-commerce store (bahamar.com/art) to sell art and provide curatorial services.

BAHAMIAN ART HAS BEEN historically underrepresented on the global stage. That's partially because we often struggle to cohesively articulate our identity in a contemporary way, but also because the world still sees the Bahamas through the lens of "sun, sand, and sea." While those elements have undoubtedly shaped our country, the roots of our culture run much broader and deeper.

Over the past decade, there's been a movement to showcase a more nuanced side of the Bahamas. In 2014, the nonprofit Creative Nassau helped establish Nassau as a UNESCO Creative City of Crafts and Folk Arts, which sparked island-wide conversations about the importance of the Orange Economy, a term used to describe a country's artistic industries. Since tourism is our main economic engine, bringing in about half of the country's GDP, how could we use the Orange Economy to enhance the way visitors experience Bahamian culture?

The Current has been a key force in making this idea a reality—in no small part through its three-month artists' residencies. I applied in December 2019 and began the following January, with the intention of expanding on the ideas of exoticism, home, and Black Americana that I had

started exploring as a student. Though the residency was cut short by the pandemic, I completed a collection of 12 oil paintings, relief prints, and sculptures. Perhaps more importantly, I learned the value of working in a sustained community and having a regimented artistic practice.

Other Bahamian artists who have participated in the Current's residency program have also been profoundly impacted by the experience. "Listening to how Bahamians and guests from all over the world viewed my work was energizing, and it encouraged me to express new ideas without fear of ridicule," said muralist June Collie, an April 2019 artist-in-residence whose painted stools depicting curvaceous Black women can still be seen in the gallery.

Nowé Harris-Smith, a street photographer who focuses on the ideas of masculinity and otherness, has been able to use the Current as both a trial run and a launchpad. "It was the first time I exhibited my photography on a wider scale," she said of her show, "Aperture." "It gave me the courage to continue photographing subjects in my own unique way."

Painter and songwriter Navarro Newton's experience drives home just how wide-ranging the opportunities are. Natascha Vazquez, the Current's former curatorial

