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A Dialogue Between Basel and the Caribbean

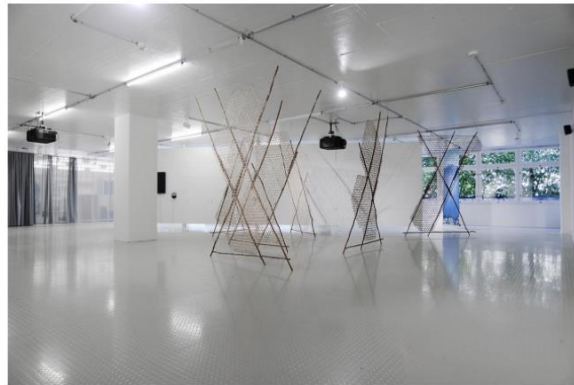
A group exhibition at Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger draws attention to the unique positionality of Caribbean artists

BY RIANNA WADE PARKER IN REVIEWS | 02 NOV 20



'One Month after Being Known in that Island' is the inaugural exhibition of the Basel H. Geiger Cultural Foundation's new permanent space. Commissioned by the Caribbean Art Initiative and curated by Yina Jiménez Suriel and Pablo Guardiola, the show brings together paintings, drawings, films, audio works and installations by 11 artists hailing from Aruba, Colombia, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, Guadeloupe, Haiti, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Venezuela. (The Anglophone Caribbean is largely absent.)

It might seem incongruous to stage an exhibition on the Caribbean in the city of Basel, but the curators took inspiration from the 1795 Peace of Basel, which saw representatives from various European powers congregate in the neutral Swiss city to redistribute colonial Caribbean territories. Spain ceded its Haitian territory to France as part of this treaty, four years after the onset of the Haitian revolution, resulting in the entire island of Hispaniola becoming a single French colony – one that ultimately gained independence in 1804.



'One Month after Being Known in that Island', 2020, exhibition view, Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger. Courtesy: Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger and Caribbean Art Initiative

The first gallery features two prodigious paintings by Haitian artist Tessa Mars in which she continues to conceptualize her long-running alter ego Tesselaines, a horned woman with a strong facial resemblance to Haiti's national hero and revolutionary leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines. In *A Vision of Peace, Harmony and Good Intelligence II* (2020), Tesselaines is depicted naked in tones of blue flanked by an elderly woman with forest-green skin while a Creole pig feeds on the earthly provisions at their feet. Highly symbolic, the black pig is offered as a sacrifice in voodoo ceremonies and became closely aligned with the success of the Haitian Revolution. The work also recalls a 1983 incident whereby the American government – fearful of an outbreak of swine flu spreading to the US – ordered the slaughter of Haiti's entire black pig population, which was central to the country's economy and culture. In Mars's sister image, *A Vision of Peace, Harmony and Good Intelligence I* (2020), Tesselaines is submerged in water, her head just emerging above the surface. The same green-hued elderly woman (a figure based on Mars's Haitian childminder) wades through the water, her back stooped under the weight of the physical and historical baggage she carries, her passage observed by the watchful gaze of her ancestors, whose faces peer out from behind towering trachycarpus plants.



Tessa Mars, *A Vision of Peace, Harmony, and Good Intelligence II, 2020*, acrylic on canvas 1.3 x 1.9 m, Courtesy: the artist

Sharelly Emanuelson's film *Moments* (2013) is a 13-minute collage of personal home videos made by the artist and her mother throughout her childhood in Curaçao. Emanuelson stitched together these fragments of an evolving Dutch-Caribbean womanhood, captured on Hi8 camera, with archival clips of a pre- and post-colonial Curaçao. With the exception of sporadic subtitles, *Moments* has no clear narrative or dialogue: its strength lies in its first-hand documentation of a lesser-known island, typically only seen through the lens of foreign media.



Madeline Jiménez Santill, *The Construction of the Strange Inhabitable Murals, 2020*, installation view, Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger, Courtesy: the artist

In common with many group exhibitions about the Caribbean, this show borrows its theoretical concept from Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997) and his proposal that the Caribbean Sea is the ultimate binding agent for its inhabitants. A connection created by the creolisation of the nations catalysed by forced migration, trade and colonisation. In her 2014 essay 'What Is a Caribbean Writer', Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé quips: 'So, here is the Caribbean with no fixed abode. It is not necessarily regrettable, may we say again. Strangled by their cramped, overpopulated islands, the peoples of the Caribbean are suddenly offered the vast world and its wide expanses open to the heart. As a result, their egos swell and they are elated.' The rising prominence of Caribbean artists in Western art spaces can put them at risk of an inflated sense of self and eagerness to shed the constraints of the global south. However, if the artists manage to keep their elasticity, remembrance and Caribbeaness intact their unique positionality between diasporas can serve as endless inspiration.

'One Month after Being Known in that Island' run at Kulturstiftung Basel H. Geiger, Switzerland, until 15 November 20210