Postcolonialism and the Artist: The Social and Political Underpinnings of the Artwork of Eleanor Merritt

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The Artist
Earth tones. The human figure. Organic patterns. These words provide some rudimentary description of the evocative artwork produced by Eleanor Merritt. In fact, her pieces are more complex than the acrylics, inks, fabrics and collages that she has created. Each piece is best understood in terms of her personal, familial, and even ancestral story.

Eleanor Merritt's story spans more than one continent and more than a single generation. She was born to Jamaican immigrants and is a native of Harlem, New York. Perhaps her story best begins in those Jamaican roots.

Jamaica
Jamaica is a nation of contrasts. This small Caribbean island is made up of both dilapidated slums and luxury resorts. Its inhabitants are proud people, who have produced their own rich and unique music, art, and food, yet the population is plagued by violent crime and a corrupt police force. The land itself has been blessed with natural resources, such as sugar and bauxite, yet the people have not fully benefited from those riches. It is an island nation, yet its ocean borders have not insulated it from being conquered by others.

The occupation of Jamaican land by other countries fundamentally shaped Jamaican history. The Spanish settled the island in the 1500s, eventually eradicated the native population of Taino Indians entirely. The native population was gradually replaced by slaves imported from Africa. The term postcolonial refers to the occupation of Jamaica by the British, from about 1655 to 1958. Taking advantage of the island's natural resources, the British established plantations which produced sugar, coffee, and cocoa. They used slave labor to produce the goods. Slavery on the island was finally outlawed in 1834. Jamaicans eventually gained their independence in a series of leaps. First, they were granted some degree of independence from Great Britain when they joined the Federation of the West Indies in 1958. Finally, Jamaica became sovereign in its own right when it withdrew from the federation in 1962.

Harlem
In addition to the influence of her Jamaican roots, Eleanor Merritt has also been guided by her experience as a Jamaican-in-Harlem. Early in the 20th century, many Jamaicans moved to the US and to Great Britain to find work in bustling cities. As a result of this immigration, New York state has the largest population of Jamaican Americans in the US today. The artistic contributions of those Jamaican and other immigrant groups were profound and have been described as the Harlem Renaissance. This Renaissance is associated with the music of Louis Armstrong, the writings of Langston Hughes, and the portraits of Beauford Delaney. Eleanor Merritt was schooled in the culture and richness of this tradition.

It is the culmination of these factors that provides insight into the artist's images. Perhaps at this point the observer better understands the shadow of oppression, injustice and poverty, along with the light of determination, hope and pride that reside in the works of Eleanor Merritt.

Sources
Postcolonial Artist Eleanor Merritt Exhibits at MCC

(Bradenton, Fla., Dec. 6, 2007) – A “Colormatters” exhibit by award-winning, postcolonial artist Eleanor Merritt located in the fine art gallery, building 9A, MCC Bradenton, 5840 26th St. West. The reception is free and open to the public.

Regular gallery hours are 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. The exhibit continues through Feb. 21. For more information, contact Joe Loccisano, gallery manager, by calling (941) 752-5225 or e-mailing loccisj@mccfl.edu. For directions, visit the MCC Web site at mccfl.edu/maps.