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DANIEL MARTIN DIAZ • FRANK BRUNO • CUBA • BALKANS

OBITUARIES

photo: Edward M. Gómez



DAVID BOXER (1946–2017)

David Boxer, a well-known art historian and former, long-serving director and chief curator of the National Gallery of Jamaica in Kingston, Jamaica's capital, died there in late May after a long bout with cancer. He was 71 years old. Although he had retired from the museum in 2013, as recently as late last year, Boxer enthusiastically composed a detailed essay for the catalogue of the exhibition of the work of the Jamaican self-taught artist John Dunkley (1891–1947) that opened at the Perez Art Museum in Miami on May 26.

It was the last text that would flow from the pen and the mind of this pioneering researcher, thinker, teacher and working artist (Boxer made paintings, collages and mixed-media installations, often on history-related themes, including slavery), who was widely held as one of the most original and influential recent cultural figures in the Caribbean.

Born in southeastern Jamaica, Boxer earned degrees in art history in the United States, at Cornell University in New York and Johns Hopkins University in Maryland. His doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins examined the early work of the British modernist painter Francis Bacon. In his own art, Boxer was deeply influenced by Bacon's psychologically intense, semi-abstract figurative imagery.

A wunderkind whose talents were recognised by Edna Manley, a sculptor and wife of the Jamaican, pre-independence political leader Norman Manley, Boxer went on to write extensively about his mentor's art. Boxer became the director and chief curator of the still-young National Gallery of Jamaica (NGJ) in the mid 1970s.

In his work at the NGJ, Boxer made the case that the history of Jamaican artistic expression and, in effect, of his homeland's national cultural identity, could be traced back to the Taino, an ancient, indigenous people. He championed the works of unschooled, self-taught artists who mostly lived and made their paintings, sculptures and carvings in Jamaica's rural towns and villages. He proposed that the works of such "Intuitives", as he called them, could and should be appreciated as contributing to the shaping of a sense of Jamaica's national cultural identity. Of the Jamaican Intuitives, Boxer observed: "Theirs is not 'art for art's sake', but rather, as someone once described African art, 'art for life's sake.'" Boxer's more expansive approach to local art history did not always sit well with certain art-school-trained, Jamaican modern artists.

"Five Centuries of Art in Jamaica" (1975), "The Formative Years: Art in Jamaica 1922–1940" (1978), "The Intuitive Eye" (1979), and "Barrington Watson: A Retrospective" (2012) were among the many exhibitions Boxer organised for the NGJ. His numerous books include the 1990 monograph *Edna Manley: Sculptor; Modern Jamaican Art* (1998) and *Jamaica in Black and White* (2013), a survey of early Jamaican photography co-authored with Edward Lucie-Smith. Last year, Boxer was made a member of the Order of Jamaica, an award that is considered the equivalent of a knighthood in the British honours system.

Edward M. Gómez

photo: Ted Degener



OL SAMUELS (1931 - 2017)

Ossie Lee Samuels grew up in south Georgia and north Florida, with all the disadvantages of being black in a time and place where money was scarce and racism deeply entrenched. His heritage was Geechee, aka Gullah, the creole culture developed by slave descendants on the southern Atlantic coast. Kept out of school as a child, he was put to work performing menial jobs. As a young man who had tried washing cars, driving a truck, and working in gas stations and pulpwood mills, he moved to New York in search of better opportunities. There he became a prizefighter, until he sacrificed his career by refusing a mobster's demand that he intentionally lose a match. Returning to Georgia, he settled in

Moultrie, a small town where he established himself as a tree surgeon. The job sustained him until 1982, when a tree-topping accident left him seriously injured, temporarily disabled, wheelchair-bound, and deeply depressed. During this period of inactivity he recalled his grandmother's recommendation of woodcarving as an effective means to calm a troubled mind, inspiring him to start what soon developed into a prolific output of distinctive wood sculptures.

Samuels carved natural subjects, especially animals, as well as human subjects extraterrestrial characters, cars, and aircraft. His work's distinguishing characteristics include its imaginative hybridity - its frequent conjoining of physical features from two or more different animals in a single sculpture - and its idiosyncratic surface details. The sculptures are painted and/or finished with glossy layers of varnish or clear lacquer, sometimes in combination with lurid shades of glitter paint. (Samuels was colorblind, according to his longtime dealer Jeanne Kronsoble, owner of Main Street Gallery.) They're often embellished with faux jewels, marbles, metal foil, animal teeth, bones, and other ephemera chosen to add flash and personality. Coinciding with his late-life art pursuits Samuels built a lectern and moved several pews into his house to set up a church where he preached sermons on Sundays and whenever the spirit moved him. The small sanctuary doubled as an exhibition space for new works and special pieces that weren't for sale. Years after regaining his strength and mobility, he continued to make art and preach. When he moved to Tallahassee, Florida, in the 1990s, he brought his sculpture practice with him, along with his church and its trappings.

Samuels' health took a turn for the worse in recent years, primarily due to heart and blood-pressure problems. Visitors to his home in 2016 found him physically diminished and seemingly not long for this world. Kronsoble visited him in May and found him "in very bad shape" and under hospice care. He died on July 6, 2017.

Tom Patterson