

Red ,green and golden moments

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'Culture Corner' oil on canvas.

AN EXHIBITION of oil and acrylic paintings titled **Village** is currently on show at the Mutual Gallery by artist, Alexander Cooper.

It has been a year since his last show at this gallery this time around he has chosen to shed spotlight on the Rastafarian community (or village). The artist depicts the humble but cheerful, harmonious surroundings of Rastafarians and manages in the process, to superimpose his favorite pictorial elements history, people and good times.

Cooper's collection of work seems to tell a story and each painting is an aspect of the tale. The people, rendered in caricatures, are character types.

The artist is not necessarily interested in facial details unless he is painting a portrait such as in the pieces **The Advocate** and **The Songwriter** which pays tribute to the late reggae icon Bob Marley who was also a Rastafarian. One will note that however, in these two pieces the likeness of the image to Marley is not "spot on".

Marley shares the spotlight with the "ordinary" Rastas who, with their entrepreneurial spirit, create a village from their various livelihoods from vending to fishing. The lives of these villagers are painted before our eyes. The artist shows us what the people do for recreation after the work is done.

As is usually the case with Cooper's art, there are two levels of thematic significance. On the surface, there is the happy country life. In these works he chronicles the lifestyles of Rastafarians as they go about their everyday lives work, school and relaxation.

SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Beneath this level, we find a tinge of social commentary that is charmingly worked into each brushstroke by the artist. We are given a historical and futuristic account of Jamaica in three paintings that are hung beside each other.

In *Life in the 17th Century*, colonial Jamaica is in full bloom while in *The March 1962*, the slaves have been liberated and have formed their own state. An Independence parade passes by the old Government building while Jamaicans, including Rastafarians, watch.

The futuristic aspect of the story that Cooper gives us is an image titled *Future Event* where Rastafarians lead their own parade in front of present-day Gordon House.

The recognition of Jamaican culture and, inevitably, Rastafarian lifestyle and principles are celebrated in *The Advocate* where the form of Bob Marley almost eclipses the world while below Jamaicans - Rastafarians and non-Rastafarians alike celebrate. (See F1) In Negril, it is the ubiquitous red, green and gold decorating the huts that line the seaside where the tourists swim. Cooper reminds us that Rastas too, have made a contribution to this sector of the country's economy.

The swiftness of the artist's hand is evident in all the works. The colors are mixed on the canvas, leaving traces of various colors to form the images when one views them from a distance. The reds and yellows contrast with the pervasive cobalt blue that bathes each picture.

While the hues are richer in tone when compared with Cooper's show last year, the images are darker. The light is almost non-existent in some of the pieces while in a few such as *The Twins* and *Landscape with Figures*, dramatic contrasts in light and dark are seen when the shaded areas of towering trees are juxtaposed with the surrounding scenery lit by a brilliant sunshine.

To lead us into the paintings, the artist tilts picture planes toward us especially in the street scenes and then uses the Rasta colors (red, green and gold) to take our eyes through each image.

In *The Empress*, a large red Poui tree holds our attention while the action in front of the picture plane for which the piece is named, is played out a Rastafarian woman escorts her children down the street.

ATTENTION

While the Poui tree is recognizable in a few other pieces, it returns in the centre of the picture in *Landscape with Figures* where it helps once again to hold our attention as we follow the red petals from the lower left-hand corner of the painting towards the whole tree in the background.

The disarming charm of Alexander Cooper's images is once again on display. While we may initially consider the paintings as Eden-like scenes of rural splendor in a village of Rastafarians, he injects subtle metaphor to comment on their achievements, contributions to nation-building and the aspects of life that make up their daily existence. While the images are not born out of academic observation of form, he provides caricatures of various characters in their natural setting in an effort to capture the essence of the colorful and rich Rastafarian life that is intertwined with Jamaican culture.

Cooper tells us that they have come a long way even though he does not focus on their initial rejection in the society, but rather his favorite preoccupation pleasant moments. As a sign, on a post in the piece *Culture Corner* declares, "With Jah, no problem".

The show ends on October 11.