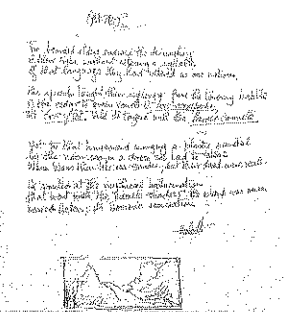
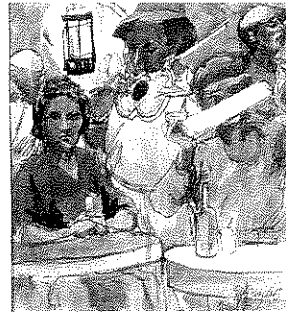


The Painterly Visions of Derek Walcott and Donald Hinkson

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Art historian Gail Levin first saw Derek Walcott's watercolors reproduced on the covers of his books, which her husband John B. Van Sickle was teaching in comparative literature courses on the tradition of the Greco-Roman classics. His research for a book on Walcott's epic poem "Omeros" led them to visit the Caribbean to explore the poet's native island, St. Lucia, where they discovered a collection of his watercolors on view at the National Trust. Levin was impressed by Walcott's facility with the medium and by the resemblance of his style to that of Edward Hopper, whose art had been her subject in many books and exhibitions. She, too, began to read Walcott's poetry, fascinated by his involvement with visual art. Both Levin and Van Sickle welcomed the chance in Albany to see more paintings by Walcott and study a painter he admires. The following is their review of *Island Light: Watercolor and Oil Paintings by Derek Walcott and Donald Hinkson*.



Storyboard and text from *Omeros*, 1995 watercolors by Derek Walcott

The brochure that accompanies the University at Albany exhibition *Island Light* (1998) excerpts a 1992-1993 essay in which Derek Walcott wrote: "I can pay Hinkson no deeper compliment than to summon the same admiration

and technical astonishment for him as I do for Winslow Homer." "The comparison with Homer reflects the fact that Walcott emulates him in his own painting, as we shall see, and had just used him for a poignant moment in "Omeros" (1990).

... Then I saw him. Achille! Bigger than I remembered on the white sun-splintered deck of the hot hull. Achille! My main man, my nigger! circled by chain-sawing sharks; the ropes in his neck turned his head towards Africa in *The Gulf Stream*, which luffed him there, forever, between our island and the coast of Guinea, fixed in the tribal dream, in the light that entered another Homer's hand, its breeze lifting the canvas from the museum (5.XXXVI.1: 183.8-184.11).

Imagining a museum tour, the poet identifies the lone castaway of Winslow Homer's painting, "The Gulf Stream," with his own St. Lucian fisherman, Achille. Walcott underlines that the painter is "another Homer" because the old Greek poet and his epics have been a recurrent presence in the poem.

In the present exhibition, the style of Winslow Homer's early work in watercolor reverberates in three of Walcott's watercolors, marked by precise and delicate detail: *St. Malo* (1993), "View of Stockholm" (1991), and "Marblehead" (1990), the latter a location that also figures in "Omeros" (5.XXXVI.iii: 186.4). Yet Homer's later style in watercolor became much broader, bolder, and more painterly by the end of the 1880s, when he began to paint while spending winters in the tropical environments of Nassau, Bermuda, and Florida. Painting in the powerful sunlight, Homer transformed the medium into a more sensuous naturalism.

It is the essence of this later Homer that we find in Hinkson's current watercolors of Trinidad with their bold strokes and masses of shadow and light. Hinkson's bravura technique even at times recalls the confident application of pigment that distinguishes the watercolors of John Singer Sargent. Hinkson's "Coconut Estate" (1998) demonstrates this ease of execution, achieved by a master of the medium, who no longer fears the will of the paint on the wet paper. There appears in Hinkson a spontaneity of technique quite different from Walcott's deliberately plotted and executed compositions.

Hinkson appears to work directly from nature, *en plein air*. Looking at his "Lambeau Road" (1997) or "Salt Air" (1998), we note how he cap-



Salt Air, 1998 watercolor by Donald Hinkson

tures the wind bending the palm trees. Much like the French Impressionists, whose work he first discovered in art books in the local libraries in Trinidad, Hinkson has rendered not only the physical landscape, but also the changing weather and light.

Walcott often conceives of his subjects in an entirely different manner, sometimes drawing directly on his poetry. We are fascinated to find "Ideal Head: Helen" (1998), painted in both gouache and watercolor, which looks back to the seductive heroine who figures so importantly in the St. Lucian plot of the 1990 epic:

... now the mirage
 dissolved to a woman with a madras head-tie but the
 head proud, although it was looking for work. I felt
 like standing in homage to a beauty
 that left, like a ship, widening eyes in its wake. "Who
 the hell is that?" a tourist near my table asked a wait-
 ress. The waitress said, "She? She too proud!"
 As the carved lids of the unimaginable
 ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton-wool cloud,
 it
 the waitress sneered, Helen. "And all the rest fol-
 lowed (1.IV.iii: 23.7-24.2).

Now as then she haunts the poet's imagination, for he returns to her after nearly a decade.

Walcott also exhibits what he calls a "Story Board and Text" from "Omeros". Borrowing the concept of "story board" from the dramatic arts, for he is also an accomplished playwright, he presents five watercolors surrounding a hand-written text excerpted from the epic. Two of the subjects again evoke the enigmatic Helen: a woman walking down a street and wearing the yellow dress that was Helen's emblem, also a woman seated, impassive, although serenaded by musicians. Another vignette depicts three men under a tree, who might be fishermen resting on the beach at Gros Islet, the village on which the poem centers. The two remaining panels show public celebrations, perhaps parades like those in the epic that satirize political campaigns. However, the pair are signed and dated January 26, 1995. Both Walcott and the economist Sir Arthur Lewis, St. Lucia's other Nobel laureate, were born on January 23, which now is celebrated as part of the annual Nobel Week in St. Lucia. Thus, Walcott appears to have sketched



Coconut Estate, 1998 watercolor by Donald Hinkson

the celebration five years after his epic was published and three years after his Nobel prize.

Storyboards also figure among Walcott's other watercolors here: lively images from the play *Ti-Jean and his Brothers*, which presents the adventures of the Caribbean folk hero, "Little John," and pictures that offer intriguing hints of Sulphur, an unpublished play depicting colonial life, a recurrent theme in Walcott's poetry. Walcott's style here, in contrast to the works painted en plein air, often seems less precise and more free, perhaps because imagination more than observation comes into play.

Although Walcott and Hinkson show many differences in subject matter and style, they share an enthusiasm not only for the "Island Light" captured in the tropical watercolors of Winslow Homer but also for Goya, with his singular darkness. On the first page of his long autobiographical poem, "Another Life", Walcott appropri-

ates the title of Goya's etching, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters", identifying himself paradoxically as the monster produced:

... The clear
glaze of another life,
a landscape locked in amber, the rare gleam. The
dream of reason had produced its monster:
a prodigy of the wrong age and colour.

(Collected Poems 1984, 145)

The poet refers here to his youthful struggles to come to terms with his race, his talents, and his island origin.

Hinkson, too, has declared his admiration for Homer and Goya, but also for Piero della Francesca, Chardin, Manet, Matisse, and Edward Hopper. Hinkson's "Church Shadows" (1998) recalls Hopper's "St. Francis Towers" (1925) painted in Santa Fe, New Mexico. As in Hopper's watercolor, Hinkson animates architectural form through the skillful rendering of light and shadow and makes us peer at the church over an intervening wall.

While Hinkson has given his viewers a direct and powerful vision of

what he observes on Trinidad, Walcott seeks to reconcile his dual gifts as painter and poet. He addresses this conflict in "Another Life":

I hoped that both disciplines might by painful accretion cohere and finally ignite, but I lived in a different gift, its element metaphor, while Gregorias would draw with the linear elation of an eel one muscle in one thought....

Gregorias abandoned apprenticeship
to the errors of his own soul,
it was classic versus romantic
perhaps, it was water and fire...

(Collected Poems 1984, 200-201)

Walcott represents his own aesthetic dilemma by recalling his boyhood painting excursions in the company of Gregorias (actually the St. Lucian artist, Dunstan St. Omer). St.

Omer's singularity of purpose contrasted with Walcott's own awareness of his own different, metaphorical gift. Walcott's poetry continually draws strength from the power of his visual imagination, even as his paintings reflect his affinity with language. In his early and sustained admiration for "Gregorias," in his essay praising Hinkson, and in his decision to share the current exhibition, Walcott generously reveals both his love for painting and his respect for painters, recognizing all the while that artists such as Hinkson enjoy a focus different from his own complex talent.



Ideal Head: Helen/Omeros, 1998 gouache and watercolor by Derek Walcott