



“Idiosyncrasies of Place”: A Conversation with La Vaughn Belle

By David Knight Jr. *Monday, June 25th, 2012*

I first met La Vaughn Belle in Christiansted, St. Croix in January of 2012. She was working on renovating a historic building near Sunday Market Square with the goal of creating a public art space that “engages with the square – it’s history, current issues and problems.” It was a tough winter for the U.S. Virgin Islands, and St. Croix in particular, with a wave of government layoffs abruptly followed by the closing of the territory’s largest private employer, the Hovensa oil refinery. In the atmosphere of uncertainty that rippled through the community, those individuals who were quietly going about the business of empowering their fellow Virgin Islanders seemed heroic.

La Vaughn Belle is one of those individuals, although I’m sure she would be modest about this fact. Through the humanities classes she teaches at the University of the Virgin Islands she is encouraging a new generation to be active social critics, and through her own practice she is a critic herself – investigating postcoloniality in the Danish/American context, local vernacular culture, and, in an upcoming documentary entitled “The House That

Freedom Built”, the struggles and triumphs of past Virgin Islanders who are sometimes too easily forgotten. I recently spoke with La Vaughn via Skype about her artistic practice, her studies in Cuba, healing dialogue between the Virgin Islands and Denmark, and cultural pluralism.

David Knight Jr.: Can you tell me a little bit about your background and, very generally, what sort of work you do as a visual artist?



La Vaughn Belle: Well, I was born in Tobago in a small village called Moriah. My father met my mother there while he was a missionary preacher for the Moravian church. After five months of me being alive he was re-stationed to St. Thomas. He switched to the Anglican Church, we had a brief stint in Wisconsin while he did his master's and then we moved to St. Croix, which is where I consider myself to be from. In terms of school I went to parochial schools my whole life, then left the VI to study at Columbia University in NY. I stayed there for about 8 years teaching and trying to figure out how to be an artist and then decided to move home before Y2K (remember that?) and do the art thing. Soon after I realized that I wanted more training though, but didn't want to go back to the States...that's when Cuba came into

the picture. I first went for a summer program and then 6 months after that moved there indefinitely and stayed for 4 years getting a master's in fine art at ISA, El Instituto Superior de Arte.

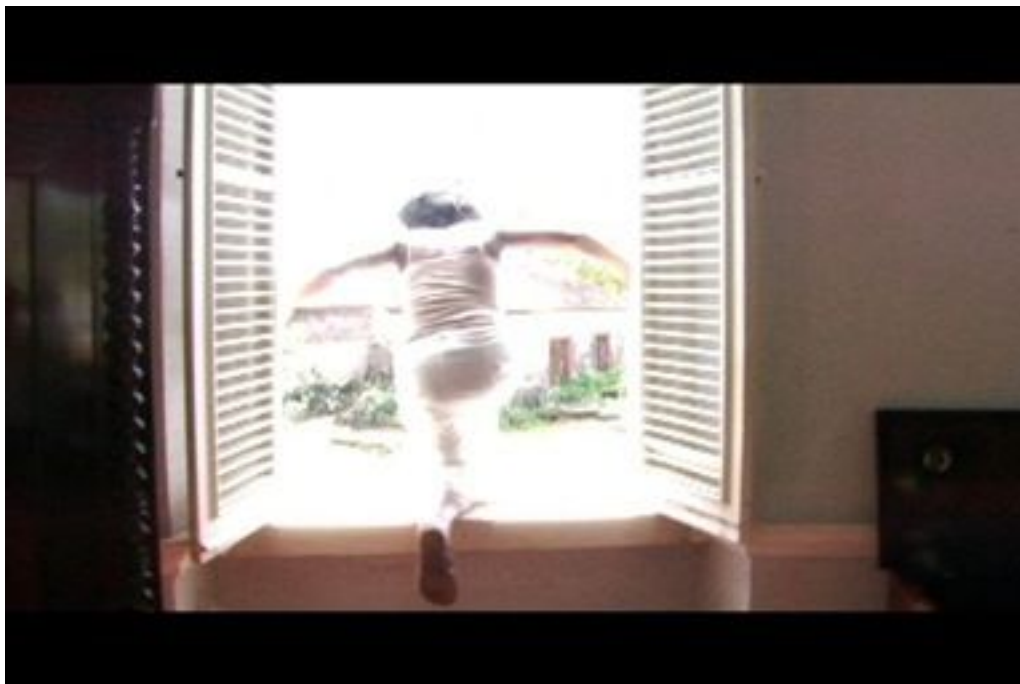
Before going to Cuba I was a painter – figurative, symbolic work mostly, but while there I began a program called Arte de Conducta, based on

performance art in a way, and it changed my work dramatically. So now I would say that I don't focus on any one medium, but my practice is more driven by my interests and the form takes shape based on the idea.

DK: You've said that you're interested in "the provincial and the domestic". What does this mean?

LVB: The provincial often has a negative connotation. People think of small towns, small islands, small mindedness. But I am interested in all the things that make a culture and a people who they are – the idiosyncrasies of a place. I had a class once in semiotics that taught that in every culture there is a "semiosphere" that only the people of that culture can understand. My interest in the provincial is about wanting to know that space as best I can.

In terms of the domestic, I'm obsessed with houses. How they are made, how people decorate them, what they mean to different people. A lot of my work touches on these issues. I suppose you might say that the "provincial and the domestic" are the same space. They are both a type of semiosphere.



Still from "Somebody's Been Sitting in My Chair, Somebody's Been Sleeping in My Bed", 2011 video, 8:33 min, projected in loop. (image courtesy of www.lavaughnbelle.com)

DK: Speaking of houses I want to talk a little bit about your current documentary project "The House That Freedom Built." It's very exciting to see all the high quality media work being produced locally in the Caribbean right now, especially given the region's long and troubled history with warped and one-sided representations. Can you tell me a little bit about the project and what you hope to achieve with it?

LVB: Yes, well the catalyst for the project was a desire to have a studio space and looking for an inexpensive space in town [Christiansted]. I checked out these houses that were advertised for dirt cheap and then got shocked and overwhelmed by the condition of them. It took months just to see one of them because an addict had taken up residence there. One day I went with a friend and we just asked permission to go in! But, when I mentioned purchasing the property to a local historian he did a brief historical sketch of the previous owners. I was shocked – literally speechless – when we met and I looked over the document he gave me with a list of previous owners, mostly African-born women who were brought here as slaves, survived the middle passage, survived slavery, escaped that system and then own property! It was just shocking and overwhelming and embarrassing too that this story was so unknown.

To many people these little houses are just abandoned shacks in the backstreets of town, but they are a part of our cultural patrimony. They tell a vital and important story of who we are, and both the story and the houses should not be abandoned. My goals are to raise interest, educate, and I hope to also motivate others to recapture both the buildings and the history. And of course, it will be wonderful when the project is finished and I can finally have my own studio space. I dream about that, and have for a long time.



The House That Freedom Built (image courtesy of thehousethatfreedombuilt.blogspot.com)

DK: And how is the production going so far?

LVB: Hmmm...slower than I thought. But it's partly because I took on full-time at University of the Virgin Islands and started another renovation project with my husband. Then of course Hovensa closed and I lost my cameraperson. So right now, it's re-engagement time. I have a new cameraperson, most of the background on the previous owners is complete and we are continuing to do interviews. The renovation part has been stalled due to lack of funds and time. My goal is to finish one of the buildings by August though and be finished with the documentary by November. My deadline is tight since I am expecting another baby, so it has to be done by then.

DK: You mention in your bio a relationship between artistic practice and daily life. What is this relationship for you at the moment?

LVB: I would say that right now the current renovation has taken up all my resources – time, money, creativity and otherwise. So I am not quite in actual art production mode. However, in my moments of stillness I see how it is laying a foundation for some other projects. I'm not exactly sure how that will take shape, but I've been saving a lot of construction materials. I believe I will be doing something with them. We'll see.

DK: I want to go back to something you said about your interests and how your practice is very assertive in its "local-ness" but at the same time your experience and education seem to be very international. This is a quality of the Caribbean that seems to interest a lot of people outside the region right now. The way that Caribbean artists (and people in general) seem to fuse that assertive locality with a cosmopolitan outlook can be perceived as a contradiction, even though it really isn't. Would you agree?

LVB: I think it is who we are naturally as a people. Every major civilization has crossed these islands so it's natural that there is an "international"-ness about us. But yes, as Caribbean people we are often seen as insular, and we are, but we are a people who also spend a lot of our time looking out too. At least if you live on a small island you are constantly reminded by the sea that there is something else out there and there is a yearning to see and be a part of that.

DK: I personally think you are a great role model for Virgin Islanders interested in the arts because you are very engaged in the broader Caribbean. I know this has a lot to do with your personal family history as well. Do you have any tips for how U.S. Virgin Islanders can foster a better sense of community between islands?

LVB: My background gave me the opportunity to actually travel and see and feel and know and meet the other artists and people from the Caribbean. However I think the internet is such an opportunity to "travel" as well. Networking is important in all forms and media. If you can't literally travel, get on social media, Skype, blogs and meet artists, curators, be engaged. But thanks for the compliment.

DK: You're welcome La Vaughn. One of Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo's theories about the contemporary Caribbean is that the plantation seems to persist as a site that influences the way identities are constructed in the

region. I want to ask you two things that are both related to this in different ways. One is your connection to Cuba, where you studied, and the other is your participation in a show entitled "The Great House: A re-imagining of Power, Space and History" at Whim Plantation in St. Croix. First can you tell me a little bit about your studies in Cuba and how this time in your life influenced you?

LVB: Oh my, my studies in Cuba! That experience was so complex and profound that I wrote a book about it. It's unpublished as I figure out what I want to do with it – it needs some dramatic editing. Cuba was an interesting place for me, especially being from the US Virgin Islands. I am from a small island, Cuba is a big one. We have an ambiguous sense of identity. Cuba has an overblown self-centered form of nationalism. I never realized how much of a capitalist I was in terms of mindset until living in a communist socialist country. And then of course living in a socialist communist country with this incredible amount of retention of African culture and religious thought. And the art scene! What socialist countries do to support the arts is amazing. There were so many things that influenced me. The building I studied in at ISA is created in the shape of a fallopian tube that unravels into a courtyard space with a giant clitoris. The property is located on the site of a former country club, golf courses, rivers, palms trees if that gives you any idea. It was just an amazing experience.

It changed my life in many ways. I met my husband there who was studying opera at the time. And I met Tania Bruguera who was a mentor for me and let me into her program Arte de Conducta which really was a progressive way of teaching art. The classes met mostly off-campus, in parks, homes, her studio at times and it really challenged us to think of different ways of art-making. We worked together in groups and individually to create work and had such an open dialogue. She invited artists, critics, and curators from all over the world to give us workshops so I got to meet lots of people. The program was strong in introducing a level of professionalism in our work and how we presented ourselves. We practiced dozens of times, talking about our work, how to document your work in traditional and non-traditional ways. It was systematic and spontaneous.

DK: Can you tell me a little bit about the show you did at Whim plantation? What were you investigating there? And do you have a favorite piece of work from that exhibit? Mine is "The Planter's Chair" by the way.



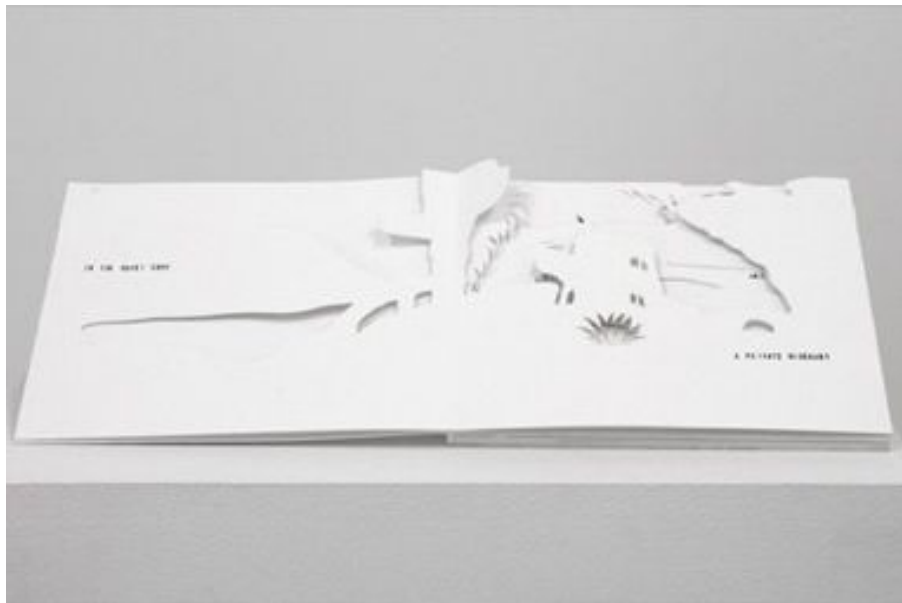
The Great House: A Reimagining of Power, Space & History. (image courtesy of lavaughnbelle.blogspot.com)

LVB: I'd been wanting to do a show there for awhile. It's such an amazing space, this restored plantation house and its surrounding sugar mill and slave village which is in ruins. It's also an amazing museum and has these great archives. When I had the opportunity to go on a residency in Denmark for two months it helped to solidify what I really wanted to do there. My experience in Denmark was this very "Twilight Zone" type of experience in that it's this fabulously rich and progressive country – clean, efficient, historical and modern – and we have a connection of 250 years of collective history together. However when I was there, it was as if that was completely erased, they have this collective amnesia about the Virgin Islands. It was quite shocking, especially being from a place that was cut into 250 sugar plantations and the two towns are named after Danish kings and we have Denmark literally carved into us. It's impossible to forget. A lot of my time was spent there looking for visible connections, in the architecture, the people. When I came back things made even more sense. There were things I had seen my whole life, like "chaney" (the shards from Danish colonial plates commonly found in the dirt) but had never really seen a whole plate. When I learned that Hans Christian Andersen was Danish and how for many

children around the world he formed so much a part of their childhood psyche with his stories and fairytales I thought it was a good metaphor for how our current relationship with Denmark is; somewhere between fact and fiction, like memory in many ways.

But specifically with the project I wanted to reexamine this plantation system and structure by creating a parallel story, which is why there are so many pieces that have this parallel narrative. In terms of a favorite piece, I am pleased with different pieces for different reasons. I love the engagement of the “The Planter’s Chair” with the audience.

DK: The piece you have at the Caribbean Crossroads show in NYC right now relates to this Danish postcolonial dialogue, which more Virgin Islanders and Danes are becoming interested in. It seems there is a lot of potential for miscommunication in this dialogue as we are coming at it from many different angles. What’s your personal aim in participating?



Hideaway, 2008, Handmade book of cut-outs, 10 pages. Currently on display at Caribbean: Crossroads of the World. (image courtesy of lavaughnbelle.com)

LVB: Well, I am just happy to have a dialogue. It helps for healing and understanding. My documentary project has shown me in so many ways that this conversation still needs to happen. We in the VI have been a culture of

“ruin” and decay and abandonment. And anyone who thinks we haven’t just needs to take a drive through any of our towns.

DK: This next question relates to what you’ve said about insularity but also to the ambiguities of the USVI, which is something you and I live with everyday. I like to ask culture producers in the U.S. Virgin Islands about their feelings on identity politics and forms of nationalism that arise frequently in relation to “art and culture” in the territory. Do you think that our explorations of particularity are useful given the islands’ unclear political situation (unincorporated territory of the U.S.)? Or do you think they obscure other important things? To give a very personal example of what I mean, I sometimes have a slightly antagonistic (maybe not the right word) relationship with the USVI as a Virgin Islander who can be constructed as an outsider, but I am also fiercely loyal to the place in a way that could make me less open to new places/experiences. Any thoughts?

LVB: The VI is a distinct place in which this outside/inside, native/tourist, local/expat dynamic plays out A LOT. It’s a part of what it means to be Caribbean, it’s part of what it means to be a Virgin Islander. I too had a lot of issues with my identity when I was younger. I was a Barbadian, Trinbagonian Virgin Islander and also American. It seemed too confusing and not neat enough, not singular enough. When I went to Cuba it was exasperating being in a country with such a strong sense of national identity. Their identity is very constructed and reinforced by their political situation. I read a quote that our Congresswoman posted the other day that said – it was at a ceremony of naturalized citizens – that “you could move to France and never be French, but you move to the United States and can become American”...That really resonated with me, because I knew that while I lived in Cuba I could have been there for 40 years and would never be Cuban.

But I think the Virgin Islands is that type of place. Part of our narrative is encompassing. It wasn’t always that way but I think that is our reality now and as a cultural producer it will be reflected in our work. I have a project I want to work on next year called “Losing Our Virginity: Contemporary Art of the Virgin Islands”. Now the majority of the artists and the work I will be looking at will not be from the Virgin Islands (born or raised), but it still reflects who we are.

DK: Fascinating and a great title for the show. What classes are you teaching at UVI this semester?

LVB: Hmmmm...Spanish (I think), Humanities (which is an overview of Caribbean art forms; music, dance, film, etc..) and a new art class that will merge contemporary art making and Art History.

DK: You strike me as the kind of person who would involve your students in a lot of hands-on types of projects rather than lecturing. Is that an accurate perception?

LVB: Absolutely. I hate lecturing! Some people have a gift, and I love a good lecturer, but I also have a degree in curriculum design and teaching so with good conscience I can't teach that way. I'm a learn by doing type of gal.



La Vaughn with two UVI students, Kadeem Hendrickson and Wyndi Ambrose, who interned on her documentary. (image courtesy of thehousethatfreedombuilt.blogspot.com)

DK: Ok, so one more question to wrap up. Anything on your mind lately that you are curious about and want to explore through your upcoming work?

LVB: Right now I am really curious about working with objects, drawing and painting again. I've moved away from that type of work in my practice but it's always nice when my ideas meet that type of form. It's personally gratifying to me in ways that working in video or performance is not. I look forward to that. In terms of ideas, this "free gut" community ("Free Gut" or "Negger Gotter" is an area of Christiansted, St. Croix that was designated for freed blacks in the 18th and 19th century) is very interesting to me; this concept of negotiated freedoms and space and how freedom was directly connected to space. I am also really interested in revisiting Hans Christian Andersen's work. He lived during the time that we were still colonies of Denmark. I have been researching possible specific or indirect mentions and metaphors in his stories to the Danish West Indies and hope to be producing work based on those investigations.

To see more of La Vaughn's work visit:

www.lavaughnbelle.com,

www.lavaughnbelle.blogspot.com

www.thehousethatfreedombuilt.blogspot.com



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