

See the 'visual poetry' in Brian Ashing's paintings

Tevin Gall

Published on *LoopTT*, Sept. 7, 2021

Just a glance at Brian Ashing's paintings reveal a deep inner life. His pieces—"visual poetry" in the artist's own words—are brimming with emotion, and composed with lifelike hues and rich textures. The self-taught painter is set to give his first solo exhibition, *Prelude*, from September 4-11 at the Art Society of Trinidad and Tobago headquarters, organised by 101 Gallery. Ashing spoke to us about his creative process and influences.

On the topic of being self-taught, Ashing said that he'd never really taken the time to understand what that meant when contrasted with other artists who may have attended art academies or taken classes from veterans until recently. "I'm really starting to appreciate the [meaning] of self-directed education."

Ashing explained that he engaged in hours of his own research to fill the gaps. "You find your own nuggets [of knowledge] to latch onto," he said. "I do have a deep appreciation for the scientific method, so it's nice to think that may have an impact on my approach."

After leaving secondary school, Ashing applied to the University of the West Indies, St Augustine to study visual art but was urged by his parents to choose a more traditional course of study. "I changed my mind at the last minute [based on] advice to have a backup plan," he said. With his science background, Ashing opted to do environmental science.

Throughout his time at UWI, Ashing continued to paint and network with other artists, participating in joint exhibitions, most recently in April with AJ Rogers, Damian Moore and others, but has only recently begun to make art his main focus. "I didn't think it hard to pursue my degree," he said. "[But] it did have an impact on me. Now being outside of my degree [programme], I realise how much time one can devote to art when there are no finals, or different courses to study for."

“Creating art during the pandemic in itself is strange because there is the pressure of just being a human within the new normal and navigating all these different rules,” Ashing said. All the same, he felt fortunate to have had so much free time at his disposal. Having graduated last year and with COVID slowing things down in the job market, Ashing has been a full-time artist since last year, exhibiting and selling his work. In fact, it was because of this freedom and ability to zone into his work that he was able to understand how much of a priority art should be in his life.

After just about a decade of painting, the 27-year-old spoke of the “recent epiphany” he had, the realisation that he wanted to practise art seriously. “I can’t not do art,” he said. “It’s the only thing that makes me [say], ‘This is my purpose’.”

Much of the work presented at the exhibition is drawn from “the shared experience of going through the trauma from having life shift so drastically,” Ashing said. “As an artist, I was able to draw from that energy.” The artist joked that attendees shouldn’t expect to see any face masks in his work. “[There are] no direct allusions [to the pandemic],” he said, explaining that the feel of the period, a “sombreness and quiet...a sense of stillness” is what he intended to imbue into the work.

When asked about his influences, Ashing mentioned the work of the Dutch masters—among them, Jan van Eyck, Johannes Vermeer and Rembrandt. “What I really love about those old works is the different aspects of symbolism that play a role in the [pieces],” he said. Ashing spoke about how he marvels at the way in which the artists of those periods would encode messages into their work.

He singled out Italian Renaissance painter Caravaggio as someone from whom he draws much inspiration. “He really influenced the work [in this exhibition].” Ashing shared that he appreciated the way the artist tackled Greek ideologies and sought to do something similar. “As an artist in the 21st century, I approach it in a contemporary way.”

But overall, Ashing hopes more than anything, that art lovers who attend the exhibition would absorb the intended stillness, the calm emotions woven into the work rather than to draw any one idea or interpretation from the pieces.

“Creating this work month to month, I asked myself what it is I was trying to say, and then I realised that I can just have this method [where] I create without having to intellectualise what I’m trying to say.” He continued, “With my art, sometimes it may be difficult—at least for me—to articulate in words what it is I’m trying to do, but when I look at [the pieces], I see a line running through the body of work.” Ashing intends for the work to “invite people to a moment of contemplation.” He added, “There are a lot of small pieces that invite people to get close to the work. I hope that people get close, almost touching their noses to the canvas [to] just have that moment with the pieces.”

In terms of the artist’s favourite subjects, Ashing said that it can vary. “I want to represent objects, people, animals, nature. My language is realism, so I strive to make things look real, or close to reality.”

Ashing is excited for the exhibition but shared that he’s already dreaming up his next body of work. Find out more on the upcoming exhibition or check out Brian Ashing’s work @brianashingart on IG.