

# Bryan McFarlane

## Awakening ancient voices through art

By DONNA MARIE

**“W**hat inspires me about life and about making art, comes essentially from a place that's largely inside myself. Some people call it a spiritual place, some people call it heaven, some people call it fear because they are motivated by fear,” Bryan McFarlane passionately explained as he spoke about his world of art and painting.

“Primarily a lot of it is wrapped up in beauty, in what might characterise a natural environment around me. I am inspired by things in its purer form, ancient objects and ancient things, in a way that I have to decipher its beginnings or conceive it as having an end,” he added.

Bryan McFarlane is a Jamaican artist who is recognised internationally for his work. With an impressive array of credentials, teaching experience, awards and exhibitions, the artist makes the time to exhibit here at home, the birthplace of his artistic beginnings.

His exhibition at Kingston's Mutual Life Gallery in November 1999 was the latest among many he has had here. Dubbed “Minus 2000”, the show drew praise from art lovers and aficionados alike.

McFarlane's work is intuitive, it's surreal, it's impressionistic. Yet, there is always warmth in his mostly oil on linen creations that says a lot about his love of culture. Some of his pieces are dark and foreboding and riddled with messages of a mystic and ancient voice. Maybe it comes from his travels to far corners of the earth, or perhaps from his Jamaican roots. Having travelled from Europe to Asia, South Africa to Turkey, the Caribbean to Bahia, and many places in between, Bryan always comes back to ground himself in his Jamaicaness.

“My travels to West Africa, South America, the Caribbean and Europe affirm my Jamaican heritage and its indivisible creative power, a power evident in the struggle and endurance of its people and especially its artists. In spite of the significant alienation I feel at times toward my country while abroad, I still look to Jamaica, to the spirit of my maroon ancestry, for strength, cultural affirmation and meaning,” he explained.

Did he always want to be an artist? It certainly was a natural, as we read his personal story of progression on that path.

“From childhood I remember having some sort of passion to make art. I was probably about six. Of course, I didn't understand the passion then, I just felt the emotion of wanting to paint,” he said as he went back in time.

“I remember one Christmas as a child, my father bought me a painting set. I remember painting everything and even eating some of the paint itself. By the afternoon, there was no paint left. So there was a sense of a natural response to the medium.”

The passion continued through his boyhood days. “During high school people used to say, bwoy Bryan you can draw eeh man. And after a while with so many people saying that to you, you begin to recognise that there is something there that probably can be characterised as talent.”

He added that even his High School teachers used to give him class diagrams to draw for just about every subject area.

The artist honed his naturally raw talent at the Jamaica School of Art. He spoke reminiscently about his years at the art school. In third form, McFarlane pursued an A-level art programme and ended up with distinction, solidifying for him his life's dream of studying art and making it a full time career goal.

### Obsession

His focus was quite clear to him and to others as well. “It was kind of an obsession for me. When you're in other classes, you don't listen to what the teacher is saying, you just spend your time creating and drawing. I even became a nuisance at times in class, as other students were more interested in what I was doing than in academics. That was all part of the experience, part of the obsession I developed for art.”

Over the years, McFarlane's work has become more abstract and expressionist. His early works were more figurative; he also did a lot of landscapes showing the beauty of some of the places he has traversed. His pieces are large, at times from floor to ceiling.

Musing on his latest body of work, he said, “my current work deals much with the permanent and yet fleeting aspect of time. I see time as a mythical phenomena overlapping scientific and measured time. My work is about how arts and artifacts of diverse cultures have similar functions and meaning and yet may cause conflicts depending on personal and cultural perspectives. My work celebrates diverse cultures and their connectedness.”

Indeed, the artist lives and studies other cultures as he walks through the streets of Turkey and other exotic environments, including the lush hills of Jamaica's Blue Mountains. He absorbs the messages and passes them on to the canvas and students as well.

He is a tenured professor of painting and drawing at the University of Massachusetts in Dartmouth USA, and has been a visiting artist at over 35 universities and museums throughout the United States, Europe, Latin America and, the Caribbean.

The artist has works in collections at the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston, the Museum of the National Center of African-American Artists, the DeSable Museum in Chicago, the Bank of Jamaica, and has exhibited at numerous galleries in Boston, New York, and Europe. The list of public and private collectors of his work is staggering, some in private homes in Amsterdam, Germany, Canada, and Brazil.

It seems he was driven to travel the globe to pursue the cultural connectivity that he speaks about.

“By the time I was 19, having graduated from the School of Art, I felt a great need to see other kinds of art from outside of my own environment. I was always fascinated by Western European art and artifacts, and I desired to go to those places. I felt very driven and wanted to see other kinds of environment and the sources where that art came from,” he said of his motivation to travel.

### Free spirit

In fact, just as his work reveals, McFarlane has always been a free spirit. He left home at the age of 17, set up a studio in Mona Heights, exploring the world of art. “I didn't see it as significant at the time, I just felt driven to do it. I knew I needed to be alone and paint.”

As an outstanding art student, McFarlane became a recipient of the Karl Parboosingh Scholarship for art students. This gave him the opportunity to pursue graduate studies abroad, something he had dreamed of



One of Bryan McFarlane's earlier works, “Artist Eating Paint” 40x50 oil on canvas. 1986 (collection of the Museum of the National Centre of Afro American Artist, Boston). Perhaps, a kind of self portrait of an obsessed artist eating his paints.

as his talent unfolded. This he did at the Massachusetts College of Art, the oldest school of art in the United States.

Now as a professor, besides teaching the art of painting, the artist is free to create his own body of work based on the flexible schedule and working studio that came with the position.

“I never lost track of the fact that I wanted to be a painter,” he said, explaining that he spends at least half his time creating a body of work at his studio in Boston or on his trips home or to other lands.

But, McFarlane understood from very early that as an artist, a financial base is necessary, “so you don't have to compromise anything you do, you don't have to sell each piece as you finish in order to survive.”

Living his philosophy, he has been teaching from as early as 1977 when he taught art at the Jamaica School of Art before going off to Boston where he started out as a full-time instructor at the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts in Boston, several other universities in Massachusetts and Michigan, and finally as a professor at the University of Massachusetts.

### Fundamental

So, how does one teach art?

“Sometimes it can be theoretical, requiring some art history, philosophy and the psychology of art. I look at the psychology of perception, what people think when they see images. And, of course he teaches the fundamentals of art, painting, art history, sculpture and design.”

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McFarlane has received numerous awards, including a 1977 Purchase Award from the National Gallery of Jamaica. In 1987 he was commissioned by the Miller Brewing Company/Phillip Morris to paint portraits of 12 leading African-American journalists, which was reproduced in the Gallery of Greats calendar.

He characterised, through painting, noted journalists such as Bryant Gumble and Charlene Hunter-Gault. “It was a significant accomplishment for me,” he said, noting that the project and his work got a tremendous amount of coverage across the United States.

As busy as he seems, McFarlane has always made time to create his own work. He teaches two days per week, the rest of the time is his. “I guard my time very seriously, and I paint. I don't allow anything to come in between that,” he said.

He has also been the recipient of numerous fellowships and grants that allows him to take extended periods of time to create and pursue special projects.

“My work is fundamental to who I am.” So, the artist takes the time to reflect, meditate and produce his work that “may be just a suggestion of colour or a tone. It might not become a shape, hence the world becomes more abstract and less about the description of the physical reality.”

According to the artist, there is always a message in his paintings, whether profound or light-hearted. “It's about personal association. Because we bring so much to the form we view, and that has to define what we see.”

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“Shrine” 1999; oil on linen 50x50: From Minus 2000 collection of recent works by McFarlane, shown at The Mutual Life Gallery, Oxford Road, from November 13 through December 3, 1999.

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