

*By Land, Air, Home, and Sea:  
The World of Frank Walter*

Curated by Hilton Als

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Image: Frank Walter in his studio in St. John's, Antigua, n.d. (c. 1975).  
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## Water Music *Discovering Frank Walter*

By Hilton Als

When was it? Spring 2017, and there we were in Venice, at another Biennale. I had come to Italy to work with Victoria Miro on a little Alice Neel show at Victoria's jewel-sized gallery. The installation didn't take long, and I remember the rhythm of the day being more or less dictated by the sound of the water lapping just outside the gallery's main windows. I also remember reading, during that time, that Antigua and Barbuda had its first national pavilion at the Biennale. My family is from Barbados; of course I wanted to see what this inaugural pavilion might contain.

At that time, I had a more-than-cursory knowledge of West Indian painting, and I say "cursory" because, as with so much on those beautiful and brutalized, regenerating and culturally rich—conversation-rich, lore-rich, myth-rich—*islands*, there was much that was lost to history, largely because of the ways in which history had treated the Caribbean's inhabitants. As people not worth remembering, if remembered at all. As people with no history of their own because what did they—those islanders, stuck somewhere in a verdant world surrounded by their great expanses of water—need with history? Europe had gobbled them up because *they* had history, which is to say language and power; they wrote things down. Natives didn't write things down, and their passivity about place, their lack of knowledge about who they were in the world, meant Others could take what those natives didn't know they had.

Antigua had Frank Walter. I didn't know a thing about him that spring day in Venice when I arrived at the Pavilion of Antigua and Barbuda, but it was as if my eyes and my heart recognized him at once. Not only as a master artist, but as a maker of a universe completely his own, grown out of the richness and debris that sometimes characterizes the life of a West Indian island dweller who is not rich, who must make a world out of making do. It seemed to me, that afternoon, as I scanned the vitrines and talked to Barbara Paca—who had curated the show with such love and

energy and commitment to getting that part of the world known—that Walter did everything and wanted to do everything.

Looking at his paintings, none very large, all detailed, was like looking through a scrim at someone else's dreams. You could see every line, every color, but you had to peer past his poetic resolve *not* to tell everything, not to reveal all the world, but to show all the world in fragments—a palm tree here, a house there, a dog there, a woman here—because it was truer to what he knew: taking the fragments that life gave him, building on them and making it whole. What I recall, too, about that afternoon: meeting and talking to Paca, who was giving Walter new life in a European context—remember, Europeans wrote things down and were still a power insofar as places like Antigua are concerned; it was smart to bring Walter to Venice, thus introducing him to the larger world. The room where the work was exhibited was small, but it grew as I looked at the empty Polaroid boxes Walter had illustrated with paint, with his handprints, and then his extraordinary writing about lineage and his connection to the past—an Anglo-Celtic past. I saw, too, evidence not of heartbreak in his paintings and drawings, but the kind of hope that can break the heart and turn it sideways. A singular or rather unifying feature of the work was its loneliness. I don't mean the loneliness we associate with an "outsider" artist—which Walter decidedly is not, unless you count the West Indies as being "outside"—but, perhaps more specifically, the aloneness that is required to make art, or, more precisely, the solitude serious art requires.

One gets the sense, in looking at Walter's rivers and sky, that his perspectives were hard-won: he doesn't just look at a bank and water, he pulls back, rather like a cinematographer—he had a great interest in photography, too—to get at the poetic essence of a scene. This requires aloneness, and silence: you have to listen to your own feet falling as you traverse this or that landscape, looking not for the right moment but for the decisive moment that Henri Cartier-Bresson told us about so long ago and that remains vibrant in Walter's work. His art is filled with correct moments, even when the image is obviously a work of the imagination, as in his portraits of people. Part of the charm of his real and imaginary portraits is that they blend both the imaginative and the truth about this or that subject. He is awkward with the human form; it's as if he couldn't get his hands to see what he saw, which is longing, voluptuousness (particularly in the female figures), and also authority and the ecclesiastical.

When I started looking at Walter that afternoon, I just wanted to know everything about him; in a way, the work is all about him, and how he saw in a very particular way the blood and joy of history as it filled his eyes and shaped his hands and mind. He was an artist from the first. Francis Archibald Wentworth Walter was born in Antigua in 1926; he was a brilliant student who went on to help advance Antigua's agricultural system. Always hungry for knowledge, he immigrated to Great Britain in 1953 to study European agricultural systems but, because of the racist caste system, was viewed as an unskilled laborer, and treated accordingly. He returned to the West Indies—first to Dominica, where he effected change in the Dominican agricultural system, then returning to Antigua, to be what he had always been: an artist. There is more to this story, and Barbara told me more that long-ago afternoon in Venice, but what I remember most is looking at that work, which is about the articulation of a particular kind of experience: race without ideology, fantasy without apology, the natural world on its own terms as it meets the particularities of the artist's eye.

I remember leaving Barbara that afternoon now so long ago and thinking, as I walked along the Grand Canal, that I wasn't walking along the waters in Venice at all but was somewhere else, near the waters of Antigua, perhaps, with Frank Walter's hand leading my own, and his eye layered over the ancient Italian world I was in at that moment, filling it with bent palm trees, rivers, and skies that stopped only because the canvas frame couldn't take any more of it, any more beauty—but the mind could. As to Walter's mind: the injury inflicted on him in the foreign places he visited looking to enhance his education no doubt contributed to what one might call Walter's supreme point of view: he gets close to the green and growing world that made him and that he shows in these pictures, but not too close, the better to simultaneously observe it and protect himself. I don't know, though, how much Walter could protect himself; he was everything an artist is, or should be: without defenses, and enraptured by wonder. Looking at a Walter landscape, I am reminded of

the poet Elizabeth Bishop's "Crusoe in England," a verse about looking back and remembering an island where one is not inseparable from the facts of it, from memory:

*A new volcano has erupted,  
the papers say, and last week I was reading  
where some ship saw an island being born:  
at first a breath of steam, ten miles away;  
and then a black fleck—basalt, probably—  
rose in the mate's binoculars  
and caught on the horizon like a fly.  
They named it. But my poor old island's still  
un-rediscovered, un-renamable.  
None of the books has ever got it right.*

*Well, I had fifty-two  
miserable, small volcanoes I could climb  
with a few slithery strides—  
volcanoes dead as ash heaps.  
I used to sit on the edge of the highest one  
and count the others standing up,  
naked and leaden, with their heads blown off.  
I'd think that if they were the size  
I thought volcanoes should be, then I had  
become a giant;  
and if I had become a giant,  
I couldn't bear to think what size  
the goats and turtles were,  
or the gulls, or the over-lapping rollers  
—a glittering hexagon of rollers  
closing and closing in, but never quite,  
glittering and glittering, though the sky  
was mostly overcast.*

*My island seemed to be  
a sort of cloud-dump. All the hemisphere's  
left-over clouds arrived and hung  
above the craters—their parched throats  
were hot to touch.  
Was that why it rained so much?  
And why sometimes the whole place hissed?  
The turtles lumbered by, high-domed,  
hissing like teakettles.<sup>1</sup>*

The questions Bishop's Crusoe asks himself, Walter asked himself: the paintings are an inquiry into the temperature of place, the tactile sensation of ground beneath your feet while your head is in the clouds, or imagining clouds from a bird's perspective, and birds from a cloud's perspective. This was what I understood that afternoon in Venice, with Walter: he gives more glory and truth than we think we can bear. And then gives some more as we rush to meet it.

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