



As Time Goes On, 2022. Acrylic and pastel on canvas. 47 x 47 in. Photographer: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

STAN BURNSIDE

AS TIME GOES ON

Curated by Tavares Strachan

November 3 — December 23, 2022

Perrotin is pleased to present the first solo exhibition in the United States of work by Bahamian artist Stan Burnside. Born in Nassau in 1947, Burnside is a painter and pioneer in the world of Afrofuturism, utilizing elemental and mystical symbolism rooted in his heritage to explore the limitations and possibilities of the Afro-Caribbean experience. *As Time Goes On* is curated by artist Tavares Strachan. This November, the first monograph of Stan Burnside's work *As Time Goes On* will be published by Perrotin and Other Peoples Things in conjunction with the exhibition.

The following essay, consisting of four parts, was written by Yinka Elujoba after a visit to Stan Burnside's studio in Nassau.

PART A

Stan Burnside has been here for so long he remembers the days before the island got its independence: the long hours as a boy running amongst the trees, the voices of children gathered in the sun, chanting songs in praise of Britain, how every road led to the water. At age 75 he is now a walking memorial—certain histories of the island are only discoverable, only possible in his work.

He wears his sense of community like a cloak. When he speaks of the island, he says “we” even when he’s asked about himself. When asked about his life, he begins talking about his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his uncle. Only after a sense of lineage is

established does he begin to talk about himself. Perhaps this is natural, because it was the community that helped him discover that he could be an artist. First it was a deaf person who Burnside and his brother, Jackson, befriended in the neighborhood—a young man—who fashioned a gun and holster, like those of the cowboys in their childhood comic books, out of found materials. This man drew images in the dirt with sticks, wiped them away and redrew them again from memory. His unexpected talent fascinated Burnside and his brother. Later, fascination gave way to passion. Burnside began to draw, the early dabbling of a child, until one day he saw his uncle sketch a boat from an angle that made its insides visible. The world of perspective was unlocked and, along with it, a new world of wonder.

PART B

He has never been here alone. He doesn't want to be here alone. He thinks this when he returns to the Bahamas in 1979, after overcoming the initial impulse to become a dentist and instead studying art at the University of Pennsylvania. In graduate school he falls in love with Salvador Dali's work. He also, surprisingly, likes Paul Gauguin. His years in the United States provide him with memorable intersections: He meets legendary jazz musicians, including Miles Davis. He gets to design the cover art for famous albums, such as Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson's *It's Your World*. But back on the island, things are different: People are first, and individual fame—even when it's global, as with his close relative, Sidney Poitier—is secondary to communal well-being.



Protect Us, 2021. Acrylic on canvas. 47 x 47 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.



Critical Race Reality, 2022. Acrylic on canvas. 47 x 47 in. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

PART C

Surrealism is where he begins: Its hold on him is entire, yet he wants to fashion his own language, his own light within the crowd of artists who have worked under this ideology. Once, during a conference he attends, he hears the Guyanese artist Stanley Greaves say “Surrealism is an intellectual practice for the European, but for the Caribbean it is a way of life,” in reference to weird things like Black judges wearing wigs in court, along with other vestiges of colonial rule. This distortion in realities irks Burnside.

When he starts to seriously consider what kind of painter he might become, he realizes that he wants to not just depict the truth; he wants to depict things that are further into the truth. And what truth exists on the island?

Not only colonialism, although its clouds are ever cast over the relentless sun of the island. The island has a life of its own, its own atavistic essence that survived the manhandling of the British.

Enter Junkanoo: the island’s life force, the essence of everything Bahamian. The drums of the festival call to him. He dreams of its rich masks and evocative costumes. The local artists working with an aesthetic and a visual language impress upon him an intense, new way of seeing. He begins to work with the festival and, over time, becomes its leading artistic voice. He adopts its colors, shapes; its way of being rests heavy upon his brushstrokes.

The festival offers him a balance: It is another distortion of reality with its masks and flamboyant outfits and immense music. A preferred distortion of reality, one chosen by and created by the people themselves, influenced only by their undeniable African roots. The festival becomes his compass for finding a landscape that allows him to create work that celebrates as it mourns, bursts with joy even as it is contentious, and overflows even as it contains itself.

NO WOMAN NO CRY/WEEP NOT FOR ME, a painting he makes in 1990, embodies the dialectics of his thinking. There are four figures in the painting, all of them women. Three of them have masks as faces. The colors are an unusual mix: blue, red, orange, black, a sheen of pink. The frame is tight, the composition interesting. Two of the three mask-like

faces have a single teardrop falling across their faces. The third one appears bewildered. A small star rests on her blouse, in sharp contrast to her green clothing. But there is one more contrast in the painting: The woman without a mask on her face exudes a confidence that balances the fear and terror in the other women, a master fulcrum present in the canvas.

PART D

Around the house where he lives now are fields of grass, shrubs, flowers, trees. The wide space that used to be a living room now contains his large-size ongoing paintings, a new modification since the COVID-19 pandemic. To get to his studio, one must walk through the kitchen. The kitchen is filled with his tools for making art, tubes of paints, the usual kitchen utensils and his wife’s baking equipment. One gets the sense immediately that this is a house where work gets done and things are constantly produced.

It is in this house that we meet: I, a young African writer visiting the island for the first time, and Burnside, a 75-year-old Bahamian full of Caribbean wisdom. He tells me of his childhood, his father’s practice as a dentist amongst the people of Cat Island, his maternal grandfather, who was a great boxer. He shows me his paintings: photos of old ones now preserved in albums; the new, unfinished, ones hanging in the house. He is sad that in his lifetime he will not see racism come to an end. I am struck by how steadfast he has been for decades.

I am thinking about one of Burnside’s paintings now. *Simon’s Torment*. He painted it last year, in 2021, during the pandemic. What was on his mind when he made this painting? It has the dark hallowed colors of stained glass, and a male figure, centered in the painting with his head slightly bowed and his eyes closed. To the left of the painting, a black angel carries a ribbon with the inscription “Simon of Cyrene” on it. The original Simon of Cyrene was compelled to help Jesus Christ of Nazareth carry his cross towards the crucifixion. On the right side of the painting, the silhouettes of three crosses rise to the fore on a red background. We know when we look at the picture that the man is worried. Because he is worried, we, too, are worried. His suffering is instantly shared. This is the miracle of Burnside’s work: When we look at it, we know that we are not alone.

More information about the artist >>>

More information about the curator >>>