

Title

Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso

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Article DOI**Url**

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/paint-like-the-swallow-sings-calypso>

ISSN

2631-5661

Cite as

Peter Miller: 'Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso', *Burlington Contemporary* (1st February 2023),

<https://contemporary.burlington.org.uk/reviews/reviews/paint-like-the-swallow-sings-calypso>

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Cover image:

Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso

by Peter Miller • 01.02.2023

In the painting *Bacchanal* [FIG.1](#) by the Barbados-born artist and educator Paul Dash (b.1946) a throng of revellers are shown twisting, tripping and shaking against one another. Ochres, olive greens, dusty pinks and powdered blues are applied to the canvas to describe their costumes. The repetition of these tones creates a sense of rhythm, especially when seen from a distance, stimulating the apparent motion of the dancer's bodies. This is at the cost of their increasing abstraction, which climaxes towards the edges of the canvas, where the brown of the revellers' skin is layered gesturally over reds and lavenders. *Bacchanal* imagines a joy so feverous that it resists representation.

The crowd and the pleasures of its movements are key themes of *Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge. The exhibition explores the themes and forms of Carnival, centring on the work of three Caribbean artists living and working in the United Kingdom: Dash, the Trinidad-born poet and painter John Lyons (b.1933) and the Jamaican-born children's author and artist Errol Lloyd (b.1943). It takes a global, diachronic approach to Carnival, bringing together forty-six works from artists as diverse as Barbara Hepworth (1903–75) and Pieter Brueghel the Younger (1564–1638). Curated in collaboration with Habda Rashid, the Senior Curator of Contemporary and Modern Art, Dash, Lyons and Lloyd have selected works from the collections of Kettle's Yard and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, to be shown alongside their own. This approach affords the three artists the unique opportunity to contextualise their practices, situating them in a wider tradition of masquerade, revelry and pre-Lenten celebration. Broadly speaking, the exhibition is organised into three thematic areas of concern: the historical origins of Carnival, its spiritual and religious resonances and its proximity to the natural world.

The first gallery largely focuses on historical works, which are shown in dialogue with recent paintings by Dash. The engraving *A Dance of Fauns and Bacchantes* (after 1516) by Agostino Veneziano (1490–c.1540), for example, is a light-hearted pastoral, couched comfortably in the Western art-historical canon. It poses a provocative counterpoint to Dash's mixed-media work *Carnival Troupe Pays Homage to the Ancestors* [FIG.2](#), the solemnity of which is characteristic of a Caribbean Carnival tradition that approaches joy and pain simultaneously. The Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, for example, interpreted the limbo dance, which is

often performed during Trinidad and Tobago's Carnival season, as 'a necessary therapy' to 'the cramped conditions between the slave-ship decks of the Middle Passage'.¹ Here, the gallery space becomes a polyphonic space in which traditions from across the globe sit with and decentre one another as equals. In this way, *Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso* reflects the scattered history of Carnival itself, one that stretches from the ecstasies of Saturnalia to the catharsis of Shrovetide, and from the protests of Notting Hill to the samba of Rio de Janeiro.

Further connections between Europe and the Caribbean are realised as the viewer moves through the gallery. Francisco Goya's (1746–1828) *Soplones*, plate forty-eight of his series *Los Caprichos* (1797–98), finds a parallel with Lyons's woodcut *Soucouyant and Jumbie Bird*. Both works portray demons and mark the significance of mischief, magic and folklore to the Carnival tradition; in Trinidadian mythology, the soucouyant is a jaded spinster who turns into a bloodsucking fireball at night. The theme of spectacle is also addressed in another unlikely pairing: *Le bal masqué* (1782) by Jean-Michel Moreau (1741–1814) and Dash's *The Float* **FIG.3**. Moreau achieves the grandeur of a late *ancien régime* ballroom using linear perspective; a sense of depth is established through a series of arches and a mezzanine in the distance, the presence of which is a reminder that the masquerading figures in the foreground are being watched. *The Float*, a pen-and-ink drawing of a Carnival raft being built, is similarly focused on the physical structures that facilitate moments of spectacle. While making the drawing, Dash pasted paper over areas that he was unhappy with, creating an uneven surface. Such textural scars draw attention to a process of artistic construction that recalls the building of the float itself.

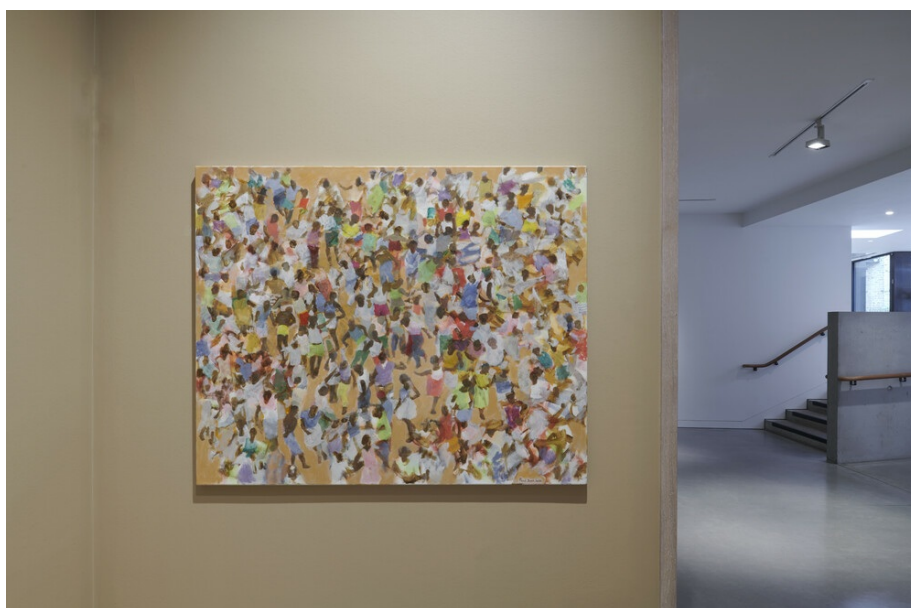


Fig. 1 Installation view of *Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso* at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2022, showing *Bacchanal*, by Paul Dash. 2015. Mixed media. (Courtesy the artist and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; photograph Jo Underhill).

Lyons's and Lloyd's works are the focus of gallery two, where they are accompanied by a roster of more modern artists, including Stanley William Hayter (1901–88), Fritz Möser (1932–2013) and Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011). Despite this period shift, there is a continuity between the galleries, particularly in the excerpts from the volume *The Carnival Trilogy* (1993) by the Guyanese author Wilson Harris inscribed on the walls: 'Fly, sunflower, star, feather, crocodile, cannon – to list a few spectres that haunted the route of the procession'.² These lyrical citations from Harris reflect the media – literary, visual and musical – that constitute and inform the Carnival tradition. Indeed, the title of the exhibition, the gallery text explains, is 'a reference to The Mighty Swallow, the performance name of the Antigua and Barbuda calypso musician Sir Rupert Philo'.



Fig. 2 *Carnival Troupe Pays Homage to Ancestors*, by Paul Dash. 2018–19. Mixed media, 69 by 64 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; photograph Jo Underhill; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).

The inclusion of Harris's writings also reflects his historical relationship to Dash, Lyons and Lloyd. The Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) was a gathering of writers, poets, artists, academics and activists that took place largely in London between 1966 and 1972. It was founded by Brathwaite, the Trinidadian writer and publisher John La Rose and the Jamaican novelist Andrew Salkey. Harris was a significant member of the movement, as were the artists central to this exhibition, to varying degrees. Lloyd was the most prominent of the three, taking part, as the

scholar Anne Walmsley explains, in CAM's first artists' symposium in June 1966.³ Dash attended the second CAM conference in August 1968 and is referred to by Walmsley as a 'core' member by January 1971, whereas Lyons's presence was more marginal.⁴ In an interview recorded for the exhibition he explains that he was 'out of London' but nonetheless 'in the spirit of it'.⁵ The context of CAM certainly illuminates the proud celebration of Caribbean Carnival that is on view here. In a paper delivered at a CAM meeting on January 1967, the Jamaican sociologist Orlando Patterson admitted: 'In my experience, yes, there is a Carnival spirit and we do have a hell of a lot of parties, far more than the average British person; and we do make a lot of noise'.⁶



Fig. 3 *The Float*, by Paul Dash. 2015. Pen and ink on paper, 95 by 59 cm. (Courtesy the artist and Kettle's Yard, Cambridge; photograph Jo Underhill; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).

Impressions of partying and noise are particularly apparent in Lyons's painting *Mama Look A Mas Passin* **FIG.4**, in which masqueraders spread their palms and throw their arms up in the air. Lyons's brushwork is choppy and loose, letting emeralds, blood oranges, pinks and yellows vibrate against one another. The artist's gestural expression shares the freedom and playfulness of his revellers, and yet he cloisters a jester in the top-right corner of

the canvas, a figure built out of crude, mint-green lines. The coarseness of the jester's costume mocks any form of sincerity that might be left in masquerade; it is a reminder not to take dressing up and pretence too seriously.

By comparison, Lyons's earlier painting *Eloi! Eloi! (Lama Sabachtini)* [FIG.5](#) is far more solemn. It depicts a brutal crucifixion, with Christ arching his back on the Cross in pain. In the wall caption, Lyons relates the agony of this biblical moment to the ecstasy of the dancing body in Carnival. His suggestion that brutality and bliss might be similar in some way, not just simultaneous as in the case of Brathwaite's limbo, is also implied elsewhere in the show. Brueghel's *A Village Festival, With a Theatrical Performance and a Procession in Honour of St Hubert and St Anthony* [FIG.6](#) is a monumental work. In the painting's bottom-left corner, a group of village dancers are entwined with a gang of street fighters, forming an S-shape. It is unclear whether the villagers are frolicking with glee or fleeing from the fight; perhaps it is both. The energy of their movements, regardless, is matched by the momentum of the ruffians' punches. Lyons and Brueghel share an interest in the potential for violence to resemble delight – an affinity made uniquely possible in the extraordinary, inverted world of Carnival. It is an example of what Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in 1963, referred to as '*carnivalistic mésalliances*', a phrase that describes the combination of phenomena that would be incompatible in a 'noncarnivalistic' reality.⁷

The complex agony of *Eloi! Eloi!* is exchanged for a more sobering pain in *The Deposition* [FIG.7](#) by Graham Sutherland (1903–80), another Crucifixion painting hung nearby. Sutherland's rendering of the Cross and the various saints that cling to it betray a Cubist influence. His painting is the beginning of a more concerted move into abstraction at this point in the exhibition: works by Hepworth and Avinash Chandra (1931–91) follow on the adjacent walls. The jilted rhythms and whimsical, humanoid forms of Chandra's *Design* [FIG.8](#) sets the tone for the explorations of dance pursued by Lloyd in the final part of the exhibition, as well as the organisation of these works of art on the wall.

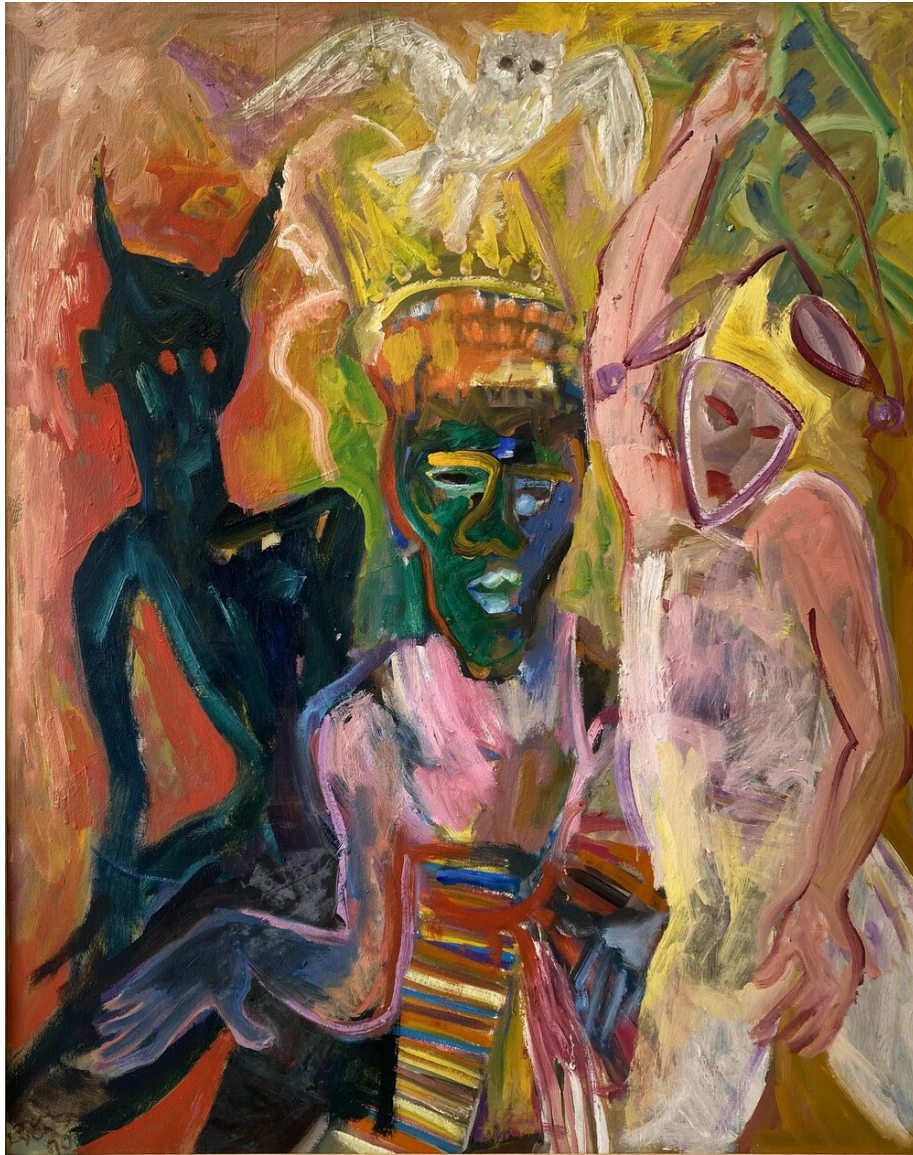


Fig. 4 *Mama Look A Mas Passin*, by John Lyons. 1990. Oil on canvas, 126.5 by 102.5 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).

The majority of Lloyd's works are modest in size compared to the large-scale portraiture of Lyons. His watercolours *Notting Hill Carnival – Mask* (2001) and *Notting Hill Carnival – Olmec* (2001) offer delicate descriptions of costume details. Lloyd's precision is a dedication to the intricate skill, time and care demanded in Carnival's production. The watercolours are hung in a collage fashion, interspersed with *Lyre Bird* (c.1943) by Ceri Richards (1903–71) and *La Tortue* (1940) by Nat Leeb (1906–90). The brisk mark making of Richards's bird portrait, which reflects an engagement with nature that is present throughout gallery two, works well with the abstraction of *La Tortue*, a painting that roughly repeats the scutes of a turtle shell against soft greens and bright yellows. The effect of the hanging is similar to the appearance of photographs on the walls of a family home. The intimate and personal quality is grounded in Lloyd's process: he painted many of his studies from photographs he had taken during visits to the Notting Hill Carnival in the 1980s.

The attention that Lloyd gives to individual costumes and details is carried through into his ambitious *Notting Hill Carnival IIC* **FIG.9**, which closes the exhibition. The grid layout of close-up portraits allows for the coexistence of multiple experiences of Carnival while retaining an emphasis on the individual. Although Lloyd's interpretation of Carnival diverges from the crowded scenes of Dash's, the primary blues, reds and yellows nonetheless disrupt the figurative montage of dance troupes and side glances. These basic hues augment, ironically, the vivacity and variety of those troupes. Abstraction is deferred to once again as a direct path to the ineffable colour of Carnival.

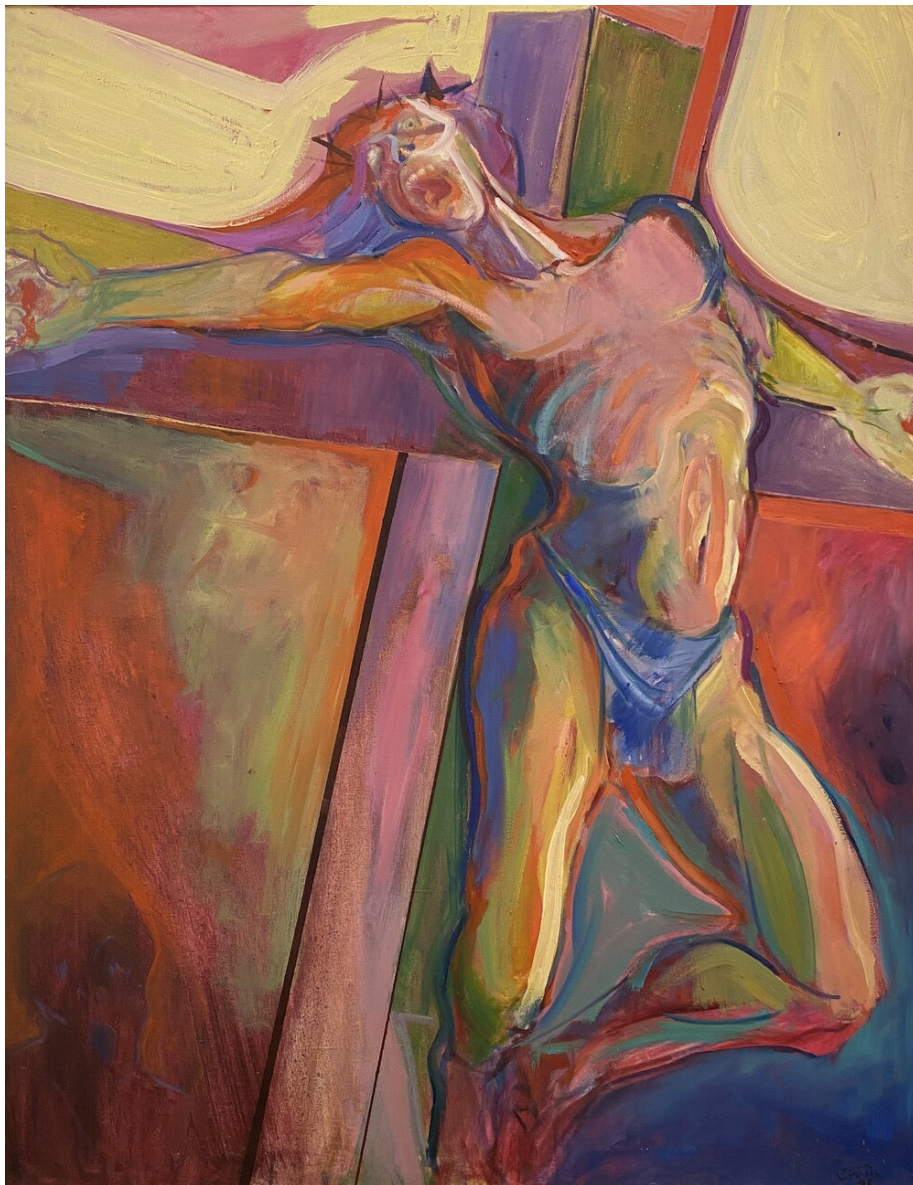


Fig. 5 *Eloi! Eloi! (Lama Sabachtini)*, by John Lyons. 1979. Oil on canvas, 102 by 129 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).



Fig. 6 *A Village Festival, With a Theatrical Performance and a Procession in Honour of St Hubert and St Anthony*, by Pieter Brueghel the Younger. 1632. Oil on panel, 118.1 by 158.4 cm. (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).



Fig. 7 *The Deposition*, by Graham Sutherland. 1946. Oil on millboard, 152 by 121.9 cm. (© Estate of Graham Sutherland and Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).

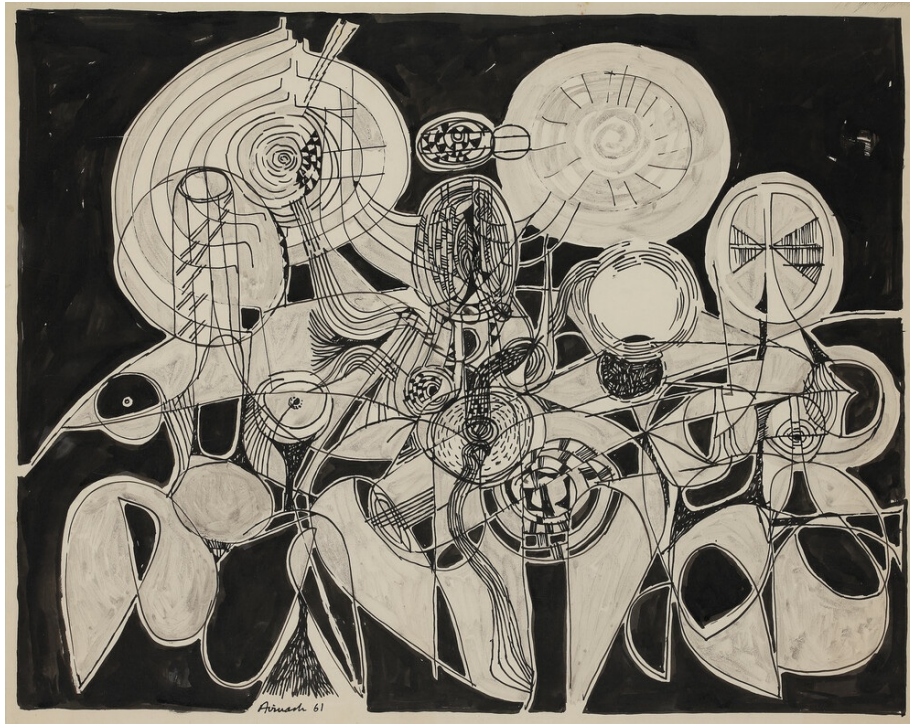


Fig. 8 *Design*, by Avinash Chandra. 1961. Pen, ink and watercolour on paper, 49.5 by 62 cm. (Courtesy Osborne Samuel Gallery, London and Estate of Avinash Chandra; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).



Fig. 9 *Notting Hill Carnival IIC*, by Errol Lloyd. 1988. Oil on canvas, 158 by 102 cm. (Courtesy the artist; exh. Kettle's Yard, Cambridge).

Exhibition details

Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso

Kettle's Yard, Cambridge

12th November 2022–19th February 2023

Footnotes

- 1** E.K. Brathwaite: *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, Oxford 1973, p.274.
- 2** W. Harris: *The Carnival Trilogy*, London 1993, p.116.
- 3** See A. Walmsley: *The Caribbean Artists Movement 1966–1972: A Literary & Cultural History*, London 1992, esp. p.80.
- 4** *Ibid.*, p.283.
- 5** John Lyons quoted from 'Interview with John Lyons', Kettle's Yard (11th October 2022), available at www.kettlesyard.co.uk/about/news/artist-interviews-for-paint-like-the-swallow-sings-calypso/, accessed 30th January 2023.
- 6** George Padmore Institute Archives, London, shelfmark CAM/5/1/2, unpublished conference paper by O. Patterson: 'Is there a West Indian Aesthetic?', 9th December 1966, p.2.
- 7** M. Bakhtin: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, transl. C. Emerson, Minneapolis 1984, p.123.

THE
BURLINGTON
MAGAZINE

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ISSN 2631-5661

The Burlington Magazine
14-16 Duke's Road, London WC1H 9SZ