Representing crime, violence and Jamaica in visual art: An interview with Michael Elliott

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Michael Elliott is a visual artist based in Jamaica. He trained at Jamaica’s Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts. His work tends to be realist, with acrylic on canvas as his preferred medium; he also uses the aid of photography as preliminary material for his painting and as a key tool in his representation of detail. Light and texture play an important role in his work, and he often uses them to create a sense of depth and atmosphere.

Elliott, Michael
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Michael Elliott is a visual artist based in Jamaica. A number of Elliott’s paintings make explicit reference to Jamaica’s high levels of violent crime; to the entanglement of Jamaican party politics and criminal organizations in what is known as “garrison politics”; and to the so-called “Tivoli Incursion”, the 2010 security operation to capture the criminal don, Christopher “Dudus” Coke, which involved the deaths of sixty-nine residents of Tivoli Gardens and led to a Commission of Enquiry. In this interview, the author invites Elliott to reflect on how his work connects to, and intervenes in, other representations of crime, violence and Jamaica.
role in his paintings, which focus on various themes such as politics, the economy, environment and warfare, which he approaches through non-literal forms of representation. His work has been exhibited extensively in Jamaica and more recently in Europe.

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Can you start by telling me a little about your development as an artist? How has your work developed over your career? Which other artists or artistic traditions inspired you, either in terms of style or topic? Are there any personal or political events that occurred that have shaped your work?

When I went to Edna Manley College (Jamaica’s art school) back in ’98, I didn’t have a strong social reference where my work is concerned. At that time, I was mainly developing my technique as an artist, how I would paint, how I would express myself in the medium. So I was exploring different types of work looking at various artists, locally and internationally. But one thing I noticed from early on is how certain artists would inspire me conceptually. For example, Salvador Dali was really interested in surrealism and I would use symbolism in my work with a keen interest in paying close attention to how I can use metaphors in my work to bring across my messages. I didn’t really have a particularly strong message when it came to Jamaican politics at the time, but a few years after I left art school, in 2006, I had my first major political piece of work, The Devil’s Currency (Figure 1). I showed it at the Biennale at the National Gallery of Jamaica. So Devil’s Currency had featured as a still life with bullets, a predecessor to National Dish (Figure 2).

Your paintings have a very particular style – photorealism, or hyperrealism – which stands out clearly from most visual work being created by contemporary Jamaican painters. Can you tell me a little more about how you developed this individual style, and how it relates to your subject matter?

I want the viewer to really engage with the subject, as if they are right there in front of it, like they can reach out and feel it. I feel that when things have a visual reality to them, it’s almost like it tickles all five senses. The way the light falls on it ... I want the viewer to feel what they’re seeing. I also use
light perspective and depth of field to really get in close to the image. I like when the viewer becomes a part of the image, becomes consumed by the image, like they can just walk into it.

I changed my aesthetic over time – I used to do quite a bit of imaginative compositions as well, which I don’t do much anymore. My work basically comes from references that actually exist. When you see a work like the National Dish painting, it’s something that I construct from reality. I put an actual gun in plate with bullets or candy, and I use photography to aid me
in that whole experience. Photography has a lot to do with how my work has got to where it has, not just in terms of my technique, but the point of view of how I look at things, how I compose things. So I am translating the experience of photography into painting. It’s not just how I compose, but how I deal with light and shadow, the various attributes of the camera come over into the paintings.

Can you tell me a little more on how Jamaican politics figure in your paintings? You mentioned *The Devil’s Currency* as your first shift to a more political emphasis. If I look at your series of landscape paintings, which feature crumbling infrastructure prominently (e.g. *The Beaten Tracks*, Figure 3), this really seems to be a record of ruins, a comment on the rusting and rotting away of Jamaica’s foundations. In addition, I see your paintings as drawing connections between crime and violence on the one hand, and entertainment, fun and games on the other hand. For instance, those works that feature toy soldiers, or teddy bears, or party favours (Figure 4), which reference political parties but also the idea of having a party.

My landscape paintings could be read as symptoms of the political. The whole ruin of things is a result of the corruption and the waste that has taken place over the years. Even in my landscapes I try to make a statement. After leaving art school I began to ask myself, “What is it that is important to me as an artist?” And not just as an artist but a citizen in this country. What is it that I can portray in a way that really tickles people’s senses?

I’ve used toys and board games quite a bit in my work. The symbolism is that politics is often a game to people, whether from the politicians’ or voters’ perspective. Well, we take it seriously in this country: it does matter.
“Garrison areas” is a reference to the violent system of political clientelism known as “garrison politics”. This system has involved Jamaica’s two main parties, the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP) and the People’s National Party (PNP), constructing housing developments meant only for party supporters; these fiercely defended party-political enclaves became known as garrisons. Local political brokers known as dons played a key role in this process of garrisoning: they received money and weapons from politicians in exchange for securing electoral turf, and channelled housing, jobs and other benefits to party-loyal residents, while to people who is in power in certain areas, like the garrison areas, it does matter. In some areas it doesn’t matter. And I use the game also as a sort of mechanism in art to make the piece inviting – it’s fun, right? – but it’s really a serious issue. It’s like something attractive that can really suck you in, but it spits you out in a different way, when you realize it has gone beyond the colourful and sweet presentation, all of a sudden it’s not so sweet anymore. And that’s how I see the political landscape in Jamaica. It looks sweet on the outside, the politicians come with promises and hand-outs making it attractive, but then you get fooled in the end. Hence the games. If you don’t know how to play the game you get caught, you get tricked.

Can you tell me a little more about your Donopoly series (Figures 5–7)? I am especially interested in how this work comments on ideas of who in Jamaica, or more exactly in Kingston, is responsible for crime and violence. How does your recent Party Favours series relate to the Donopoly series?

I did three Donopoly pieces. The first one (Figure 5) was the hunt for the criminal don Christopher “Dudus” Coke in Tivoli in May 2010. I remember it being an incident that in my mind had put Jamaica at a critical juncture. I thought to myself, the garrisons vs. the security forces again. Will it spread throughout the whole island? And how could one man in a small community cause such a huge fuss for the society and also to the United States? Then I began to think about the magnitude of the commerce of crime and the self-serving influence of the garrison structure. I felt compelled to do a painting about the Tivoli Incursion and finally decided that I would use the symbolism of a board game to represent society, with its citizens as movable pieces on the board. It became clear that I could use Monopoly as my template, as it
introduces class structure and even the threat of jailtime if a wrong move was made. The day-to-day survival of lower-income society can be a roll of the dice for many, hence I Jamaicanized this popular board game.

Episode 1 was my first manifestation of the Donopoly series featuring a heavy military presence represented as plastic soldiers that many children grow up playing with. This piece particularly shows where Dudus, the don of the day, had already been captured and the army taking control. If you notice, I also have the community names changed to Tivoli, Denham Town and even Arnett Gardens to put things into a Downtown context. The technique of photorealism which I employ in doing my pieces, I find to work particularly well, especially with the added depth of field, which brings the viewer up close and personal to the image. This method is influenced by my practice of photography.

And the Donopoly 2 (Figure 6) was the incident in Kirkland Heights, where the army went into an affluent neighbourhood because they got intel that Dudus was hiding out in Cherry Gardens or Kirkland Heights, around the same area, and they went there and shot up this businessman, Keith Clarke, thirty times or something like that. I found that story intriguing, that the security forces had crossed the class barrier. Usually, it’s a Downtown Kingston thing, where the police will go into inner-city neighbourhoods like Tivoli, Denham Town or Arnette Gardens, and they have a shoot-out with gunmen, or things like that. But when they go into an affluent neighbourhood like Kirkland Heights and they totally shatter the class barrier and do something like that, then people begin to realize, nobody is safe from this. So this incident that happened in Kirkland Heights was a very special incident, not something
JLP “garrison” that served as Dudus’ headquarters. The security forces killed sixty-nine people, although Dudus himself was not caught until a month later. He was immediately extradited to the United States, where he is currently in federal prison serving a 23-year sentence for arms and drug-trafficking. See Thomas (2017); Harriott and Jaffe (2018).

3 On 27 May 2010, Jamaica Defense Force soldiers searching for Dudus killed businessman Keith Clarke in his home in the uptown area of Kirkland Heights. He received twenty bullets to his back. Three soldiers were charged with murder, but the trial was halted when it emerged that they had been granted immunity by the Minister of National Security, Peter Bunting, in 2016. See Jamaica Gleaner (2018).

that you would hear of often. I personally believe that it was an execution. The police said that Mr Clarke was shooting at them from the house, they were outside, they were firing at him while he was shooting back. Yet he ends up with thirty gunshots in the back, how does that happen? How do all the shots enter him from behind, when they were in his front yard firing at him?

After the other two Donopoly paintings I felt compelled to complete the story by not only focusing on the (Downtown) West Kingston scenario but taking it Uptown. This chapter of the Dudus experience was so profound to me and left many really asking themselves again and again, “Did soldiers really invade an affluent area of St Andrew and pretty much empty their ammo into one man?” Over the years, we have been used to the norm of
the Jamaica Defense Force entering the ghetto and implementing their invasion and martial law. Donopoly 2 represented the magnitude of the hunt for the elusive Dudus and while some details on the incident remain sketchy, one could not ignore the fact that this catastrophic issue had engulfed all classes of society. In the painting, you can see where I have named areas on the Donopoly board representing the communities of Kirkland Heights and Cherry Gardens. Soldiers are there in numbers, pointing their guns with purpose.

I used the large red buildings to represent the type of neighbourhood being illustrated, and of course, I also placed the original luxury tax space on the board as in the classic Monopoly board. This whole Donopoly saga, to me, embodies not only what had taken place in that moment in time, but it encompasses a system that we have endured for years, the war between the haves and the have-nots, the gunmen and the gunned-down, and the orange and green. If there is one thing that has been clear to me, it is that politics can be that colourful game that draws you in to play, but the dice do not fall well for the suffering.

My focus in Donopoly 2 was how this issue with the don has enveloped all classes of society. That week in May 2010 in Jamaica was a defining moment in what a don in this country means to people. How desperate a government can get in protecting secrets. Now, I believe that the government wanted to kill Dudus because he knew too much, that’s something I’ve been told. Because the don is the only person from an inner-city area that gets a seat at the table with the big boys, nobody else gets to do that. It’s a symbiosis, it’s a very sad and unfortunate symbiosis, that we have to have government depending on the dons to keep peace.

What the dons are doing, they are like a local government that has its own order, they have their own justice system, and the Jamaican government depends on the don to do certain duties and tasks, which the state should be doing. If you go into a garrison and you have your bag with laptop or whatever, and it gets stolen, you can actually get your stuff back the same day. All you have to do is report it to the don, or somebody attached to the don; they do their own investigation and they quickly come up with the culprit. There is a trust in the don’s justice system, and you see the public sharing information with them that they are not willing to share with the police. The don is like a sugar-daddy for everybody. I don’t know if you’re familiar with some of the photos from the Tivoli incident, how they were saying “We will die for Dudus”, jump in front of a gun for him, die for him. When you can get to that level … no politician in Jamaica, in Government enjoys that. Nobody is going to jump in front of a bullet for the MP.

Following Party Favours, I did Curfew (Figure 8) specifically to speak of the ZOSOs (Zones of Special Operation), which is why I have it in a green plate, it’s a Jamaica Labour Party thing. This work on ZOSO tries to deal with similar
issues to the issues that I deal with in National Dish and Party Favours. They are also looking for guns and ammunition, that criminals will tend to hide in communities, and they want to capture criminals themselves, too. So Curfew is not really my way of saying that ZOSO is not going to work or that it is a terrible idea, it’s really a piece about where we are at in this country. Government has to be just kicking communities into special zones, I personally don’t see it. Everywhere in Jamaica to me is a special zone, whether high crime rate or not. Because one thing that history has taught us is that, if the security forces go into an area, if you go in and clamp down an area where criminals have wreaking havoc, they just move to another area. And that could be an

4 In summer 2017, the Jamaican Government passed the Zones of Special Operation Act and in January 2018, it established a new State of Emergency in sections of the country. This involved curfews in areas declared Zones of Special Operation.
area that doesn’t traditionally have crime. So it’s really a chess game where the pieces are shifting around, and you have to wonder where it is going to end, because we’ll be having special zones for a long time. And what makes them special now? Why weren’t they special before?

The government’s philosophy is that once you get rid of crime, you can build better. All the state and social services that are needed can perform better when you don’t have the rule of the gun. But they haven’t spoken about how they would tackle corruption. Corruption is also killing people, not only bullets. Also the police themselves are a big part of the problem. Many are involved in criminal activity, so all that has to happen is when the police are going into an area, they warn their friends in the area who are criminals that we’re coming into the area, “there will be lock-down and everything, organise yourselves”. And the government makes the mistake, too, of announcing where their next ZOSO operation is going to be. Like two weeks ahead of when they go they announce it, so the criminals have time to organize where to hide this gun or go elsewhere in the island.

Moving back to the Donopoly series, the third painting is called Donopoly Deception (Figure 7), and I was intrigued by those blobs on the horses. I see the how the orange and the green colours refer to the People’s National Party and Jamaica Labour Party, and I see some blood and fallen soldiers, but I was just wondering what the blobs on the horse were, is it chewing gum? How should we read those figures?

It’s playdough. Playdough is a substance that you can make anything out of it. You can shape it into what you want. The criminal elements of the Tivoli Incursion, including Dudus himself, they had to change their appearance several times to get past the checkpoints, dressing as women or old people just to get past the police and soldiers. I found that aspect very intriguing, the length that people, criminals will go to really deceive the police, and that’s why I call the piece Deception, because it was really the ultimate deception.

Donopoly Deception was a prequel piece that represents the escape of Dudus from (the JLP-affiliated garrison) Tivoli. You will immediately notice what appears to be some figures on horseback, although they seem obscure or abstracted. Playdough has the ability to be moulded to what it needs to be, just as how Dudus and some of his loyals needed to disguise themselves to make it past security checkpoints, hence “deception” in the title. The horseback elements add some drama to the scenario, as I wanted to depict the don as a “king fleeing his kingdom”. If you notice, on the bottom corner of the Donopoly board there is a Wanted poster to add to the narrative of the hunt, while in the background, blurred in chaotic bokeh (an out-of-focus
blur effect), you can see a cluster of soldiers active in the search for their elusive target while he disappears from reach.

The idea of Dudus as a king led me to place the bell crown on his head. So the green figure with the bell on it is Dudus himself. I used the bell as a crown on the head, as you know, the JLP symbol is a bell. The guy beside him, the orange one with the red hat on, he is an unknown element, what that symbolized to me is that sometimes both parties are in this together. On paper, people aligned to different parties may seem to hate each other, but in reality, they are really tied to each other. That’s how the system keeps going, no one party wants to tear down garrison politics, it’s working for them. I’ve seen for myself where you’ll have politicians on either side of the fence that shout at each other, there is media coverage for weeks about both snapping at each other. But at the same time when you go to a social cocktail thing it’s like they’re the best of friends, chatting and having drinks.

That point perhaps connects to another question I had for you, about how your work relates not only to current events in Jamaica and beyond, but also to your own position within Jamaica. Specifically, how do you understand your own position within the city of Kingston and its hierarchies of Uptown/Downtown, class and skin colour? How does that position, or the way you’re read, connect to your work?

I suppose when persons look at me generally they can say that I’m an Uptown person. I fit in the middle-class bracket. I’ve always seen myself, where it comes to garrison politics, the grassroots of Jamaica, as an outsider looking in. I am aware I don’t have as much access to certain areas in Kingston that I wish that I did. But what I recognize personally when looking at everything that goes down in this country is that anything that happens Downtown, positive or negative, it also affects Uptown. Because the more poor Downtown is, or the less fortunate, or the more they don’t have access to justice, the less safe Uptown is.

Also, I live in a mountain community just outside of Kingston where I do have access in a certain way. Maybe it is not a garrison community, but there are poor persons that live in the area, who could have even lived Downtown at one stage and could easily blend in a Downtown perspective. What I find interesting, though, is that I am a person who has dreadlocks. Sometimes I may have my foot halfway through the door where access is concerned, but then when I begin to speak now, my Uptown-ness comes out.

When you say you might not have access to certain low-income areas, precisely because you would blend in better in an Uptown circle, that gives you access to those cocktails parties where you see PNP and JLP politicians having a drink together. Perhaps that gives you a better perspective on other parts of the problem
or its complexity than someone who does not have that access. Also, when you meet politicians in Jamaica’s social or art circles, do they ever comment on your work? Jamaican art has long been political in different ways, engaging with the nationalist project or with the African heritage of much of the population, but more recently we are seeing much more art, including yours, that directly comments on party politics, corruption and state violence. Do politicians feel at all interpellated by the artwork?

Years ago when I did the first Donopoly, a politician with connections to Dudus called me and he said that he wanted it. I remember the day, it was very early in the morning, I was still sleeping or just waking up, so not in the fully awake zone. I got this call, didn’t recognize the number, it was this politician and he goes into asking me about the painting, and says how he wants it and stuff, but long and short, he really didn’t get back to me about it. I don’t know if he had a change of decision, maybe he was too closely tied up; the conflict of interest or something.

A final question – this interview is part of a special issue on representations of (organized) crime and Jamaica, and I wanted to ask how do you see your visual representation in relation to other – both visual and non-visual – ways of dealing with and representing crime and violence? Do you ever see yourself as being in conversation with the news media or with dancehall music, or do you see visual art as your own separate communication channel?

I think the two go hand-in-hand. For instance, I’ve been interviewed by the Jamaica Gleaner about my work and how it uses the art to portray crime, violence and corruption (Hill 2016). And at the same time, my influences have mostly come from articles and what I’ve seen in the news, like on television and social media. Social media has a lot to do with it, this is how I engage with what’s on people’s minds. When you watch the seven o’clock news, or read the Gleaner headlines, it gives you the current news, but it doesn’t necessarily give you the scale to which society is absorbing it. I think that social media does that. When I wake in the morning and I go on a Facebook thread, or go in the evening and see people talking about the same things repeatedly, something that is really gripping the country ... It gives me a scale of reference and perspective also, the different perspectives that people are putting out there, so that I can form my pieces in an even more clear way, and a more creative way as well. I don’t just take the news alone at face value, because the news can be wrong sometimes. But what I do is try to see the dialogue that’s transpiring, and the different perspectives people have. I formulate from that my own perspective and my work is about starting a conversation, not really finding a solution. I’ve felt that through art – the art I do – the dialogue can continue.
References


