

“This aversion to their creative history, leaves Jamaica open to the commodification of its identity by outside (European) corporate forces that see this opening as an opportunity to appropriate and commodify the Jamaican brand.”



...the Forest for the Trees

By Steve Jones

Jamaica arguably, pound for pound has contributed per capita, more to the global creative pool than any other country—think mento, ska, reggae, dub, dancehall—to its colloquial “language” - known locally as “patwa” (patois). With all that creative archive to pull from, historically, Jamaica has avoided its (African) creative past—behavior clearly rooted to its British colonial past—where all things rooted in Africa were seen and judged as second-class, denigrated, diminished, hidden; and all things associated with the Crown were high-class, acceptable. This ranged from Jamaica’s cuisine, literature, language—and art. This embrace of all things non-African effectively meant/means that Jamaicans were/are illiterate in its (literal) language, and daily artistic communication.

A few years ago, I had the good fortune to teach at the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts (Kingston, JA), and I witnessed this paradox first hand. Whether it was the visual art students I was teaching/advising, or dance performances that I attended, there were a number of times that these students looked to another culture’s visual histories, in particular African-American, to draw inspiration from. I found that disconcerting, given Jamaica’s rich artistic record and cultural contributions. Although I wasn’t surprised. The (social class) stigma associated with all things rooted in Africa is still very strong in Jamaica. As revered as Bob Marley and reggae music are today and have defined the Jamaican identity to the outside world—in the beginning, reggae music was seen as low-class, inappropriate, and shunned by the “uptown” crowd. To this day, Jamaica hasn’t reconciled that it is a bilingual nation, speaking both English, and Jamaican Standard English.

This aversion to their creative history, leaves Jamaica open to the commodification of its identity by outside (European) corporate forces that see this opening as an opportunity to appropriate and commodify the Jamaican brand. These corporations have become deft at exploitation, and skillful in their theft, and disturbingly skillful in repackaging this image of Jamaica back to Jamaicans for a profit.

It was in this state of affairs that, when I saw an advertisement for Puma (ex. 1) showcasing a brand of their running shoes. All I thought to myself was, “wow, how did Puma out-Jamaica

Jamaica?” To my knowledge, the only Jamaican input was that Usain Bolt required the ad be done in Jamaica, and employ a certain number of Jamaicans behind the scenes

The Puma ad was sublime in its composition. To Puma’s credit, they did do their homework—from the West Kingston locale; the concrete and zinc edifices familiar to all Jamaicans; the Wilfred Limonius inspired graphics (ex 2); Jamaica hand-lettered street typographies (ex. 3 & 4); the color palette. At the center of the ad is Usain Bolt, Puma’s global brand ambassador. The Puma ad embraced all that is Jamaica - the “no problem” cool vibe, the architectural aesthetic, the animated street typographies. The energy of the ad mimics that of its star athlete—kinetic, cool, larger than life... This is the Jamaican graphic and visual vocabulary that for the most part exists in the Jamaican underground. A subculture that is embraced, albeit under an umbrella of class.

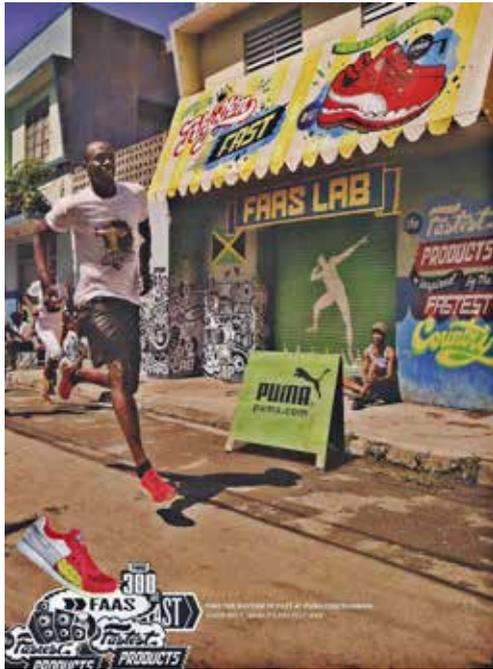
This construct is not a visible language that is part of the Jamaican mainstream. The mainstream advertisements in Jamaica are for the most part stilted and formulaic. Jamaica’s resistance to embracing its African-ness in mainstream visual culture is very strong—so to see Puma beat Jamaica to the punch, felt like a literal punch to the gut.

However, there are a number of promising young Jamaican visual artists that are bucking this historical amnesia, bravely and boldly creating work without apology that (re)claims Jamaica’s African visual source, positing it front and center. Artists such as Matthew McCarthy,

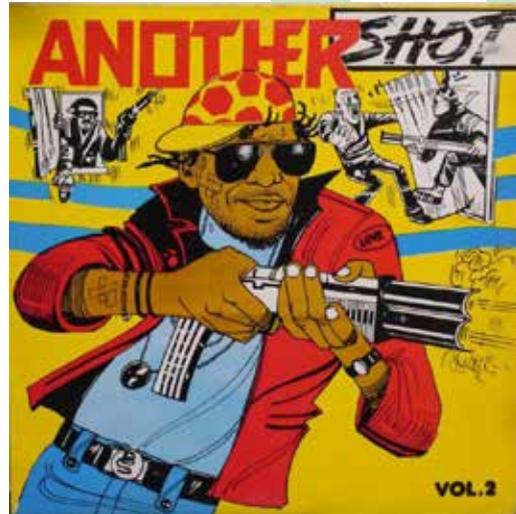
who combines his graphic design training with the history of Jamaican street graphics to create beautiful, kinetic, graphic compositions (ex 5); to Leasho Johnson’s dancehall inspired drawings and installations (ex. 6). McCarthy, though, has a sanguine view to the appropriation of a Jamaican aesthetic by non-Jamaicans, and corporations such as Puma. From an interview I did with McCarthy, he stated:

...doing work, and feeling that because this work has a certain way about it, and because it talks about certain things—it has a certain shape or a color, whatever it may be—that it should be owned by a particular country or nation or set of people. I’ve never been sold on that idea, mainly because I feel once something goes out there, and it becomes something that is influential, and influences mass culture... Puma (for instance is) a mega company that is just looking out or the next good campaign, aesthetic... It made people start to pay attention to Jamaica once more.

I understand McCarthy’s point-of-view, but still argue that a Jamaica that is in control of its graphic representation is infinitely better than an outsider coming in, and essentially, mining the culture and reselling it. Once Jamaica fully breaks free from the fog of colonialism and realizes that its language, cuisine, art, and design should not be relegated to the lowerclass, but embraced proudly, and put out on full display in its mainstream. Only then I believe will Jamaicans as a whole shed the discomfort of presenting it’s African identity first, and reflect it in its mainstream face to the local population.



Ex.1 (Puma advertisement, 2011)



Ex.2 (Wilfred Limonius album cover)



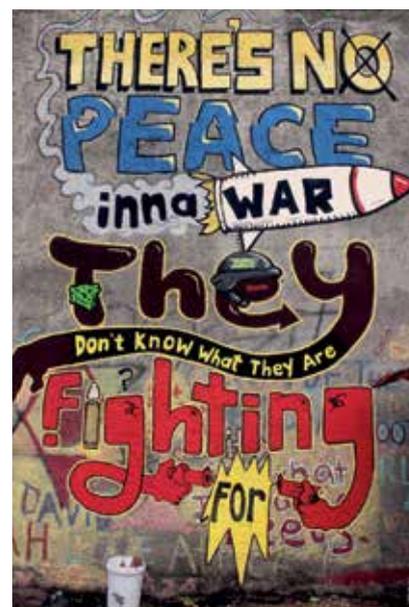
Ex. 3 (Photo: Steve Jones)



Ex. 4 (Photo: Steve Jones)



Ex. 6 (Leasho Johnson, Back a Road – The Session, 2013)



Ex 5. (Matthew McCarthy)