

FORUM
Simon Benjamin

Contributed by New Local Space
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Simon Benjamin's photographs are taken from an elevated point of view, wherein wide turquoise vistas of the Caribbean Sea are framed by windows of raw crumbling concrete. He gives us a filthy, decrepit interior punctured by a perfect and brilliant circle of light: our escape to the tropical seaside. Jutting out of the yard it inhabits, Benjamin's site-specific installation, Forum III, is as curious and foreign as its namesake is to the community of Port Henderson where it was built in 1973 and closed down in 1978.

Benjamin's trespassed visit to the defunct Forum hotel, shrouded in mystery since its closure, is the subject of his exhibition FORUM currently on view at New Local Space (NLS) in Kingston, Jamaica.

As an artist Benjamin has focused for some time now on the relationship of urban beach communities to the sea, a quest that he consciously began in places like Brazil, Mexico and The Rockaways in Brooklyn, and that has, until now, taken the form of crisp, airy abstract watercolours that convey a feeling more than a concept. In Jamaica everything changes however; and even with the sleek beautiful minimalism of Benjamin's aesthetic choices, the Forum hotel and this body of work cannot be examined without the weight under which the hotel's operations crumbled.

The generous open views Benjamin captures and shares leave us room to consider the realities of the way in which legacy and economy determine and qualify access to the sea by the people who live in close proximity to it. The structure of the hotel manifests out of Kingston, the heart of a tropical paradox, where class, economic interests and tourism bar the masses from much of the sea that surrounds them. In Benjamin's video work, which captures a lone man bathing in the sea from the towering height of the hotel, we see a communing with the sea not as a cultural rite but as a solitary act of defiance: awkward, unlearned, and resolute.

In its original short-lived inception from 1973 to 1978, the Forum hotel was to serve local hipsters and foreign travelers doing business in Kingston— an accommodation where one could have access to both a North Coast-like seaside experience as well as Jamaica's political and financial capital. The hotel had a buzzing nightlife, which included a famed restaurant, a popular discotheque, and no outward indicators of a premature death underway. The demographic it served bared absolutely no resemblance to surrounding and then burgeoning Portmore (now one of the biggest enclaves of the working class in Kingston's metro area). Benjamin's photographs

themselves capture the tension of attempting to cultivate experiences of luxury within the damning reality of Jamaica's economy of the time.

Now 38 years later, the Forum has been bought by developers, many of the units perhaps destined for AirBnBs catering to the adventurous and increasingly ubiquitous Kingston tourist in search of the city's cultural capital (however unforgiving in its harshness it may be). The profile of the ownership of the hotel has changed significantly too: divided into units that have been resold to people from the surrounding community— the offspring of upward mobility, two generations of whom had never known the hotel operating, or how it functioned.

In this way the Forum is a mirror and litmus test of Kingston's problems, progression, and the subtle reinvention the city is undergoing—a testament that, along with its culture, ultimately the city's tourism, and economy have no choice but to evolve.

Benjamin himself was raised in Jamaica but moved away almost two decades ago. Indeed, in this work there is a visible lack of naivety and the romantic fetishizing that an unknowing foreign eye might produce, and yet there is an unencumbered exploration and abandon that perhaps Benjamin's removal from the everyday reality of Jamaica permits.

FORUM is an ambitious and significant divergence within Benjamin's current body of work on urban beaches in its creation of space for considering not only the visual but also political and social design around the sea and the people who live near it.

FORUM is on view at New Local Space in Kingston, Jamaica until April 15 by appointment only. For more information visit www.NLSkingston.org or call 876-406-9771

About Simon Benjamin

Simon Benjamin is a Jamaican-born, New York-based multidisciplinary artist, who works across painting, drawing, photography, installation and video. His most recent projects are an exhibition at The Nordic Light in Stockholm, Sweden, and a commission by Tiffany & Co. to create several large installations for a private showroom at their flagship store. His current work explores urban beaches and their place in community. His studio, COURTESY- is based in Brooklyn, and he also teaches Filmmaking for Graphic Designers at the School of visual Art in Manhattan.