

QUEENS Chronicle

A Guyanese artist's mural moves mind and body

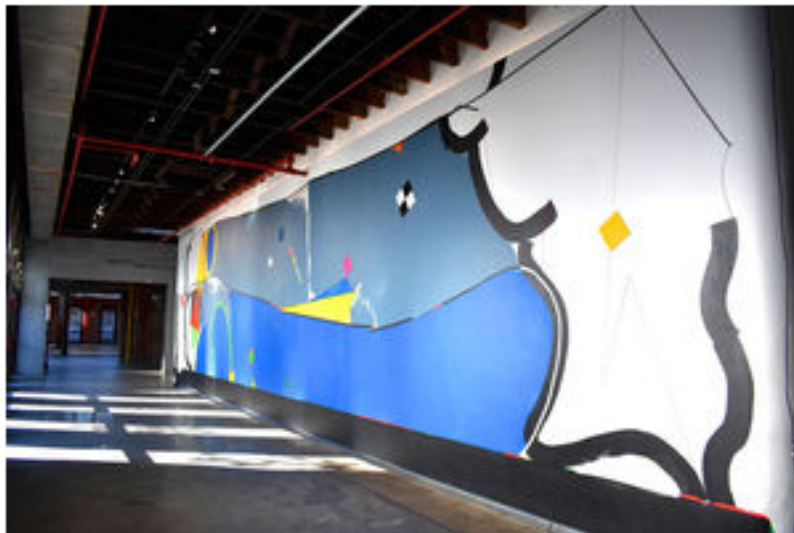


PHOTO BY NEIL CHIRAGDIN

Carl Hazlewood's 52-foot mural, "Traveler," is in a narrow hallway and too long to be seen completely from a single vantage point, leaving the viewer with different impressions depending upon where one is standing.

by Neil Chiragdin, qboro contributor | 0 comments

Flecks of gold foil sprinkle down from above, like summer rain. Oceans of blue divide a pattern rich in red, yellow, green, black and white.

Sprawling at fifty-two feet long, Carl Hazlewood's "Traveler" is a curiosity: A work that would demand your attention in any great room, the mural sits in a narrow hallway at the Knockdown Center in Maspeth. There it works differently, drawing the viewer in and out, causing passersby to pause, stay awhile and reflect. The entirety of the mural is impossible to take in from any single vantage point, and so the artist's title is in part a reflection of this reality — to appreciate the work requires the viewer to move up and down the corridor; to become the traveler. In Hazlewood's words, the piece "will have to be ... discovered as one moves (or travels) parallel to the mural."

But the mural has a deeper meaning for the artist, who considers his own position in the world as a "boundary-crosser of sorts ... not only that of an immigrant but also as black, poor, older" in a brief text accompanying the piece. Hazlewood is an artist of Guyanese descent, which is somewhat unique in the art world, even in New York, home to a number of Guyanese communities. The population of Guyana, a former British colony, is a prime example of the Colonial era: descended from slaves and indentured servants from Africa and India and taught English on a continent where the primary language is Spanish. Although loath to describe himself or his work as sociopolitical in nature, the project led Hazlewood to draw upon this history.

"It occurred to me that movement for a lot of us — people like me — from one place to another, from one social/political situation to another, is an inescapable part of our existence; from the enforced travel of the

Middle Passage, and now in North America where one dreamed of escaping the vicissitudes of Colonialism and poverty," said Hazlewood. He noted that the national conversation had centered on who should be allowed in or expelled out of the country at the time he was conceiving the mural, and may have contributed to his concept. Hazlewood also explained that the work reflects himself, adding, "I believe everything one does becomes a self-portrait, in a way."

Since "Traveler" is an abstract work, it may be difficult for a visitor who doesn't personally know the artist to connect the work to his narrative. Hazlewood seems to prefer this, as he believes the visual form especially allows poetic liberty — suggestion, rather than declaration. He believes it is up to viewers to explore the mural and form their own meanings.

Yet this work stands out for Hazlewood, who concedes that the concept shaped the form of his work more so than usual during his process. It's no mistake that the colors of the Guyanese flag have made their way into the mural. But, with the exception of white and gold, the red, green and black are also, according to Hazlewood, a reference to Marcus Garvey's Pan-African Black Liberation flag — a statement of pride. On the great wave of blue in the mural, Hazlewood noted that it is another great sweep of movement, one large enough to dominate the wall.

Reflecting on how his identity has shaped his work, Hazlewood laments that many Guyanese may not embrace art for practical reasons. "Who has need for an artist in a place where it is much more useful to be a doctor or lawyer or politician," sums up Hazlewood. The artist credits his mother for allowing him to pursue his interests in art and literature from a young age, and never telling him that they were unworthy goals.

In addition to his own work, he has created a space for others like him. In Newark, NJ Hazlewood and another Guyanese artist, Victor Davson, established Aljira, a Center for Contemporary Art in 1983. "Guyana has world-class writers, and artists (in and out of the country), though these facts may be little known even among other Guyanese," said Hazlewood.

For Queens residents, Knockdown Center remains a platform for unique voices in art that might otherwise be lost in the mix. Hazlewood's mural is part of Knockdown's "Fifty Two Ft" series of wall-based artworks, and will be up until July 16, when the gallery prepares for the next wall piece.

'Traveler'

When: Through Sun., July 16

Where: Knockdown Center, 52-19 Flushing Ave., Maspeth

Entry: Free. knockdown.center