

Wray Banker



Image: Wray Banker, 1996, *Oh! Ma Toe, 'Dis Fa Whelks?'*,
from the collection of NGCI

“I was raised at a time when there were not very many examples for artists and if you were good at drawing you did architecture; though I always knew I could and wanted to do fine art. I wanted to communicate in that way.”

The Artist

Wray Banker, who is originally from West Bay, has been drawing artistic inspiration from Caymanian culture for over twenty years and is well known for his keen sense of humour – something which he often carries over to his artwork.

Banker has formally studied graphic design in Houston, Texas, a background that continues to influence the work he does. Incorporating his graphics training



Photograph courtesy of:
Cayman Compass

into his broader artistic skills, Banker often develops his painting design ideas on the computer. Though he is often thought of as a painter, he has done work in the fields of fine crafts, industrial and graphic design, and photography. In addition, Banker learned the hand-printing techniques of collagraph and lithograph in 2002 at the Taller Experimental de Graphica in Old Havana, Cuba.

During his early years, Wray Banker's work was largely influenced by Van Gogh and Picasso. As he broadened the scope of his work and embraced the Neo-Pop movement, he began to also draw inspiration from more contemporary artists such as Andy Warhol and Keith Haring. He is a founding member of the local artists' cooperative Native Sons, which had its debut exhibition in 1996 and helped to launch a new era of art in Cayman, paying greater attention to the cultural and socio-economic contexts of the people of the Islands.

Banker has received several prizes and commendations for his artistic work, including the award for Best of Countries for both his 1996 Olympic Committee pin and his 2003 Pan Am Games pin. In 2005, Banker was awarded the McCoy Prize for photography. He has exhibited widely both in Cayman and abroad, and his work is held in various collections including Cayman's National Art Collection.

The Artwork

During his formative years, Wray Banker's work was informed by Van Gogh and Picasso. As he broadened his horizons, he expanded his exposure, and artists such as Andy Warhol and Keith Haring became an influence as the artist embraced the Neo-Pop Movement.

Banker's large-scale piece *Oh! Ma Toe #5 'Dis Fa Wheelks?* was started as a giant sketch on brown paper in 1996. He says of the piece "I was known as the paper bag boy at school. I like painting on brown paper as it's a good contrast to the white and black painting and is different from the usual colour palette chosen by artists. I really wanted to get away from canvas."

The artwork bears a clear resemblance to Keith Haring's dancing figures. "I wanted to make sure the Caymanian dialect was included in the piece, hence the title is part of the painting. At that time we didn't seem to celebrate our Caymanian accent, preferring instead to speak with some kind of American twang. I wanted to celebrate how we normally spoke and take out the unease that we seemed to have with our language," he explains.

Wray Banker's humorous take on life is depicted throughout his work, though there is always an underlying serious

message that speaks to Cayman's culture, a rally cry to ensure that this culture is constantly identified and maintained.

Discussion

- *Oh! Ma Toe* was created relatively early in Wray's career. Though his work was already being informed by Pop artists like Keith Haring, influences from the likes of Van Gogh were still apparent. Though the movements are Haring-like, doesn't the treatment of the subject in *Oh! Ma Toe* resemble Picasso's Cubist work?

Making Comparisons

- Visit the National Gallery of the Cayman Islands and view *3 A Lick No Taws (Ode To Milo)* by Wray Banker that is on display in the National Collection. Analyze each section individually. Compare these to the works of Andy Warhol. How are they similar? Are there any differences?

- Research Keith Haring's contribution to awareness on social issues such as AIDS, drug abuse and Apartheid. Discuss how Wray Banker has articulated social commentary such as the preservation of Cayman's culture. Compare the two artists' successes in their respective campaigns.

Follow Up Activities

- Complete a series of studies of an iconic, cultural staple from the region (such as Jupiña, a patty, VitaMalt or Cayman Pepper Jelly). Your studies should be informed by the work of Banker, Warhol, or both.

- Select a few other items to support your chosen subject - e.g. a brown paper bag, crumbs, \$1.50 or even a Pepsi can to support a study of a patty. Consider the associations Wray Banker used in his *Ode To Milo* series.



Image: Wray Banker (2005), *Ode To Milo* [series 4], from the collection of the artist