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Exhibition at Xavier Hufkens | Rivoli
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REVIEWS BRUSSELS

Frank Walter

Xavier Hufkens | Rivoli

By Camila McHugh



Frank Walter, *Untitled (The Eye)*, undated, oil on cardboard, 10 1/4 × 22 1/4".

“A couple of Oil-drums welded together, / A nozzle fussilage [*sic*]; and a rare fuel’s charge! / An Electronic Eye to see for it, / Radar to hear from it, / Velocity beyond the Acceleration of Gravity, / A Steering Mechanism; and a Spaceman’s Lot of Courage,” wrote late Antiguan artist Frank Walter in an undated typewritten text, *Man on the Moon*. This note was displayed alongside a small selection of other writings, including letters, manifestos, and part of a six-thousand-page autobiography, contextualizing the sixty or so paintings and handful of wooden sculptures that comprised “Frank Walter’s Chessboard,” a survey of the artist’s prolific oeuvre, cocurated by Nina Khrushcheva and Barbara Paca. Walter’s plans to build a spaceship—he considered himself “perhaps the first” contender

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in the space race and built numerous prototypes—were emblematic of the expansive and multifaceted fields of vision central to his work. International audiences first encountered the polymathic artist (who passed away in 2009 at the age of eighty-two), thanks to a retrospective curated by Paca in 2017 at Antigua and Barbuda's Venice Biennale pavilion, followed by another in 2020 at Frankfurt's Museum für Moderne Kunst. This Brussels show highlighted the range of vantage points assumed by Walter—a descendant of German slave owners and those they enslaved, and a man with a brilliant and likely neurodivergent mind—in navigating his experience of Antigua's traumatic postcolonial transition. He created countless landscapes, employed checkerboard and other patterns, and painted self-portraits casting himself as, for instance, Charles II, Jesus on the cross, or Oscar Wilde. A directness generated by an economy of line, a reduced yet vibrant color palette, and focused subject matter emerge as a stylistic throughline in his painting. His work proposes, for instance, wildly inventive genealogies showing his supposed relation to British royalty and lodges a prescient indictment of tourism's detrimental effect on the newly independent Antigua of the 1980s.

Hypnosis and *Untitled (The Eye)* take the eye itself as a motif. The dot of a pupil punctuates a pale-blue iris in this pair of restrained compositions that verge on soft geometric abstraction. While the oil-on-plywood *Hypnosis* is probably an early work made in the 1950s in the UK, the oil-on-single-ply-cardboard *Untitled (The Eye)* was likely painted after Walter moved into a state of total seclusion in Antigua in 1993. Like all of his paintings, both works are undated (he was not interested in linear time) and small in format (he worked on whatever scraps of surfaces he could get his hands on). Walter referred often to his inner eye—"Now I am awake and conscious and my inner eyes are fully tuned to optics; I am moved to awesome wander," he reflected in one of his many tape recordings—and these paintings take that portal to an imaginative interiority as a subject matter. He employed similarly circular forms in a group of tondos fashioned from Masonite and mounted with linoleum, asphalt, and other biocomposite materials that depict simple scenes of plants and animals. In the particularly captivating *Untitled (Beast, Red Land)*, a muscular mammal with deep almond eyes peers out of a rounded opening

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against a series of slanted horizon lines. Scratches and pockmarks riddle the linoleum surface, lending a weathered texture to Walter's vibrant and direct image. He based this sequence of paintings on a ship's rounded window after being imprisoned belowdecks and prevented from disembarking following an episode of erratic behavior on a voyage from the island of Dominica to Southern England's Southampton. For Walter, this period in captivity offered him a new frame through which to see the world—and later to process that in paint.

Contextualized with fragments from his many pursuits, ranging from a political campaign to epic poetry, from wood carving to musical composition, the dozens of paintings exhibited here felt like part of some ungraspable whole. By focusing on painting, the show positioned itself less as a retrospective than as the tip of an iceberg, leaving the viewer to imagine the greater totality that remains unseen.