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Gabrielle Schwarz

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“ REVIEW

Frank Walter: a fascinating, kaleidoscopic exploration of madness and creativity

★★★★☆ 4/5

The Garden Museum's new show of work by the Antiguan artist is a rich reminder of just how talented, and how complex, he really was

By Gabrielle Schwarz

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Frank Walter, Man Climbing a Coconut Palm

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On a smallish rectangle of wooden board, the face of a blue-skinned man appears in three-quarter view, his black eyes fixing the viewer and red lips slightly parted to show gleaming white teeth. He's set against a chequered backdrop: alternating squares of red, black, and yellow. For this magnificently surreal self-portrait in oils, the artist Frank Walter borrowed the colours of the national flag that his home country, the island nation of Antigua and Barbuda, adopted in 1967.

Except, according to Walter, his skin actually did turn blue when he first journeyed across the Atlantic to Britain and Europe in 1953. This was, he explained, a transitional phase in his metamorphosis from "dark-skinned" Afro-Caribbean to white European. Upon his return to Antigua, where he mostly remained until his death in 2009, Walter continued to lay claim to the racial category of whiteness. He also contended that his family was directly descended from King Charles II – or perhaps Franz Joseph of Austria, or Julius Caesar, or the Roman god Jupiter.

These strange fantasies found repeated expression in the vast body of work that Walter produced across his lifetime. And it is vast: there are hundreds of paintings and sketches, from portraits and landscapes to hard-edged abstractions (many of them done on the backs of Polaroid film cartridge or mosquito coil boxes), as well as carved wooden sculptures, photographs, audio recordings, texts, and scribbled family trees. A necessarily restricted – although nonetheless rich – sample is now on view in a UK institution for the first time at the Garden Museum in Lambeth.

It can be difficult to decide how to interpret this work. Did Walter believe the stories he was telling? If so, why?

We know that, especially during his time in Britain – where he was subjected to horrific racism and struggled to find employment, food and shelter – he suffered from hallucinations and underwent psychiatric treatments. Back in Antigua, some locals called him the "crazy artist [who] lived alone in the bush". But if Walter had departed from reality, perhaps he was also driven by what he felt was a shameful secret, harboured since childhood: that he was a descendent not of royalty but of both slave owners and slaves.

Then again, maybe the question of Walter's psychology is irrelevant. Art and literature have always occupied a realm where fact and imagination can intermingle freely. And it was not just his own identity that Walter spun into fiction: his paintings, for instance, include illustrations of invented plants alongside cherries and prickly pears. Caribbean mountains and coastlines appear next to the moon and the Milky Way. It's all intensely absorbing – sometimes overwhelmingly so. Like any great artist, Walter pulls you into a world so vivid that everything else fades away.