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ART REVIEW

The Odd Duck of Antiguan Art, in His Ecstatic, Expressionist Glory

At the Drawing Center, the revival of the Antiguan artist Frank Walter continues with a stack of his written archive displayed alongside his paintings.



Frank Walter's "Red Sun," undated, oil on paper (Polaroid box cover) in the show "Frank Walter: To Capture a Soul" at the Drawing Center. via The Walter Family and The Drawing Center, New York

By Walker Mimms

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In "[Frank Walter: To Capture a Soul](#)," a scavenger hunt of an exhibition at the Drawing Center in Manhattan, we find an aspect of so-called outsider art that is not easily conveyed in museums: compulsion.

Born in Antigua to mixed European and Black ancestry, Walter (1926-2009) at times managed the family sugar plantation, farmed in Dominica, ran photography and signage studios, worked in carpentry and framing, trained with the Royal Air Force in England, studied chemistry there and in 1971 ran for prime minister of his country.

And with mind-boggling voluminousness he recorded himself and his world: According to the Drawing Center, 468 hours of tape, 600 wooden sculptures, 1,000 drawings, 5,000 paintings and 50,000 pages of memoir and poetry fill his archive, now in Maryland.

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Walter's "Untitled (Palm Tree), recto Dream of the Vampires," undated, pencil on cardstock. via The Walter Family, Barbara Paca, OBE, and The Drawing Center, New York

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“Profile of a Man in Striped Shirt,” undated, oil on card. via The Walter Family, Barbara Paca, OBE, and The Drawing Center, New York; Photo by Kenneth Milton

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Since representing Antigua and Barbuda at the 2017 Venice Biennale, curators have sought — rightly — to restore Walter to art history as a neglected expressionist who painted a quasi-imagined Caribbean world in bursts of color, on recycled surfaces that reflect an artist's resourcefulness.

Claire Gilman and Isabella Kapur of the Drawing Center continue the revival. In consultation with the Walter specialist Barbara Paca, they have chosen the 220 small paintings, drawings and wooden sculptures. Walter rarely dated these works, and the titles are mainly curatorial. We also find a huge amount of archival and written material: poems, posters, notebooks and diagrams that we wouldn't typically call art.



“Untitled (Hitler in a Car),” undated, pencil on paper. via The Walter Family and The Drawing Center, New York; Photo by Kenneth Milton

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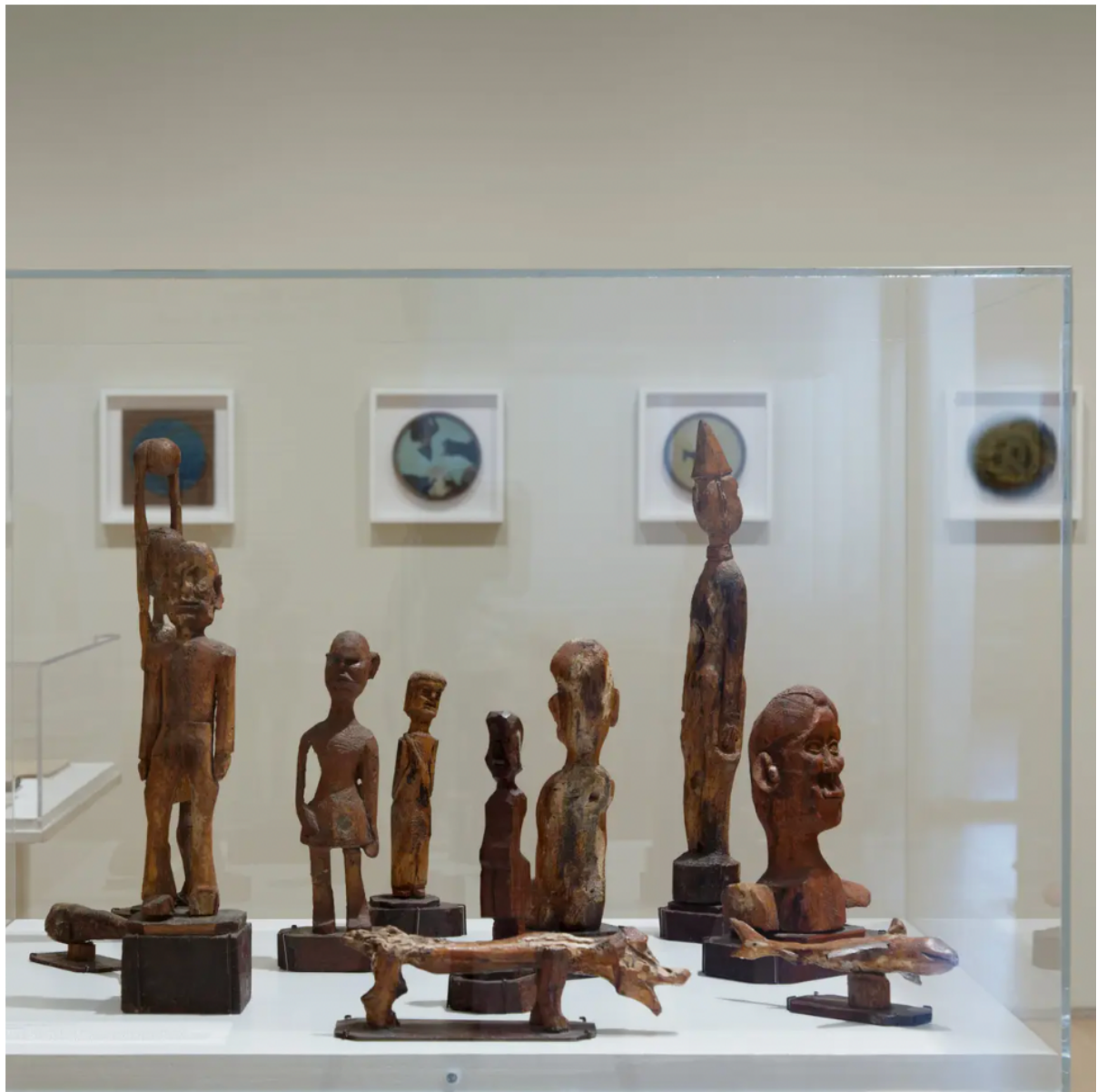
As an artist, Walter seems to have trusted his process the way non-artists might eat or breathe. Sometimes his line work is hesitant: His figure of an enslaved woman in irons takes on a crude and bizarre smile, as if drawn by a sadistic child. Elsewhere it's deft. In two pencil sketches on scraps of wastepaper, palm trees sway exactly as real ones do. "Hitler in a Car" depicts the warlord with his telltale sunken physiognomy, as an Antiguan guard stands by in a pith helmet. (Following the post-punk drawings of [Stéphane Mandelbaum](#), this is not the Drawing Center's first exhibition to include ambiguous drawings of a post-Holocaust world.)

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“To Capture a Soul” displays about 220 small paintings, drawings and wooden sculptures. On the wall are round paintings of dogs or sharks or landscapes. via The Walter Family and The Drawing Center, New York; Photo by Daniel Terna

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Very satisfying round paintings the size of Frisbees — depicting dogs or sharks or landscapes — are done on what Gilman guesses were pieces of automotive insulation.

But his commonest landscapes seem to be oils on postcard-size paper, on which Walter riffed hastily, like a musician on a three-part formula: daubs of water down each center, a block of sky up top, scumbled trees framing the scene. Loud colors. In “Red Sun,” the orb sets into a field like a daddy longlegs, its 10 long rays leggy in the wind. The landscapes on view work like exclamation points on the idea of Caribbean locale.

Most are painted on photographic paper, or in the small plastic frames of Polaroid cartridges left over from his photo studio. Which makes them an ironic sort of document: imaginary works done on materials designed to convey fact. Walter often painted from memory, Gilman writes.



Among the many small works on view are the landscapes and slogans Walter painted on Polaroid cartridges left over from his photo studio. They are “imaginary works done on materials designed to convey fact,” our critics writes. via The Walter Family and The Drawing Center, New York; Photo by Daniel Terna

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In addition to graphic works, there are scores for Walter's autobiographical allegory, "The Jupiterian Opera." Then there are his schematics for cabinetry, an unpublished memoir stacked up to my chest in typescript, handwritten poems that ruminate on free will in an end-rhymed meter reminiscent of William Wordsworth. "Whether the soul is bodily bound or free," one goes, "a binding force our lives, does keep." Was he polymath or dilettante? Not enough is shown for an answer, but plenty to demand your attention.

A further 200 pieces of ephemera — some from his hand, some taken from magazines and elsewhere — divide the gallery in two tall collage-style walls, like an archival version of [Lyle Ashton Harris](#)'s object arrangements on view at the Queens Museum.



Two tall collages of ephemera from Frank Walter's archive. Shown here, Walter's hand-painted signs for his friends in Antigua mingle with his family trees, a poster for his prime minister campaign, and a flier of the island music hero Bob Marley. via The Walter Family and The Drawing Center, New York; Photo by Daniel Terna

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This yard-sale scope is the Drawing Center's particular contribution to the Walter mythos. Equal space for writings and pictures suggests that Walter was not just a painter awaiting a curator in obscurity, as museums tend to think of such [outliers](#), but rather a documentarian of every conceivable mode, unable to quench the urge.

Even when facts were scarce. In Walter's many family trees on view, posters that bulge and balance as if under a weight, Walter has crammed his ancestors and their vital dates in tiny pencil, all the way back — dubiously, the catalog explains — through King Charles II to the monarchs of medieval France.



"Egg," undated, photocopy. via The Walter Family and The Drawing Center, New York

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“Untitled (Heraldic Red Beast),” undated, oil on cardboard. via The Walter Family and The Drawing Center, New York

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Is it wishful thinking or humor? Walter started having hallucinations at age 28. Maybe his inventions reflect the adaptation reflex described by the colonial theorist Frantz Fanon in “Black Skin, White Masks.” Rejecting his African ancestry, Walter deemed his fellow Black islanders to be an adapted form of Europeans called “Europoids.” His notebooks show an obsession with British heraldry, armor, peerage and law. In his written recollections he comes across as a loner at home and a victim of racism abroad.

All artists take license, though Walter’s Antigua seems especially fertile ground for it. He was a rare plantation manager of color, a British subject who lived well into the island’s independence, a descendant of both enslavers and enslaved — and thus spiritually entitled to a British culture kept out of his reach. Fanon also said “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World.” He meant through forced labor and resources like sugar, but the rampant metabolism of the Drawing Center suggests a subject so eager to repossess the colonial realities into which he was born that he enlarged his private world to accommodate them. Who’s to say it wasn’t real?

Frank Walter: To Capture a Soul

Through Sept. 15, the Drawing Center, 35 Wooster Street, Manhattan; 212-219-2166; drawingcenter.org.

A correction was made on Aug. 19, 2024: An earlier version of this review misidentified the Caribbean country where Frank Walter farmed. It was in Dominica, not the Dominican Republic.
