



Local Colors

THE BIGGEST RESORT IN THE BAHAMAS IS A MAJOR SHOWCASE OF THE ISLANDS' ARTISTIC HERITAGE.

The first phase of Baha Mar (bahamar.com) resort destination opened in April 2017, stretching along two miles of coast west of downtown Nassau. Three hotels face the sea—a Grand Hyatt flanked by an SLS and a Rosewood—together offering 2,300 rooms. The 1,000-acre campus features palm-lined paths that wind past pools to the silky beach, a Jack Nicklaus Signature golf course, dozens of restaurants and bars, a strip of upscale retail outlets, and an enormous 100,000-square-foot casino and 200,000-square-foot conference center, both the largest in the Caribbean.

The multibillion-dollar project is one of the largest hospitality investments in the Western Hemisphere and will be one of the Bahamas' largest employers, with a staff of more than 5,000 manning a business projected to generate 12 percent of the islands' GDP within three years of being fully operational. Former Prime Minister Perry G. Christie has called Baha Mar "critical to the economic viability of our national economy." Moreover, the resort is proving to be a major player in another component of Bahamian life: as one of the country's most important art patrons.

Luxury brands tend to supplant local culture with their own style and ambiance, but Baha Mar's owners, Hong Kong-based Chow Tai Fook Enterprises Ltd., are taking a different approach by blending Bahamian culture into the resort's leisure and gaming mix. In addition to assembling a noteworthy collection of native art and commissioning new work by island artists, the resort is running a gallery with art-educational programs and displaying the largest-ever presentation of Bahamian art.

The art program, called The Current, is led by John Cox, former curator at the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas. Cox not only selects the more than 6,000 Bahamian works (unique and multiples)

installed throughout the complex but operates the commercial gallery with changing exhibitions, residencies for local and international artists, an art library, art-making classes, lectures, and film screenings, all of which are open to guests, including children. The idea is to foster creative exchange between guests and the local arts community, but these activities also position Baha Mar as a juggernaut buyer of Bahamian art.

The resort has acquired playing card-themed paintings by Kendall Hanna, flamingo paintings and landscapes by Lynn Parotti, abstract seascapes by John Paul, music-themed paintings by Maxwell Taylor recalling the Over the Hill neighborhood of Nassau, and wildly colorful collaborative canvases by Stan Burnside, Antonius Roberts, and John Beadle. Cox has his own acrylic silkscreen paintings on display, along with works by John Paul, Brent Malone, Tessa Whitehead, Dominique Knowles, Janeen Walker, and Dom Cant, among many others.

Filling the public spaces of the Performing Arts & Convention Center, the long-term Fairwind exhibition assembles approximately 350 works that tell the story of Bahamian art, from colonial times to today. The chapters range from Columbus' discovery of the New World (he landed first in the Bahamas in 1492) to European influence on Bahamian art and Afro-Caribbean themes. There are also landscape, nautical, piracy, and Bahamian life subjects, including the carnival-like Junkanoo Festival, women in society, and



photographic portraits. Slated to be fully installed this summer, the show promises to include a number of artists with international reputations, such as Tavares Strachan and Lavar Munroe

(both of whom have been in the Venice Biennale), Janine Antoni, Heino Schmid, Dave Smith, and intuitive artists Amos Ferguson and Wellington Bridgewater.

To create the landmark survey, Cox is borrowing around 200 works from the holdings of Dawn Davies, a private collector with several thousand Bahamian artworks (few of which are publicly displayed). By comparison, the National Art Gallery of the Bahamas, founded only 14 years ago, has a modest collection of 450 works. Only a handful of those can be shown at once in the institution's colonial house in downtown Nassau. The nearby D'Aguilar Art Foundation, conserving 1,350 primarily Bahamian works amassed by the late collector Vincent D'Aguilar, offers temporary shows, but not on the scale undertaken at Baha Mar.

How important the resort's art program will be to conference attendees and guests remains to be seen, but Baha Mar is already playing a prominent role in promoting Bahamian visual culture. "We feel a responsibility to provide our guests access to Bahamian art and a glimpse into the everyday life of our artists," says Baha Mar president Graeme Davis. "Working with John Cox and local artists is a way for us to honor the culture and recognize the exemplary work coming out of the Bahamas, while providing guests access to the top thinkers, artists, and visionaries here." —Jason Edward Kaufman ▶