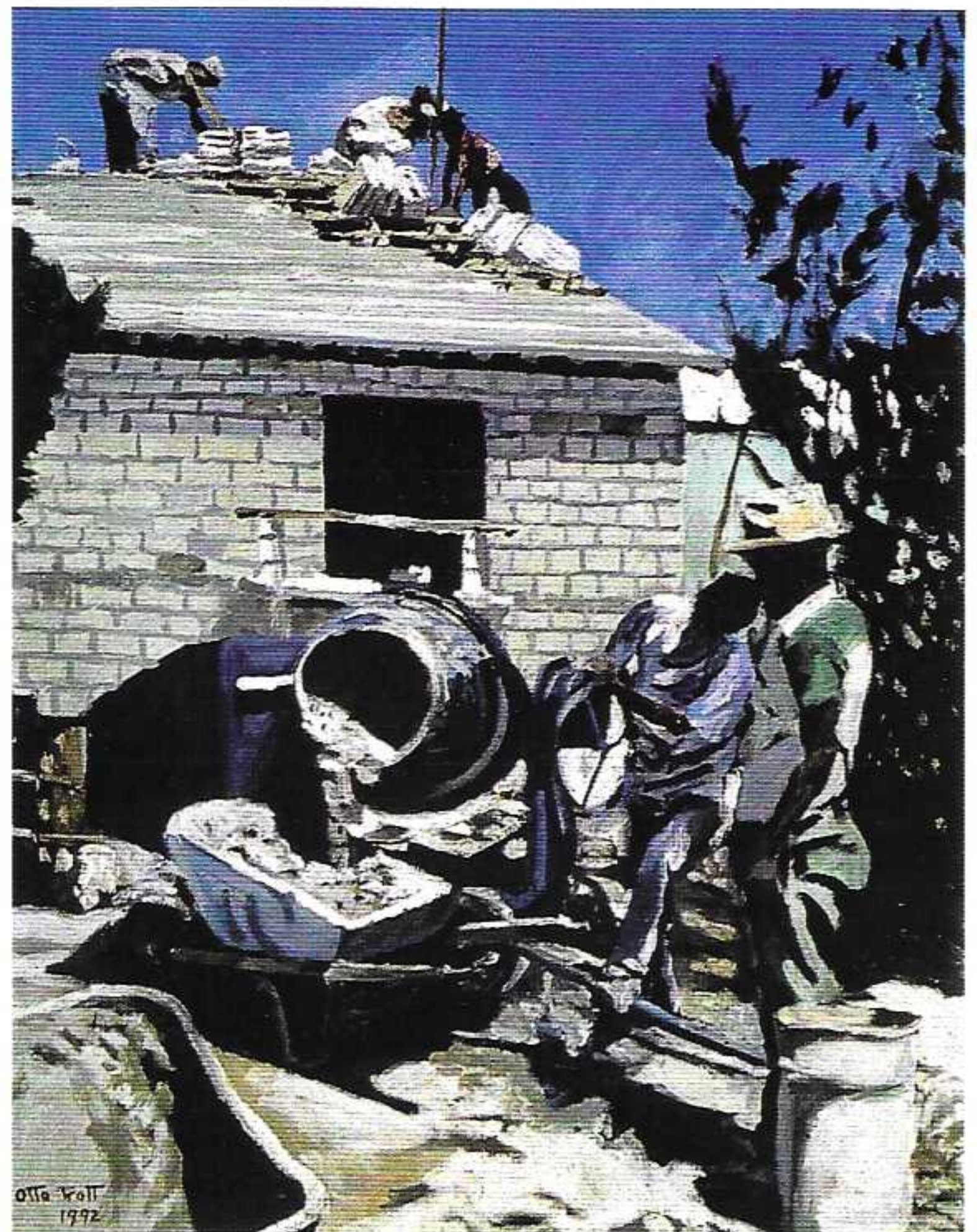


La Madre e Hijo (The Mother and Son), 1992, oil on canvas, by Israel Uck, Belize.



Builders, 1992, oil on linen, by Otto Trott, Bermuda.

ARTS HELP HEAL BERMUDA'S IDENTITY CRISIS

FOR A LONG TIME NOW, WE HAVE BEEN aware of Bermuda's "identity crisis." Our government has recently passed parliamentary motions regarding the Referendum on Independence. The desire for independence is a struggling cry for group identity, but how can we possibly entertain such hyperbole without learning about our fundamental selves and strengthening those first? Bermuda no longer can survive on notions of "separateness," and Bermudian identity aside, our tenuous notions of self are being fundamentally



Cavepool Walsingham, 1992, pastels, by Vaughan Alan Evans, Bermuda.

challenged by our participation in an exploding world communications environment. How can we expect to survive, independent or otherwise, as Bermuda in such a world?

We are forced to realise just how insignificant we are in the context of such an environment; not only are we overwhelmed by the sheer volume of information available to us but also by the speed of access to such information. We need to develop confidence in our own perception and direction in

sorting this information. In such a shrinking world where ability to process information determines success, we would be far better served, like our vast neighbour the United States, by promoting individual responsibility and self-development.

To begin with, what is "Bermudian?" We are of a multicultural origin: African, British, Portuguese, and others, living in a British colony with British and Caribbean traditions, fully exposed to the American market. Our society is transparent in that all but a fraction of television programming aired is from the U.S., and we play host to more than eight times our number of visitors annually. Our post-secondary education is mostly completed outside Bermuda. Our frame of reference, of historical necessity, has been external. So what is "Bermudian?" ►

BY DANIEL C. DEMPSTER

Although we might point to sports and traditions as evidence of "Bermudian" society, there is very little recorded about the way we think, and this is the crux of the matter.

The arts have a symbiotic relationship with the other aspects that "define" a society's greater culture: Its sports, religions, sciences, industry and trade, military, sociology, architecture, customs and traditions. The arts observe and learn from society, and society learns about itself from the arts.

The existence and encouragement of the arts is vital for the development of our society's self-expression and understanding of itself. It is through expression in the arts that an image of society is created that may be referred to; it is through the arts that we may say: "Yes, that is the way we thought in 1991, 1992 ..." and even where there is disagreement, there exists a frame of reference from which to argue and debate. It is this healthy self-reference and debate which allows us to improve upon ourselves and develop confidence.

The arts teach us individually to develop confidence in our own thoughts and intuition. Consider a child's art education. If a child has an idea, then he or she is able to draw, paint or sculpt it, and gives expression to thoughts. By expressing an idea, and putting it up on his bedroom wall, that child then has physically altered his or her immediate environment. The child very early on learns to understand it is possible to change one's environment by one's thoughts—a very powerful concept.

The child subsequently learns how to edit his or her own work to further shape thoughts and realises it is safe to choose, take up and discard thoughts at will. The child soon learns other children have entirely different thoughts. The child learns how to communicate ideas through critique and debate. Through constructive critique of his or her own and others' thoughts without feeling threatened by them. Through debate the child learns of others' ideas; he or she broadens the mind by learning from others' thoughts and they from the child's. The child learns his thoughts are thoughts, not a definition of self.

The child also develops self-discipline and intellectual self-reliance. Regardless of what field the young person decides to pursue, confident creativity and the ability to communicate well

can only improve his or her standard of life and contribution to others.

Because we have not historically had much use for thinking at all, our culturally-related values, ethics and judgments have been imported without filtering or question. We have imported literally wholesale cultural ideas without stopping to see if they would even apply to Bermuda. If they do, on what scale should they be applied? We have applied other societies' debates and conclusions without the benefit of healthy debate. Why? Because if it's bigger it's better. We are guilty of cultural plagiarism. Why? Because thinking is not cool. Why? Because there is no perceived use for it. Why? Because there is no obvious perceived reward in it. Why? Because we are not taught otherwise.

Luckily some of the Island's leading arts institutions have already begun to actively reward Bermudian creativity. Without disregarding additional developments in music, theatre, writing and dance, in the visual arts there are highly visible examples of this.

The Bermuda National Gallery mounted its first "Best of Bermuda" juried exhibition last year. Among a series of notable shows since its opening in 1992, the gallery mounted a major one-man show of Bill "Mussey" Ming's sculptures.

The Masterworks Foundation has finally begun honouring its commitment to encouraging contemporary Bermudian artists by mounting a series of two-week exhibitions of young professionals in its Front Street gallery. The Masterworks Collection, itself, shown in the National Gallery, is a testament to the interest Bermuda had for some of the most important figures in 20th-Century art. We can take pride in this record of Bermuda. Our light, climate and landscape have attracted and influenced such famous artists as O'Keeffe, Gleizes, Demuth, Webster, Homer, Senat and Bush, who were tremendous influences in their own countries. Those famous artists found Bermuda important. By seeing first-hand what other societies found of great value in these artists, and seeing their connection to Bermuda, we begin to understand the very important role of art and creativity in our own society.

WedCo and the Bermuda Arts Centre at Dockyard have been very active in their innovative approach to

promotion of the arts in the West End. Both have shown a willingness to talk with artists, provide space for the young "MOSAIC" art group, stage a large annual summer show in the Cooper's yard and take a broadminded approach to exhibition.

We are also fortunate to have the Bermuda Society of Arts. Under its constitution, non-Bermudian residents must become members and pay the Society a commission on their works. They will then be protected under immigration law in producing their work without interfer-

ence. We need this openness to allow for the free exchange and display of art in Bermuda. The Island's culture is a reflection of impressions from all segments of society, and as such, creative work by all of us, Bermudian and non-Bermudian resident, needs to be fostered and encouraged.

By far the most encouraging sign of cultural development in Bermuda is not what has been done for people but what they are beginning to do for themselves. The growing emergence of individual responsibility and self-development with the will, determination and vision to raise standards and to prevail, despite popular indifference or negativity, is an enormously positive premonition of Bermuda's future. ■

Daniel C. Dempster is a local conceptual artist, best known for his coloured pencil studies of water and light. A member of Mensa, he is currently showing his sculpture at the Fulcrum Gallery in New York's SoHo, beneath the Guggenheim Museum.