

MARCEL PINAS

The art of Marcel Pinas

Staying up to date on the developments in the art career of Surinamese artist Marcel Pinas, requires continuous effort. For years now Marcel is known as an artist strongly dedicated to his culturally inspired theme; a theme with which he has managed to put the unique maroon culture in Suriname and also the country itself, on the map in many places around the world. That has been his purpose all along; to give the culture and its vulnerability to our rapidly changing modern World, the attention it deserves and by doing so, contributing to the preservation of its cultural wealth and traditions, and protecting it from eventually disappearing altogether.

At the same time however, Marcel Pinas is also determined to make his art, and art in general, accessible to the Surinamese public. Because museums and galleries in Suriname are traditionally not visited by a large part of the general public, Marcel spends a great deal of his time in Suriname on building art installations in public places. His installations can be found in several locations in the capital city Paramaribo and in the district of Marowijne. Each installation pays tribute to his maroon heritage and to his message of preserving the valuable culture and traditions of his ancestors.

He is also involved in several projects intended to lift Surinamese art to a higher level and give it the recognition it deserves. In 2008 for example he took part in an art exchange project called the "Wakaman Project" in which several Surinamese artists and artists with Surinamese origins were paired with each other in order to create collaborative works of art. The results of this collaboration were exhibited in the Fort Zeelandia museum in Suriname in February of 2009 and were a striking display of contemporary art and installations.

The unique Maroon culture in Suriname

Throughout the period of transatlantic slavery settlements of runaway and rebelling slaves, named Maroons, were formed in the Americas. In 1503 the first case of a maroon settlement in the Americas was recorded in the Dominican Republic. Over time Maroon communities emerged in other Spanish zones, Mexico, Venezuela and Columbia, but till 1888 they manifested throughout the Americas, from Jamaica to Brazil.

Prosecuted by colonial armies and plantation owners Maroons were often forced to flee deeper into the rainforest or up the mountains (Jamaica) away from the plantations. Nevertheless, many Maroon communities waged war on the slave system, frequently attacking plantations and army posts; for necessities, revenge and to free other slaves. Eventually most Maroon settlements in the Americas were destroyed by the colonial armies, with the exception of the settlements in Jamaica and the Maroon strongholds in Suriname.

The Maroon culture in Suriname is unique to the region. Suriname is the only former European colony in South America and the Caribbean where rebelling African slaves whom escaped the bonds of slavery and established separate and distinct communities in the dense tropical rainforest, to this day for a large part still live in these separate and highly traditional communities.

The first Maroon communities in Suriname, then a Dutch colony, emerged around 1678, slowly growing into stable settlements that imposed an increasing threat to surrounding plantations. The height of maroon uprisings occurred in the mid and late 18th century, imposing significant threats to the colony's

economic prosperity. Finally the Dutch colonial authorities were forced to sign lasting peace treaties with several Maroon communities (In 1760 the Aucan, 1762 Saramaka and in 1768 Matawai). Slavery was finally abolished in the Dutch colonies in 1863.

The Surinamese Maroons evolved in to 6 distinct ethnic communities or tribes with their own language, regional concentration and governance structure. Nurturing on their African heritage and learning from new experiences in the Amazone, the Maroons developed a unique culture. They built a unique Afro-American culture and society with its social and political systems based on their original homelands of West Africa which was self-sufficient through hunting and agriculture. For over two centuries the Maroons have retained their distinctive identity based on their West African origins. Traditional social organization is strong. The culture, history and artistic craftsmanship of the Maroons has drawn significant attention from anthropologist, museums and historians alike.

Marcel Pinas was born in 1971 in the Maroon village Pelgrimkondre.

An interior war in Suriname between the then ruling military regime and a rebelling (largely Maroon) faction in the 80's, wreaked havoc on many Maroon villages. A great number of villagers were killed and countless others fled their homesteads to escape the destruction left behind. Life in many traditional regions especially in Marowijne, the district where Marcel Pinas was born and raised, changed drastically. Cultural values and traditions are currently at risk, perspectives for the future are lost and serious threats such as mercury poisoning from the lucrative gold industry face maroons and indigenous societies throughout the country.

These issues greatly concern Marcel Pinas and he uses his art to give a voice to the Maroon communities. Although these communities form approximately 10% of the total population, they are with the Amerindians, the poorest and most marginal sector of society in Suriname. Local governments have up till now failed to bring hope and better prospects for this part of the Surinamese population. With his art Marcel Pinas seeks the attention locally and internationally for the plight of traditional communities in his home country and he also tries to use art and the heritage to create opportunities for a better future in the communities.

The larger mission

With his striking colorful paintings and the strong statements of his modern engaged art installations, all addressing his now famous theme of "Kibri a Kulturu", Marcel has made quite an impression in the many countries worldwide where he has traveled and exhibited in the past years.

Spreading his wings on his many global adventures, be it for study, exhibitions or his continuous search for new opportunities and exposure in the art world, has allowed Marcel Pinas to build an ever increasing platform for his own personal mission. For his art, his exhibitions and his studies and residencies abroad are to Marcel not just a way to further his career as an artist, but they are to him a vehicle; a means to an end; a way to build an artists' platform, with a base large and strong enough to allow him to fulfill his most recent and urgent mission. Because despite it's difficult past, Marcel sees a bright future for the district of Marowijne.

He is a man on a mission and that mission is to make Marowijne the art district of Suriname. He sees Marowijne as the place where the rich and colorful cultural traditions so unique to this country, the beauty of the tropical surroundings and the unique artistic talent ingrained in so many of its people, draw visitors from all over the world. The purpose is twofold. The district is allowed to grow because tourism will create job opportunities in handicrafts and other service related areas, bringing financial security to local communities. At the same time, young generations acquire a newfound appreciation for that which is so

uniquely their own. By experiencing the interest and appreciation of tourists and other visitors for their lifestyles and traditions and the potential of their own traditional art and artifacts to earn them a good living, their own perceptions will be positively influenced.

Marcel Pinas is already hard at work to realize his dream. In Suriname, in the district of Marowijne, he has long since started the process of increasing awareness by educating local communities, especially the younger generations, in art and the value of their traditional artifacts. Through workshops he teaches his pupils specific artskills and tries to convince them of the potential of art to positively influence the community. He uses himself and his own experiences and successes as an example during his motivational sessions at local schools. The attention his own art installations in the district of Marowijne already attract from tourists passing by, are a powerful practical example.

The artist also initiates several projects for the younger children of Marowijne. In some of these projects for example, he provides essential school materials, little children at school with new shoes (in exchange for old worn out shoes which he then uses in his art installations) and lobby's for funds at his international contacts to implement renovation projects at the local schools that need it most.

Marcel's plans for Marowijne include an International Art Park, which will consist of his own public art installations (many already stand there) and that of other Surinamese and international artists. All the artists to be invited to Marowijne to create public art installations will also give workshops to people from local communities. This will be done through the Cultural Center which is an equally important part of the plan. The Art Park will attract tourists to the area and the Cultural Center will give the population the skills (by training them in arts and crafts, music and other performing arts) to market traditional products and provide entertainment to all visitors. Employment opportunities, economic stability, positive self-image and appreciation for culture and hope for the future are what marcel Pinas hopes to achieve for the people of Marowijne.

With his plans for Marowijne he also offers a new sustainable alternative for use of this beautiful section of rich tropical rainforest. Responsible tourism with respect and appreciation for nature and traditions holds great promise for the sustainable development of the country.

Art career on the move

Art by Marcel Pinas is regularly exhibited in several countries in Europe, the Americas and the Caribbean. He has a hectic schedule of activities and exhibitions and thus has the opportunity to broaden his horizons, thereby creating for himself a valuable network of contacts in the art industry. Many are aware of the artists' mission and have been able to witness his ambitiousness, his hard work and dedication to the cause.

In 2009 Marcel Pinas continues his work with a number of new exhibitions in Cuba, France, the Netherlands and Suriname. In many of the art installations which Marcel will exhibit during these exhibitions he combines different media such as audio and real life objects and artifacts with his three dimensional creations in order to create engaged visuals which depict current issues influencing maroons and indigenous peoples in Suriname today.

In September of 2009 Marcel Pinas will commence with masters' studies at the Sandberg Institute in the Netherlands. His thesis will be concentrated on intensive research to determine the power of art to change a community. This research will enable the artist to structurally approach his objective to create an extensive artists' platform towards the realization of his own artist's mission of establishing an art district in his home country.