Abstract

Artist Journey on the Congo Coast of Panama

Arturo Lindsay © 2017
During the colonial period in Panama, the village of Portobelo sat at an important crossroad that was seminal in the unfolding history of Latin America and the African Diaspora. Portobelo is a 16th century Spanish colonial village that is nestled at a historical juncture where diverse cultures of humans, fish, fowl and fauna have been encountering each other for centuries. From its inception enslaved Africans were brought to Portobelo to build Spanish settlements as well as to be resold as forced laborers to work in the silver mines of Peru.

The will to be free compelled many of the enslaved to liberate themselves by fleeing into the rainforests of the isthmus and returning to fight the Spaniards. They were known as cimarrones. The Congos of Panama are descendants of these cimarrones. Today the Congos practice a centuries old tradition known as el juego de Congo that consists of impromptu street performances, music, dance, costumes and a language that retells the stories of their ancestors.

My journey on the Congo coast of Panama began shortly after the United States invaded my native land. My goal was to assist in the recovery process by shinning a positive light on the people of Panama with a focus on Portobelo. It was my intent to create a body of work that would document and honor the cimarrones and to write a scholarly article highlighting Congo history and culture. More than two decades later I continue to live, work and make art in Portobelo. I established a study abroad program for art students from the United States and co-founded a painting workshop where Congo artists are preserving their culture through art while earning an income.
Artist Journey on the Congo Coast of Panama is a slide-lecture that begins with a deconstruction of the iconography, signs and symbols of Congo culture and culminates with a discussion of the power of art and artists in preserving culture.