

This is Not The Lamentation

Laureate Lecture 2021

November 1, 2021

Amidst a rich and wide tradition of almost 1,000 years of art depicting the life of Christ, *The Lamentation* is a particular focus of numerous artists that emerged in the Middle Ages. Sometime after the crucifixion, Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy member of the council negotiates successfully with Pontius Pilate for the body of Jesus to be released to him. The Pharisee Nicodemus then brings almost 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes to assist Joseph in the embalming of the body before Christ would be wrapped in a shroud for burial. Versions of *The Lamentation* include the moment when Jesus' body is taken down from the cross to his lifeless body held across Mary's lap.

Two thousand years later, and more than six thousands miles away...

West of the Guyanese capital of Georgetown, across the surreal floating Demerara Harbour Bridge, midway along the coast road to Parika is the community of Ruimzeight. The road is below the sea, and along the upturned ridge of land protecting the land from the Atlantic, there is a Hindu crematorium. In my travels of the area, I recall the music carried by the gusts from the ridge down to the road, and the snaking clouds rising up to the gaping sky. In these Hindu traditions, the bodies of the deceased are similarly washed and wrapped before being committed to the purifying process of cremation. I cannot help but notice the echoing image between these two ancient traditions of faith.

I draw these two images together with some deliberation. It is to place at the centre the duty and significance of the artist, their art, and their process. How else might I, or any other for that matter, begin to see the parallels, the echoes, the resonances of humanity when we are so often trained to see the fissures, the gaps, the difference?

The word art comes to us Middle English via Old French (*art*), Latin (*artem/ars*), and originally (*arti*) from a Proto-Indo-European language long forgotten.

Fundamentally, it referred to a *practical skill*, a *craft* in one sense, and *to prepare*, or *fit together* in the other.

In the academy, the arts (or liberal arts) are contained within the wider spectrum of the humanities. The word humanities derives from the Latin *studia humanitas*, literally the study of humanity. Where are we going when we remove the ‘human’ from the work?

This is the immediate peril of the fashionable focus on STEM subjects leading to a deliberate neglect of the arts and humanities from which the creative industries and the artist must spring. By all means we must ensure that science, technology, engineering, and math are taught to our students to the highest standard. But we must also uphold the quality and necessity of the arts and humanities alongside. If not, we cannot then be surprised when we raise up successes in business, in technology, and other areas that have not fully considered the human implications of those successes. Machines, programmes, and algorithms not only contain but amplify the biases and prejudices of their designers. Capitalism fails people when capital is prized over personhood.

We cannot look around in wonderment at a lack of artists or wonder why it may be difficult for the artist to survive in an economy we created. We have made this choice with intention, and intention is required to correct it.

In my Poet Laureate acceptance speech I said that *the artist is not constrained by the borders and limits of their reality, that she must be given room to imagine, to truly create new things, to illustrate new ideas that may challenge the ways in which we are accustomed to viewing ourselves and the world.*

The artist, therefore plays the role of provocateur. Their role must be one of instigation and interrogation.

Fundamentally, we must draw the conversation towards the purpose of art, and therefore, the artist. In the same way that the one face we are unable to perceive is our own, society collectively holds this same blind spot. As in the first instance, a society must rely on its artists to reflect its own image back to it. Without the artist, or at the very least the scattered fragments of the art of the artist long forgotten – the *disjecta membra* if you will – we are missing the mirror, not least the sharp shards of glass that the artist holds up to their society.

The duty of humankind cannot just be the conquest and control of the material world. The work of the physical world never subsides, but there is another world that we are also a part of. A vast spiritual and emotional tapestry of humanity that connects every member of the species, a world most vibrant when we are alone within ourselves. Indeed, the artist must embrace solitude, embrace their innermost selves and the wild stillness within to discover the richness of intuitive imagination

from which the art may spring. The arts allow us to dwell in that other world of possibility, because surely now is not just the time of lamentation, it is also the time of dreams.

As James Baldwin tells us, *the precise role of the artist is to illuminate that darkness, blaze roads through that vast forest, so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.*

In the heart of the Tasman Peninsula of New Zealand, a tiny glass house has been built, meant to designed purposefully for a writer to complete his novel. It is a place designed for solitude, yet its glass walls offer windows into the stunning vistas, the verdant meadows, the Pacific lapping at the northern coast, and slumbering islands in the distance. In this solitude, the writer is more connected to the world than when he is in it. In the same manner that this literal/littoral space has been created in this part of the world, there is much to do to make space for art and the artist here.

There is no better time to be having this conversation. The old world is dead and the new one is not yet born. This is a time of flux, we are in the crest of the wave curling towards the shore. We can no longer be comforted in the ways we were before, so now we must demand the space required to think, to make, to build, and to dream. Perhaps a digital age accelerated by a pandemic can properly democratize access to art and virtualize cultural space, but in a society as young as ours, surely we require the things that we can touch, we must surely have the concrete before we can abstract it.

These islands deserve the physical spaces required to nurture the next great painter, the next designer, writer, filmmaker. Can we look at the ones we have now and see them as products or exceptions of the society? The creatives, the culture bearers of these islands deserve a system of support that nurtures them through their education and utilizes their gifts towards the benefit of us all.

I, like many of this generation of my family, was born in Trinidad and raised in the Virgin Islands. Trinidad is the southernmost Caribbean island, barely two hours by boat from Venezuela in South America, while the Virgin Islands lie at the point in the Caribbean archipelago when it begins to arc, to sway, to bend towards the Northern continent and all its influence. Indeed, it can be argued that we are nearer to North America than geography might suggest – the United States being 40 minutes between the two closest ports of West End and Cruz Bay.

Both islands contain universes. They both exist in a liminal setting; their borders are ocean; the global migrant crisis is bleeding on their shores.

Our shores once projected the desire to create something that had not gone before. That dream was perverted at its root by greed, defiled with blood, but still the essence, the desire of humanity is to continue discover itself anew, to reveal our inner faces to ourselves. To do that, we must be armed with the great mirror of art, to have the courage to raise that pane of glass to our faces and open our eyes.