

# FRIEZE



## Frank Walter



Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, UK

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Frank Walter, *Scotland: Beach with Distant Hills*, date unknown, oil on Polaroid card, 10 x 9 cm

Muffled platform announcements from Edinburgh's Waverley Station – over the road from Ingleby Gallery – were an appropriate backdrop to the exhibition of paintings by Antiguan artist Frank Walter. Walter had arrived at that same railway station from England in 1961 after following the exhortations of King Charles II, who appeared to the artist in a dream, revealed himself to be Walter's ancestor and exclaimed: 'Now out of bed to see our graves to Scotland, and immediately lad!' In his later years, spent painting in near-complete seclusion back in Antigua, Walter styled himself as '7th Prince of the West Indies, Lord of Follies and the Ding-a-Ding Nook'. A brilliant, undiagnosed schizophrenic, Walter was obsessed with genealogy, believing himself to be distantly related to the crowned heads of Europe.

Born in 1929, Walter stood out as a talented and capable youth who, at the age of 22, became the first native Antiguan to manage a sugar plantation. Turning down the chance to run the island's entire Sugar Syndicate, he opted for an industrial Grand Tour of Great Britain with a view to bringing modern manufacturing methods back home. In England he was treated with racism and indifference, ending up in menial factory jobs where he nonetheless persisted in his research on industrial methods. In Scotland, he believed he had found his ancestral home. He spent months there, often walking from town to town, interiorizing the landscapes that – alongside those of Antigua – dominated the exhibition at Ingleby Gallery.

Confronted on the ground floor of the gallery space with 50 small, identically sized and undated landscape paintings, I struggled to slow down to the pace of their simple motifs – stippled trees, dappled mountains, oily sea, scratchy sky – but felt compelled by their insistence to seek some form of backstory in an adjacent vitrine filled with photographs and Polaroid film boxes.

On the same floor stood the wooden shack in which Walter spent his final years, with its humble contents of typewriter, bed, photographs and paintings reconstituted like sacred relics. This structure had been transported from Antigua to Edinburgh with a stop at Art Basel Miami Beach where Ingleby Gallery presented Walter's work in 2013. On the upper floor of the gallery were paintings with sharper teeth: a marionettish Adolf Hitler in a mustard-coloured uniform playing a fiery-red cricket match with Antiguan men (*Hitler Playing Cricket [with Antiguan Men]*), a vampire rendered with childlike, fervent gore (*Dracula*), a mysterious tambourine about to be clenched between the jaws of a schematic harp/mouth (*Abstract Instruments*). Revisiting the ground floor, it became clear that Walter's paintings had absorbed the materials that lay around him: the game of draughts in the painting *Complex of Life* was also something laid out on the bed of Walter's shack; on the flipside of the vampire painting, was a photographic portrait of a dapper Caribbean gent with side burns and thick glasses who resembled the figures in the faded photographs in the vitrine. The identical size of the landscape works was explained by the fact that they were all painted on the back of the cardboard boxes that held the Polaroid film Walter had used when he set up shop in Antigua as a studio photographer for a period in the 1980s.

The show reminded me of visiting the Basilica of St Francis in Assisi, where the saint's hair shirt and some of his writings were on view in the middle of two separate floors of paintings. In Walter's work, however, there is something engagingly narcissistic and unascetic that resists the notion of the hermit. Given the sophistication of the artist's writings reprinted in the exhibition catalogue, I had to resist the temptation of bestowing on him the elastic generosity of the label 'outsider artist'. In the end, I found myself back with the landscapes, thinking about Caspar David Friedrich. These works had a deep melancholic hum that tempered the otherwise naive technique. Like the train announcements, the paintings were insistent, hinting at journeys one would like to make, or had made once, but long ago. Was this solitude or loneliness? Repetition or meditation? Either way, I was in them, between two trees looking out to sea.

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