

DEREK WALCOTT DISCUSSES HIS PAINTING AND POETRY

Derek Walcott (1930-2017), Caribbean poet and playwright, wrote, among many other works, the play Dream on Monkey Mountain (1967) and the epic Omeros (1990). He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1992. Walcott's writing revolves around the West Indies, its national identity and European heritage, the theme of exile and betrayal, in a rich blend of verse, prose, Creole and English, filled with classical allusions as well as calypso rhythm. Donald Friedman recorded him in 2003. Below is the transcript of the excerpts from this interview available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQTbxiEafjs&t=17s>

All art has to do with light. Whatever the art, it's based on light and I think... I think plays are based on light, not on lighting, but on light, and the real thing at the back of every artist's intention is an intention towards the representation of light, the light that comes off the page. And that the greatest writers have that quality of light, and so do the painters. There's a light inside Vermeer, outside of the paintings of Vermeer, and that light that is painted by Vermeer comes because the light is inside of him and not necessarily the one that he tries to represent, and that is true of any great artist. And my attempt to paint is not to try to achieve that, I don't have any ambition in my painting, short of trying to make a thing feel as if it were alive, including a face, including anything, any object.

St. Lucia

So I haven't done much painting in the States, whereas the rhythm in St. Lucia is totally different. The excitement in it is that it hasn't been really thoroughly painted, you know, there are good painters in the Caribbean, but you feel as if, you know, you and probably two other people have all the stuff to you, you don't do it justice enough, obviously, but the fact that it's out there waiting to be made articulate or visible.

Abstraction

I don't believe for instance in abstraction really. I'm not a fan of it. I have a lot of things to say about it. I think it's part of twentieth-century vanity. So that I could have done, or I could do things that

were based on imagination, or whatever you want, or history, or metaphor even, so that they would not be representational or realistic. But the life around me is alert, it's botanically vivid, it's there, you know, and very unpainted. So I don't know why I want to look at a pawpaw tree and be stunned by, you know, the symmetry of it, and then decide I'm going to do something called *the essence of a pawpaw tree*. The same thing, I think, happens in verse and in prose. It's very very difficult to do what is real, you know.

Poetry and painting

You very rarely say about a poem "this is shit" because you feel that maybe there's something in there, something spiritual, something true, something something, you know and you never...and the verse can help you make you believe that it's really pretty good. You can't do that with a painting. You know very fast that this is a piece of crap, you know. And there's nothing much you can do to save it, right? And the more you try to save it, the worse it gets, especially in watercolor. But you never, you certainly don't get...I don't get any kind of joy from writing a poem. I get a lot of joy in working on a long thing when it's like a job, you know, going to work in the morning, and doing that. In terms of any kind of... it's impossible, I think, for any serious writer, poet particularly, to feel that this is a very good poem, you know, "I like it" or something. It's hard to think it's possible. It's very permissible to enjoy a painting that you have done, that's perfectly OK, I think, because it's so physical, you have it there, you can see the little piece that you did to the right of the eye looks good, or, you know, the shadow of that thing on the ground looks great. That's OK, I permit that. The other one is vanity. I don't know about that.

Even in Larkin, you have him saying "If I were made to construct a religion, it would be out of water, then the light would congregate endlessly", that's beautiful, he is just talking about a glass of water, a prism of that, and, this is true in Rilke when he says we write so that we can pronounce the words house and bread, and stuff like that. And it's true and I think it's what you try for all your life. What I hope for is to try and get to that anonymous serenity that says something without a cloud of identity or of biography, or, you know, anything that ascribes it to me. An ideal would be to be really anonymous, for the I to disappear, between the object and you.