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Featured Artist

Janet Cook-Rutnik

Creating Ghost-like Images of the Past

By [Marina VataV](#)

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Janet Cook-Rutnik, *Osiris (Chaos)*, 1996
Acrylic on Canvas

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Philosopher and restless in her nature, artist Janet Cook-Rutnik perseveres in exploring the dimensions of time and history in her paintings, sculptures, installations, sounds, and video images.

Janet moved to the Virgin Islands (VI) from the mainland US in her 20s, but she admits that her art is totally about the Caribbean because she finds it to be an extraordinary place that is visually, culturally and historically rich.

The artist is fascinated by the notion of time. Excerpts from Columbus' diary, naïve houses, old broken dolls in a 89-year-old man's yard, all of these images captured by Janet Cook-Rutnik in her art, trace memories and moments in time that are gone forever, but yet so present.

Moments in Time

One of those explorations of history is "**Moments in time**" video, where the artist captured the night view and sounds of the Caribbean landscape and Columbus' words about the island he found. The artist notices the timelessness of the landscape, and that things are not very different on the island now, 500 years later. This multimedia artwork had an incredible resonance on the local audience, which was more used to decorative art forms, because they could identify with what they see, read, and hear; they understood that it's about them and their history. "Colonialism is an interesting presence that needs investigating, but yet, I don't believe art should be literal - not propaganda. Art has something different, it has an instinctive sight, an intuitive sight, it has the quality of reaching people in a different way," says Janet.

The Transfer Project

Another historical moment deeply explored by Cook-Rutnik is the transfer of today's Virgin Islands from Denmark to the US in 1917. The artist notices that while this happened not so long ago, the impact on the local population was tremendous. "This event has had the most impact on today's government and social organization, as well as the economy. Its relevance is not always recognized," says the artist.

Since 2004, Janet Cook-Rutnik in collaboration with artist **Edgar Endress** and scholar **Lori Lee** have been organizing the *Transfer* Project, a yearly art event that commemorates the transfer of Danish West Indies (currently US Virgin Islands) to the United States. Using collected stories and contemporary art methods, *Transfer* aims to reframe Virgin Islands' history from the local rather than the colonial perspective.

For this science-based project, the artists researched historical documents and photographs to illustrate stories and figures of those who lived during those times. Some installations from *Transfer 90* (2007 *Transfer* edition), for example, are historic images of local people enlarged to life size. They were printed on fabric and hung inside Fort Frederik, in a cave-like environment. The Caribbean breeze made the fabric move and revive those memories. In our conversation, Cook-Rutnik called this scene, "Almost ghost-like image of the past." She says that, "by continuing to collect and present the stories and images they become "living history" for today's Virgin islanders."

Cook-Rutnik shares that the audience's reactions to the *Transfer* project were incredible; they connected in a tremendous way. They found it so interesting and important that they urged their family and neighbors to see the exhibition.

"History is ever-present in the Caribbean"

"History is ever-present in the Caribbean: it informs everything from politics to politeness," says Cook-Rutnik. She continues:



Janet Cook-Rutnik
Icarus
Island Heritage Fine Arts

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Janet Cook-Rutnik
Village
1997
Serigraph



Janet Cook-Rutnik, Edgar Endress, Lori Lee
2007
Installation
Image from the 4th edition of *Transfer* - *Transfer 90*



Janet Cook-Rutnik
Paradise Lost
2010
Installation

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"Because much of it is painful and shameful, it is not always given the public view that it requires for our society to move forward in a positive and healthy way. Continually, there is much more at stake than it seems that today's leaders are willing to recognize. It is art's duty these days to shine the focus on those areas of social, moral, and environmental neglect that have huge consequences for future generations of people within the Caribbean and the world."

Cook-Rutnik feels that today's artists are sociologists and art is a new educational tool that doesn't speak directly, but has a very subtle way of reaching people.

Due to years of work in promoting V.I. fine art and artists through numerous initiatives, Cook-Rutnik's impact over the local art scene is even more valuable.

Cook-Rutnik is an activist and likes to feel that many things are possible. In 1976, when the local art scene was not very professional, she opened the **Art Project** and had sophisticated shows featuring her work and the work of other local budding artists. Janet shares that the events were well received by the public, but there were not enough collectors to support these artists and gradually the gallery survived by selling Caribbean arts and crafts from "down island" and paintings from Haiti.

Janet Cook-Rutnik was the first artist from the US Virgin Islands to exhibit at the **Museo de las Américas** in Puerto Rico (1999), and three years later she brought the first group show of VI artists to the same museum in an exhibition entitled, "**VIA Colectiva**". This was a big boost for a lot of the local artists who had not shown much outside of the territory.

Cook-Rutnik has lobbied the local VI arts agency to do more for individual artists, and has been working to encourage the University of the VI to have a full art department and an MFA program. For the past 20 years, Cook-Rutnik has been a staunch supporter of the Caribbean Museum Center for the Arts in St. Croix, working hard to bring exhibitions and programs to a world-class level by fostering working relationships with international curators to achieve this goal.

As an artist, Janet Cook-Rutnik works in various media: painting, sculpture, and multimedia. Now she is most enthusiastically working with digital images, video, film and installation.

"For me there has never been a start or a stop in art"

"For me there has never been a start or a stop in art," shares the artist, but her earliest recollection of making art is the art contest organized by her grandmother in nursery school when Janet was 5-6 years old. "We had all colored the same coloring book page. My sister won and I asked my Grandmother to explain why to me. She said it was because my sister had painted each grape separately. I never forgot this; my first art lesson and my first group show!" recalls Janet.

Born in Albany, New York, Janet Cook-Rutnik moved to the US Virgin Islands in 1969 while still a student. This was the year of great political unrest, the year when civil rights movement leader Martin Luther King was shot, and US Senator Robert F. Kennedy was killed, a period of student riots and frustration. "I was a student and felt that I needed to leave the States to see from a distance what was intrinsically American and what was intrinsic to mankind. I was not disappointed when I arrived in the Virgin Islands on the same day that Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, July 20, 1969," says Janet. Now she feels totally a part of the V.I. community.

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