

SEEING FRANK WALTER  
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*Our crown has already been bought and paid for.*

*All we have to do is wear it.*

– James Baldwin at a televised roundtable,  
August 28, 1963, Washington, D.C.

*We made you bastards rich.*

– Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place*, 1988

There is no typical Frank Walter. His range as a painter is extensive and unfettered. His perspective is all his own. His oeuvre seems to stand in opposition to the permanent ascriptions he was subjected to throughout his lifetime, with respect to race and nation. His cosmological paintings have a transcendental glow, his abstract works are systematic, the individuality of his figurative painting is captivating, and his landscapes gain strength through their clear abstractions. All his works exhibit an unusual degree of clarity and directness. This sense of focus in his works, which also comes from their small size, gives us an authentic way of approaching them. The complexity of Walter's subject matter is matched by the great variety of his materials. He created works on wood, Masonite, cardboard, paper, linoleum, and the backs of photographs, and he painted and drew with oil paint, tempera, watercolor, crayon, pencil, shellac, and glitter. When he was not painting, he wrote; when he was not writing, he made sound recordings. Walter's creativity had an unbelievable intensity, which one can see, feel, and sense in his work. It was only in art that he felt liberated: free of the brutality that lay in normative attributions, which was a permanent presence beyond his artistic work. Frank Walter believed that creating art was an inherently subversive act, and one that uniquely enabled him to assert the right to lead his own life, as determined and defined by himself.<sup>1</sup>

Born in Antigua in 1926 as a descendant of slaves and plantation owners, Walter's education was strongly influenced by the British colonial occupation. In 1948, he became Antigua's first plantation manager of color. His constant endeavors to improve working conditions took him to England in 1953 in order to expand his knowledge of agriculture. Yet having arrived in London he was rejected by the branch of his family there because of their racist bias. Confronted with racism everywhere he turned in Great Britain, he was not able to find a point of entry into society despite being a Commonwealth citizen. He survived as a day laborer; his everyday life was characterized by hunger and cold, the hallucinations he suffered as a result, and racist attacks. Between 1957 and 1959, he traveled to West Germany several times to explore his family history. While there, he worked for companies such as Mannesmann in Gelsenkirchen and learned German. In 1961, he returned to the Caribbean: first to Dominica, where he created most of his sculptures, then in 1967 to Antigua. After working as a photographer from 1975 to 1984, he moved to a remote mountain location outside the town of Liberta and built a house and studio, where he lived and worked until his death in 2009.

Due to his subjectivation in colonized Antigua, Frank Walter was acutely aware of the many different identities that made up his own. His numerous self-portraits and photographs bear witness to this. His self-distancing is obvious in the numerous Rückenfigur self-portraits, while his internal schism is revealed in self-portraits as a white person (p. 85). In a society that had the power to define the white European male as the norm, it seemed almost impossible to him to self-identify as a Black person.<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon wrote at that time: "[T]here is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white."<sup>3</sup> As the Rückenfigur-like self-portraits show, the artist preferred to spend his time in the natural world, away from people. His landscape paintings testify not only to

his highly precise observations, but also to his ability to encapsulate the atmosphere of his location by means of abstraction. These pictures have nothing in common with the picturesque landscape paintings so frequently found in the Caribbean that the tourist industry engendered. In sharp contrast to the idealized kitsch of palm trees and beach, Walter studied the landscape in detail. It was a landscape deeply inscribed with colonial history and one that, as Édouard Glissant wrote "is its own monument."<sup>4</sup>

While many residents and tourists alike in Antigua were familiar with the small photocopied and colored drawings that Frank Walter sold in his photographic studio, his extensive artistic oeuvre was virtually unknown.<sup>5</sup> He did attempt several times to exhibit his work in Great Britain and even in Germany, and wrote letters to this end. Moreover, he wished to set up his own gallery<sup>6</sup> and stage a complete exhibition, the works for which he stored in boxes ready to dispatch. Yet an exhibition of his work was never forthcoming during his lifetime, and he himself was not able to experience what people thought of it.

1 Stuart Hall with Bill Schwarz, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands*. London: Penguin Books, 2018, p. 138.

2 In *Familiar Stranger*, Hall explains how "much of my life can be understood as unlearning the norms in which I had been born and brought up." Hall, *Familiar Stranger*, p. 3.

3 *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. Richard Philcox New York: Grove Press, 2008, p. xiv.

4 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1992, p. 11.

5 Apart from his close family, Connee and Fuller Cowles, who purchased works from him, and later Barbara Paca, who often talked with him about his work.

6 This is confirmed by letters and notes from Frank Walter's estate. For an example of a letter from Germany in answer to his inquiry, see p. 329 in this catalogue, for the use of his company name Walando-Angol-PanEuro Arts and Crafts Productions, for example, pp. 312–13.