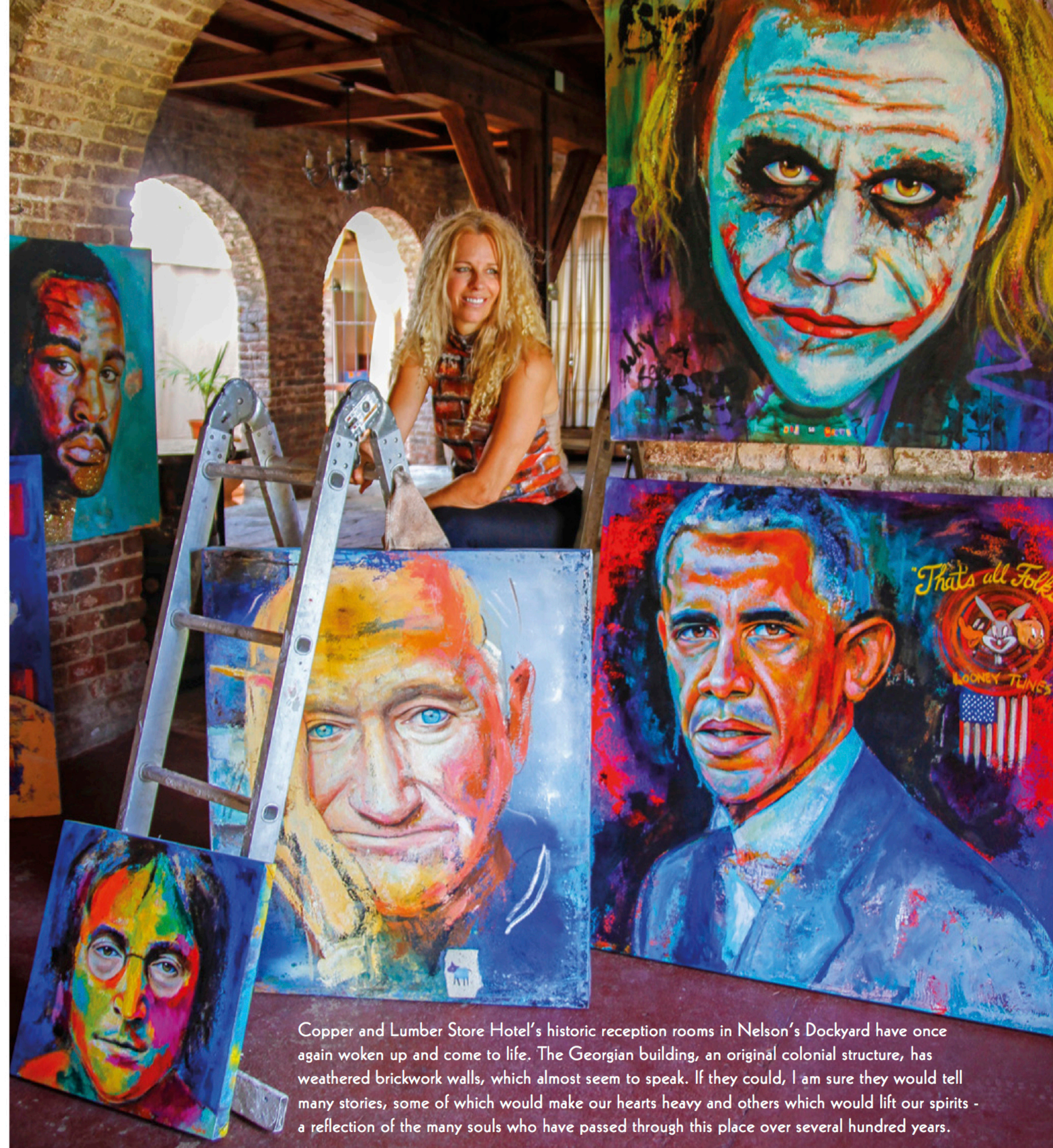




NAYDENE GONELLA

POP PHIZ
ART EXHIBITION BREATHES
LIFE ONTO WEATHERED WALLS



Copper and Lumber Store Hotel's historic reception rooms in Nelson's Dockyard have once again woken up and come to life. The Georgian building, an original colonial structure, has weathered brickwork walls, which almost seem to speak. If they could, I am sure they would tell many stories, some of which would make our hearts heavy and others which would lift our spirits - a reflection of the many souls who have passed through this place over several hundred years.

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Today, as I saunter past reception, take in the beautifully polished wooden floors and the lush open courtyard, I am unsure what to expect beyond this sensation of the past. As I enter the rear of the hotel, I am greeted by a smiling Naydene Gonnella and a collection of her latest works, an explosion of colour and celebration. Naydene is a well-established artist on island. Born in Canada, she studied figurative art at OCAD University in Toronto and in Florence, Italy. She has held many exhibitions throughout the Caribbean and having lived in Antigua since 2004, is very much at home here.

I am instantly drawn to the canvases, which are randomly positioned in the space which will host Naydene's *Pop Phiz* exhibition. The vibrant paintings all seem to light up and consume the large space. As I take in the lively portraits, I realise I know most of the subjects. Naydene introduces me to her 'family' - the majority of these expressionistic representations are famous iconic figures. Some are still alive, but most have passed, having met a tragic death, taken a dark path and in many cases, died before their time. Others are fictional, based on local characters who have inspired the artist; faces are created by merging several personalities together. Some are recognisable, others remain anonymous.

Many of the paintings portray individuals who suffered sadness, angst and despair, but Naydene explains, she has attempted to "capture a moment before the darkness prevailed, when a love of life and light still existed." These characters are to be remembered for their tremendous talents and the fun and joy they brought into other's lives. Prince who died of a reported overdose earlier this year, stares out from a huge canvas full of abstract pattern, vivid colour and comic book-like slogans, such as *sh-boogie-bop* and *cream*. His eyes are realistic, a contradiction to the rest of the painting, which through bold splashes of colour and playful brush strokes, seems almost whimsical in its essence.

Another sorely missed musician, John Lennon, was perceived by many as an embodiment of colour and light. Naydene has used colour to embrace positivity, leaving only flesh-coloured circles where his spectacles sit. Again, intensity shines through the eyes, which resonate with the viewer. The artist's intention is certainly to rouse emotion, whether it be happiness, sadness, humour or a mixture of all and more.

The late Heath Ledger, as the Joker, is a particularly menacing portrait with sinister floating skulls embellishing the background with death. And yet,

the scrawled tag line, *Why so Serious?*, brings a sense of relief to the viewer and "Pretty much sums up the show and life in general" explains Naydene. The artist has been working through a period of transition; having started this particular project with focus on people who succumb to their weaknesses, she flipped the melancholy aspect on its head and decided to inject some humour. Punchy headlines and carefully incorporated text draw the viewer toward subtle references and undertones. *Hidden* symbols crop up in unexpected, prominent positions and yet go unnoticed by those who are naive to their meaning. Look out for the *little lamb of innocence*, which is incorporated onto the portraits of those who died as a result of addiction or other demons. Other obscure symbols such as birds are reoccurring and remnants of children's art crop up, a testimony to the artist's role as a mother.

Other references are more direct and as mentioned, some of the subjects are still alive. The handsome President Obama gazes out of his canvas, aged, drained and exhausted. Above his left shoulder, the American flag and the Looney Tune Logo-Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck and Porky Pig are laughing, "That's All Folks!" Images of striking local individuals have also found their way into

the collection, displayed alongside the likes of Bob Marley, Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Jean-Michel Basquiat, to name a few.

My personal favourite is the portrait of Robin Williams, who took his own life, having suffered from depression. The piece seems unfinished and as parts of Robin merge and almost dissolve into the background, he is almost fading in front of our eyes. Only his bright blue eyes are completely finished and they hold a sadness that is pure and honest and yet missed by so many during his lifetime. Here Naydene really has captured a lost soul.

The *Pop Phiz* exhibition, which will display three years of Naydene's work, will literally light up the charming Copper & Lumber Store in a way never dreamt of. Prince's portrait is enhanced with L.E.D lights and there is talk of glowing cocktails and other preparations that will modernise the exhibition floor for the one night only show on December 29th 2016. The contradiction of contemporary art within an Old World venue is one that appeals to the artist, as contradiction is a theme running throughout her career, influencing both technique and subject matter. The historic building definitely is an appropriate choice for the *Pop Phiz* exhibition, which will bring the past and the present together with dramatic effect.