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Oliver Bruce and *La Cascada*: Eulogy to a Temple of Panamanian Popular Art

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The patrons at Panama City's recently demolished *La Cascada* (The Cascade) restaurant were often sailors on shore leave in the capital, hungry for a good meal and perhaps a little adventure, while their vessels waited to transit the interoceanic canal. The business, which opened its doors in the early-1970s, was located just off Balboa Avenue, across from the seawall and blocks from the colonial quarter. It catered especially to the nearby U.S. military bases whose restless soldiers had equally voracious appetites for cheap beer, women, and for the enormous fried dishes, served so peculiarly at this establishment.



Exterior of La Cascada

Youthful waitresses, dressed in miniskirts, taciturnly took orders from their unruly clients and accompanied male employees when they delivered their plates, stacked impressively onto massive trays. Seafood was the specialty at *La Cascada*, but its long-winded menu numbered some sixteen pages and offered dozens of other carbohydrate-packed options which were interspersed with ramblings about the staff's dedication, instructions on how to pick one's dinner, and complicated explanations of *piña coladas* and the health merits of certain fruits juices and vegetables. A full-paged announcement warned potential vendors to sell only the freshest fish to the restaurant, which was fantastically adorned with baroque ornamentation, paralleling the self-aggrandizing and didactic verbiage.



Entrance to La Cascada

La Cascada's outlandish decorations were the work of Oliver Bruce (1928-2004), an artist of Afro-Antillean descent who had grown up in the segregated Canal Zone and who had learned to paint as a poorly paid worker, fashioning its street signs and abundant office lettering. As a young man, Bruce –tired of the Zone's racist structures– soon left for Panama City, which was rapidly expanding in the postwar decades. In another society, he might have become a distinguished figure in galleries and other bourgeois cultural circles. Instead, in Panama's harshly

divided social environment, this creative son of West Indian immigrants devoted himself to more proletarian endeavors and earned the praise of mariners and their drinking buddies. Bruce or Bruzolli, as he was more commonly known, became a decorator of bars and clubs, often associated with the U.S. military presence which had established itself in 1903 and which would remain until the end of the century. Bruzolli infused these venues with a sense of Afro-Caribbean aesthetics, closely related to carnival traditions with their capacity to astonish and charm their viewers, grabbing them like an eager dance partner. The admirers of Bruzolli consider *La Cascada* to be his masterpiece.



Patio of La Cascada



Interior of La Cascada

La Cascada was owned by George Bush, an enigmatic businessmen and immigrant from Greece, who first came to Panama in 1948 and changed his name in the 1950s during an extended stay in the United States. Bush, who rarely appears in public, ostensibly refused to grant this author an interview. Nevertheless, he proceeded to talk with him for an hour, via his office's crackling intercom. Bush is clearly a man obsessed with himself, and while he spoke warmly of Bruzolli and his talents, he quickly launched into his own well-practiced narrative, emphasizing his discipline, his abstinence and hard work, and even his decision to delay marriage until he was

well into his 70s and felt that he had become financially secure. Meanwhile in Panama, he built a small kingdom of bakeries, pizza parlors, and other low-end eateries, designed especially for the foreign population and their occasionally seedy proclivities. Bush hired Bruzolli to transform these environs into hybrid and swirling places of fantasy.

At *La Cascada*, customers ate in an open-air patio, seated at ornate wrought-iron tables, each with a light bulb to call the attractive waitresses. The courtyard was surrounded by a web of circular grating which, as Bush affirmed, was designed to provide security while avoiding the impression of a cage or prison. “I wanted guests,” he said in his interview, “to be able to take photos without appearing as if they were inmates.” The area overflowed with flowers and tropical foliage and featured a faux waterfall gushing into a moat, filled with gold fish and plastic ducks. Canoes, paddles, and bright ring buoys also drifted in the dingy waters which enhanced, in some way, *La Cascada’s* allure. Cleanliness was never one of the business’ strengths, and intermittent piles of broken chairs and equipment contributed to its destabilizing and transient quality, highlighted at night by clinking beer bottles, the colored lights strung from the eaves and bar, and by the laughter of rowdy patrons who often seemed intoxicated by their eccentric surroundings. Prostitutes naturally made their appearance and added their presence to the boisterous mixture of sailors, servicemen, and the occasional wide-eyed tourists. Like a street festival, *La Cascada* projected multiple rhythms and entangled its visitors in these complex pulses. Iconography was another important aspect of Bruzolli’s bedeviling festival.

Amidst the tangle of blooms and shrubs were dozens of life-size plaster statues with similar, smaller reliefs attached to the walls. Some of the pieces reflected maritime subjects and included mermaids, anchors, and leaping swordfish which spouted streams of water into the pool. The sea creatures were strangely combined with numerous members of the Disney Animal Kingdom. Bruzolli was a fan of the animated movies, and like many other creators of Afro-Caribbean popular culture, he cannibalized aspects of the international media, setting the figures loose in this seamy environment. Ze Carrioca, Shere Khan, and other well-known characters stared out improbably from the overgrown bushes, surprising and delighting the uninitiated visitor. As if the

visual exaggeration were insufficient, Bruzolli packed the restaurant with loquacious lettering. Using his talents as a former Zone painter, he filled the restaurant with rambling signs, praising *La Cascada's* overgrown gardens, its cuisine, pond, and “petrified” wildlife. The words were like those of a boastful *rumbero*, who praised his own talents, his charisma, and rhythm and enveloped the audience further into the spectacle. “*La Cascada* is like an oasis,” assured the restaurant’s verbose menu, “like a dream, like a fantasy, like a mini-Disneyland in Panama.”



La Casa de la Frutas (Calle 50), another of Bruzolli's creations



Sign outside La Casa Redonda

Today, the U.S. troops are gone, as stipulated by the Torrijos-Carter Treaties (1977) which transferred the canal to the Panamanian authority. The last bases closed in 1999, and *La Cascada* shortly fell to a project of urban renewal which transformed dramatically the waterfront area. Workers bulldozed Bruzolli’s temple and erected in its place a high-rise condominium. Bruzolli’s genius, however, survives in other places, many of them parts of Bush’s empire and easily identified by their effusive lettering, their extravagant paintings, sculptures, and grating. His creativity persists at *La Costillita*, a more domesticated eatery on the trendy Vía Argentina, but also affected by Bruzolli’s art and its sense of ephemeral indulgence. Bruzolli’s influence is similarly evident at the giant *Casa Redonda*. The Round House is an enormous pizzeria in the middle-class Betanía area and is cluttered with imagery, signs, and Disney figures. *Hotel Ideal* in blue-collar Santa Ana, however, best recreates *La Cascada's* ambiance with its large faux

waterfall and fish-filled swimming pool. There, sailors relax on a shady terrace, next to mermaids and spectacular swordfish, and cling to the remnants of a now extinguished era.



Hotel Ideal