The Choreographer’s Eye on Art

Garth Fagan does not mince words. This I learned when the Jamaican-born choreographer—famous for his work on “The Lion King” and beloved for his humanity, unaffected approach to modern dance—joined me at the Studio Museum in Harlem. The occasion was a walk through its segment of the three-museum exhibit “Caribbean Crossroads of the World,” which looks at the history and culture of the region by way of about 500 works of art.

Just look at that abobe,” he said, using the Spanish word for “grandmother” while captivated by Rafael Tufino’s oil portrait cited “Goyita” (1951). “You see all that she has done and will do—to survive, to keep her family going. She’s had no spring-chicken life.”

Then, looking at a nearby painting of women, he said, “Those are just regular grannies.”

Standing in front of the abstract bronze sculpture “Gigante” (1981) by Cuban artist Agustín Cárdenas, he considered a smooth, oblong shape that appeared to be giving birth to a man. “What the hell is the upside-down woman doing?” he asked with a toss of his hands. “I don’t know!"

The focus is ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR.” he said, snapping his fingers upward.

A comic moment, yes, and also one that embodied—rather than dismissed—the obsequities in art. Which Mr. Fagan is well acquainted with. Born in Kingston, Mr. Fagan, 72 years old, studied art at home in Jamaica with the painter Albert Mele (who was in the El Museo del Barrio’s portion of this exhibit). “He got me going,” he said. "I thank my parents for that," he said.

In 1960, Mr. Fagan came to the U.S. for college and launched a successful career in dance at the Rochester-based company, Garth Fagan Dance, tours regularly and is celebrating its 40th anniversary season. Along the way, he has become a major art collector who owns pieces by artists included in the Studio Museum exhibit, such as Jacob Lawrence, a Harlem Renaissance figure who painted scenes of African-American history, and the self-taught artist known as Kapo (Malick Reynolds), the sculptor and painter who was a leader of Jamaican art.

“I’m a big fan of Kapo,” said Mr. Fagan, directing me to “Seven Brothers,” a 1966 wood sculpture depicting seven men. “It’s the faces of all the people who came from Africa—the lips, the eyes, the noses and not trying to make it look European. And he used the wood that he had.”

While visiting Mr. Fagan admired the sculpture was a lesson in how a choreographer sees the world, what he noted in the composition was the positioning of the bodies—looking up and out in all different directions. “The focus is ONE, TWO, THREE, FOUR,” he said, snapping his fingers upward. “Only two are looking down.”

His quick eye for bodies was also evident when we tried to unravel the bloody and demonic figures in John Coltrane’s 1949 “Reptile” and Cynthia del Caribe’s Child’s Wake and Mythological Creature of the Caribbean.”

Mr. Fagan noted immediately that one figure’s feet were in balance’s first position (heels together) but the lower legs were facing backward, whereas the torso and thighs were facing the viewer.

And he brought his sensitivity for casting to bear while looking at “Redcoat,” a 2006 photograph by Jamaican-born Brassa Cox, who uses her own body to create images that comment on society and history. In what is a key image of the Studio Museum show, Mr. Coe stands for a military-style portrait in a bright red colonial uniform while gripping a machete. “I see the same commitment in her eyes with the machete as in the grandmother,” he said, referring to Tufino’s “Goyita.”

“Those are women who will not be defeated.”

Such women are also to be found in his company, Garth Fagan Dance. “I want my women to be strong, to be able to do all the jumps,” he said, adding that they’re not so tough as to be without emotion. Which also goes for the men. “I want my men to be masculine and vulnerable. Not much.”

He’s currently at work on a new piece—set to music by Wynton Marsalis—that will have its premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Sept. 27 to 30. While his choreography does not stray from the serious, it often connects to the uplifting and inspiring.

As he is well known, he is looking at the Kapo sculpture: “We dwell too much in the realm of the negative.”