

ABOVE Sabbat Point

## out of eden

ST JOHN ARTIST PAINTS WITH HONESTY AND INTENSE DETAIL  
WHEN DEPICTING HER NATIVE ISLAND

AS A CHILD, EDEN WAS HER PLAYGROUND. Free time and a lack of resources joined forces to inspire in her a kind of creativity that is apparent across several genres—fashion, quilting, cooking, and painting, for which she is most well known.

Karen Samuel, a native of St John, the smallest of the three US Virgin Islands, spent her childhood roaming the bush and the beaches of the sparsely populated Estate Eden on the island's quiet Coral Bay side. She and her nine siblings were largely left to their own devices while her parents worked hard to provide for their family. It was, indeed, a utopia of sorts.

"We rummaged through the woods playing and entertaining ourselves when we weren't doing chores," Samuel recalls. "We were always in packs, going off half a mile into the bushes or the beach by ourselves without parents. It was a fabulous, idyllic childhood."

Art has been a part of her life for as long as she can remember. It was "just something that I did all the time," she recalls. Drawing and painting were among the many ways she expressed her creativity. Sewing, knitting, crocheting, and cooking helped satisfy her imagination while serving a purpose.

"In our family, we're big DIY-ers," she says. "Part of it is not having money. I grew up on hand-me-downs. You had one pair of school shoes, and you better make sure they last all year, because that's all you can afford."

Creativity runs rampant in the Samuel family. Karen's brother Avelino is a well-known woodturner, a skill borne out of the desire to make his own toys as a child. One family member paints booths in Festival Village during the island's annual Carnival celebration, while another's murals brighten the walls of a local school. Yet another family member is a sculptor.





LEFT Gate Keeper

BELOW LEFT Rooster

BELOW Laundry Day



"Many of the family members are really gifted in art," says Samuel. "We're seeing it more and more now."

Samuel's first taste of formal training in the arts came at the age of 14, when she attended the Long Island University's Southampton College on a month-long scholarship. She subsequently finished her schooling in the Virgin Islands, skipping the fourth grade and graduating from high school seventh in her class of 133 at the age of 16. Samuel immediately went to college at George Washington University, in Washington, DC, in the United States. As a quiet, shy 16-year-old, Samuel went largely unnoticed in the classes she attended at the then-affiliated Corcoran College of Art + Design. Nude models were a part of the curriculum from the beginning of Samuel's schooling, and it was during this coming-of-age that her love of portraying the human form blossomed.

MANY ARTISTS ARE THEIR OWN WORST CRITICS, AND SAMUEL IS NO EXCEPTION. SHE VIEWS PAINTING AS A CONSTANT FLOW OF QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS, A MENTALLY TAXING EXERCISE THAT REQUIRES TREMENDOUS DISCIPLINE







“I LIKE TRYING TO GET TO THE INNER MIND OF MY SUBJECTS,” SAYS KAREN. “WHAT KIND OF CHARACTER DO THEY HAVE? HOW DO THEY SHOW THAT IN THEIR FACE AND BODY LANGUAGE?”

Samuel is a realist, and perhaps more pragmatic than most others in her field. Life happens, there are bills to pay, and though she could lose herself for hours attempting to capture the intricacies of the human form using compressed charcoal—one of her preferred mediums for portraiture—Samuel has made a name for herself as an oil landscape artist. Simply put, she creates paintings that sell. Her depictions of island flora, fauna, and sweeping vistas are sold exclusively on St John at Bajo el Sol gallery in Cruz Bay.

Many artists are their own worst critics, and Samuel is no exception. She views painting as a constant flow of questions and answers, a mentally taxing exercise that requires tremendous discipline. These days, she is keeping her interest piqued by delving into the details of the very natural environment in which she's immersed herself since her days as a child in Eden.

“I like close-ups of intricate things,” she says, glancing over my shoulder for what seems like the hundredth time during our interview at a picturesque oceanfront cafe not far from where she grew up. Curiosity gets the better of me and I twist around to see a common sight on St John—a mature seagrape tree. Karen has been making mental notes of its thin, winding branches laden with large, round deep green leaves, the veins running through them tinted various shades of red, and the way the sun washes over it all, sending shadows cascading down the tree's organic form.

“I've been doing big close-ups of plant life—tree parts, palm trees, sugarcane. Seagrape,” she adds, noting that I've discovered what's really been capturing her attention this morning.

“I'm still working on making the colour interesting and not just representational,” she says, expressing the self-critique that never seems to be far from her mind. “People always tell me my work is so detailed, but I'm trying to loosen up and not be so literal with the colour.”

The one form of art at which she allows herself to admit adeptness—portraiture—has not been a part of her repertoire for many years. Although she can't remember the last time she painted someone's portrait, this is clearly the subject that gets her most excited.



“I like trying to get to the inner mind of my subjects,” says Karen. “What kind of character do they have? How do they show that in their face and body language?”

As the only well-known native St Johnian painter currently producing works, Samuel feels a duty to her fellow islanders to capture them with her insider's eye. She feels that artists who did not grow up on St John paint native islanders as a stereotype.

“They focus on subject matter they consider entertaining, but to us they are picking on flaws,” she says, noting in particular the depictions of women with large backsides gossiping at the market. “There are painters who do faces, where all the images have similar characteristics. They're not individualized. As an insider, I see the individuality of the people I paint. Any time you produce an image of a face, there has to be something there that makes you think, makes you wonder.”

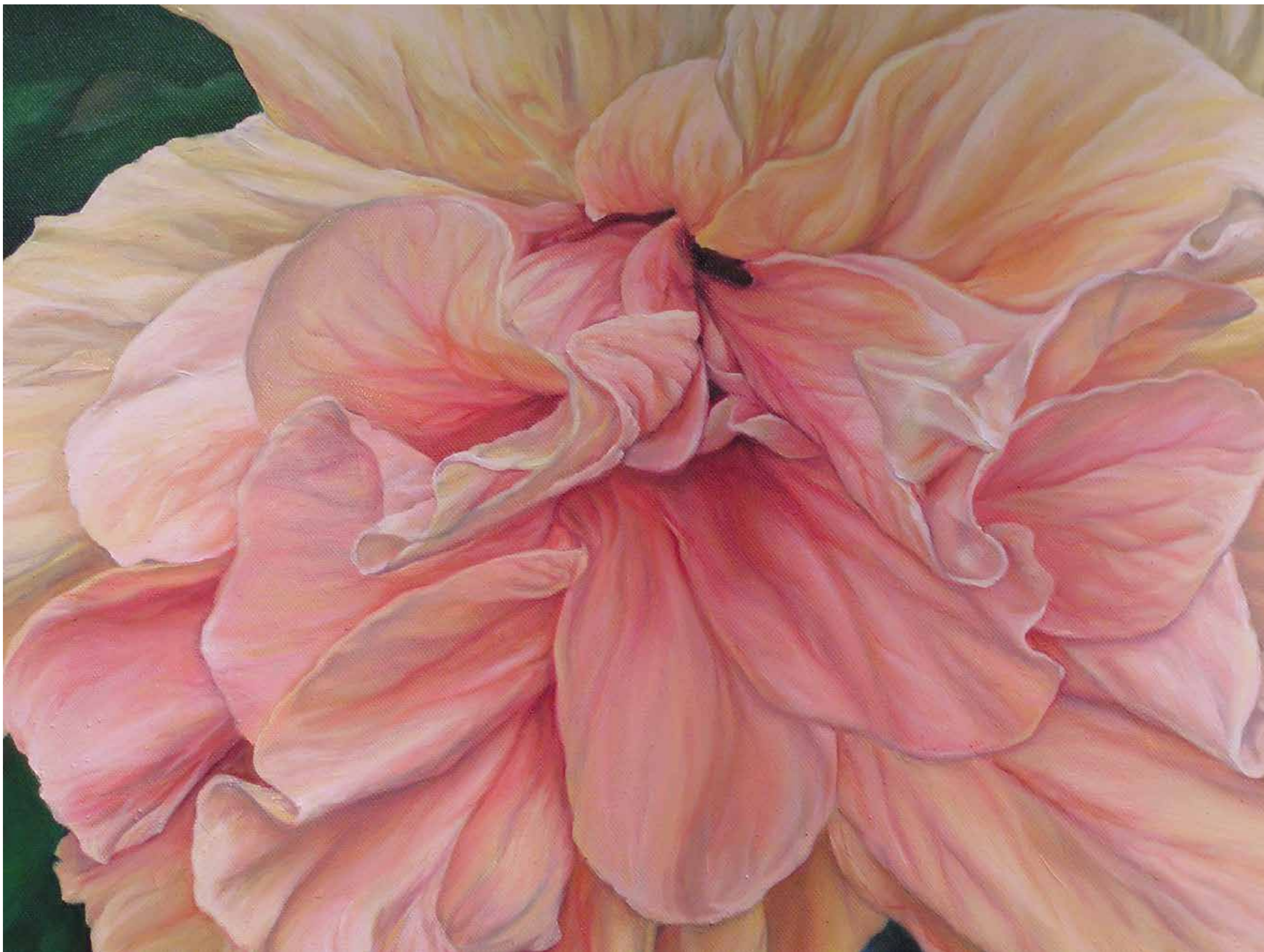


ABOVE Karen Samuel

ABOVE RIGHT Trellis Bay

RIGHT Seagrape Trees





One of Samuel's portraits, an image of an island woman holding a large local pumpkin, the faintest glimmer of a smile in her deep brown eyes, greets those waiting in line at the island's only post office in Cruz Bay. In fact, several government buildings throughout the Virgin Islands display works produced by Samuel in the mid-1970s when she was fresh out of college. Samuel was hired as a legislative aid by her father's cousin, who was a senator in the Virgin Islands Legislature at the time. Her job as legislative aid was to paint historic buildings throughout the territory—her first gig as a paid artist.

Art has been a constant theme in Samuel's life, from painting for the government to teaching art at a local public school to running her own gallery featuring folk art made by native Virgin Islanders. Although painting is not her only source of income—she is well-known on island for her custom clothing line, *Artistry of Eden*, and for the tarts and preserves that she sells at the local farmer's market—it continues to be a subject about which her passion is tangible. Her love of art is unmistakable in the way she talks about the tactile experience of selecting paintbrushes, about spreading rich, buttery oil paints across the canvas, using brush stroke after brush stroke to perfect an image as the paint slowly dries.

She's building a studio in Eden, a space to work on and display her paintings, in an effort to devote more time to the constant pursuit of knowledge and improvement to her technique. Although Samuel has been earning a living as an artist for many decades now, she is still in pursuit of perfection, and she will probably never stop.

"I just want to keep working on my skills," she says. "I really see it as a lifelong thing. I'm going to keep painting." M