Michael McMillan
Writer, playwright, curator/installation artist and scholar

Themes: The paper unpacks the aesthetics of the front room created by immigrants from the Caribbean in UK in terms of its social and cultural meanings. It raises questions about the constructions of diaspora, identity, race, class and gender in the domestic interior.

Abstract: The front room is a phenomenon that resonates in many migrant communities and emanates from the Victorian parlour. It was the room you weren’t allowed in unless there were guests and no matter how poor you were if the front room looked then you were decent people. Also as a room dressed by the mother of the home, the front room speaks to working class respectability and gendered practices in the domestic domain. Post World War II West Indian immigrants arrived in the UK with a sense of ‘good grooming’ and in struggling to find a home, they created front rooms which signified aspirational desires expressed through a consumer fetish for artificial things cherished for future with colourful patterns and opulence. Key items of furniture included the drinks cabinet laden with rarely used glasses and the ‘Blue-Spot’ radiogram on which was heard Jim Reeves especially on a Sunday. Many surfaces were covered with ornate crochet dollies, artificial flowers and blow glass fish and upholstered settees were either plastic covered or had chair backs. Wall hangings reflected moral codes such as family in terms of studio composed framed photographs, religion with images such as ‘The Last Supper’, home with black velour scrolls with the map of their home island and education with certificates of achievement. The aesthetics of the ‘West Indian’ front room is less an imitation of middle class values or valorised white-bias ideals of beauty, but rather the performance of status and the creolisation of popular culture. As a sacred shrine, the front room was a contradictory space in a post colonial discourse, and its legacy for Black British identities raises questions of inter-generational diasporic identities, disavowal through material culture.

For more information about The Front Room visit: www.thefrontroom.org

BIO

Michael McMillan is a British born writer, playwright, curator/installation artist and scholar of Vincentian parentage. His plays include: Invisible (1993), Brother to Brother (1998), Blood for Britain (2001 BBC Radio 4 Drama), Master Juba (2006), The Good Person of Trenchtown (an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s The Good Person of Setzaun will be produced in autumn 2010). His books include: Living Proof: Views of a world living with HIV & AIDS (1992), The Black Boy Pub & Other Stories (1997), The Front Room: Migrant Aesthetics in the Home (Black Dog in October 2009). His installations/exhibitions include: The West Indian Front Room (Geffrye Museum 2005-06), which inspired the BBC4 documentary Tales from the front room as well as Van Huis Uit (Holland wide tour 2007-08) and A Living Room Surrounded by Salt (Instituto Buena Bista, Curacao 2008). See also www.thefrontroom.org
Recently there is also The Beauty Shop (198 Contemporary Arts & Learning 2008) and he is lead designer/co-curator of The Southall Story (South Bank Centre April-May 2010). He has just submitted his Arts Doctorate to Middlesex University.