

# Haiti Art Naïf

Erinnerungen an ein Paradies?

## **Korrektur/Errata**

Durch ein redaktionelles Versehen wurde der Text von Gina Athena Ulysse bedauerlicherweise ohne Anmerkungen gesetzt. Dadurch sind zitierte Autoren und Quellenangaben nicht kenntlich. Die Verantwortung für diesen Fehler liegt beim Herausgeber. Wir bitten um Entschuldigung und drucken hier den Text in der ursprünglichen Fassung noch einmal ab.

Due to a failure during the editing process the contribution by Gina Athena Ulysse has been reproduced without annotations. Therefore citations and sources are not referenced. The full responsibility for that fault lies on the editor's side and we want to apologize for that. Here Prof. Ulysse's text is reprinted in its original version.

## Not so Random Thoughts on Words, Art and Creativity

by Gina Athena Ulysse

Years ago, as a translator for Haitian refugees, I found myself getting attached to certain words spoken by men and women seeking asylum in the United States. These words took me into unfamiliar places. Uncomfortable places. Dangerous places. The paintings in this collection, like those morsels of words, also took me on a journey. They took me to a different place. A beautiful place. A regenerative paradise. A place that I did not want to leave. They gave me breath, exposed me to a limitless imagination and reminded me, once again at a very crucial moment, of Haiti's undeniable and unbeatable spirit of creative survivalism. And because of their location—in a village four kilometers from Grimma, in Germany, they forced me to further expand my notions of community. In that sense, like the words that I have written about, the paintings in this exhibition gave me: a little of this country that I used to know, a little of this country that I never knew, a little of this country that I wish I knew.

Art in Haiti is complex. Haiti is the country that produced the only successful slave revolution in the world and as a result became the longest neocolonial experiment in the history of the West. Haiti, once the *enfant terrible* of the Americas who defied the great European powers has endured external and internal pressures of all kinds to become the region's *bete noire*. To paraphrase, anthropologist, Michel Rolph-Trouillot, the more that Haiti appears weird, the easier it is to forget that it represents this aforementioned past.<sup>1</sup>

Art historians and critics tend to view Haitian art from specific perspectives. Central to many of their frameworks is the idea that Haiti is first and foremost a land of poverty and deprivation from which art—expression of joy and richness of the human spirit derives.<sup>2</sup> Or that Haiti is actually a wreck of a country—with a people who are simultaneously the economically poorest, and artistically richest culture in the New World.<sup>3</sup> Such notions rest on a particular juxtaposition that disavows the presence of Haitian artists while undermining their agency. The fact is that while the social economic conditions undoubtedly do impact the country, they certainly are not the only things that define it. Associating Haiti solely with its materials conditions is a discursive practice, an exercise in hermeneutics—an act of interpretation. These perceptions actually incarcerate Haiti—restricting it to dystopian narratives of desperation that obscures the Republic's complexity. In so doing, these views come dangerously close to dehumanizing Haitians. Indeed, Haiti cannot escape its main tagline as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, it is so much more than that. It is much more than a series of markers and quantitative indices. Haiti is, and has always been, a country of extremes as Catherine Hermantin puts it. And nothing reveals this as much as the art world. Who makes art? What kinds of art? Who appreciates art? Who views art? Who sells art? Who imports art? And ultimately who owns it. It is no wonder that those looking to explain where Haiti fits within the order of things are continually puzzled by Haitians who make art and why they actually do so.

I was not born into a family that appreciates paintings. We did not go to museums. But creativity was always all around me. My father habitually sculpted anything that he could manipulate into self-portraits, whether these were pieces of wood, metal or even plastic. Mother sewed and baked cakes that took on life of their own. Making something with anything was simply a way of our daily life. Almost everyone around us did the same. Part of it may have been lack, but part of it was certainly wonder. Thus, it is not surprising that years later their three children (my sisters and I) are professionals who also sing, dance, write, and yes even paint. When we reach the limits of one form of expression, we simply take on another. The point is to answer the call to give voice to that which words alone cannot fully express. As artists, we turn to the arts because we are as filled with need as we are with the torment that will eventually bleed onto canvases in the shape of forms and lines. The desire to pick up a brush is response to a visceral demand. An answer to a cry to document outwardly that which boils within instead of remaining trapped, archived in our minds and bodies where no one can see them.

1 Michel-Rolph Trouillot. "The Odd and the Ordinary: Haiti, the Caribbean, and the World," *Cimarrón: New Perspectives on the Caribbean* 2, no. 3, 1990, 3-12.

2 <http://www.artshaitian.com/>

3 Professor Donald Cosentino, *World Arts and Cultures*, University of California-Los Angeles, <http://www.yoonsoo.com/ghetto/files/about.html> 2/5/2010.

I prefer to think of the works in this catalog on similar terms, putting less emphasis on economic determinism and the social conditions that sprung them than on the verve stirring within the artists who created them. In so doing, I bring the artists to the center as active agents, revelers who are interpreters of their world. Gerald Nordland, I believe, puts it best when he says: "Haitian artists paint out of their own resources, their own history and mythology, the double experience of [Vodou] and Christianity, the observation of earth, sea and sky and their knowledge of human interaction. Their personal expression of creative imagination- a fundamental level of human consciousness- has preserved their art's authenticity and given the world a rich and intense experience of the will to creativity."<sup>4</sup>

The works in this collection came to my awareness days after 1/12/2010 when a devastating earthquake 7.0 on the Richter scale and its numerous aftershocks fractured the Republic. Upon encountering the paintings in the file to write this introduction, I burst into tears. I practically demanded to see them in person for myself because these paintings confirm that in spite of a history of confrontation, recent ravage and devastation, as long as there is art and there are artists of all kinds, Haiti will remain a place full of life, love and will. A place where every single breath is, actually, a promise.

### *Musings on Breath, Imagination, Spirit & Community*

#### **Breath**

There are various shades of green in Jean Edner Cadet and Henry Robert Brezil's landscapes that automatically beckons the viewer to enter his lush green jungles to breathe. Deeply. Clean breath. Fresh breaths. Even on a computer screen, the trees invites one to take a rest than breathe again even deeper to merge with trees that offer a solace that Haiti has yet to know, which was recently taken from her.

#### **Jungle** <sup>5</sup>

Jade colored leaves  
Unfold themselves to  
Nature,  
Glowing from the sun's reflection and  
Longing to be part of this  
Ending World

#### **Imagination**

Frantz Zephirin must see out of more than one eye. This ability is reserved only to those charged with the greatest of responsibilities—to see through the eyes and into one's soul. He must know what many others are too often afraid to put into words. So he paints them. Knowing that he who wields a sword is not fearful of guns. I imagine him in conversation with Philton LaTortue discussing encounters at the crossroads where spirits and animals roam while mere mortals bow their heads to turn their eyes away in respect.

#### **Spirit**

In the unknown landscapes, there are bits of Haiti that you can only know if you stay a little longer. Foreigners tend to depart too soon. If you remove your self-importance and let your feet get muddy, you may find shelter under the thatch roof of the peasant woman who rode her donkey to market that morning and may be later in the imaginary city, you too can ride a tiger.

#### **Someday** <sup>6</sup>

I will show you passion, passion, passion  
Tempestuous drums drumming  
Mayanman Ibo le le le le le le  
Thin voices threading needles  
Prickling you drawing happiness  
Redder than raw sugar cane  
Sweeter than hot rapadou dripping like sap  
Where limbs were amputated for firewood  
I will show you this and more Someday

4 "Haitian Art: A Western View" in *Haitian Art* by Ute Stebich. New York: Brooklyn Museum of Art. 1978

5 Poem by Kyrah Malika Daniels in *Brassage: An Anthology of Poems by Haitian Women*. Edited by Claudine Michel, Marlene Racine Toussaint and Florence Bellande-Robertson. Santa Barbara, CA: Multicultural Women's Presence and The Center for Black Studies Research. 2005.

6 Poem by Laurence Françoise Géhy. *Ibid* p109

## Community

Germany has something of a sordid connection to Haiti that most Germans may not even know. This exhibition in some ways represents another turn. Art knows fewer boundaries. Art heals. Art can also make and remake connections and communities. Thirty-seven pieces purchased over a decade ago will now be exposed to celebrate a Haiti that once was and perhaps can be again.

In the aftermath of the earthquake, assessment of the damage reveals loss that is unimaginable. Hundreds of thousands of people are gone, most of them uncounted and undocumented now buried in mass graves. Additionally, state properties have also been affected including the Centre D'art—the art center opened by DeWitt Peters in 1944. The center became both an exhibition space as well as a training ground for artists especially those who were self-taught. Many of the artists in this collection (including Gabriel Alix, Préfete Duffaut, Jean-Baptiste Jean, Philton LaTortue and others) honed their skills there or had some connection to the Centre.

This exhibition at Hoefgen may very well be the first one to occur since the earth cracked open on January 12 and fractured Haiti. For that reason, it is of great importance. It is both homage to Haitian artists and recognition that Haitian art must not only survive this earthquake and its fallout, but also thrive in the future especially within Haiti. Given this connection, hopefully, Hoefgen will play a role in the rebuilding efforts of the Centre D'Art. And perhaps someday, this same exhibition will cross the waters and be shown in Haiti. Then Haitians too can see these works up close and revel in the mystery, poetry and passion that are at the very core of their artistic traditions.

### Haiti <sup>6</sup>

Haiti, réveille-toi!  
Haiti, ouvre tes yeux!  
Redeviens belle et prospère!  
Redeviens "Perles de Antilles"!  
Redeviens notre lumière brillante!  
Redeviens les rayons qui éclairent la Caraïbe!  
Redeviens notre fierté!  
Redeviens notre orgueil!  
Redeviens AYITI!

## BIOGRAPHY

**Gina Athena Ulysse** was born in Petion-Ville, Haiti. She is an Associate Professor of Anthropology, African-American Studies and Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT. She earned her Ph.D. in anthropology the University of Michigan in 1999. She is the author of *Downtown Ladies: Informal Commercial Importers, A Haitian Anthropologist and Self-Making in Jamaica* (Chicago 2008). She has published several articles and essays on research methods, feminism, Haitian diasporic tensions and Vodou. A poet/performance/multi-media artist, Ulysse is also riveting performer, described as by a reviewer as "a fantastic whirlwind of word and emotion, transforming Haiti from an objective abstract to a subjective reality." She has performed her one-woman show "Because When God is too Busy; Haiti, me and THE WORLD"—a monologue that weaves spokenword with Vodou chants--- across the U.S. on the college circuit, at various stage theatres and in Berlin. When she is not expressing her eloquent rage on the stage, she works on the Haiti Illumination Project (HIP).

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DENKMALSCHMIEDE HÖFGEN - Impressum/errata

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Art Works for Haiti, [www.artworksforhaiti.com](http://www.artworksforhaiti.com)

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