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*Firelie Báez: Road Map of Symbols*

Course: 5750 Women and Art in Africa
Professor: Dr. Rebecca L. Skinner Green

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The Dominican diaspora artist, Firelie Báez, is painting in the history of resilient Afro Caribbean women and making their acts of defiance more readily known through various works such as Bloodlines and Sans-Souci. Báez imbeds images in her artwork that follows the slavery movement from Africa, to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, then ultimately to the rich cultural past of Louisiana. Firelie’s subtle but powerful narrative found within her work promoted by her dynamic range of color selection, makes the viewer entranced and engaged with various histories being told in one painting. One can initially feel the importance of Firelie’s works. However upon deeper historical research the true weight behind the symbolic images embed in her work begin to resonate upon a knowledgeable viewer even more acutely. Firelie Báez depicts these acts of defiance while coupling them with other strong moments of resistance that alludes to the profound. The pooling of power, one act of defiance may derive strength and inspiration from another act of defiant strength creating a much more powerful wave.

Firelie Báez was born in Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic in the year 1981.¹ The area Firelie Báez grew up in was the border city of the Dominican Republic and the alienated country Haiti. Living in Los Caballeros for her younger years, the artist experienced the stark differences between the lush green scenery of the Dominican Republic, to the ravaged, deforested and tense state of Haiti.² She and her mother’s family left the Dominican Republic to live in Miami.³ Growing up as an immigrant, Firelie Báez felt the different spaces and binary structures of a U.S. citizen and Dominican female quite acutely. In an interview with Angie

¹ https://www.gallerywendinorris.com
² See note 1 above
Cruz, Firelie talks about the different view she has of the Dominican Republic and how it has
been shaped over time and distance:

> It’s funny, I’m a Dominican citizen, but I was raised here. My accent’s American, my
sense of the world is American, a lot of the work I’ve made wouldn’t have been made if
I’d been raised in the Dominican Republic. My work addresses race and class and in D.R.
they would be like, what’s wrong with your brain? Why are you speaking about these
issues? Because they think that they don’t exist or are addressed differently. I exist as a
bridge. In this in-between space. Right now, I’m either Latin American or I’m American.
The art collections are built around those two identity politics. So someone like me has to
choose a camp. There’s no space for that in-between.  

Firelie exists in the in-between space with her work and her very existence.

Báez’s work is a full on multi sensory experience. She provokes different responses with
her diverse styles of media. The artist’s subtle but powerful narrative found within her work
promoted by her dynamic range of color selection, makes the viewer entranced and engaged with
various histories being told in one painting. She states in her interview, “They don’t know how
much restraint we have to put on ourselves to show only a fraction of our experiences. There is
so much more to say and this is just the needle’s eye being allowed at this moment.” Being an
artist who is migrating through this complex landscape she sees her audience relating more
closely to people like her sister and mother, or any woman of color. Her ideal audience is
women who have shared her island history of repression and subjugation.

_Sans–Souci_ the citadel or palace represents to the Haitian people the fight for freedom
and the agonizing pain it brought to keep their freedom. The citadel was built under Henri
Christophe I, the king of Haiti and a former slave who played a pivotal role in the Haitian

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6 See note 5 above
7 Ibid.
Revolution in 1804.\textsuperscript{8} Christophe created the citadel of Sans-Souci and, with other slaves they fought and defeated Napoleon Bonaparte.\textsuperscript{9} The citadel is not just a symbol of freedom it is a stand against the inhuman treatment of slaves and the very act of slavery itself. The citadel acts as a monumental memory for the islands under the sun that freedom was won against the dominant European powers by the hands of slaves.

\textit{Sans-Souci} (figure 1), depicts the human figure of the historicized citadel found in Haiti. The persons body though one cannot tell the sex of the figure. The angle the body is facing and the crystal clear gaze from the person gives a sense that this is a female figure. By the artist just having the eyes and the headdress be of clear definition it, possibly it makes the viewer meet the artist half way. The observer then can create a narrative with the hidden figures of resistance found on the headdress.

Each element that is on the headdress creates a story of the different moments of resistance found in history. The artist comments on the items found in her work, “I wanted to create different emblems that reflected the different rebellions and moments of resistance that happened, starting from the Caribbean, that then influenced global contacts.”\textsuperscript{10} The chains that are found on the headdress can depict slavery or enchainment of people from Haiti, Africa, and the States. It could also mean the restriction placed on cultures that were not from the western mindset. The figures of humans found on the headdress could represent the people who were put into slavery. The panthers represent the Black Panther movement that was in the United States.\textsuperscript{11} The hair picks that are dispersed throughout the headdress both large and small represent to the

\begin{footnotesize}
\item[11] See note 37 above
\end{footnotesize}
artist the movement of reclaiming black beauty and the natural black hairstyles. The fist pendants are a charm called cabache it wards of evil spirits and is supposed to protect babies. This pendant is usually found in Brazil and in the Caribbean, the artist also talks about the circumstances the pendants were used as system of communication. “Some people say it has a link to slavery in Cuba where they would guild male slaves as part of that whole breeding system. If you wanted to be intimate with someone outside of that breeding system as a way of reclaiming your humanity, it was code for “hey I want to be with you.” That resistance, that subversion, was claimed as something for protection.”

Every symbol that the artist has on the headdress and even the headdress itself are forms of moments of resistance. The repressed groups fought against their oppressors and while some of those movements may have been small they still carried a strong impact on movements of today.

The way Sans-Souci (figure 1) is painted with dark reds, purples, greens, and browns give a sense of the mixing of blood and the forests of the Haitian region. The paint itself looks like it was applied and lifted to run across the figures body, almost like a stream of muddy dirt with blood mixed into water. The dark colors create a movement that the static body does not have. The array of colors depicts how the Haitian people have given their blood to the land and their blood to the fight for their freedom. The viewer can almost sense how the colors show the pain and determination of the people and history of resistance found in Haiti.

Fabric has always been important to the type of representation one wants to have on an outside audience. In choosing a high quality of fabric a person is stating that one is wealthy and have good social standing in the community. Bloodlines (figure 2), a fabric that depicts and displays to audiences’ movements of resistance and reclaiming. The artist uses indigo ink to

\[\text{12 Ibid}\]
create these patterns of resistance. The indigo ink is of pivotal importance to contextualize the artwork:

Indigo, which, in itself, had such a strong significance in the slave trade. A bolt of indigo cotton was used to trade a body, so a person would be worth a bolt of cotton, which is insane, but the process of making indigo was particular to West Africa. It had been perfected. Something that had been an emblem of culture and progress and specific to the region was used then to further exploit that and take it away.¹³

Firelie Báez could be using indigo ink to give the West African tradition of making indigo some context. Indigo can now be used as a tool of power against old and frail forces of oppression. The floral fabric pattern found in figure 2 tells a history as well, it is from a royal Indian family in the north.¹⁴ The fabric is called palampurs. Firelie Báez delves more into the meaning of the fabric and what she does with it in this interview:

They were emblems of power for that court. They were then taken by the British crown and used for smoking jackets or for a lady’s gown – really banal things. They were emblems of power in themselves and of the vestige of empire and then were further democratized by people like William Morris, who made like the printed wallpaper for every middle class household to have. That’s further diluted into something like Crate & Barrel making duvet covers and shams. Something that had so much power in itself gets taken away and further separated from its original meaning. That’s how it becomes decorative. Some of the ways that I use it, I started to reclaim that original meaning and to give context.¹⁵

The artist is showing a sort of struggle that comes from the powers of fabrics how they may gain context from artists like Firelie Báez, but will still be used as insignificant things such as pillowcases or wallpaper.

The other patterns found on the linen also depict other forms of resistance found in history. Many symbols used are repetitively found in the artist’s other works of art. Firelie Báez

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¹³ Ibid
¹⁴ Ibid
¹⁵ Ibid
uses some common symbols that show different moments of resistance. The panthers found on Bloodlines are the symbol of the 1960s Black Panther movement that represented the fight for equality for African American people. The artist also uses the pick, which has the black fist to reclaim the power of natural black women’s hair. The black fist is a dual concept in Firelie’s work she uses it as the representation of black power. She also uses the fist with the Latin American cambache pendant that is a good luck charm and keeps away evil spirits. Indicated in the previous paragraph the cambache was also used to as a form of communication between men and women who were enslaved in Cuba to reclaim a part of their humanity. The element and materials used in Bloodlines creates a roadmap that shows how different areas of history have created forms of resistance. The items have a delicate but powerful way to communicate their beliefs within the groups of the subjugated.

The eighteenth century for Louisiana was a time of mass importation of goods, most of those goods were humans specifically Africans. Virginia Meacham Gould in her article, “A Chaos of Iniquity and Discord,” explains that in “1719 thousands of Africans were imported into the Louisiana region for the major purpose of plantation agriculture.”16 “Between 1719 and 1731, twenty-two ships carrying nearly 6,000 slaves arrived in Louisiana’s various ports.”17 Gould’s information is vital to know the reasons why the French were purchasing so many slaves. However, from what region did these Africans come? The main region from where the people came was Senegambia; Senegambia geographically means the area of Senegal and Gambia rivers.18 This region is not just a geographical area; the great empires of Ghana, Mali, 

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16 Clinton, Catherine, and Michele Gillespie, eds. The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 233
17 See note one
and Songhai were founded in the Senegambia zone. A substantial number of Bambara were brought down from the upper Senegal and Niger River region to the coast of Senegal, sold into the Atlantic slave trade, and transported to Louisiana. Author Gwendolyn Midlo Hall delves into detail in her book, Africans in Colonial Louisiana: tells us how important Senegambia is to Louisiana. “During 1726 and 1731, almost all the slave-trade voyages organized by the Company of the Indies went to Louisiana. Thirteen slave ships landed in Louisiana during these years; all but one of them left from Senegambia. Over half the slaves brought to French Louisiana, 3,250 out of 5,987 arrived from Senegambia during this five-year period. The last ship, arriving in 1743, also came from Senegambia.” This mass exportation from the Senegambian region was massive to say the least. Yet when the French were importing slaves to Louisiana they were not just accumulating bodies to work on plantations fields. They also were bringing to Louisiana a new type of cultural environment that mixed different cultures from Africa and Europe.

Only one-third of the Africans taken to Louisiana were women, a majority of them coming from the coast and mainly women from the Wolof region or as people from Europe called it, Senegal. The Wolof women played an extremely vital role in creating and passing on their culture and making the first generation of Louisiana Creole people. Wolof women had many different statuses upon arriving to Louisiana -- some women were wives, concubines, and mothers, in addition to being slaves in Louisiana. The Wolof women were to the French men considered women of great beauty, very fashionable and highly intelligent, many men sought

19 See note three
20 Clinton, Catherine, and Michele Gillespie, eds. *The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 249
21 Ibid, 249
22 Ibid, 249
23 Ibid, 249
after having a Wolof woman as either a slave or concubine. If a French colonist brought his Wolof wife to Louisiana some of the marriage practices from the Wolof culture were brought over. One important marriage practice being stated in Gwendolyn Midlo Hall’s article African Women in French and Spanish Louisiana “if a freeborn man married a slave woman, she and her children were accorded freeborn status.” During the control of the French, Louisiana had a few interracial marriages but the majority of the women were concubines. Some of the women were employed in the domestic areas such as inns and boardinghouses. Others could be working in the markets where they could interact and have opportunities to create a way out of slavery to be a concubine. Being a concubine was most likely to realistic way to be ‘free’ of slavery.

Free black women, or libres as the French colonials called them during colonial Louisiana, inhabited a complicated and uncertain world. Libres were living within a plantation slave society in which racial discrimination and a hierarchy based on order of race, class, and gender would naturally pin these women in a submissive role. The free black women of Louisiana though, were able to move fluidly within these constrictions, as Kimberly S. Hanger states, “New Orleans created a frontier, small scale society in which relationships between persons of different race, status, and gender were fluid, mutable, and highly personalistic.” Some free women were rising up within the Louisiana hierarchy while other free women worked

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24 Clinton, Catherine, and Michele Gillespie, eds. The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 253
25 Clinton, Catherine, and Michele Gillespie, eds. The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 250
26 See note 10 above
27 Clinton, Catherine, and Michele Gillespie, eds. The Devil's Lane: Sex and Race in the Early South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 219
28 Ibid
29 See note 12
to raze the hierarchy to the ground in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{30} The desire to dissolve the distinctions between themselves and the whites became prevalent, women had to work gingerly and cunningly within a white patriarchal society.\textsuperscript{31} Kimberly S. Hanger points out the determination of these women, “Free black women fought daily oppression and pursued to affirm their identity, in part by striving to get what was important to them: freedom for themselves, friends and relatives.”\textsuperscript{32} Some of these fights for freedom needed to be fought artfully and within a state of restriction.

The Spanish took over control of Louisiana in 1770.\textsuperscript{33} Don Estevan Miró a governor of New Orleans from 1785 to 1791 had a census taken in 1788.\textsuperscript{34} The survey was to show how many free people of color there were and the results were surprising, according to Sybil Kein author of Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana’s Free People of Color, “the population of free persons of color in New Orleans was given as 820 in the 1788 census, along with 2,131 slaves and 2,370 whites.”\textsuperscript{35} In an effort to maintain class distinction the governor of New Orleans Don Estevan Miró tried various ways to discourage the popularity of the free people of color.\textsuperscript{36} In 1788 Governor Miró enforced that free or slave women must cover their hair, and tie it with a knotted headdress and refrain from “excessive attention to dress.”\textsuperscript{37} The governor also forbade them to wear any plumes or jewelry in their hair.\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid
\item Ibid
\item Ibid
\item Ibid
\item Ibid
\item Sybil Kein. \textit{Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color}. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 55
\item Sybil, Kein. \textit{Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color}. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000), 47
\item See note 18
\item Ibid
\item Ibid
\end{enumerate}
Hair, to many cultures, has been an important part of religions and customs. The hair’s importance and substance to African people was intensified by its spiritual qualities. In the book Hair Story, it discusses why hair is of spiritual importance, “The hair is the most elevated point of your body, which means it is the closest to the divine, communication from the gods and spirits was thought to pass through the hair to get to the soul.” When the Tignon law was passed to bind and hide the hair of African women in was a way to show a distinction of the classes. The law also acted as a constriction on their connections to their gods and muffled their communication of prayers. The Tignon law made the unique hair of the African women vanishes and turned them into a group of sub humans who were not allowed to show their different hair textures.

Many free and slave women who were targets of this decree were clever and were used to creating small movements of resistance while still abiding by the law. Since the law did not state what type of fabric had to be used for the knotted headdress, or that one could not ornament the headdress with feathers or jewelry. So finding this loophole free black women and black women of slavery created beautiful headdresses with bold, colored fabric, which outshined the fashion of the white women. The Tignon or headdress became a form of identity to many black women in Louisiana.

The headdress’s worn by the women of Louisiana did not spring forth from nowhere. The cultures and styles of dress also came with the women from Africa. In the book Fashioning Africa Power and the Politics of Dress, “Among the Yoruba, clothing and its accessories

constitute the most important form of aesthetic expression, Yoruba popular thought often expressed the relationship between dress and social interaction.”

Although Yoruba women’s clothing was not tailored and did not have ornate embroidery that was typically found on men’s clothing, Yoruba women wore three different headdress--an unmarried women wears a small headscarf idiku, a married woman’s headdress was called the gele, while on older women had the right to one more headdress called the ikaleri.

Since the style of dress is important in Yoruba culture, it makes sense that the fabric chosen to construct an outfit would be equally as important. The quality of the fabric can display a person social and economic status, because only the wealthy can attain the finest of cloths. The elites in the Yoruba culture, as describe in Fashioning Africa Power and the Politics of Dress, “Chiefs asked missionaries of good merchants in England to exchange cotton with for fine cloths, missionaries and other travelers often described the fine imported silks and velvets worn by political elites.” Fashion can sometimes mix with old traditional dress and can make a new statement but still retain a ‘traditional’ feel. The author explained how good fabric is purchased, “There are certain areas that must be met to know if one has purchased fine cloth: the quality of the weave, the use of silk instead of cotton thread, uniqueness of the design, depth of color and amount of fabric used, and delicacy and heaviness of any embroidery.”

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43 Ibid
44 Allman. 32
46 Ibid
48 Ibid
The Yoruba women’s traditional headdresses gave them their identity and told everyone without them verbally saying who they were, how much they are worth, their age and marital status. The women of Louisiana did the same thing, their identity was found in their beautiful selection of cloth used for their headdress. While this embroidery and fabric choice falls closer to the Yoruba men’s choice in cloth wanting to proudly display ones status to the public viewer. The headdress displayed race divisions as well as the formation of new social groups such as the free black women or women under the Tignon law they were defined by their adherence to the new values.49

From the first slave ship that departed from Senegambia to the last, women have been the forces behind moments of resistance. Women free or slaves had certain powers they could use to create small movements of resistance while still adhering to the laws and constraints placed on them as women. The Wolof women brought to Louisiana either as mistresses or wives were able to import some of their marriage customs. Their marriage customs allotted them the right to become freer then other imported Africans this higher status made it feasible for them to grant a freer status to their children as well. Libres or free black women lived in a very complex world. They had power but not equal power to that of the white women. The dominant group in society during this time was highly patriarchal. Free black women who worked within in the hierarchy could make powerful connections and get their friends, family, and other relatives free by using their influence on their white consorts. The tignon law geared to bind and make free and slave women seem sub human to the white classes. A loophole was found in the law, which allowed the free black women to enhance their beauty. The headdress also became another connection to the traditional headdresses found in the Yoruba culture. Firelie Báez creates her artwork to

49 Ibid
display and tell the histories of the repressed. Mostly those histories are about women who were apart of moments of resistance, but have never been addressed in mainstream history. The artist also shows how the history of resistance from a female’s perspective is full of symbols that hold strong meanings and create powerful narratives in feminist spaces even to this day.
Works cited


https://www.gallerywendinorris.com
Figures

Fig 1: *Sans-Souci*
2015, acrylic and ink on linen, 108 x 74 inches
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA
Fig 2: *Bloodlines*
2015, acrylic and ink on linen, 108 x 74 inches
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, PA