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Haitian Carnival: The Art of Resistance

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The different carnivals that are held throughout the Caribbean every year are based on different traditions, cultures, religions, folklore, and myth. Not only is carnival a time for celebration, but for some, it is an opportunity to mask their identities in order to act out mythological and political tales, emphasizing the corruption of their countries through costume and drama. This is notably evident in Haitian Carnival which is held every year, attracting people from all over the world. Apart from the intricate costumes represented in Haitian Carnival, one of the biggest elements are the different characters that are being depicted which can appear bizarre, comical, or terrifying, especially when compared to popular images of Carnival where the costumes include bright colors, sequins, and feathers. This raw, gritty side of Haitian Carnival can be compared to the artwork of André Eugène, whose work is characterized by and embodies the haunting, provocative side of Carnival.¹

First, in order to understand the motivation behind depicting such eccentric characters, it is important to remember the history of Haiti and its impact on the Haitian people. Ranked as one of the poorest countries in the world, with one of the highest population densities, Haiti is noted for its successful slave revolt in 1791. This revolt included African and Creole slaves against the white plantation owners which was a crucial development of the New World.² After the slave revolt, Haiti was vilified and feared by the other nations of the world, especially the nations where slavery was legal.³ Because of losing its economic independence during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Haiti has gone through long periods of political instability, social conflicts, and foreign debts, which has attributed to the fragility of the country.⁴

¹ Gordon, Leah. Introduction to *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. London, Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 10-11.

² Coupeau, Steeve. *The History of Haiti*. Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2008, 1-4.

³ Clark, Ramsey. *Haiti: A Slave Revolution*. New York: International Action Center, 2004, 5.

⁴ Coupeau, 1-4.

However, despite these ongoing hardships, Haiti has become an attractive tourist destination because of its rich culture, festivals, and Pre-Lenten Carnival which is characterized by extraordinary costumes and all night partying.⁵ Similar to other Carnivals that are held every year throughout the Caribbean, such as Trinidad and Tobago, the Haitian Carnival includes vibrant, celebratory costumes and aesthetics. However, not all of the Haitian participants are expressing themselves in this way. A large number of performers are interested in representing the dark side of Haiti's history such as death, battle, venality, and carnality as travel writer Richard Fleming explains, "It is in the moment when I, the individual, fear the crowd, but cannot resist partaking in the pleasure of being swept away by it."⁶ The Carnival that is held every year in Jacmel is, "an annual opportunity to discuss the country's latest political skullduggery, its economic woes and environmental catastrophes, and the many military incursions it has suffered."⁷

Some of the characters that are represented during Haitian Carnival include transvestites, political satires, costumed menaces, zombis, Indians, devils, and characters from mythology. As Fleming describes, "Carnival has never been just a party. Carnival is a time for releasing tensions, for rupturing the boredom of the quotidian labouring life. It's a time for making political commentary, and for keeping history in mind and focus."⁸ One of the groups that embodies this idea are The Rope Throwers. The Rope Throwers represent slavery and being freed from slavery, celebrating their independence in 1804. According to Salnave Raphael, a Rope Thrower performer, "The cords we carry are the cords that were used to bind us. We are always sullen and menacing and we never smile. The blackness of our skin is made with pot

⁵ Coupeau, 5-13.

⁶ Fleming, Richard. "Kanaval" in *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 29.

⁷ Fleming, 24.

⁸ Fleming, 15.

black crushed charcoal, cane spirit, and cane syrup mixed with a little water in a bucket.

Although we know that slaves never wore horns, this is about the revolt of the slaves, and we wear the horns to give us more power and to look even more frightening.”⁹ They want to show that even though the slaves suffered, they are strong. This group exemplifies how other nations were afraid of Haiti after their successful slave revolt because of the power and rebellion of the slaves.

A different character representing Haitian politics during Carnival is called Chaloska. This character is named after Chief Charles Oscar, who was a murderous military commander in charge of the police in Jacmel during the nineteenth century. It is said that Oscar took 500 prisoners from the local jail to kill them, and in turn, was publicly lynched by angry people in the community. Chaloska is intended to mock Charles Oscar, with the character appearing with oversized red lips and buck teeth protruding out of its mouth.¹⁰ As Carnival performer Eugene Lamour, describes, “These characters are still here in Haitian society, so it is good to parade them on the street. It is a message to all future Oscars that you will end up this way. The group goes all over town threatening people. The boss Chaloska always finally eventually dies, and the others call for mercy, as they are cowards - but then another Chaloska immediately replaces him. This is to show the infinite replication of Chaloska, which continues to be produced under the same system.”¹¹ This character embodies the political instability and corruption that has impacted Haiti and its people in the past and in the present.

The character called Papa Sida (Father AIDS), is another powerful character that is represented in Haitian Carnival. Papa Sida was created in response to the growing number of

⁹ Raphael, Salnave. “The Rope Throwers” in *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 27.

¹⁰ Lamour, Eugene. “Chaloska” in *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 50.

¹¹ Lamour, 50.

people dying from AIDS and to help spread the message that AIDS is a reality in Haiti, not a lie created by politicians. This character features a man dressed in drag, usually carrying medicine or some other identifying prop to signify that he is sick with the virus. Papa Sida warns the youth of Jacmel of the consequences of not using protection and that AIDS is too easy to get, whether black or white, emphasizing the idea that everyone can get it.¹² According to Lendor James, the creator of Papa Sida, “I created Papa Sida because I see many young people die of AIDS and I want to get a message to the youngsters of this town that before having sex they must put on a condom.”¹³ This character represents the danger and fear that are connected with this disease, while also confronting the misconception that AIDS is a myth.

The aesthetics and the deep messages behind the characters of Haitian Carnival can be related to the artwork of André Eugène, a contemporary artist from Haiti. Eugène works with recycled materials and other found objects to create sculptures that are characterized by their crude forms and sharp edges and are made from broken TV’s, discarded toys, and real human skulls that were discarded by grave robbers.¹⁴ Additionally, Eugène formed the Atis Rezistans in 1998, a collective group of artists that produces works that embody the ideas of Vodou, as well as the country’s political and economic troubles. The group is based in Port au Prince along the Grand Rue which is the main avenue that runs through town.¹⁵ These artists are “extending the historical legacy of assemblage to the majority world. Their use of the readymade components are driven by economic necessity combined with creative vision and cultural continuity.”¹⁶ They have held exhibitions in Paris, London, and Los Angeles and their work has been embraced by a

¹² James, Lendor. “Papa Sida” in *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 86.

¹³ James, 86.

¹⁴ McFadden, David. “Haiti artists forge int’l reputation with art made of junk.” *The Seattle Times*, April 10, 2016, sec. Nation.

¹⁵ “About Atis Rezistans,” *Atis Rezistans*, accessed January 19, 2019, <http://www.atis-rezistans.com/about.php>.

¹⁶ “About Atis Rezistans,” *Atis Rezistans*, accessed January 19, 2019, <http://www.atis-rezistans.com/about.php>.

number of international art connoisseurs and academics.¹⁷ Art critics embrace the artwork of the Atis Rezistans because of its bold and confrontational nature. In a 2012 interview with photographer Leah Gordon, Eugène stated, “Something was happening in the neighborhood, the carnival bands, the Pèp Samiz, the numerous craftsmen sculptors and the voodoo all around. That’s what got me into the art world.”¹⁸ Eugène’s sculptures reflect Haitian Vodou, social issues such as sexuality and mortality, and Haiti’s ongoing economic crisis, which are similar to the themes of Carnival, and depicted in a similar way.

Playing on Haiti’s unstable history, then and now, Eugène creates works that appear eccentric and provocative, similar to some of the aesthetics of Haitian Carnival. For instance, his sculpture titled *Ezili Danto* features a large female figure composed of metal scraps, car parts, cans, bottles, metal pins, and nails. She is holding a smaller figure in front of her body, possibly representing her daughter Anais, whose name comes from ananas, the French and Haitian Creole term for pineapple.¹⁹ The title of this sculpture comes from the Haitian god Ezili who is one of the most powerful gods in Vodou. She is also recognized as the most contradictory, as author Joan Dayan explains, “Ezili is a spirit of love who forbids love, a woman who is the most beloved yet feels herself the most betrayed. She can be generous and loving, or implacable and cruel.”²⁰ She is a Petro Lwa, contradictory and complex, and is said to appear at night to her followers in the form of a pale virgin, or a Black Madonna. The Petro Lwa is a family of spirits in Haitian Vodou. Ezili Danto is described as the perfect mother who always defends and protects her children, was brought to Haiti by enslaved Africans, and was a central symbol

¹⁷ McFadden, David. "Haiti artists forge int'l reputation with art made of junk." *The Seattle Times*, April 10, 2016, sec. Nation.

¹⁸ Gordon, Leah. "Bold sculptures drawn from the waste of a failing economy." *Les Ateliers Jérôme*, 2012.

¹⁹ Cosentino, Donald, ed. "Interleaf M" in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. California: Regents of the University of California, 1995, 300.

²⁰ Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, 59.

during the slave revolution, as she was the essence of a powerful black mother.²¹ The way in which Eugène represents this god is similar to the way the participants of Haitian Carnival were representing their characters. Instead of idealizing this important figure, Eugène depicts her as fierce, rough, and intimidating, just as the Rope Throwers wanted to appear during Carnival. Both the Rope Throwers and Eugène's *Ezili Danto* reflect different aspects of Haitian history through appearing powerful and strong.

Another piece by Eugène that embodies the spirit of Carnival is titled *Military Glory*. This sculpture features a skeletal figure, representing Gede, dressed in a military outfit, with a halo resting behind its head which is constructed from a hubcap. The way in which the figure's arms are outstretched in victory, along with the title *Military Glory*, suggests that this piece is a satire to the military regime. According to Katherine Smith, a scholar of Haitian culture, "When Gede manifests in a devotee's body, he often delights in satirical performances that mock authority figures, such as the military."²² Furthermore, there appears to be a phallus like spring protruding from its body, emphasizing its satirical nature. The image of a penis is a common symbol in representing Gede in Vodou.²³ The skull is missing several teeth, the eyes are mismatched light bulbs, and its helmet is loose around its head, all of which allude to the idea that this is a parodic representation. This piece by Eugène can be compared to the Chaloska character from Carnival. The way in which Eugène mocks the military is similar to the way in which Charles Oscar is being satirized by the performers. Through different mediums, they are both distorting a military figure and mocking this part of Haitian history.

²¹ Dayan, 58-63.

²² Smith, Katherine. "Chapter 2: Genealogies of Gede" in *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art*. California: The Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2012, 92.

²³ Cosentino, Donald. "Chapter 16: The Gedes and Bawon Samdi" in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. California: Regents of the University of California, 1995, 399-415.

These same ideas can be applied to Eugène's statue titled *Gede* in relation to the character Papa Sida. Eugène's *Gede* features a skeletal figure that appears weathered and frightening, with hollow eyes. In Haitian vodou, the Gedes are the spirits of the ancestral dead, whose leader is the Bawon Samdi.²⁴ They have no other heaven but the body of man and they absorb whatever is new on the social horizon. It is said that today, according to Vodouists, Gede is the spirit of the people and is the most omnipresent and beloved spirit of Vodou.²⁵ Death and mortality are major themes in Eugène's work, as well as being a major theme in Haitian culture. For example, during Carnival, not only does Papa Sida represent mortality through the AIDS epidemic, but stock characters called Mo, or "the dead" also represent mortality by wearing white hoods over their heads. These Mo characters are covered in white, the color of Gede, which represents death and rebirth.²⁶ Andre Eugène's treatment of death and mortality as a theme of expression can be related to the Papa Sida character and the Mo character of Carnival because they contain elements of vodou and mortality.

Not only are the Haitian politics, religion, and social issues that are represented by Haitians at Carnival related to Andre Eugène's artwork aesthetically, but also through content and meaning. The performers use Carnival as their platform to promote their message of making political commentary, for keeping history in mind and in focus, and to reflect on and emphasize the realities of their lives in Haiti. Through this platform, participants exemplify how the Haitian people are tough and resistant.²⁷ These same themes and ideas are present in Andre Eugène's sculptures. He uses recycled, found objects as his medium to spread his message about Haitian

²⁴ Cosentino, Donald, ed. "Interleaf R" in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. California: Regents of the University of California, 1995, 396.

²⁵ Cosentino, Donald. "Chapter 16: The Gedes and Bawon Samdi" in *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. California: Regents of the University of California, 1995, 399-415.

²⁶ Cosentino, Donald. "Aristocrats" in *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. London: Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 44.

²⁷ Gordon, Leah. Introduction to *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti*. London, Soul Jazz Publishing, 2010, 10-11.

identity. As Eugène expressed in an interview on NPR, “Look at my art and look at Haitians. Look at my art and look at resistance, look at resilience.”²⁸ Expanding on this idea, Eugène states, “Resistance means struggling for justice in all ways, in the day-to-day happenings of your neighborhood, your country, your culture, but above all, your own life.”²⁹ Like the participants at Carnival, Eugène expresses the realities of Haitian history and culture through the medium of sculpture.

Although Carnival is usually a time for celebration, for some, it is also a time to represent the politics, social issues, and the corruption of Haitian history. Some of the themes, costumes, and characters that are depicted in Carnival can be related to the themes and aesthetics of Andre Eugène’s artwork. Not only are they similar in their theatrics and provocative aesthetics, but they embody Haitian identity, history, and culture.

²⁸ Gilkey, David. “An in Depth Interview with Andre Eugene in Haiti by NPR.” *Frederick Fine Art Gallery*, 2015.

²⁹ Camacho, Rafael. “Atis Rezistans: Preserving Haiti’s Anticolonial Resistance.” *Taylor & Francis Online*, June 08, 2018.

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