

## **Gédé Transmogrifications; Sex, Death and Resurrection on Grand Rue**

[© LeGrace Benson, Arts of Haiti Research Project. Originally presented at a colloquium of KOSANBA (Kongré Santa Barbara, an association for the scholarly study of Vodou.)]

Ariel Sings  
Full fathom five thy father lies;  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade,  
But doth suffer a sea change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:  
Hark, now I hear them, –ding-dong bell.

Nothing is ever totally discarded in Haiti. Stacks of hubcaps or universal joints; lengths of bamboo, ragged planks torn in a hurricane; dark computer screens and silent radios; lightless lamps and toneless telephones; shoes, hats, shirts and dresses: all lie ready at hand for some truck repair, the framing for a house, clothing to be worn yet again. Someone will spot just the thing from among the resistant rags and shards. Whatever defies disintegration becomes another state of being. And of the people? Some say only the body dies, the ancestral spirit stays around, stays around. Along Grand Rue stacks of detritus waiting for reincarnation become the art medium for artists Andre, Eugene, Guyodo, Celeur. And the skulls, too, or the thigh bones, their former inhabitants long released from that limiting armature. The bony remains are sold out of the dusty cemetery, the skulls, once repository of lore and love, especially prized. All of it found objects, revived by young *bos mekanisyen* familiar with sudden mortalities and possessed by a divine sense of humor.

Shudder at a Gedé dancing through the auto graveyard, haloed with an old Toyota rim, and another one swirling love-spirit Ezuli's pink skirts over an astounding exhaust pipe erection. Laugh until the tears run.

Do these wretched rag dolls transport us to the presence of the Great Laughing God of Prayer and Praise? Has the artist stretched these fragile pieces of unraveling burlap and pink polyester to rend transcendence?

Scene in the creation yard: An artist carries one of his assemblages in his left arm. His right arm cradles a five gallon container. He carries it lightly, so it is probably empty. Perhaps he will translate it into a head or a torso. Beyond him are basins and buckets. Laundry? Clothing for the next production? In the far background is a display of hubcaps. Between the hubcaps and the laundry looms a menace surmounted with a cross. Crucifixion or crossroads? Jeopardy in any case.

What would Jesus do with all this junk and charnel leavings? Resurrect it? Pablo Picasso, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst, or Robert Rauschenberg joined Surrealism's found objects with the sensibilities that invaded Europe from its colonial possessions. They reframed both the subjects and the materials of art in their efforts to break through the inadvertent prison of the Renaissance and Baroque. Once adventures into space, those Italian and Netherlandish techniques had become codified into constraints on imagination. In part the European artists sought for the deeper regions of spirituality, and in part an escape into the open spaces of secularism. Religion suffered a coeval Babylonian captivity, imprisoned in its own bourgeois power. Religious visual arts

expressions can be said to have fared poorly in the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. There has been little acceptance of modern subjects, and where churches, temples, mosques or synagogues allowed contemporaneous art, the results have most usually been materials and styles drawn from determinedly secular modes that effectively preclude the presence of the breath of the spirit. (Corbusier's chapel at Ronchamp, Matisse's in Vence, or Marc Chagall's stained glass windows are exceptions that leap to mind.)

Andre Breton's famous recognition of the breath of the spirit in the works of Haitian artist, Hector Hyppolite, as well as the works and the efforts of such Latin American artists as Wifredo Lam of Cuba, or Matta Echaurren of Chile, activated a diversity of expressions in the southern hemisphere. Typically these have incorporated attitudes toward both European and American sacred convictions with the free use of whatever materials are available that persisted from African traditions. The artists also incorporated the Western modernists' game of using the detritus of society to create high art. The occurrence in western museums of trash from the streets and iron from the auto graveyards came out of Africa as presented in ethnographic museums. It comes back into both Africa and the African Diaspora as a novel idea that smoothly connects with very old practices and beliefs. Caribbean and Latin American art of the last fifty years provides many examples of this Kreolization that conjoins not only different cultures but also different historical periods and trajectories.

A catalogue, *Lespri Endependans*, of the works of these Grand Rue artists along with other contemporary Haitian artists, shown at the Frost Museum of Florida International University includes a text by Africanist Donald Cosentino, who has written extensively about Africanisms in Haiti. His positions on the tradition of African roots in Haitian sculpture are indisputable. On the other hand, according to gallery director, Reynald Lally who gathered these particular works for the exhibition, the artists wanted to be looked at as contemporary artists and their work as contemporary art rather than as folkloric African continuities. The continuities are undeniable. So is the cosmopolitan contemporaneity of the pieces.

The Gédé are not an extinct family who left some garments for latterly others to wear at Halloween. They are the lively, antic spirits of death and sex, conductors of the passages into and out of this visible life. Gédé lives. Gédé are in Bernini's Santa Theresa in ecstasy from the erotic arrows of the putto sent from Jesus. They are there by the gold-framed crystal coffin of Santa Caterina, her nails longer after her interment than they were in life. Gédé are in a Congo *minkisi* despite the geographical and national separations; and they dance around, sometimes even visibly, on countless orgiastic MTV performances. Gédé came over as *malunga* on the trade ships, and other companions came along with them. They say there were slave ships where Shakespeare's plays were performed. *Minkisi* came too. They all made common cause. They are all Kreyols nowadays. When a performance is hilarious and frightening, know well that the Gédé are present and sea changes into something rich and strange are in process. Ding,dong bell.