

Haitian sculptors give British audiences a new perspective

by Charles Arthur

Three artists from the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, have been making a big impact during a month-long visit to Britain. Jean Hérard Celeur, André Eugène, and Frantz Jacques Guyodo - known collectively as the 'Sculptors of Grand Rue' - were originally invited to the port city of Liverpool to help launch their massive 'Freedom Sculpture', a work commissioned by the city's Museum and the British development organisation, Christian Aid, to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain.

Following the launch, on February 26th, of the 'Freedom Sculpture', which they made in collaboration with Haitian artist Mario Benjamin, the Sculptors of Grand Rue (a street that runs through the centre of downtown Port-au-Prince) decided to stay on in London for a few more weeks. The British solidarity organisation, the Haiti Support Group, provided some funding and found some additional funding from other sources including the JA Clark Charitable Foundation, to cover their expenses. The photojournalist, Leah Gordon, provided them with accommodation and found them a temporary workshop in east London.

At a Haiti Support Group reception for the sculptors at Four Corners arts centre in Bethnal Green, a full house watched a UK-premiere screening of the short film about them – 'E.Pluribus Unum', directed by Maxence Denis – and later quizzed the artists about their work and experiences in Haiti.

Answering one question, André Eugène explained, "When we started, people thought we were mad, but with growing outside interest our local community has begun to respect our work. In Haiti - especially in our area - children have nothing to do, and so we see a responsibility to encourage them and get them involved in art, in whatever small way we can, and give them an alternative to being on the streets."

At the studios in Hackney Wick, the sculptors created new works from discarded items found in skips and abandoned lots nearby. They also shared ideas with a number of internationally-respected artists working on the same studios, including Cat Barich and Tania Stanic who this summer are due to show at Documenta - one of the world's most important exhibitions of modern and contemporary art which takes place every five years in Germany.

Their new creations – together with some smaller pieces that they brought with them from Haiti – went on display for two weeks at the end of March at Hoxton's trendy bar and gallery space, The Foundry. The exhibition space was offered to them after the centre's joint owners, Jonathan and Tracey Moberly, had read an article and seen photos of the sculptors' work in the monthly arts magazine, Dazed & Confused.

During the launch night at The Foundry, the three sculptors took part in a performance of drumming to commemorate the abolition of the slave trade in Britain, and spoke at length on The Foundry's own radio programme on Resonance FM.

Tracey Moberly said, "It was splendid and symbolic to be marking the abolition of the slave trade by exhibiting Haitian artists, and the atmosphere was particularly electric on the day and the evening of March 25 when the artists and their friends performed Vodou drumming."

She added, "The Foundry looked fantastic because the artists, as well as showing their sculptures inside, had decorated the outside of the building with sculptures and paintings. Everyone that passed by photographed the building's exterior." Moberly continued, "By hosting this exhibition we were hoping to dispel the negative myths surrounding Haiti and its religion,

Vodou."

There was also a very positive audience response when the sculptors showed the same film and participated in 'Illusions of Disempowerment' - a six-day festival of documentary films and talks on activism from the Global South, organised by the Solidarity Not Charity organisation. Jean Hérard Céleur told the audience, "We appeal to you all here this evening to use whatever influence you have to bring attention to the situation in Haiti."

During their time in London, the sculptors were invited to give a talk and show their film to masters degree students studying fine arts at the Chelsea Arts College, one of the most prestigious institutions of its kind in Britain. There was a considerable turnout of students to see the film and take part in a question and answer session afterwards.

In response to a question about whether or not they were concerned that their work may be seen as 'exotic' and implicitly marginal, the artists replied that they did not accept the 'naive art' label. Frantz Jacques Guyodo said, "I believe we have a right to a place on the international stage alongside other serious artists."

They were also asked to respond to the comment that their art could be described as "totally absorbed in its environment". Jean Hérard Céleur replied, "Clearly our art is inspired by our own reality of poverty and lack of justice, but we believe it speaks with and for all countries struggling against oppression, and in that sense it has a universal message and appeal."

There was also considerable interest in the influence of Vodou in their work and in particular the Gede spirits. Eugène explained the significance of the Vodou family of spirits called Gede, guardians of life and death, and their appeal as representing freedom from inhibitions and in particular sexual inhibition, hence the preponderance of phallic symbols in their work, as well as the use of skulls and crosses.

Later, the students showed the artists around their studios. Guyodo remarked, "We have no real arts facilities like this in Haiti."

Dr John Cussans, lecturer in fine art theory at the Chelsea Arts College, suggested, "There should be always a fine and delicate negotiation between the English arts scene and art produced in the South, and this visit has helped further the ongoing debate."

The sculptors themselves also took in a lot of the culture and art on offer in Britain, visiting the Tate Modern, Britain and Liverpool, the Hayward Gallery, and the British Museum, and many of the new contemporary galleries in London's East End. "I am so surprised," said Guyodo, "There are no galleries in Haiti that would take a risk and exhibit work of this kind."

Reflecting on the visit, Leah Gordon said, "This has been a great chance for the cross-fertilisation of ideas about art and creation - many artists and students have been quite intensely inspired by the Haitians' work and culture, and I feel that the sculptors have benefited too from their unique snapshot of the British arts scene."

"The best memory that we take back with us to Haiti is of all the friendly British artists and musicians who we have met and worked with here", said Eugène.

The impact of the Sculptors of Grand Rue will continue to be felt around the country as their 'Freedom Sculpture' – a complex mass of bodies, faces, arms, hands and feet, makeshift guns, chains, agricultural tools and recycled car-parts - will be going on show in various locations before returning to Liverpool where it will remain on permanent display in the new International Slavery Museum that opens on August 23.

Natalie Fanfan, a young woman from the Port-au-Prince area of Carrefour Feuilles who with other youth worked with the sculptors to design and create the 'Freedom Sculpture' also travelled to Liverpool for the launch. She said, "We created this work as Haitians who are still enslaved. You can see in the work that we are struggling to free ourselves. It shows that we, as Haitian people who created the first independent black republic, are still in chains even today."

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