

Edward J. Sullivan



Spirit Travellers¹

PAINTING BY EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ

THE SUBJECT OF MIGRATION IS CENTRAL TO THE DISCOURSE OF MODERN AND contemporary art of the Caribbean. The spiritual and aesthetic basis of the cultural expressions of the nations of this part of the world revolve around both forced and voluntary migration. Exile and expatriation have found their way into concrete visual terms. The terrors of the Middle Passage, the journey of the enslaved from Africa to the Caribbean, and the resulting trauma of bondage and servitude remain the central defining issue in the history of the islands. In contemporary art migration takes on many appearances. In Cuban art of the 1960s and 70s, for example, the theme of migration as exile has been fundamental to many artists. Luis Cruz Azaceta and Ana Mendieta, among others, expressed the trauma of obligatory banishment and cultural transplantation. Exile and the consequences of re-location again became significant in work by Cuban artists in exile in the United States after the Mariel crisis of the early 1980s. More recent Cuban art of the 1990s has focused once again upon this dilemma. Artists both living on the island and working abroad have employed the image of the boat or the raft as a symbol of societal instability causing the need for re-location and accommodation to unfamiliar and, at times, alien circumstances.

Cuban artists are not the ones to use the metaphor of travel and migration. Dominican artists have also depicted the water, rafts and boats in their art to denote the equally tragic circumstances of the thousands who flee the island for both reasons of economic privation and societal coercions. In Puerto Rican art of the 1980s and the 1990s the symbol of the airplane as opposed to sea-going vessels is employed. The “air bridge” between San Juan and New York links the two islands in both tangible and spiritual ways. Jamaican artists have also dealt with the subject of split identities (including migration between the island and England) to question the essential qualities of Caribbean identity. Haiti is a nation for which migration and exile have played key roles in the formation of a contemporary consciousness. The social upheavals of the 1990s are only the most recent circumstances that have occasioned massive retreat from the island. Haitian-ness, Haitian identity and Haitian cultural personality are by no means involved solely with life on the island itself; the complexities of the country’s personality have extended far beyond its political borders. The constant flow back and forth between Port-au-Prince and Brooklyn, Paris or Montreal is an essential

factor in defining the realities and the problems of the contemporary life of Haitians.

The art of Edouard Duval-Carrié is deeply rooted in this notion of migration, change, re-invention and transformation. The vicissitudes of Haitian society and its shifts of personality and values are integral to his vision of the world he inhabits. The artist himself is an embodiment of alteration and transmutation. As a Haitian who has lived and studied in France and Canada and who now resides in the United States (Miami), he is acutely aware of the disorientations caused by migration. Duval-Carrié is also conscious of the necessity of possibilities inherent in physical and spiritual journeys. His work reflects a continual rumination on metamorphosis and its consequences. In his paintings he deals with these themes in an allegorical form. The travels of the *lwas*, the spiritual essences of voodoo, are the principal subjects of his recent images. In some of these paintings, such as *Migrations des Betes* or *Dambalah Di*, Duval-Carrié addresses this theme directly, while in others the fluid movements of the spirits are more broadly suggested.

In many ways the journey of the spirits across both time and cultures, may be understood as a metaphor for the peripatetic existence of the artist himself. His affirmation of the vitality of voodoo, as both a religion and a way of life inside and outside of Haiti, is a testimony to one of the most intimate and innate characteristics of himself as well as the culture from which he emerged. Voodoo, a religion of West African origin into which Christian elements (saints, symbols and ritual) are interpolated, does not have a written theology. It is a religion which has developed organically, shaping itself to the needs of the faithful and their circumstances. Voodoo is not a religion of the word but, rather, one of images which have evolved over many generations. The visual language of voodoo is both concrete and abstract. The individual spirits made the sea journey from the lands of the Fon, Yoruba and Ewe peoples in the lands around the Gulf of Benin with the slaves transported to the New World. They came to the Antilles as well as to Brazil and were embraced with similar but varying names and attributes in islands such as Cuba, Puerto Rico and Hispaniola. Santería shares these deities as well as many of Voodoo's ritual practices. While santería is extremely important in the Spanish-speaking nations among a wide cross section of the population, Haitian voodoo is, perhaps, more pervasive within the totality of the various social strata of the nation. In Haiti voodoo developed in a particularly tenacious way after independence from France was achieved and the French Catholic clergy departed.

Edouard Duval-Carrié's art acknowledges and affirms the steadfastness of the religion and its pervasive qualities, yet his paintings are by no means religious icons. The artist deals with the essential personalities of voodoo (Erzulie Freda, Erzulie Dantor, Dambala, Baron Samedi, Gédé and others) as inevitable presences within the landscape — both visual and mental — of Haiti. In a manner that has been described as “post modern” Duval-Carrié appropriates these *lwas*, yet he does not change their personalities and does not reconstruct their connotations. He employs the figures of these deities as symbols of self realization and cultural affirmation. In his depictions of

migrations he describes not only the mythical journeys of the spirits from Africa to the Caribbean but suggests their pervasiveness in every site of the Haitian diaspora.

In the new paintings Duval-Carrié appropriates many formal qualities of the visual vocabulary of voodoo. Some of these paintings combine semi-abstract, pattern-like forms ultimately derived from the traditional *vèvè*, a pattern drawn on the ground during voodoo ceremonies with flour or coffee grounds which invokes the presence of the spirit or spirits. In addition, Duval-Carrié also forges his own critique of the Haitian “naif” tradition. The most well known form of “modern” Haitian painting developed in the 1940s with the work of painters such as Hector Hippolyte, Seneque Obin, Rigaud Benoit and others. These artists were reacting against an already established current of European- based modernism in Haitian art that had emerged earlier. The early “naifs” (as well as the hundreds of others of varying levels of accomplishment who have continued this tradition into the present) established a “voice” for Haitian art that was accepted with alacrity throughout the Americas and Europe. Duval-Carrié’s work represents an appropriation and a critique of this mode of artistic vision.

Duval-Carrié has always invested his art with a degree of irony and, often, an acerbic social criticism. Some of his well-known pieces, for example, comment upon the lamentable socio-political injustices under the Duvalier regime. These pictures administer a caution to every viewer, with their powerful visual metaphors, to carefully consider the essential qualities of Haitian existence and, by extension, of the human condition. These paintings accomplish this goal by means of a high degree of imagination and inventiveness within the framework of a resplendent palette, thought-provoking imagery and evocative depictions of the pervasive spirits of voodoo.



1. Reprinted from *Des Migrations Sous L'eau* – Generous Miracles Gallery.