

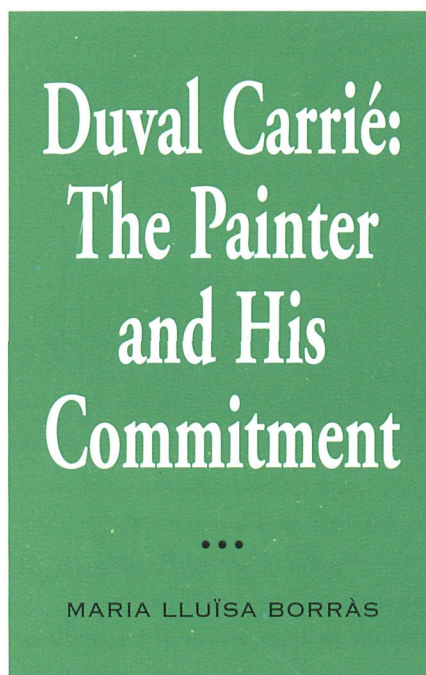
REVIEWS

The city of Port-au-Prince stretches out in a sort of ascending initiation from the pestilential coastal area to the very top of the hill: from the district of the pariahs and disinherited on whom 300 years of slavery still weigh heavily, up to the chosen, the elite who live in Petionville, the summit, the top, from which can be seen unforgettable panoramic views of the horizon, filled with the profiles of the mountain ranges that are outlined in black against the abundant warm light of dusk. And symbolically as well, the unfortunate and the privileged are condemned to go along together without losing sight of each other throughout the length of the twisting and narrow highway that winds its way from hell to heaven, some in air-conditioned automobiles, prisoners in the enormous morass, impotently honking their horns, while the others are barefoot, walking freely along with their bundles on their heads and usually cheerful, thinking that the past was even worse. But both advance at the same pace, some strangely joyful and the others impotent prisoners of their rage against the exasperating slowness.

He wears shorts and a t-shirt and speaks fluent Spanish, the product of the Puerto Rican education that he received when his family was forced into exile by Duvalier. His tone is so convincing and warm that it is difficult to contradict him, especially since the tone is aided by a steady gaze and a pair of strangely gray eyes. He is clearly a refined and cultivated man, and everything about his appearance and attitude refutes the stereotype of the primitive Haitian, the typical naïf painter.

He opens by talking about politics, about the irreconcilable differences of Haitian culture; it is the argument of an attentive and extremely lucid man.

D - Politicians have been taking advantage of religion and culture in order to keep the Haitian people in oppression. Despite the fact that they belonged to hundreds of different tribes, as soon as the blacks were taken out of the slave ships they managed to join forces, which is incomprehensible since



they came from very different parts of Africa and because in addition to not knowing each other, they didn't even have a common language. Upon arrival all the tribes began instinctively installing themselves in a cosmogony that no one could take away from them and which miraculously, despite everything to the contrary, made them feel free. Life conditions in Haiti were – and are – so tragic that the inhabitants have to look to the supernatural realm for balance. Spirits are the true representation of the people; the pantheon of their gods was created in the image of man. What most interests me about voodoo is that it is the expression of those who hope to remain true to themselves. And in addition, it has a political aspect. More than anything else, it is a religion for an oppressed people.

These are people who have always struggled, who were brought to Haiti as slaves and were enslaved for 300 years, at first exploited by the French, who saw blacks as little more than cog in the production machinery which brought France unheard of economic power, and later by the stupid, boorish Duvalier crowd. We are talking about a

population of 7 million people, of whom 80% are more destitute now than when they were 200 years ago. People who, as soon as they achieved their own freedom, were enslaved yet again.

B - You dealt with that episode in the *Portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture* of 1989. L'Ouverture was the slave who wrote the first Haitian constitution and died in a French prison after having risen up against the French attempt at restoring slavery, which had been abolished by the Napoleonic army. In the painting, Toussaint L'Ouverture, his proclamation of liberty in hand, symbolically tramples a snake. I believe you painted another portrait of him rowing a boat, surrounded by crocodiles.

Given the fact that you have almost always studied abroad, how familiar are you with Haitian history, which is so frequently reflected in your work?

D - In France I began seriously studying Haitian history, although I was limited to the Occidental point of view. The slaves obviously did not bring any documents with them when they came to the island: all the documents dealing with the subject come from European sources. I studied with enormous passion, hoping to revise history, every period of our history, all the ideas that had become stereotypes and clichés under the exclusively European perspective.

B - Your painting interested me precisely because it criticized the European point of view. It seemed to me to be a translation, shifted to the Haitian condition, of the problem of "Orientalism" as advanced by Edward Said: the Occidental vision created at the end of the 19th century, a vision of a fake Arab world, of invincible warriors and houris. It had been nurtured by painting since Delacroix, who kept an arsenal of all kinds of gear acquired from Parisian antique dealers which he used to compose his scenes of an apocryphal Islam which sadly still survives. Your painting seemed to me as demythifying for Haiti as Said's text is for the Arab world.

D - It's curious that you should refer to Islam, since Haitian painting traditionally has been incorporating Arabic calligraphy, fascinating. No one knows what it means, and it probably doesn't even reproduce phrases or words. The island received all sorts of African tribes and cultures indiscriminately, and among the blacks there were also educated men who knew how to write. This calligraphy has lasted all these years as a form that lacks meaning, eventually becoming yet another magical element.

B - To what extent do you consider that magic and politics are intermixed?

D - In Haiti, the mix is such that quite often it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. The leaders of this country typically resort to this combination in order to keep the people in misery. Even a man like Aristide succumbed when he found himself forced to use this type of discourse in order to be able to communicate with the people. My work attempts to go deeper into these sorts of problems, which in fact are not so simple to analyze.

B - It wouldn't be quite correct to say that you resemble what is usually considered to be a political person.

D - Despite the fact that I have supported Aristide, I am not interested in party politics. But I didn't sign the protest against the U.S. intervention in Haiti because I was in favor of the intervention, but rather because I felt that something had to be done when the world community at last had decided to intervene in favor of the Haitian people. I am neither a politician nor a crusader nor an activist. But I enjoy when people say that my art speaks for me.

B - That is a phrase I have heard more than once, and which is based, I feel, in the fact that the painting, using parody, overflows with political, cultural and social connotations. The commitment is occasionally fixed within a critical vision that extends from cynicism to Romanticism and defines a certain cultural space where the past has its place but only as a function of the present as the purpose of reflection.

D - For my first exhibition in the

prestigious Centre d'Art in Haiti, in 1980, I painted *Portrait of Jean Claude Duvalier* (the son and successor of Papa Doc) in a wedding gown. But Francine Murat, the director, said to me 'If we exhibit this, well be thrown in jail.'

B - Yet I think that *Le Nouveau Familier* of 1968 was more powerful, with the image of the general who took control after the fall of Duvalier dressed as Napoleon, gripping a machete.

D - The machete symbolizes the revolution of 1791, when the slaves revolted, gained their independence and gave the name of Haiti to the western part of the island Hispaniola.

B - I also think that another powerful image is the 1980 *Surprise Partie Chez Les Militaires*, with its generals wearing their medals. The smallest offers a pastry that is a map of Haiti, while the other shows the *carte blanche* that he possesses in order to distribute among the generals.

D - I was unable to exhibit it in Haiti until 1991, when Aristide came to power.

In fact, I have lived more than 40 years away from Haiti. I spent part of my adolescence in Puerto Rico, where my father had to flee from the oppression of Papa Doc, François Duvalier. In the 70's, my parents, my sister and our brother Robert, who is a year older than I and who is an authentic political activist, returned to Haiti in order to reopen the automobile-parts factory. Going back to our house in Port-au-Prince and continuing with my studies at the institute was a truly important experience for me. But soon I had to go to New York in order to finish the last year of high school, and from there I went on to study at Loyola and McGill universities.

B - Why do you say that your brother is an "authentic political activist?"

D - Because when he was in the University he was locked in prison for two years. Specific charges were never brought against him, other than that he frequented circles that were opposed to Duvalier. When they told him he could go home, he had to wait six months until the sores healed and he regained weight. I came back from the University of

Montreal just as they were bringing him home and I decided that I was not going to confine myself to just painting pretty pictures. When he was released from jail my brother formed an association of political prisoners, in addition to editing a magazine that denounced the abuses of human rights.

B - How did you begin to paint?

D - Since I didn't dare tell my parents that I wanted to study art, I began with something more practical but not unrelated: urbanism. In order to earn some spending money I worked in the gallery of a collector who even had work by Paul Klee. Almost without noticing, I began to paint in my free time and I even exhibited in the gallery some paintings. They were quite Haitian in style, since I was as self-educated as the primitive Haitian painters. Later I understood that for me, painting in that style was a way of searching for my roots.

B - In reality, distancing oneself physically from one's home country always involves a certain re-encounter, don't you think?

D - Yes. When I was studying in the University of Montreal in the 70's, I felt homesick for the tropics, and for the first time ever I tried to paint without thinking about painting, allowing myself to act on instinct as I made an effort to revive myths and history and a culture that I, despite the distance, strangely and more than ever felt was my own. Thus arose the series of characters: saints, *loas*, heroes and ancestors, the Duvalier clan and its guards, the awful Tonton Macoutes. Everything was mixed together: past and present, history and fantasy. As far as technique was concerned, I tried to rescue the primitive Haitians, from Georges Liataud to Rigaud Benoit.

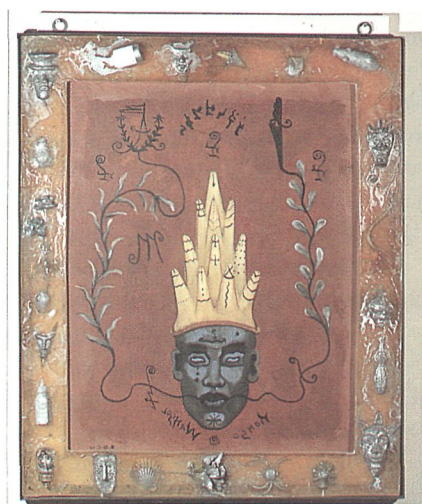
Later, in 1989, I was invited by the French Ministry of Cooperation to participate in the Bicentennial of the French Revolution - in a project entitled "The French Revolution in the Tropics" - along with two other artists, one from Nantes and the other from Senegal. I had to move to Paris for two years. I was able to attend the Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts and they kept us in constant contact with historians,



Les Aides Memoires. Mystères X, 1997.
32 x 24 cm.

anthropologists, geographers, ethnologists and others. I was quite interested and I was able to describe what life was like in Haiti in 1789 in 40 paintings that I exhibited in the Museum of Art from Africa and Oceania.

B - I still remember the impression that the series *Roman Noir a Saint Domingue* (1988) made on me. It was a sort of installation or drama in various paintings that reflected the society of the time, with a central group formed by the Great White, the Little White holding a whip, the Mulatta who seemed to be a princess and the black slave, who in fact was the one who worked and maintained the estate. Why Saint Domingue?



Les Aides Memoires. Mystères I, 1997.
32 x 24 cm.

D - Saint Domingue is the name the French colony had before the Revolution, and that period is spoken of with great nostalgia in France.

B - What was the response in Paris?

D - I was well received by everyone, and in fact when the two years were finished I didn't return to Haiti but instead remained in Paris five more years. I was married and had two children. However, Paris didn't interest me: the artistic scene seemed to me to be dominated by politics and political dealers. In reality, I had never wanted to emigrate, and so we chose Miami for a variety of reasons. In the first place, the light. Paris is gray, despite its reputation as the Ville Lumière, and Miami has the type of light that I aim to capture. We were also drawn by the city's diversity and the fact of being able to join the Haitians who, even while in exile, are preserving their identity and are concerned about the future of our country. Miami was the first step in our return to Haiti, but we have remained in Florida, seeing that even President Aristide has had to go into exile. Also, the Haitian nucleus that we encountered upon arrival has been expanding and today represents a substantial sector of the Caribbean re-encounter. I sensed that Miami would be the meeting point between the U.S. and the Caribbean and that I would be able to some degree to play a part as a Haitian, joining those groups that are trying to do something based in Miami. Every day thousands of Haitians leave the country and they aren't going to Santo Domingo or Caracas; they go to South Florida. Haiti's problems are experienced more directly in Miami than anywhere else; in fact Miami seems like an extension of Haiti, and I think that the decisions that are made here have some sort of repercussions in Haiti. What happens here, happens there. We have established the Association of Haitian Artists in America, with Fredy Vieux-Brierre as president, and we have the Art Center in the neighborhood known as Little Haiti.

B - What is the importance of voodoo in your work?

D - Since voodoo worship is the

soul of Haiti, which has always found its expression in art, the voodoo spirits are normally the protagonists in my work and are represented in thousands of different ways. They can take on forms within the range of greens (as in *The Wild Garden*) or the brilliant colors of the street. Voodoo brings a magical world into everyday reality, and when I paint the image of a voodoo spirit I think of the people and of their capacity to be more than what they are.

B - How long have you been making sculpture?

D - Nexus, an art center in Atlanta, asked me to create a work about memory for the 1996 Olympic Games. I thought about the *Mysteries* that summarize the entire Haitian cosmogony. They are ideas, concepts, abstractions that are impossible to define and, in contrast to the *loa*, are characters. I was interested in giving them shape, a kind of *aide mémoire*, a reminder. In fact, the 30 bronze pieces that I made during those three months are not characters, but rather are symbols. They were the basis for the paintings I made that are currently being shown at the Sixth Havana Biennial, which strangely coincides with the subject of memory.

B - That was in the summer, and for the Sao Paulo Biennial you exhibited the *Voodoo Pantheon*, which consisted of a group of sculptures. Gerard Alexis, the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Port-au-Prince, stated that Wagol, Erzulie, Datod, the Greath Ahulz, the Great Bois des Islets and the Baron Samedi were not idols but in fact belonged to VeVe. What does that mean?

D - In Haiti the representation of the *Loa* or spirits is based on symbols called *Vefe*. These are graphic designs that are made on the floor with flour or ashes, since the slaves were not allowed to carry out their worship and everything had to be clandestine and ephemeral. I had to resort to artistic license in giving form to those gods, which are also known as "Mysteries".

B - How long have you been making sculpture?

D - In 1993 I was invited to participate in the First Festival of

Voodoo Cultures that was held in the Republic of Benin (formerly Dahomey). I created an installation of 23 sculptures, representing the Haitian folk spirits from the Congo. The statues of Oggún (the god of iron) and of Papa Loko (the wild spirit) were like gods that showed the spirits of the Haitian dead the way back to their homeland, Africa. I also painted three murals for the interior of the temple of Dagbo Hou Nou, who is the supreme spiritual leader of Ouidahque; is a very special place, one of the ports from which the majority of the slaves embarked. I was quite moved by the thought that Ouidahque had been the last they had seen of Africa. Dagbo asked me to make a portrait that, of course, no one has ever seen. One of the



Les Aides Memoires. Mystères III, 1997.
32 x 24 cm.

act during the festival was the “bathing of the fetishes”. They were brought out of the temple in a grand ceremony and were solemnly bathed before the public. This was the event that inspired the canvas *Mes Amis au Bain* from 1993, which refers to the ceremony but changes it into a group of friends bathing themselves in a modern bathtub.

B - Why do you always incorporate the frame into the painting?

D - In the frames I recover the voodoo aesthetic of appropriation and recovery of all kinds of arranged things, which are lent a magical role. A Haitian temple is a fully occupied space, without even the walls painted as in a church.

The space itself is everything and every object has symbolic meaning, from the baby dolls that are transformed into symbols of the goddess of love to *Baron Samedi* who is the symbol of death. I paint and decorate the frames with all kinds of clay objects that I make with molds. Sometimes I incorporate small plastic animals or masks or hands, as if the frame were the entrance to a voodoo temple with all those objects on the floor converted into objects of worship.

B - Does your painting take a certain satisfaction in primitive Haitian painting? For example, in the 1992 painting dedicated to Hicks?

D - That's *Le Royaume Visible des Mubarts*, which refers to *The Peaceable Kingdom* by Edward Hicks, a self-taught and nomadic painter. In my painting the exuberant tropical vegetation frames a scene in which the main characters have been nuded and the fantastical tropical animals are transformed into strange mutant shapes.

B - You say that the 1994 series entitled *The Wild Garden* is a metaphor for Haiti.

D - I call it *The Wild Garden* but in fact it is a conventional garden with all kinds of illusions, in which all kinds of events take place and in which the mythical world coexists with reality. I created the series at the request of a gallery in Bogotá, working out of my studio in the South Florida Art Center on Lincoln Road. My inspiration was the *magú* tree, the legendary home of the voodoo spirits, from which blue heads hang like strange, fantasmagorical fruit. The triptych about the fountains belongs to this series: *The Fountain of Violence*, where a fountain generates unpleasant people, such as some of the gangsters and killers who have led Haiti during the last half-century; *The Fountain of Verbs*, which was inspired by the illiteracy throughout the island; and *The Fountain of Light*.

I am a chronicler of my time; some painter had to be. This way at least some images will remain of what has happened during these years...My whole family comes from Haiti and the nation is going through a dramatic situation. If the United States invades Haiti, they will make us pay dearly.



Les Aides Memoires. Mystères II, 1997.
32 x 24 cm.

I think that I am the only Haitian painter who has taken the baggage of folk art and has converted it into a contemporary idiom. That is why people consider me an outlaw. I am not a primitive person, so that when Haitians saw my work they said “Why is he painting like a naïf painter?”. And the treated me as if I were a traitor to the cause, although I never knew what cause they meant. I only try to speak for myself and for others like me, people who think for themselves. Someday, perhaps, we may join together and do something worthwhile.



Les Aides Memoires. Mystères VIII, 1997.
32 x 24 cm.