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PLUNDER AND PLAY

Édouard Duval-Carrié's Artistic Vision

by Jenny Sharpe

Ships and seas constitute central imagery in the mixed-media work of Édouard Duval-Carrié, a Haitian-born, Miami-based artist. It is perhaps due to his own nomadic life that his work shows such a keen sensibility for the diasporic experience of Haitian migrants. Duval-Carrié escaped the brutality of the Duvalier dictatorship for the sanctity of Puerto Rico in the 1960s. Since then, he has lived in Canada and France, eventually moving to the United States in 1993. Although his work was not shown in Haiti until after the collapse of the Duvalier regime, Haiti has always been present in his paintings, installations, and sculptures. His art constitutes a visual form of oral storytelling that merges religious motifs with political references, the sacred with the profane, often with an ironic sense of humor toward the tragedy that is Haitian history.

Duval-Carrié's colorful paintings—with their vibrant figures that practically leap from the canvas—tap into the pulse of Haitian people. He incorporates into his art the visual language of Vodou that pervades everyday life in Haiti. Vodou, which means “spirit” in the Fon language of Dahomey (now Benin), is a religious practice of West African origins that was secretly practiced by slaves. The *lwás* or spirits are depicted in *vèvès*, which are line drawings made with flour or ashes to summon the spirits and which could easily be erased when exposed to the prying eyes of the law. They also manifest themselves in Vodou temples and homemade alters, which plunder the world's cultures for relics. *Erzili Dantò*, the *lwa* of motherhood, is represented in the Black Madonna of Czestochowa (introduced into Haiti during the revolution by Polish soldiers) as well as a black Barbie doll attired in the plain denim or blue and red calico dress of Haitian peasant women. Baron Samedi, the *lwa* of death, is often dressed in funeral attire consisting of a top hat, tuxedo, and sunglasses. François “Papa Doc” Duvalier refashioned himself in the image of Baron Samedi—an image that frequently appears in Duval-Carrié's paintings—for terrorizing the Haitian population.

Duval-Carrié's art pays homage to the syncretisms of the Haitian *lwás* even as it borrows from European, African, and Asian religious art for constructing a sacred shrine for them. In his work, the *lwás* are simultaneously the *Mystères* and the Haitian people, as is evident in their all-too-human demeanor. *The Landing*, the third panel of the *Migrations* triptych (1994)—the first of his migration series—depicts a group of *lwás* standing on a causeway as they prepare to make a dignified entry into Miami, whose city lights sparkle across the water. The second panel of his *Milocan ou La Migration des Esprits (Migration of the Spirits)* (1996) shows prominent Haitian (rather than ancestral African) *lwás* like *Erzili Freda* and *Baron Samedi* sitting alongside Africans packed tightly into a small wooden boat. The

boat is reminiscent of slave ships as well as the improvised crafts used by Haitian boat people. This doubling suggests multiple crossings that transform the meaning of diaspora into an active and ongoing process. The forth panel depicts Erzili Dantò disembarking a U.S. coast guard ship off the Florida coast. Strapped to her waist is a tiny baby, the sign of future generations of Haitians that will grow up in the United States.

Duval-Carrié's paintings offer powerful social commentary on Haitian history through their ironic doubling of time and space. Each picture tells the fragment of the story of a dispersed people, but the combined images raise more questions about diasporic identities rather than coming together into an easily-identifiable answer. I spoke with Duval-Carrié in April 2006 in his Little Haiti studio, a former warehouse that is now crowded with the artist's collection of sculptures, statues, paintings, and masks. As we sat chatting on that balmy Miami day, I was reminded of how migrants have transformed American cityscapes into transplanted replicas as well as utopian possibilities of the countries from which they originate.

* * *

SHARPE: Your paintings and installations exhibit a deep connection with Haiti's past. What place does history occupy in your work?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: My interest in history is very, very serious. I try to understand the slave period, and what it did to Haiti. What is of interest to me is how Haiti differs from or is just like the rest of the Caribbean. If you take account of the slave period, you see that the flow of ideas was much easier back then than it is today. For example, the little that could move around, *did* move around—maybe not the slaves themselves, but the ideas.

SHARPE: They moved across the islands?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, across the islands. For example, I just got Bryan Edwards' *History of the British West Indies*. He *was* in Port-au-Prince and in Cape Haïtien. He *did* move around, to go and check out what was going on. I was quite surprised to see that he was there and that he met so-and-so. That was quite an amazing thing. It means that the Haitian revolution wasn't such an isolated or *cloisonné* [French for "partitioned" or "cut off"] situation. It seems like it was an area of interest from an exploitation point of view. The Europeans back then did not feel the allegiances that people have today—you know, I'm from Martinique, or I'm from here or there. The Caribbean was not the series of countries that it is today. It was more like an outpost. It was more like the situation of the American West.

SHARPE: You mean it was a frontier?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, it was a frontier-like situation. Things moved and happened in a way that they could not happen today.

SHARPE: Was it because there was less centralized control and also the possibility for a free-flow of ideas through the ports and sailors?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Exactly, because if you had a problem, you just took a boat and fled. I'm talking about Europeans and free coloreds rather than slaves. Look at the history of New Orleans. I flipped out when I realized what happened after the Haitian Revolution: whites, mulattoes and their slaves just packed up and fled. They decamped from Haiti and went to recamp in New Orleans. In just a few weeks, the city's population doubled!

SHARPE: That is mind-boggling.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: It *is*. When I first went to New Orleans, I said to myself—"This is impossible, this is just like Haiti." I mean you feel like—"I know this place. I understand this place. I understand even how to circulate in this city."

SHARPE: Of course it's something we don't even think about today, is it? We think of New Orleans as French, we think of the Louisiana Purchase, but we don't necessarily think of Haiti.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, New Orleans is totally Haitian. And once you had been through that prison of the colonies, you were completely tainted by it.

SHARPE: So the Haitian-American diaspora goes further back than more recent events. It goes back to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, to me it's a whole *bouillon*: this Caribbean Sea world.

SHARPE: Is that the kind of world you were trying to capture in *La Vraie Histoire des Ambaglos (The True History of the Underwater Spirits)* (2002), which is a floor panel if I'm not mistaken?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: It's a floor panel that is meant to be used either as a floor or even underwater as the bottom of a pool, since everything in the African cosmography happens in the water.

SHARPE: Can you talk a little about the religious significance of the floor panel, since "ambaglos" refers to the underwater spirits?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Well, there is this Haitian funeral rite of going underwater to go back to the homeland. It's like sending the spirits back to Africa. From the Haitian point-of-view, there was no way to return. At least when you're dead, you can go back home. The rite is like buying a plane ticket for your dead family. I once saw a massive group of people and a very old woman being carried in a chair on people's backs. She was so old that she

requested the rite so that she would be able to go back faster to Africa. And it wasn't near the water at all; it was up in the mountains. So it is much more of an imaginary thing.

SHARPE: I've read that you wanted to place antennae on the beach at Benin for guiding the returning spirits of the dead.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, it was for the first international Voodoo Art and Culture Festival held in Benin in 1993. A number of artists were invited with the idea that the diaspora can return. I wanted to create antennae for all these souls not to get lost. So, I did an installation of sculptures that looked like antennae. It was not on the beach but at the compound of Dagbo Hounan, who was the African equivalent of a Vodou leader at Ouidah, a former center of the slave trade. I don't know if he's passed away now.

SHARPE: What I like about the image of the antennae is that it's a modern technological means for a return to Africa. It overturns the idea of Africa as existing in some timeless past, as if it hasn't itself entered modernity.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, yes. The Dagbo had organized a festival, but I noticed there were no African artists. So I said—"Where are the African artists?"—and I realized that they hadn't been invited. So I said "Why don't we do a reunion?" But after I spent a day with the African artists, they said: "Oh, all these Vodou things, we're over it; we can't be identified with these things anymore." And here I am a Haitian, in my colors! And they were saying, "What are you, a Vodou priest? What are you?" And I said, "I'm an artist, just like you." In the meantime, they had been spying incognito on Dagbo the priest, and they told me that he finally took out his real fetishes. I said—"Really? What real fetishes?" And they said—"He brought out all these fabulous things from his treasury." And when I asked them to explain, I realized they were talking about my sculptures. It was fabulous!

SHARPE: The story you have just told suggests that perhaps the diaspora *cannot* return—at least, not to an unchanged past since Africa is also changing. Maybe this idea is reflected in *The True History of the Underwater Spirits*. Although the drowned slaves and gods are looking out at us, the slaves' eyes alone are closed.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: To me it's the middle passage. In that particular piece, it's more like the Sargasso Sea, where things were thrown overboard during bad weather. The first ones to go were the slaves. The Sargasso Sea in my head is full of vines. Of course, I was very literal in using actual historical documents, so that it would not be mistaken for anything else.

SHARPE: What I really like about that installation is the layering technique that you have achieved, and how you incorporated archival images of slavery into the fruit of the vines. But the slave images are from the land. So there's a way in which the land is being brought into a sea motif. There's a feeling of a suspension of time in the sense that slavery continues to resonate in the present.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Well, that's the whole thing, I'm really glad I managed it!

SHARPE: Can you talk a little bit about your use of archival images?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, I have a large collection of books, and I feel totally entitled to plunge into these and use them whenever I want to.

SHARPE: To plunder?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, to plunder them! Which is the word that describes what's going on these days. I feel free to plunder whatever I want from history and culture. First of all, you have to realize the whole thing is very Indian—a kind of *pichwai*. The *pichwais* are meditation pieces. They are usually very small and very well-organized.

SHARPE: When you say Indian you mean. . .

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: . . . from India. *Pichwais* are Rajasthani cloth paintings used in temples. So I travel very far. I decided to use the Indian form to create something that would be ours. To me, the Caribbean has everything dropped into it, so one cannot claim that this place is autonomous or authentic.

SHARPE: So you are speaking of syncretisms?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, it is a place where so much has happened, and so many people have shown up on its shores. Even in Haiti, there are things that appear and you think—"Where did that come from?"—and you can trace it from wherever it came.

SHARPE: I've been reading about the excavation of slave villages in which they've discovered concealed objects that come from as far away as China.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, can you imagine it?

SHARPE: And what they've realized is that these objects did not come from the Great House but have been obtained by slaves through bartering, often with sailors.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: There are Peruvian ceremonial cups called *keros*. I have a friend who has collected about six of them from Vodou temples in Haiti, and these are pre-Columbian! So that means somebody liked them enough to bring them to the island. And they've managed to last at least two centuries, because they were not brought over the other day. And I've asked Peruvians if they would bring things like that, and they said—"No, we don't collect them."

SHARPE: You've mentioned incorporating the style of Indian meditation pieces into your

work. You also draw on European religious iconography in your use of Baroque-scaled triptychs and polyptychs. Your *Migration of the Spirits* consists of four panels that provide a visual history of migration from Africa to Haiti and then from Haiti to the United States. While each panel tells a portion of the fragmented history of Haitian people, you use a religious or sacred form that, at least in the European context, presents a totalizing vision of the past. Can you speak about your merging of Indian and European sacred forms with Haitian Vodou iconography?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: It is meant to honor a Haitian past, to give it its place in reality. Since there is no Haitian Vatican or Vodou church to pay homage to the past, I am doing it for them. What I wanted to do is to create the ultimate cathedral for Vodou and devote it to different subjects of this tragedy, which is what the slave trade was. My first installation, which was done in Paris, is called *Rétable des neuf esclaves* (*Altar of the Nine Slaves*).

SHARPE: Oh yes, I was going to ask about that one, because the boat is very similar to the boat in the second panel of *La Migration: La Traversée* (*The Crossing*).

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: They're all similar. *Rétable des neuf esclaves* (*Alter of the Nine Slaves*) was the first installation. The second one was *Brève Relación de la Destrucción de las Indias* (*Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indies*), which was commissioned in 1992 for the Columbian Quincentenary in Mexico. I did this whole thing about the Indians that were destroyed as homage to Bartolomé de Las Casas. And the third one was for the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta. I did the Vodou pantheon visiting their cousins at the Olympics. And the last one, which is the biggest, is the regatta boat in *La Migration*. It is a warning to Haiti that it is losing its soul if the politics continues as it has.

SHARPE: But there is a doubling in the images inasmuch as the figures are both the Vodou *lwas* and the Haitian people.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, to me the gods *are* the people.

SHARPE: There is another doubling in *The Crossing*. The figures are not only, as you say, the gods as the people, but in terms of the crossing, the boat is less a slave ship than the boats Haitians took over to the United States.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Absolutely, which to me is a continuation of the same story. Since Africans were taken from their lands, either sold or bought, they were already destitute. For them to be put in that position meant that they were not in power. After Independence, and even today, they're still as destitute as they were when they arrived. They're still on the move. It's a resonance from the past and an accusation of the present.

SHARPE: And is the accusation of the present represented by the question mark on the head of the slave sitting at the front of the boat in *The Crossing*?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes. I am asking: “Why is this still so?” Whoever looks at the panel is forced to ask themselves: “Am I responsible?” “Are *they* responsible?” It’s a big question mark. You have to ask yourself a lot of questions.

SHARPE: Yes, and there’s also the question of the future of Haitian people.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Right, the uncertainty of the whole thing. Are they the chosen people? Are they the damned people or what? The barriers that are being put on Haitians—I want these questions to be asked. Living in Miami, the whole thing gets complicated. There’s favoritism by the state, when it comes to Cubans and Haitians. I am pushing the envelope a little bit, as I don’t want to come out and say—“You bunch of hypocrites!”

SHARPE: Do you consider your perspective to be that of a Haitian-American?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, because I’m an American citizen now. I feel totally entitled to represent the people I wish to represent, because that’s the beauty of this country.

SHARPE: When you continue the story of the migration of the spirits in *The Landing*, the gods are now on the causeway looking at Miami. Is the painting making a political commentary that Haitians are in a no man’s land, in a state of limbo?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: But they’re there.

SHARPE: They’re there.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: That’s all I wanted to say. They’re there on your causeway. And you pass by and you see them. That’s all.

SHARPE: If you wanted to look at your twenty-year career, how would you characterize your work changing over the years?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: To me, there are two things in my art: the *métier*, you know, doing it, and the politics. I really like to play, as I get bored very easily. And I am always trying to change materials—mostly that’s where I try to innovate. I am also interested in a steady understanding of where I come from, my position within it, the Caribbean, the political situation over there. I mean first of all, realizing that Haiti is part of a very sad story. We don’t have the monopoly on it. And I’m trying to create a vision for that whole area. I’m also trying to play with the idea that this city, Miami, has the position of being the capital of the Caribbean basin. *It is*, whether the central government wants to acknowledge it or not, the Caribbean’s new capital.

SHARPE: Right, that’s true...the ease with which Jamaicans can travel between Kingston and Miami.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, everybody comes here, everybody has family here, everybody has a contact here. The locals have realized that it's time for us to group together and create a political force. Unfortunately, the Cubans are so much more advanced in this regard over the rest of us. But we will become a parallel group to counteract the Cubans. I'm not saying this in a nasty way; it's just the reality. The Cubans have a lot of clout, they're very well organized. Whenever a Cuban arrives here, he is taken care of, which is not the case for the rest of us.

SHARPE: That lack of Haitian political power relative to the Cubans also has to do with the political role the United States has played in the Caribbean.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: But nevertheless there is a population that is becoming bigger and bigger and bigger. The Caribbean is recreating itself here. The upper classes, the middle classes, the lower classes, they're all here.

SHARPE: Yes, but is there the possibility for greater democracy?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Well, that's why I moved here. Maybe it's a total fantasy on my part—that I would be here and have much more influence than when I was sitting in Paris, where I was this token artist.

SHARPE: Right, there's a history to that too, the French patronage of black artists.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Yes, I thought I would be in a much better position over here—to be rooted in community and to have more relevance.

SHARPE: What are you working on right now?

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: One of my biggest accomplishments this year was to have an anthropologist sit down with me and write a description of all the gods in my installations for a booklet called *The Vodou Pantheon*. It's going to show next month, and the book is being done by the Bass Museum. We will have the installation with the accompanying booklet finally giving the gods names, explaining who they are, and what they do. It's very nicely done. I'm also working on a show for a local gallery, and I'm doing this huge wall about *déracinement* (uprootedness). I've been playing with my self-portrait as a tree, an *uprooted* tree. Here, the thematic stays the same, but I'm using metal. I'm going to engrave the metal, have it pierced industrially, pour resin over it, and then put all these elements that we have been discussing: the migration of the spirits, the plundering of history.

SHARPE: It sounds great.

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: Huge! It will be a twenty-four foot thing, but in a new medium—that's what keeps me excited. Even though I'm talking about the same things over and over again, I'm presenting it in a new format each time.

C A L L A L O O

SHARPE: What I like about your installations is the three-dimensional aspect to them. Whether it's the floor or the polyptych, there isn't a sense of separation, but in fact. . .

DUVAL-CARRIÉ: . . .you are enveloped within it. That's what I like to play with! I mean, I have ten fingers until I drop dead.