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Artistes du monde artistique reconfiguré d'Haiti

The first half of the 20th century saw the Haitian art world reconfigure itself from what it had been in the 19th century. The subaltern occupied a central position, beginning in the early 1930s, as a subject to be treated and, from 1945, as a creative subject. The artists of the so-called indigenous movement (first period) looked to rural life, the peasantry and the popular urban world. Then, in the context of a particular place that opened in May 1944, the Centre d'art (Art Center), and thanks to unexpected circumstances, artists from a new social group emerged, producing original works. Belonging to modest, lower-status social categories, they broke into the realm of fine arts, a space reserved for the elite until then.

In 1945, Cuban art critic José Gómez Sicre commented on the works seen at the Art Center. To him, the productions that those in charge of the institute considered to be attempts by apprentice artists were works in their own right. Thus, he made an aesthetic judgment that identified "art" where it had not been perceived before. This led to a change in the initial artistic vision of the Center's members, which encouraged them to value alternative skills, that is, skills other than those acquired during a long academic apprenticeship. This initiative had far-reaching consequences in a social space where all types of formal learning were highly selective, reserved for a small minority. The practice of painting now opened up to a large number of people; the social base of the fine arts was broadening. The resulting type of figuration is stylistically unprecedented. It is also unprecedented in terms of the iconographic, thematic and discursive sources and resources it draws on. Artists drew on all kinds of circulating images that make up common visual culture, with a predilection for the Catholic imagery shared by the Vodou. More generally, the fine arts opened up to broad swaths of the social imagination. Hence the importance gained by what literature specialists call oraliture (songs, proverbs, tales, riddles, legends, religious and historical myths, etc.), a universe from which artists draw subjects, motifs, a discourse to legitimize their productions and even ideas for formal experimentation. All of this upheaval is part of the reconfiguration of the visual art world in Haiti, which includes artists who do not belong to the newly emerged group but must consider their presence and what they propose. A new ecosystem of images has emerged, in which modes of expression (or visual coding and recoding operations) are established, shared, and transmitted, allowing works to be classified not only by genre, trend or theme. There are four main modes: narrative, apparition, metamorphosis and presentification. They are both autonomous and heteronomous. The autonomy of an expressive mode consists in the fact that it is the very object of the encoding of the constituent elements of the image produced. In heteronomy, in contrast, the image is the result of a combinatorial play of creative ambiguities.

Any narrative representation involves the actions of the actors in a story, the moments of the story being told, and the places where the actions represented take place. Of course, there must be a selection of figures, moments or aspects of place, and it involves representing moments. However, the moment represented is a totality of simultaneous actions, hierarchized by an organizing center that gives them intelligibility and necessity.

The phenomenon of appearance abounds in Haiti's artistic production. First, this is because of the importance of Christian mythology and the pervasiveness of Catholic religious imagery in society. Second, there is a widely shared belief that, in addition to spirits (the Loa vodou, for example), individuals invested with appropriate mystical powers can appear, disappear or make themselves appear and disappear. There is, thus, a vast imaginary world of apparition that has preoccupied and even fascinated artists. The challenge posed by this mode is to signify a fugitive, fleeting phenomenon, to suggest the imminence of a disappearance. The works of St. Pierre Toussaint are an example of this.

Metamorphosis has some relation to apparition; the resources of the word play a decisive role here. Myths, legends and fairy tales abound with metamorphoses that visual artists try to transpose. This process refers to works in which human, animal, plant and mineral forms meet, transform, intertwine and mutate, giving rise to composite beings and objects. This mode is found in several works in the corpus, but combined with others.

As for presentification, this refers to the actualization of an invisible power in a figurative world through a variety of processes. It is, thus, a form of presence in figuration. It concerns all manifestations of invisible spirits or entities in works of art. In this sense, apparition and presentification are similar, but in the latter, there is not necessarily the imminence of disappearance. Some of Pierre Joseph Valcin's works fall into this category, as does Serge Jolimeau's metal

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sculpture depicting a mermaid, a specific entity with its own identity that, although half woman and half fish, is not a metamorphosis. In a second meaning, presentification refers to the act of making an object or set of objects, a figure or set of figures, present in and of itself, that is, without being involved in a narrative device. Again, absent from the work is any suggestion of imminent disappearance, as in apparition, or of a process of transformation, as in metamorphosis.

In general, St. Pierre Toussaint's approach seems to favor presentification. Prolonged observation of the works allows one to distinguish motifs, such as the three birds, that suggest a contained narrative intent. Presentification is clearly associated with apparition in Robert Saint-Brice. The result is works of formidable strangeness. Pierre Joseph Valcin uses presentification in a different way, combining it with narrative. In the painting on display, the unfolding of the ceremony undoubtedly belongs to the latter register, but the invoked spirit manifests its presence, is presentified, by the motif of the serpent descending from the tree. Like Félix Lafortune, Valcin plays on three registers: narrative, presentification and apparition, adapting their articulation as appropriate. The mixing of registers is also characteristic of Franz Zéphirin's approach, whose narration often appeals, as in this case, to metamorphosis and apparition.

The works in the exhibition by Saint-Soleil, a movement that emerged in the early 1970s to which Prospère Pierre-Louis, Denis Smith, Levoy Exil, and Louisiane Saint-Fleurant belonged, deserve special consideration. These artists shared a formal vocabulary and stylistic devices that clearly distinguished them from the creators of other currents. These common features include a ubiquitous central element consisting of a circular or ovoid shape that may be a head, face, mask, sun disk, or figure of some kind. This element usually bears a pair of "eyes," a small globular shape, whose presence is essential, as evidenced by the special care given to them compared, in many cases, to the treatment of the nose and mouth. These eyes pierce or dot the canvases, lending a certain presence to the figures wearing them and ensuring a certain vitality to the compositions.

This is combined with an entity suggesting the shape of a bird, as well as plant elements: branches, leaves and flowers. The treatment of these elements, their modeling and spatialization, is achieved using a network of lines outlining the application of color. The basic structure and overall configuration are based on the loose, vigorous or narrow, simplified or complex strokes or colors, when not black and white drawings or canvases.

This formal and stylistic option does not privilege narrative. It allows the other three modes to be explored, both autonomously and heteronomously. The possibility of self-engineering forms by playing with lines facilitates the exploration of metamorphosis. Moreover, the existence of a ubiquitous (multipliable) central figure, the head-front-mask-sun-disc, captured by the linear and colorful textures, enables the experimentation with, research into or achievement of presentification or appearance. The latter mode is exemplified by the works of Prospère Pierre-Louis, while it is combined with metamorphosis in those of Levoy Exil and Denis Smith. Louisiane Saint-Fleurant does not explore metamorphosis and apparition in particular. These elements can be found incidentally, the latter more than the former, in combination with the dominant mode in her work: presentification. In some works, a narrative will is evident that quickly settles into presentification.