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New Fine Arts Center exhibition dismantles Haitian stereotypes

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- Ralph Allen

On Saturday, Feb. 10, the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College will officially open another culturally significant exhibit in a diverse and exciting season. The Art of Haiti: Loas, History and Memory, a title which curator Anthony Bogues calls "deliberate and precise," features contemporary Haitian artwork, commenting on the cultural memory of Haiti, the Loas (spirits) that embody the Vodou religion, and the history that informs the art and culture of Haiti today.

Bogues says: "What we're thinking about is the ways in which people in Haiti, and particularly artists, think about history itself. ... Also ways in which people think about questions of the relationship between memory and history."

Haiti has a complex history of colonization, despotic dictators, political unrest and natural disasters that influences the world's perception of their culture, and influences the way they think of themselves.

In recent months, alleged derogatory remarks by President Trump have thrust Haiti into the national spotlight once again. And while the exhibit at the FAC is not meant to be a political statement, according to Joy Armstrong, the FAC's Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, it does feel prescient.

"I think we do have an opportunity in our country and in other parts of the world right now to learn from what's being presented here," Armstrong says, "and to think about the roles that we play, and how we contribute to global society."

In particular, the FAC and those involved hope that this exhibit may address the stereotypes Americans typically associate with Haiti – in this case, artistic stereotypes that relate to the American (mis)understanding of Haiti as a whole.

Bogues addresses a common misconception surrounding Haitian art – assumptions that all Haitian art is "exotic" or "naive." This exhibit, he says, displays contemporary schools and styles of art coming out of Haiti today, building on tradition and history while unquestionably creating something new.

The Art of Haiti: Loas, History and Memory, features three contemporary Haitian artists, Edouard Duval-Carrié, Ralph Allen and Tessa Mars, alongside significant Haitian works from the early and mid-20th century. The exhibition illustrates the ways in which art, artistic expression and interpretations of Haitian culture have evolved within Haitian society.



- Edouard Duval-Carrié

Duval-Carrié undertakes elaborate studies of Haitian history to create his artwork, addressing everything from Haiti's early colonization to its various regimes to the effects of historical events on present cultural ideals. "We tend in Haiti to start our genesis with the revolution [in 1791, which ousted French colonizers and concluded with the abolishment of slavery]," he says, "forgetting the 200 years of colonization by the French government. That has been a very big problem for me, because I could not understand what was happening post-revolution without really understanding what happened before."

It is appropriate, then, that Duval-Carrié's sculptures are the first sight to greet museum-goers upon entering the exhibition. Sparkling as though sculpted from sugar (the resource that originally led to Haiti's colonization) Duval-Carrié's boats hang from the ceiling, in flight and at-sea simultaneously. The slave and sugar industry, both of which existed long before the revolution that created Haiti as we know it today, set a foundation in place for the entire development of the country. The boats – and truly all of Duval-Carrié's work – serve as a reminder of that fact.

"I'm trying to make people remember these things," Duval-Carrié says, "and realize how complicated within Haiti it is. ... I wish that my work is read not only internationally but at a local level in Haiti, and in a more complex

way.” Through a visual medium, and spiritual symbolism, he hopes to reinvigorate conversations about legacy and history. What traditions are worthwhile, and what should be discarded?

Duval-Carrié’s Memory Windows, five total, each address a different theme, meant to start discussion about how history affects the present – whether specifically addressing the legacy of the people of the Congo who came to Haiti as slaves, or the effect of America on Haitian development. These colorful, brightly lit displays resemble kaleidoscopes, created through layered collage and objects in transparent resin.



- Edouard Duval-Carrié

Ralph Allen, another exhibiting artist, paints abstracted figures that explore more contemporary Haitian history, specifically the political turmoil of the Duvalier regime. According to Bogues, Allen's parents were exiled by the Duvalier regime, and some of his family members executed, so much of his work draws on that inherited pain. Both Duval-Carrié's Memory Windows and Allen's paintings deliberately layer the present on top of the past, in a very literal sense, drawing connections, if not conclusions.



- Ralph Allen

A notable Allen painting depicts musicians in celebration, the colors of the Haitian flag proudly integrated into the piece. This, Bogues says, conveys Allen's hope for Haiti – his appreciation of its culture. Cultural appreciation shines in his intimate and tender portraits depicting the Loas of the Vodou religion, too. Though Bogues says that Allen is not a believer in Vodou himself, he recognizes the importance of it in Haitian society.

Tessa Mars, the youngest artist on display at age 32, creates very unique mixed-media work, using paper and paint to explore history, gender, body image and the legacy of her ancestors. Bogues says of Mars: "She's very much a 21st-century young lady, in which the question of the personal is deep. But she's not just a person in isolation from Haitian society. She's asking some questions about Haitian society through her understanding of the personal."



- Tessa Mars

Her work, he says, exists in conversation with a history of Haitian art, and Haitian history as a whole. Two particularly interesting portraits in her installation "Aunts and Uncles" depict the founder of Haitian independence, Jean-Jacques Dessalines. She calls her depictions of him "Tessalines," integrating herself into her culture's history, and her culture's history into herself.

Mars' work displayed alongside paintings and sculpture of early and mid-20th century artists, conveys the wide variety of Haitian art and its subjects: historical figures and battles, the details of everyday life, Vodou and the Loas. And though each artist on display tackles these subjects differently, one can clearly trace the lines from history to present in their work.

"That's the richness of [Haiti]," Bogues says. "There's not just one style of art, one art mind. There are different artists, different schools of doing painting and making sculpture, like everywhere else."

This is very much, as Bogues and Duval-Carrié point out, a Caribbean exhibition, presented from the inside out.

"How do people see us?" Bogues asks. "What are the stereotypes? But we see ourselves in a certain way; how do we present that?"

This is how.