



The Landing

THE WORK FEATURED ON THE FRONT COVER OF CALABASH CAN BE DESCRIBED as the precursor to an installation of some of my work exhibited at the Miami Art Museum from October 26, 2000 through February 21, 2000, entitled "Migrations".

The piece is a thematic re-presentation of the forceful "voyage du non retour" (the voyage of no return) undertaken a few centuries back by million of Africans who had only their gods and their memories as their stolen baggage. In "The Landing" my cast of characters are a continuation of the theme of the experience of slavery and displacement, contained most forcefully in the horrors of the middle passage. The characters predate and foreshadow another, newer middle passage in which we witness the disembarkment of waves of dislocated immigrants to the inner coastline of Miami. In "The Landing" the cast is composed of a number of "loas" who, after a perilous crossing, fix their attires so as to make a dignified "Entrée sur scene". For the ones who know Miami, the site of that landing is none other than the island causeway where pedestrians are not allowed. Thus begins another chapter in the story of identity interrogation that is the cultural inheritance of many immigrant Caribbean groups. The conditions and possibly the causes of displacement may be different today, but these events suggest that we are watching the replay of a kind of global politics in which Haitians constantly negotiate the physical space of America that they are trying to call home.

But, you may say, all this talk is a talk of politics and an artist should be well cautioned to keep at bay that kind of poetry about which there may be nothing poetic. However, given the political disaster that Haiti represents today, I believe in the power of representation. I believe in the way in which that power can contain and reverse the miscarriages within the political process that are taking place in Haiti. I have tried to analyze the historical context of the genesis of my partial island nation by examining the strife and suffering that brought a society of slaves and slave masters to the place where aggression and cruelty seem inevitable in my island home. How does a nation develop patterns that are easily learned and extremely resilient to alteration? Those patterns referred to are those of extreme violence, the type that never looks back; the type that finds a certain comfort in its inevitability. I have scrutinized the successive generation of tyrannical rulers, their sordid entourages

and the deepening hole of misery that they have dug for their adoring peasantry and urban masses.

In this particular piece, "The Landing", I use my art as a means to express my interest in the way that African culture intersects with and empowers the culture of the Americas to produce the modern nations of the Caribbean and in particular the nation of Haiti. The fabulous world of spirits: old and new, true and false, real and imagined, have made themselves felt at the different planes of social and cultural consciousness that pervade the Caribbean. They come under many names: "Loas", "Espirits", or "Mysteres" and they all convey a strong sense of intense empowerment which inspires the fabulous nature of their symbolism. Where will we find Erzulie Freda Dahomey, the goddess of love? In the local Haitian communities as they struggle against their neo-colonial government? Or, is it possible that the fiery Ogun, god of war and steel, might offer his services to the people of Haiti in their struggle against cultural imperialism? Perhaps, Azaka Medeh, thundering hero, might join forces with the armies of migrant Haitians who come to live, labour and love in foreign cities like Montréal and Miami.

I constantly depict these characters because they come from a land similar to the land of the glaring sun in the tropics and they best can represent the struggle of the Haitian people. One of their unique assets is that they are true to their origins and yet are willing partners in the drama of Haitian identity-building. As points of focus they are excellent representatives of human frailties and qualities: greed, hate and depravity constantly countered by love, courage and generosity. Those are some of the attributes which make them so endearing to me. I have staged them over and over again and never tire of doing so. My characters, like all good actors, relish the risks involved in their representation. They are timeless and adaptable, easily placed against a New York skyline or on a defiant raft headed into dangerous Caribbean waters. They are simple and easily readable yet they represent the complex and multiple possibilities for Haitian personal identification: from the destitute or the weary to the charming and mysterious, who are worthy protagonists of my artistic dramas.

