



Judith Bettelheim *

THREE TRANSNATIONAL ARTISTS: JOSÉ BEDIA, EDOUARD DUVAL-CARRIÉ AND KEITH MORRISON

José Bedia, Edouard Duval-Carrié and Keith Morrison are three Caribbean artists who now reside in the United States. Morrison moved from Jamaica to the United States in 1959 to attend university, and has remained here since. Morrison is both a painter and an educator, and he is currently Dean of the College of Creative Arts at San Francisco State University. Duval-Carrié's family moved from Haiti to Puerto Rico when he was a child, and he attended high school in New York and university in Canada. He now has homes in Miami and Haiti. José Bedia moved with his wife and son from Cuba to Mexico in 1990 and then to Miami in 1993. So what constitutes an artist's home or national identity? Many artists who now live in the U.S. reveal in their work layered identities. Think of all the African, or Caribbean, or Asiatic artists living and working in London, or all the Pacific, Caribbean, or African artists living and working in Paris. And think of all the contemporary artists who are refugees, self-designated or otherwise. We are solidly in the era of the transnational artist. What is so interesting about these three artists is that their work speaks to issues of personal/cultural identity while simultaneously invoking broader issues of migration and the fragile contemporary human condition.

In Keith Morrison's work we are invited to a visual feast. Each story he tells has a Jamaican element, a personal anecdote about his life in a country and a culture that thrives on stories, where storytelling is a very special art form. In Jamaica there is a tradition which produces plays and "pantomime" full of words and raucous laughter. I enjoyed this theater and storytelling wisdom when I lived there in the mid-seventies. The Caribbean is full of stories.¹ Morrison has invented his own standard characters to create a personal vision that combines social commentary on contemporary urban culture, with Jamaican references, with personal history, all flavored with an intellectual distancing and punctured by a potent dose of humor. Morrison often refers to his own "personal lexicon of myths and images", and no doubt his Jamaican roots have a lot to do with the creations. At the same time there is no denying that some of his imagery has parallels in other Caribbean iconography, in Haiti, in Cuba, and in the Afro-U.S.A.. Although Morrison contends "I don't try to make it Jamaican; I don't even think about Jamaica", he does acknowledge that many of the images are born of very basic things in black culture. Morrison's actors embody both historical experience and religious ritual.



Death is a recurring theme in a series that was exhibited at Bomani Gallery, in San Francisco in spring 1996. As Morrison was explaining his fascination with graves, I suggested that many of the themes he works with provide a type of exorcism, a way to recall and come to terms with his Jamaican youth. He often accompanied old relatives to funerals. In Jamaica funerals are a grand affair, an appropriate opportunity to honor those who have passed on, while meeting with relatives and friends, some one might only see at funerals. Morrison has written: "In the Caribbean a funeral is a wonderful pageantry of religion and supernatural spirits, a place where reality and fantasy coexist." He broke into a chuckle while remembering the festive occasion that accompanied his own mother's funeral. "Basically, they launched her," he stated with a broad smile.

"A Funeral Fit for Egypt", 1995, is a powerful summary of Caribbean and African American humor. Here is the artist laughing at himself and his people. Yet this laughter is filled with respect and perhaps some nostalgia. Morrison spent his youth participating in complex religious events (some on the sly, away from family who would have disapproved), yet today he considers himself one of the least religious people he knows. He fills his paintings with Biblical references which, knowing Morrison, perhaps should be regarded as literary rather than religious. He is truly an urbane man, yet his paintings depict the disintegration of the city and city life.

Morrison is well-versed in African American literature, and many of his paintings, such as "A Funeral Fit for Egypt," comment on certain aspects of it. Throughout the history of the African Diaspora important thinkers have used the image of Egypt to affirm black creativity and strength. Egypt as a conceptual force and historical fact is at the core of both formal religion, such as Rastafarianism, and popular culture. In "A Funeral Fit for Egypt" icons of Egyptian tomb paintings adorn the ravaged buildings and tombstones. It is a grand

celebration of death. Yet in the center of the painting, above the terrestrial tale, a golden trumpet is carried aloft in the talons of a green feathered tropical bird. I cannot help but think of references to Gabriel merging references to Miles and Dizzy. I am even tempted to speculate that the lush tropical bird and the golden horn provide a relief, an image of joy in the gritty decomposed city.

Morrison also uses references to things Egyptian satirically. Perhaps he is commenting on the fad for images of Egypt, or Egyptian things, as a way to reference Afrocentric philosophizing. In the painting "Crabs in a Pot" (1994) a frieze of Egyptian-styled figures and animals decorate the circumference of a clay pot in which dolls, a skeleton, and crabs are cooked. This ominous reference is to the African American proverb of "crabs-in-a-barrel". This phrase originated with Booker T. Washington in his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, written in 1901. According to the artist, "the pot is sometimes my tableau where the futility of human turmoil and self destruction plays itself out, like burning bodies clawing over one another in a death filled cauldron."

It is tempting to compare Morrison's art with Haitian painting. Most Haitian paintings also tell a story, and, to the uninitiated, the stories may appear to be similar. Both contain references to death, to graveyards, to skeletons. But there is a big difference. Haitian paintings by and large tell similar stories; they are stories of the *lwa*, the gods of the Vodou religion.



José Bedia
Para un Cubanito Viajero

Haitian iconography is for the most part determined by Vodou or by Haitian history, and herein lies the challenge for younger Haitian artists today. They must innovate on these very standardized narratives. That is why recent work of the Haitian painter Duval-Carrié is so potent. He has created a very personal, stylized version of the base iconography of Vodou, metamorphosing the *lwa* into haunting stylized actors.

Duval-Carrié creates complicated dramas that are as full and nuanced as Morrison's, although their stylistic means is quite different. While Morrison's canvases are packed with figures, actions, and landscape, Duval-Carrié's are almost stark and static, even though the figures are deliberately detailed and dramatic. Both artists use lush Caribbean vegetation to assist in claiming place and moment, even though one is not quite sure which moment is being referred to. For example, Duval-Carrié's figures are often dressed in the style of eighteenth century France, recalling the period of the French Revolution (1787 was the storming of the Bastille). And at the same time this style recalls the dress of the French colonials in Saint Domingue, soon to be renamed Haiti after the successful fight for independence from France (1792-1804). Sometimes Duval-Carrié even uses the dress of the contemporary elite of Haiti, who live somewhere between colonialism and its legacy, just as they may live somewhere between Haiti and Miami. And then he dresses the *lwa* in these same fashionable clothes, forcing the viewer to closely scrutinize the scene to figure out who is "real" and who is a spirit.

This is made quite clear in a recent series of paintings "Milocan ou La Migration Des Esprits" (1996), (Milocan or the Migration of the Spirits).² The first panel is "Le Depart" (The Departure). Naked humans are led away in chains, but they are painted in non-human colors, bright pinks, oranges, and turquoise. This is the first hint we get that these "humans" may in fact also be something else, perhaps even the African spirits that make up the core of the Vodou religion. These naked souls are



Edouard Duval-Carrié
Milocan on La Migration des Esprits: La Traversée

chained to others, clothed and fancily dressed. One has a skeletal face and is wearing a jacket adorned with what may be African style amulets, little packets of power that also will be taken to the Americas with the captives. Here Duval-Carrié is alerting us to the African sources of the Vodou religion, and to the special esteem that is due the ancestors of the people of the African Diaspora. In the background a tree with many branches and a human-like face in its trunk watches over the scene, and then we realize that this tree too wears an iron collar and is also a prisoner.

The second panel "la Traversée" (The Crossing) obviously references the middle passage. The collective group of spirits are seated in a row boat, adrift on a blue ocean. The "tree" accompanies them in the back of the boat, and two of the branches have metamorphosed into human limbs and hands. Duval-Carrié has placed the tree in the absolute center of the composition, a device that he has used frequently in other paintings. This is a reference to the tree trunk-like center pole of



Vodou, the “*poteau mitan*”, which the *lwa* descend during a Vodou service. In this narrative the strength and spirituality of Africa are being transported to the Americas, albeit under horrendous circumstances.

Duval-Carrié has developed a singular style which reflects a poetry of ambiguity. His figures are flat, graphic, and starkly painted. They are deliberately posed, as if frozen in a particular scene, a part of a narrative. We see them in rich detail, can describe them in the minute detail that Duval-Carrié offers, yet we cannot be sure if we are reading the narrative correctly. These bizarre lushly colored actors perform a drama that continues and repeats, much like the history of Haiti itself.

Since the early 1980s, when he first began to exhibit internationally, José Bedia has questioned both the role of religion in contemporary life and his particular situation as a Cuban citizen. And because of his personal search for both spiritual and artistic stability, Bedia also has straddled many worlds, some spiritual and some physical. Bedia’s artistic vocabulary, literally in terms of written text and in terms of recurrent imagery, is predicated on his life experiences, so that a certain basic level of biography is at least helpful in permitting a depth of appreciation of his multi-layered work. José Bedia was initiated into the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Monte in 1983. This marks a time of transition, when Bedia began working with a living religion and the people who practice it.

For some artists the “popular culture” of non-European religious experience provides nothing more than certain elements to be manipulated, thus relegating religious belief to a marginalized position within artistic production. But for Bedia, his religion and his collaborations with other religious leaders and artists provide a foundation and a wellspring of aesthetic energy. While living in Cuba he was an active participant in all events at the house of his Palo Monte Tata, or initiating sponsor. In his art Bedia reveals the multiple contexts of his own life and the parallel layering (hybridity) of contemporary society.

Although known for his signature hand-painted large wall figures and accompanying floor installations, José Bedia’s Fall 1997 exhibition, at the George Adams Gallery, NYC, consisted of ten carved and painted wooden object-ensembles, made from light weight pine, mounted on the walls, and two handmade boxes resting on pedestals. In these new pieces there is a condensing of narrative. Bedia references the use of miniature mass-produced figurines and religious representations commonly associated with children’s toys and religious altars, and includes these along with his own hand-made objects. These constructions exhibit finely painted figures in stark outlines, juxtaposed with a recurring depiction of specific trees, plants, animals, and objects, such as knives or machetes, used in his religious practice.

In these pieces Bedia has combined religious references with images of immigration and travel. Many of the objects are vehicles of physical transportation, like boats and trucks. Here the metaphor for Bedia’s own life is direct, for the reference is to both physical and metaphysical movement. Both of these references are autobiographical, for, as self-designated refugees, Bedia and his family have moved and Bedia himself has been moved by his religious practice.

In a similar vein, the two small boxes hint at migration and faith, which is always portable. “*Para un Cubanito Viajero*” (“For a Wandering Cuban” 1997) is a hand-made toolbox constructed as a portable altar, consisting of three altar-like rooms which pay homage to the three major Afro-Cuban faiths: Palo Monte, Santería, and Espiritismo. Placed in the open lid are miniature statues of the most important gods of Afro-Cuban faith. Although each is represented by a Catholic saint, all religious Cubans know that each saint is cross referenced with an African deity. For example, the Brown Virgin is the Virgen de la Caridad de Cobre, the patron saint of Cuba, who is celebrated as the Afro-Cuban *oricha* Ochún. Painted on the back



Keith Morrison
Funeral Pit for Egypt

of the other box is a swimmer positioned between two miniature wood ships, partially submerged in the water. One boat is named Cuba, the other Habana, and both are sinking. A man on an inner tube is stranded in the vast ocean which encompasses and sinks the boats. This composition is a reference to the *balseros*-the Cuban refugees who flee on inner tubes, with perhaps only their faith to sustain them.

These objects are deceptive, for Bedia has constructed miniaturized environments reminiscent of scenes that children build. Bedia worked with his son Pepita to create these objects. But their content and subject matter belie their form, for serious content merges with brightly painted toy-like objects. A related painting, "Al Límite Posible" ("At the Extreme Edge", 1996), has a miniature inner tube attached to the canvas, with the rope emerging from a painted depiction of Havana architecture set along the top perimeter of the canvas. In the blue ocean below, Bedia has painted two eyes, one crying and one pierced by a sword.

The latter references an oath taken by religious adepts who swear to keep the faith. The Crying eye again reminds us of the travails of the immigrant. During his years of travels the educated tourist José Bedia has seen and collected crafts, but he knows well that these objects cannot substitute for the experience, tangible and heart-felt, of the immigrant and believer.

Bedia, Duval-Carié and Morrison present us with actors and lush anguishing tales of layered histories. Here is the emergence of a new cultural condition, steeped in a respect for the past and frightened by the violence of the present. These contemporary artists are creating transcultural art that participates in and reflects the cultural hybridity of the later twentieth century. It is through their art that we get hints at how they position themselves in a complicated process of cultural exchange and express a transcultural citizenship.

Notas

¹ Satirical drama in play and in song is a longtime Caribbean tradition. In Jamaica comics have performed "pantomime" for decades. In the 1950s Morrison, while still a youngster, worked as an apprentice stage designer and, later, as TV sound effects technician with some of the great Jamaican comedians, Ranny Williams, Louise Bennett, and Charles Hyatt.

² "Milocan" is a Vodou word which refers to a spirit which is a collective entity. Its *veve* (sacred drawings) is composed of part of the *veve* of many different *lwa*.

* Judith Bettelheim
Ph.D. Professor of Art
San Francisco State University