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Kanaval: The Animated Archive

Keywords: Carnival, Haiti, Performance

While in most countries, history has been replaced by consumerism, media or the terrorist spectacle, it is still a potent force in Haiti. Haitian culture is a potent vessel for this history, continually transmitting, telling, retelling and reinterpreting Haitian history. School fees are excessive for the majority of the Haitian people, and educational standards are poor, but you would be hard pressed to find a Haitian person who does not know the vast and intimate details of their country's history.

Aesthetics, creativity and performance have a social value in the daily life of Haitian people. If you walk along any street in Haiti with a Haitian artist, you would quickly notice a phenomenon that is rare in most other countries. People will greet the artist using the term 'Atis' as a professional title before their name. In Haiti, 'Artist' is a term of respect, equal to 'Doctor' or 'Agronomist'. These are titles that address professions that are both honourable and important for the life of the nation. While the Agronomist tends to the land and the Doctor to the body, the Artist feeds the soul. 'Pep La' do not consider Haitian art as another cheap local export to a foreign land that holds no internal significance, but as something far more necessary and pregnant with possibilities.

When discussing Rara bands in Haiti, Liza McAlister notes how your ability to 'play' [Carnival/Kanaval] can be an important marker of your social status. "Play is associated with the crossroads or the street…and with establishing one's reputation through performance…In a country with low "professional" employment and a low literacy rate, this sort of reputation is a major form of social capital."

Haiti, as a nation, uses every cultural tool in its possession to transmit its history, from the drumming, singing, dancing and possessive ritual of the Vodou religion, the songs of Twobadou groups and the collective melodies and rhythms of Rara bands. Haitian history also uses the words, theatre and poems of its great literary tradition and the unique visions of its painters, sculptors and flag makers. Haitian history, and not only that of the Revolution, is also replayed through the masks, costumes and narratives of the carnival in Jacmel, a coastal town in southern Haiti.

Each year, Jacmel holds pre-Lenten Mardi Gras festivities. Troupes of performers act out mythological and political tales in a theatre of the absurd that traverses the streets; rarely shackled by traditional procession. Mardi Gras in Jacmel is light-years away from the sanitized corporate-sponsored tourist-driven carnivals around the world. There appears to be no set time, route or parade. One can wander a seemingly deserted street; turn a corner to find a group of cardboard-masked solicitors and judges with chairs and a table seated in the middle of the road performing a play based on a French 19th century novel. Around another corner you might find a painted boy riding a donkey, wearing sneakers, trousers and speaking on a mobile phone. It is of carnival of flaneurs and meanderers, rather than marchers and processors.

Some extravagant, many-peopled troupes can totally overtake the streets, such as the Zel Maturin, satin-clad devils in papier maché masks with four-foot hinged wooden wings which they smack together dangerously and the Lanset Kòd, hordes of horned, shirtless men, skin shining with an oily patina of cane spirit, syrup and charcoal, who rage through the streets, ropes in hand, before diving communally into the ocean at the end of the day. But there are also lone, idiosyncratic performers, for whom the character and costume represent their own intensely personal spiritual visions, such as Bounda pa Bounda, who enacts a Vodou vision given to him by a spirit sitting high in a tree. For many of the participants, the carnival isn't just the highlight of their year, it's also the source of their social status.

Jacmel carnival is intense, but also so [inexpensive, not dependent on structures of consumerism]. While Hollywood squanders millions on CGI and 3D effects to frighten the world, Jacmel carnival does it far more eloquently with papier maché, pot black, cardboard and nylon stockings.

Kanaval has become a potent vessel for a people's telling of Haiti's history. Henry Ford once said, "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition." What we find on the streets of Jacmel at carnival time unravels this statement with acerbity, threat, imagination, grace, and a wild surrealism. The whole event is swirling around in a miasma of warped historical retelling. This is the kind of history that would make Henry Ford's palms sweat. And so it should. This is people taking history into their own hands and molding it into whatever they decide. Within this historical retelling we find mask after mask, but rather than concealing, the masks are revealing, story after story, through disguise and roadside pantomime.

I first witnessed and documented Jacmel carnival in 1995. The first time I saw it, I realised it was unique. What also became increasingly apparent is that the carnival itself is quite nebulous, as I said earlier: the different troupes setting out at different times in small neighborhoods. There is no set time, route or parade. This lack of traditional parade feels very important. It is what, in my mind, creates space in the carnival for [multiple] narratives, and consequently [historical retellings]. To lose this fluidity within [a single] procession would be to reduce the complex poetry of mask, gesture, theatre and costume, to pure spectacle.

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I began this project in 1995 and kept returning for seven or so years. It became rapidly apparent to me that there were many underlying narratives to Kanaval. I realized that by making photographic images I too was acting like the [narrow principle of] parade, stripping away the history and narrative-making present in the carnival. As a photographer, I have always been keenly aware of the difficulties and responsibilities in representing Haiti. Since the enslaved people's revolt, Haiti has been a mythological epicentre for racist and colonial anxieties. And many of these encoded mythologies are reproduced and replicated through the visual representation of Haiti. Looking at my increasingly iconic photograph of the Lanceurs de Corde, the two men with the bulls' horns, one of the first images I took of carnival, I was aware of how easily the wildly exotic image could reinforce stereotype. The issues of "who can represent whom, and how" are significant issues of power, race and class. While I could not eradicate all of the power imbalance inherent in me representing people in Haiti, or overturn the 200 year cultural demonization - I could at least find strategies for "damage limitation".

So after seven years of photographic documentation, I realised that the images were not enough, I needed something to contextualise the work. I returned three times to Jacmel in calmer, more tranquil, non-carnival periods and collected the oral histories of the people making and wearing the masks. The stories behind the masquerade. I tracked down the leaders of the carnival groups and asked them to tell me their stories, in order to restore narrative to the photographs and try to reduce the level of spectacle.

I would also like to highlight a few technical details as further explanation of how the form, technique and aesthetic of the work relates to the project of history and narrative. I use a 50 year old Roleiicord medium format twin lens reflex camera and a Lunasix lightmeter. I shoot onto black and white negative film. The camera is totally mechanical and once the film of only 12 exposures is loaded, the shutter has to be cocked before you can actually take a picture. All exposure changes are manual and winding onto the next frame is quite laborious as well. I wander the streets searching for characters that will agree to be photographed, I always ask their permission beforehand and pay people for the chance to photograph them. If they agree, and many do not, they always seem to be very patient with the long process, during which I have to take a light reading, change the speed and aperture and focus. There is always stasis in my images as the process takes time. Yet within the slow process, a space is created between myself and the sitter which seems to enter the territory of the old-fashioned portrait studio. The sitters strike poses reflecting their masked characters. One of the essayists in the book referred to this as "performed ethnography". The time and space created seems to allow for some of the historical narrative to seep through the sitter's performance, in a way that rapid cameras which need no interaction between photographer and sitter cannot.

It is also important to say that my attraction to Haiti is also a part of a trajectory: a culmination of my love of folk traditions and people's histories. [This trajectory spans] the feminist folk punk band I sang in and wrote lyrics for in the mid-eighties, my enduring love of British folk traditions from the Burry Man to the Hooden Horses of Kent, my photographs of fairground ghost trains and street-hawking children in Guy Fawkes, to my love of the photographic project of August Sander and the political oral historian, Studs Terkel. I celebrate the times when people hold on to their own traditions, their own histories, their own creativity and their own worth for their own class, without blanket consumerism and broadcast entertainment to dilute history. What I feel we have nearly lost in the U.K., I still find in Haiti—a nation tirelessly binding their history into sculptures, paintings, novels, poems, song, ritual and costume.

Chaloska (Charles Oscar)
Eugene Lamour a.k.a. Boss Cota 61 years

The Chief Charles Oscar was a military commandant in charge of the police in Jacmel. He died here in 1912. He was tall and strong with big feet and teeth and feared by all. At a time when there was political instability in Port-au-Prince, when President Sam had just been assassinated, Charles Oscar took his chance to take 500 prisoners from the local jail and kill them all. There was so much blood it made a river of death. The population was so angry that it revolted and tore the police chief to pieces in the street and burned him down. He was killed in the same violent way that he had treated the people.

This story has always been very striking to me, and in 1962, I decided to create the character of Chaloska for Carnival. I designed the military uniform and made the big false teeth with bull's teeth bought from the market. Each year I change the costume a little by designing a different hat for the group to wear.

When I created Chaloska, I also wanted to create some other characters to go along with him. I created Master Richard and Doctor Calypso. Master Richard is a rich man with a big bag full of money and a huge fat stomach. He walks with the group of Chaloska buying justice and paying the judges. He represents the impunity and corruption that hides behind Chaloska and is the real chief of the city. Doctor Calypso is an old hunchback with a black suit and a stick in his hand. He works for Chaloska and checks on the health of the prisoners, always reporting that they are healthy when they are dying.

These characters are still here in Haitian society, so it is good to parade them on the street. It is a message to all future Oscars that you will end up this way. The group goes to different places in town threatening the people. The boss Chaloska always finally dies, and the others call for mercy as they are cowards, but then another Chaloska immediately replaces him. This is to show the infinite replication of Chaloska which continues to produce the same system. There will be Chaloska until the end of the world. They started with the beginning and will not end until the end.