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In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art **Open Sept 16 at Fowler Museum**

A *coup d'état*, a devastating earthquake, hurricanes, floods, poverty, and epidemics; the 21st century in Haiti has been a study in tumult. *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art*—an exhibition on display at the Fowler Museum from Sept. 16, 2012–Jan. 20, 2013—demonstrates how leading Haitian visual artists are producing an enthralling, sometimes unsettling body of work that confronts these hardships head on.

Consisting of more than seventy works including paintings, prints, installations, metal sculpture, and mixed-media sculptures by established artists and a new generation of self-taught genre-busters, the exhibition offers unflinchingly honest and viscerally compelling reactions to Haiti's contemporary predicament.

The most emblematic of these rising artists, André Eugène, Jean Hérard Celeur and Frantz Jacques (aka Guyodo), have emerged onto the international art stage of biennials, galleries and museums from a warren of junkyards, auto salvage shops, and ateliers on Port-au-Prince's Grand Rue. They have moved Haitian sculpture into a new territory by constructing huge figures out of car chassis, human skulls, tire chains, and discarded computer parts.

Many of their sculptures are manifestations of Bawon (Baron) Samdi (Papa Gede)—the Vodou divinity who presides over mortality, sexuality and rebirth—and of the Gedes, his capricious sons. These bold works dramatically underscore the subject of the exhibition: the disjunction between social collapse and artistic florescence, and how Haitian artists' work can be seen through the prism of this increasingly dominant family of Vodou divinities.

Notions of an emerging dystopia loom large in the work of painters featured in the exhibition. Where Haitian artists of an earlier era envisioned Vodou divinities disporting themselves in paradise-like settings, today's painters imagine their gods in full retreat from a 21st-century nightmare. Edouard Duval-Carrié's depiction of Bawon Samdi in *Le Baron triomphant* strides confidently into an uncertain future. Didier Civil, more famous for raucous carnival masks, now paints Gedes with leering, blank white faces, utterly indifferent to human desperation.



André Eugène (b. 1959, Haiti)
Military glory
Mixed media
H: 183 cm
Collection of the Artist

Similar transformations have reshaped the making of ritual flags (*drapo*), which over the last half-century developed into the genre of Vodou art most popular in galleries and museums. A new generation of fiber artists featured in the exhibition—Myrlande Constant, Roudy Azor, and Evelyne Alcide—is responsible for this venerable tradition morphing into gigantic, beaded narrative tableaux. No longer simply saluting or celebrating divinity, these often ribald compositions evoke Papa Gede “in extremis”: a god whose extravagant sexuality confounds his role as avatar of death.

As an introduction to the Vodou clan of Bawon Samdi and the Gedes, visitors enter a gallery meant to evoke the cemetery, their domain. A cluster of iron crosses by famed master blacksmith Georges Liautaud, mixed-media sculptures in the form of coffins by Pierrot Barra, paintings, textiles and more testify to the ever-presence of death.

Other ways of seeing and encountering the Gedes in Haiti are considered with tableaux by leading bead artists, paintings by Jean Philippe Jeannot and *André Pierre*, and a seven-channel video display installed in the form of a cross by Maksaens Denis. Looking towards global popular culture, Frantz Zéphirin’s acrylic painting *The Immortal Dream of Michael Jackson for the Third World*, 2010 offers a haunting vision of the King of Pop assuming the guise of Bawon Samdi. Likewise, works by artist Jean-Michel Basquiat (*whose father was Haitian*) strongly suggest the presence of these avatars of death and regeneration.

A series of artists’ responses to the massive earthquake of January 12, 2010 is anchored by Myrlande Constant’s large (7’ x 9’), apocalyptic beaded portrait of the disaster. She depicts a tragedy of such epic proportion that even members of the Gede family, who often laughingly attend to death, now find themselves overwhelmed by the immensity of their duty.

Towards the end of the exhibition, a site-specific installation by Jean Robert Celestin, aka Emperor Sonson, is inspired by this Vodou priest’s temple altars in Port-au-Prince. Sonson’s altars are festooned with intimidating figures: spangled dolls, coffins inset with sculpted corpses, and skulls, as well as an array of other objects. Like the emotionally charged sculptures of the Gran Rue artists, Sonson’s arresting assemblage proclaims Bawon Samdi and the Gedes to be paramount spirits for a nation, and perhaps a world, *in extremis*.

Haitian Art at the Fowler Museum

In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art is organized and produced by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and curated by Donald J. Cosentino, UCLA professor emeritus of Black Atlantic religions and popular culture, and Patrick A. Polk, Fowler curator of Latin American and Caribbean popular arts, with Leah Gordon, the late Marilyn Houlberg, and Katherine Smith.

The Fowler Museum has a long commitment to the research and presentation of the arts of Haiti. Over the course of five decades, the Fowler has amassed one of the largest and most important collections of Vodou-inspired 20TH- and 21ST-Century Haitian art in the United States.

The Museum has mounted several exhibitions of Haitian art, including the 1995 travelling exhibition *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, also curated by Cosentino, which the Los Angeles Times termed a “landmark show” and *The New York Times* called “spellbinding.”

This fall the Fowler will publish the book *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art* (paper, ISBN 978-0-9847550-0-4), distributed by the University of Washington Press. The multi-authored volume is edited by Donald J. Cosentino with a preface by Edwidge Danticat.

Major support for the exhibition comes from the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. Additional funding is provided by the Barbara and Joseph Goldenberg Fund, the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director’s Discretionary Fund, the Faye Bettye Green Fund to Commission New Work, and the Pasadena Art Alliance.

The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country’s most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The

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museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$11 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Opening Weekend Events

Sat., Sept. 15, 5–6 pm

Donald Cosentino on *In Extremis*

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture

Guest curator Donald Cosentino offers an overview of the new exhibition and then is joined by photographer and curator Leah Gordon and Grand Rue visual artist André Eugène to discuss current trends in Haitian art.

Sat., Sept. 15, 6–8:30 pm

Opening Party: *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art*

Celebrate the opening of *In Extremis* with a night of Haitian art and culture.

Sun., Sept. 16, 2012 1–4 pm

In Extremis Artists Open House

Meet some of the artists whose sculptures and installations appear in the spectacular new exhibition *In Extremis: Death and Life in 21st-Century Haitian Art* during this afternoon open house. Artists André Eugène, Maksaens Denis, Leah Gordon and Jean Robert Celestin, as well as exhibition curators will be on hand in the galleries to discuss the works.

Additional programs are announced online at fowler.ucla.edu

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