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Interviewing the Haiti-born artist Edouard Duval-Carrié is a lesson in interpretation. There's little discussion of technique, color, or space. Instead, with a precise vocabulary but slightly askew English syntax, Duval-Carrié talks of symbols and meaning, and how the history of his land is also the history of the United States.

Duval-Carrié's works certainly have an exotic quality: His paintings use bold, dramatic colors and often place their subjects at the center of the compositions, while employing spiritual and cultural symbols unfamilar to Midwestern United States audiences. Yet they also have a directness, urgency, and intensity that communicate a great deal of information, even though specific references might be elusive.

More importantly, the artist's themes should resonate with any American audience. Both countries, after all, share a collision of three cultures: native American, European, and African. "I try to talk, yes, about Haiti, but in a more general way which transcends the borders of Haiti," Duval-Carrié said last week. "It talks of this whole slavery thing. It's not particular to Haiti. ... It talks of the mixture of those three cultures, the American, the European, the African. It's not strictly Haiti. Haiti might be the most poignant one in the sense that things have not gone so well there."

Duval-Carrié was in the Quad Cities assisting with the installation of *Migration of the Spirit*, which opened last weekend at the Figge Art Museum and runs through April 16. The artist calls the show, curated by the Figge's Michelle Robinson, a "mid-career retrospective," covering 1989 to the present.

The tentpoles of the sprawling exhibition are four large-scale installations incorporating painting and sculpture: *Altar to the Nine Slaves, The Destruction of the Indians, Vodou Pantheon* , and *Endless Flight*. Together they tell the stories of European exploitation of Africans and native Americans, migration from Haiti, and finally the melding of Haitian (which is to say, African and native American) culture with the United States.

"All of them would have been nice in the apse of a cathedral, meant for the poor people of the planet," Duval-Carrié said. "Museums are the new temples. That's why we have the show here."

Duval-Carrié is emphatic that *Migration of the Spirit* is not merely an exhibit of Haitian art, but uses Haiti as a microcosm speaking to histories of colonialism, slavery, and genocide. "It's a history of the New World that I'm talking about."

The Armed Cake

Le Gâteau Fort is a painting of a cake, dominated by rose and pink frosting and accented by a rose frame and light blues. On the three lower layers of the cake sit 15 decorative cannons, and four tiny, unlikely hot-air balloons are visible, floating above the dessert and attached with strings. It looks like a fitting end to a patriotic celebration.

It is only upon closer inspection that a viewer notices that several of the cannons on the right side of the painting are firing, most likely at the gloved hand coming into the painting from its right edge and holding a knife, threatening to cut the cake. The effect is at once slyly funny – with its allusion to Gulliver's visit to Lilliput and its six-inch-tall people – and startling in its miniaturized violence. "It's a sugar cake, and it's armed," Duval-Carrié succinctly said.

"That's what I like my work to be," the artist added. "You look at it, 'Oh, how pleasing.' ... And suddenly, something surreptitious, very insidious starts showing through."

In the case of *Le Gâteau Fort*, the cake represents the Haitian sugar that was so prized by France (the hand), while the cannons show resistance, culminating in the slave rebellion of the 1790s that eventually led to Haiti's independence.

That such a relatively straightforward, static-on-the-surface painting (of a cake, no less) can effectively represent a portion of Haiti's troubled history speaks to the weight the artist gives to his symbols.

"Art is a medium where you attract people's attention, and then you feed them some ideas," he said. Yet Duval-Carrié isn't dogmatic, and as vivid and loaded as his works are, their messages are often vague, and their tone matter-of-fact. *Mardigras au Fort Dimanche*, a portrait of the dictatorial Duvalier family, is full of grotesque imagery and suggests rot, but it also has a playfulness, vitality, and respect that give it ambivalence.

Similarly, the visual center of the *Altar to the Nine Slaves* depicts Africans being brought to Haiti as slaves, but there's no explicit emotional content. Duval Carri é explained: "They have green heads because they are slaves, and they don't have free will, because there's a French saying that says, 'The fish rots from the head down.'" Yet the slaves' faces are impassive.

His work is often pulled different ways, tugged one direction by its sophisticated technique and

dense symbolism, while imagery invoking the primitive resists.

"I'm not a proselytizer," Duval-Carrié said. "It's just a space of questioning. ... I'm a very curious person, and I want to know. And I assume everybody's just like me."

Some of the artist's most striking work involves Haitian deities. In one painting in the installation *Vodou Pantheon*, the island country's gods and goddesses are asea, abandoning their land. As Paula Harper wrote in *Art in America* in 2001, "In Duval-Carrié's imagination, everyone is leaving a desolated Haiti, even her presiding spirits."

The installation was prepared for the 1996 Olympic games in Atlanta, and Duval-Carrié used the occasion to invest the serious theme of migration with a little humor. Referencing the Greek origins of the Olympics and that country's rich mythology, the artist said he was bringing in Haitian deities "to visit their cousins."

Mythic figures and real complications intermingle. In the same installation, one painting shows Erzulie, the Vodou goddess of love, captured by the United States Coast Guard, soon to repatriate her. It seems that even the spirit lords are subject to immigration law.

Yet Erzulie has made it to the United States and is assimilated in the fourth installation, *Endless Flight*, along with other deities. "We have the goddess of love in some club in South Beach," Duval-Carrié said. "We have the god of war in a field near Baghdad helping the Americans out."

And the largest painting shows Anansi, the spider trickster, "the strongest of them all, and ... the one who manages to keep evil out of the village." In this particular painting, Anansi is blue, except for red feet and calves and a web of red all over his body. This is not how Anansi is traditionally portrayed, and here the artist is making an explicit connection to none other than Spider-Man. The work is the juncture of Vodou spirituality and American pop culture.

Urban Planner as Artist

Migration is an apt theme for Duval-Carrié, who was born in Haiti in 1954 and whose family fled Haiti for Puerto Rico when he was nine years old. His family returned, but Edouard has traveled and studied abroad extensively, with schooling in Canada and France (where he lived for nine years) before settling in Miami 12 years ago. He has had solo exhibitions in major metropolitan areas including New York City, Miami, Los Angeles, San Diego, and Houston, as well as in Columbia, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and his home country.

He infrequently gets back to Haiti, but his absence has given him a critical distance that's reflected in his artwork. "I have more of a detachment" than he would have if he continued to live there, he said.

Maintaining an outsider's perspective is a recurring motif in both Duval-Carrié's life and work. He got his bachelor's degree in urban planning, and even though he's a professional artist, his

use of the present tense is telling: “I’m an urban planner,” he said. So how much urban planning has he done? “None,” he said.

Yet urban planning is at its core the study of humanity and solving its problems, Duval-Carrié said, and looking at how one thing affects another. So while he hasn’t reconfigured streets or revised land-use plans, he’s incorporated his training into his artwork. “I have a totally different vision of art,” he said, “a more scholarly approach.”

Duval-Carrié isn’t shy about wanting to educate as well. He hopes that his honest reflections of Haitian culture might counteract common stereotypes and fallacies about the country and its spirituality. A key problem is that Hollywood has appropriated small slivers of Vodou, without giving a full picture. “It’s as if we were judging the Christian church by the [Spanish] Inquisition of the 15th Century,” Duval-Carrié said. “You cannot deny it, but it’s not the totality of what the Christian church is all about. It’s a much more complex thing.”

Because of the history and culture infused in his artwork, it’s easy to overlook the art itself. While Haiti provides the inspiration for much of the content, the technique is informed by his artistic training. “My work also has a very important side, which is: how I do it – the painting itself, the sculpture,” Duval-Carrié said. “Is it pleasing? Is it interesting?”

While Duval-Carrié’s paintings dominate *Migration of the Spirit*, the exhibit’s three-dimensional works – particularly the plastic sculptures of the installation
Endless Flight
– show the artist’s skills in other areas.

“Nobody uses plastic like I do,” Duval-Carrié said. He said there are philosophical reasons to use plastic – “It is of my time. It is now” – but also practical ones, such as its flexibility: “My work could not be done without this plastic.”

Most impressive is a massive four-legged carriage. The artist has transformed the plastic, making it look more like wood than a petroleum-based product, and Duval-Carrié sounds as if he wants to elevate and celebrate his material. Plastic is “supposed to be very plebeian, very banal, even grotesque,” he said. “I’m trying to apply it in an artistic way. ... It’s been denigrated as a material. I think it’s beautiful myself.”

The Davenport Connection

Migration of the Spirit is the artist’s first exhibit in the Midwest, but to anybody who has seen the volume of the Figge’s Haitian art collection, it’s not a surprise. Dr. Walter E. Neiswanger, an avid Quad Cities collector of Haitian art, has long been a key benefactor of the Figge/Davenport Museum of Art. And Duval-Carrié sounded happy to have a major retrospective of his work here.

“When I had my first exhibit 25, 26 years ago, they were the first people who bought my work ... literally from my first show,” he said. The fourth installation in *Migration of the Spirit* was a Neiswanger commission, and it will remain part of the Figge permanent collection after the show

closes.

In the Figge's Haitian art collection, Duval-Carrié sees a yearning by the Haitian people – a desire to emerge from centuries of bloodshed and oppression. While many people – and perhaps some gods and goddesses – have defected from the Caribbean country, many have not abandoned it.

"For people that are in such dire straits, that they still want to create something that could be considered art is what's fascinating," Duval-Carrié said. Many permanent-collection works – primarily from the 20th Century – portray tranquil domestic scenes, he noted. The artwork tends to be "very idyllic," he added, "the last word one should use for Haiti. It is *not* idyllic. ... Things are not like that. Things were never like that."

That assessment puts the Haitian artwork in the same realm as Duval-Carrié's, with the meaning purposely obscured by a deceptively pleasant surface. "It was almost like a political statement," he said. "They use these images to show to the government and to the empowered elite: 'Listen, this is how we would like to live, not in this misery that we are in.' What they were portraying had nothing to do with reality."