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The latest exhibit at the Figge Art Museum, Migration of the Spirit, creates an unsettling mood that is simultaneously full of melancholy and levity. The exhibit, which runs through April 16, is a powerful show that explores a tragic history through the vision of Miami-based artist Edouard Duval-Carrié. It is a rare treat to have a show that is thematically and historically complex as well as visually stunning.

The exhibit populates the top two floors of the museum with large, colorful paintings, texturally rich sculptures infused with a playful wit, and four powerful installations chronicling the forced migrations of humans and their deities. While Duval-Carrié frequently references the struggles of his native Haiti, the show is far broader in scope and insight than just Haitian history. (See “A New-World Order,” *River Cities’ Reader* Issue 565, January 25-31, 2006.) Some of the bright colors and buoyant compositions sardonically belie much harsher and gut-wrenching historical references that permeate the show.

Migration of the Spirit showcases the exceptional diversity in Duval-Carrié’s free use of media to eloquently explore and share his insights into the under-spoken history of the New World. While he could be described as primarily a painter, that would be inadequate.

Duval-Carrié is a complete artist who is fluent not only with pigment, but also displays great visual eloquence and daring with plastics, metals, and light. His use of various media is not rooted in the novelty of demonstrating that he can use different materials, but arises from their appropriateness in relation to the concept.

Many of his frames are dotted with either three-dimensional masks, symbols, and characters or painted images that reinforce the action within the painting or expand the parameters of what the painting is about. The frame becomes an extension of the idea within the painting and not just a way to physically contain the work. The relief elements of the frames also facilitate a fluid transition between the paintings and the sculptures.

Whether floating boats, bronze staves, glowing red figures, or amazing bronze busts, Duval-Carrié’s commanding sculptural elements serve to energize the space throughout the exhibit in a way most sculptors only dream about and allow his paintings to resonate with more

depth and character.

Our journey starts with the complex installation *The Destruction of the Indians* (1992), which Duval-Carrié created to mark the 500-year anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World. This installation features several large paintings on the wall as well as numerous sculptural elements that fan out on the Figge's third-floor exhibition space.

The three main panels on the wall contain the bulk of the narrative. The left panel shows three natives – with red mask-like faces stitched to their shoulders – sitting in a canoe on a narrow expanse of cool blue water flanked by lush green vegetation. This "before" panel showcases a lifestyle and culture unknowingly on the edge of obliteration.

The center panel shows us the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors – whose helmets disguise and homogenize their identities – jammed into a dark but warmish-brown boat. Jutting out between the seven conquistadors in their golden armor are several golden attack dogs. Both the masters and their dogs are consumed by gold. Unlike in the "before" panel, in which the natives' canoe was visually harmonious with its environment, the stark darkness and warmth of the boat stand in ominous sharp contrast to the cool and luminous blue water.

In the panel on the right, the natives are in the green grasses (sugar-cane fields) being harassed by the golden dogs. The dogs are both literal harriers as well as a metaphor for the destructive practices of the European colonial powers that were trying to turn a profit. Duval-Carrié reiterates this European connection even more in the medallions on his elaborate frames, which contain images of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain.

The European powers quickly depleted the natives in their search for gold. Soon they turned to sub-Saharan Africa for a new labor force: slaves. Much of *Migration of the Spirit* examines institutionalized slavery and its effects throughout several cultures and eras.

While the primary image in *The Door of No Return* (2001) is distilled to just a few elements, Duval-Carrié lays out the composition to maximize their impact. We see three African slaves in a hot-pink room contemplating what lies beyond a dark-cool-blue door. The "door of no return" was that last doorway a slave went through before being crammed into a slave ship and forcibly taken away. There is a steady visual drumbeat of arrows leading from the newly enslaved Africans to the ominous door. The battle between the hot pink and the cool blue causes this infamous doorway to resonate with urgency.

In *Mardis Gras at Fort Dimanche*, Duval-Carrié reinterprets some of the history of his own Haiti. In 1957, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier proclaimed himself "president for life" of Haiti. His regime was both corrupt and brutal. In this piece, we see the Duvalier family standing inside the stain-splattered green walls of Fort Dimanche – an infamous political prison.

Near the center of the composition is "Papa Doc" Duvalier – who in real life intentionally co-opted the appearance of Bawon Samedi (a deity who was the head of the spirits of the dead) – wearing a fedora on top of his half-face, half-skull head. Next to him is his wife, Mama Simone, who is carrying a picnic basket with two bottles of wine and a severed hand sticking out

of the raised lid. A bishop – who was Mama Simone's cousin – the three Duvalier sisters all in black dresses, and a decorated general round out the entourage. By showing the Duvalier family hiding their eyes behind sunglasses, Duval-Carrié conjures images of the Tonton Macoutes (the secret police).

All in attendance at this gruesome gala arc around a man in a white dress. This is Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. Edouard Duval-Carrié uses his visual wit to find humor within the horror. Baby Doc's white dress is intentionally reminiscent of the beautiful gowns favored by Erzulie (the deity of love). The dress playfully taps into the rumors that Jean-Claude Duvalier was a mama's boy and possibly a cross-dresser as well.

These few examples from *Migration of the Spirit* show how rich with strong imagery and meaning the work is. The museum has done an excellent job of providing plaques and resource literature to follow along on Duval-Carrié's journey.

Roughly half of the fourth floor is consumed by Duval-Carrié's most successful installation, *End less Flight*
(2000). When you step off the elevator, you are greeted by a stark chalk-white Bawon Samedi in his top hat, grinning downward at you while floating overhead in his pink and white marbled boat. The vessel is hovering over a rounded, diamond-shaped pile of sand with layers of dying flowers splaying out from its center. The light from within the boat shines down through the heart-shaped and skull-shaped incisions on the underside.

Although the other installations brim with captivating elements, *Endless Flight* has a unified presence that transcends the sum of its parts and changes the character of the space.

Endless Flight has the joy and levity of a Mardi Gras parade fused with the somber and serious character of a cathedral. The boat-like constructions are vessels bearing the deities to a new life in America. Two tables convey aspects of the human struggle – one covered with terrines and serving vessels (for the dead), the other coated with palm trees (a symbol of Haiti) and elaborate daggers (a reference to violence).

A more land-bound boat/vessel in the center seems to carry the whole history of Haiti – an amalgam of European, native, and African culture represented by daggers, hearts, crosses, serpents, and Vodou symbols – toward the New World.

These elements all lead our attention to the series of paintings on the wall that show some of the traditional Vodou deities carving out new lives for themselves in America. They, too, must cope with relocation and re-vocation. Unlike many of his other works that are rooted in history, *Endless Flight*
shows a challenging but hopeful future.

Duval-Carrié reiterates themes and motifs, such as migration and the endurance of culture, throughout his work and has cultivated layer upon layer of meaning within single pieces as well as between several pieces. At times there is almost a James Joyce-like level of complexity in imagery and nuance. But unlike Joyce, this show is not for some dry intellectual elite.

The exhibit is an amazing visual journey to experience. Duval-Carrié's work is full of dramatic uses of color, strong textural elements within the frames as well as the sculptures, and a robust warmth of spirit that make the show very accessible. I have spent more than six hours looking at it so far, and I come out seeing and understanding something new each time.