

# Vodou Riche: Contemporary Haitian Art

Eric Grimes

Art has an extremely colorful relationship with wealth. Most art — in the contemporary sense — is generally a privilege of the wealthy, yet human creativity still manifests itself in even the poorest nations. Columbia College's [C]Spaces' Glass Curtain Gallery in Chicago explores the implications of art created in one of the world's poorest countries in the recent exhibition of *Vodou Riche: Contemporary Haitian Art*. *Vodou Riche* is part of the college's ongoing Critical Encounters

program that brings community attention to socially relevant issues through active dialogue. Each year, a central theme is chosen and is explored by various projects throughout the academic year. This year's theme is *Poverty and Privilege*.

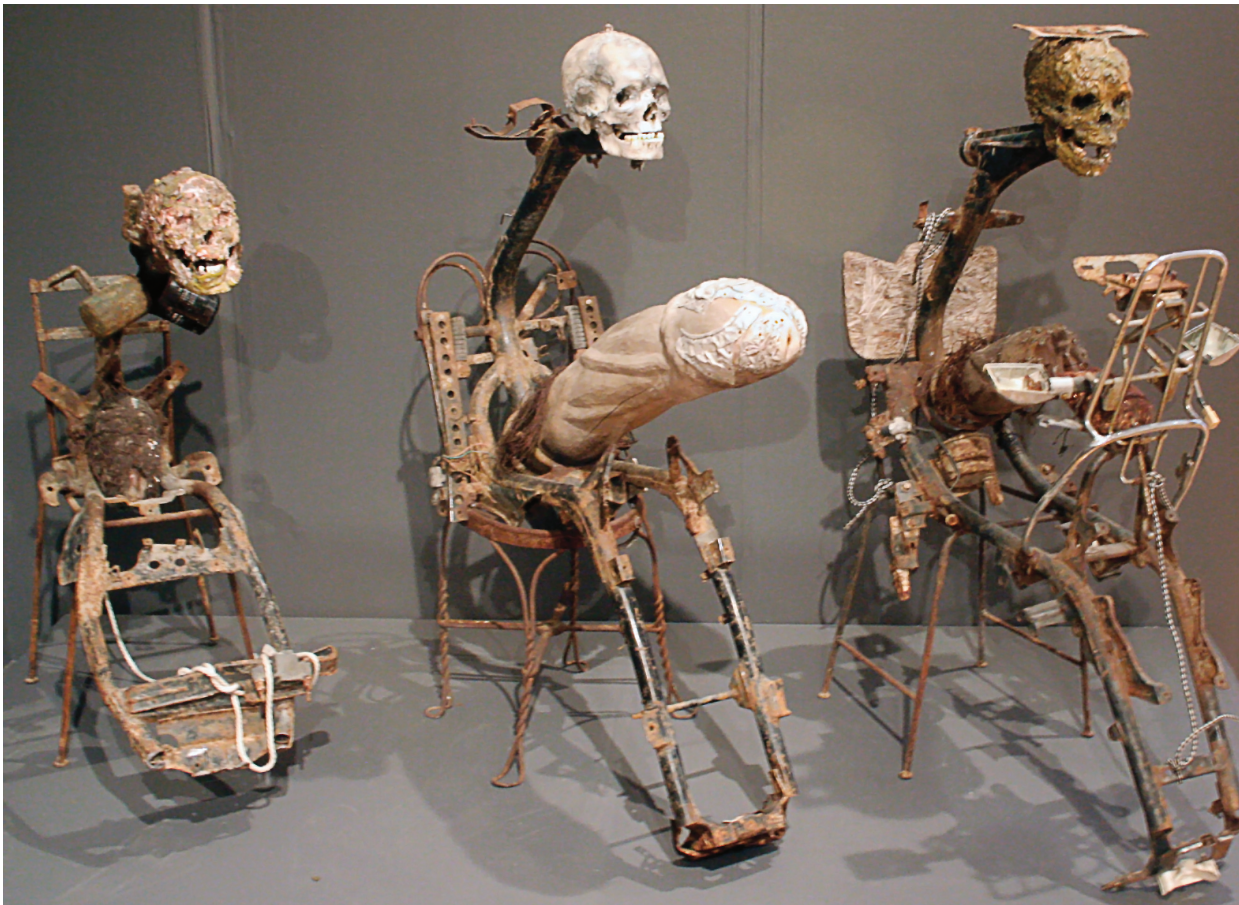
The announcement flier stated plainly, "Haitian art absorbs and interprets visual culture so masterfully because of its foundation in Vodou, a culture that was

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born and survives due to its history of accommodation and inclusion." An excruciatingly oversimplified synopsis would be: Contemporary Vodou in the Americas is the result of African slaves' attempts to keep their native religions alive by amalgamating them with religious and cultural aspects of the western cultures in which they were forced to survive. Vodou is practiced by most of the population of Haiti and is also considered an official religion, alongside Roman Catholicism. It should also be noted that Vodou differs from the more commonly seen spelling "Voodoo". Although they both derive primarily from the West African Vodun religion, their practices are influenced by a variety of other unrelated traditions. Vodou references traditions native to Haiti, but Voodoo is a term applied to the Creole rituals of the southern United States, specifically Louisiana.

The tale of contemporary Haitian art speaks to humanity's innate drive for self-expression and how this passion has never been constrained by something as comparatively trivial as poverty. *Vodou Riche* was a superb exploration of a wealth of art coming from an extremely poor nation. This broad multimedia exhibition was curated by the director of [C]Spaces, Neysa Page-Lieberman. The works ranged from the traditional mediums of painting and sculpture through the more modern ones of photography and video and included some installation pieces. Perhaps most importantly, the most engaging art was largely unique to Haiti. More than simply idiosyncratic styles of painting and sculpture, contemporary Haitian art is powerful and plentiful enough to be classified as a category unto itself. Even though Haiti is often touted as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, the very title "*Vodou Riche*" frames this exhibition with a view that is rife with the spiritual abundance at the core of Haiti's vibrant people.

The style in this exhibition that most literally converts social poverty into visual wealth comes from a group



Celeur, *Untitled (Three Figures on Motorcycles)*, human skulls, motorcycle chassis and other mixed media. (All Images courtesy [C] Spaces)

known as “the sculptors of Grand Rue,” which is the main street going through Haiti’s capital city, Port-au-Prince. The three sculptors from this group are Jean Hérald Celeur, André Eugène, and Guyodo (Frantz Jacques). In the “about” section of their shared website, they autobiographically describe that they “have transformed the detritus of a failing economy into bold, radical and warped sculptures... [we reference] a dystopian, sci-fi view of the future and the positive transformative act of assemblage.” Their sculptures are constructed from sundry electronics, car engines, car wheels, lumber, and whatever else may land in what the three describe as an atmosphere of junkyard, make-do, survivalist recycling and artistic endeavor.

Celeur’s *Untitled (Three Figures on Motorcycles)* was the one that immediately demanded the attention of most viewers. Upon turning the gallery’s first corner, visitors were greeted by a sculpture that was a set of three humanesque figures. Though each was more robotic death-monster than human, they were proportionately and structurally akin enough for viewers to be welcomed into a self-comparison — albeit, through an extremely grotesque mirror. Each recumbent figure used a motorcycle chassis for its body and a real human skull for its head. The central creature had a massive phallus about four feet long. Formal academic interpretations could rightly include comparisons to Albrecht Dürer’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and the Vodou spirit Gede. Regardless of any specific mythological connotations, there are broader ideas that are more relevant in discussing what is uniquely offered from this sculpture as a result of Celeur’s poverty.

The most obvious aspect of this sculpture is that it places the viewer in direct confrontation with death. The more prosperity a community has, the more it tends to shield itself from death. In contemporary America, we often try to remove ourselves from death as much as possible. We would prefer to sterilize



Guyodo (Frantz Jacques)



André Eugène

it, then shrink-wrap it, and store it conveniently in the freezer aisle of life until such time as we feel it would be tolerable for us to select whichever yellow plastic rectangle would give us the best deal (already having compared each price tag sticker on the top of each neat package). The poor, on the other hand, simply cannot afford the luxury to ignore the ugly or uncomfortable parts of life; they must make do with whatever they have available. The sculptors of the Grand Rue make this abundantly clear by using human skulls from local cemeteries in their sculptures.

There has always been a correlation between poverty and closeness to death — the physical and metaphysical closeness to the dead. It naturally follows that art originating from poor communities looks more fearlessly into the eyes of death. This is expressed very literally in *Three Figures on Motorcycles* with the viewer looking into the eye-sockets of the human skulls. The six hollow sockets from Celeur’s sculpture deliver the exacting, neutral stare of death. This is very much why the assemblages coming from the Grand Rue speak volumes about morphing societal dregs into expressions of joy and beauty. Celeur’s biographical statement makes this clear: “I live in the reality that deals with poverty every day, which informs my work all the time.”

*Vodou Riche* was a very large exhibition where many styles and media were juxtaposed without restraint or hesitation. The entire room was a cornucopia of stylistic symbiosis. The *Three Figures on Motorcycles* (and the sculptors of the Grand Rue in general) are merely succinct examples of the overall themes within the entire collection of artworks. This review simply illustrates those ideas through a focused discussion of one work.

Columbia College deserves praise for attempting the admirable goal of building responsible citizens; both the art-makers who create the media that inundates us and the community that surrounds their arts and media college. Bringing attention to contemporary Haitian art definitely draws focus to the conundrum modern society draws between poverty and privilege. ●

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