

Reinterpreting slavery

Two centuries on from the abolition of the slave trade, a group of Haitian artists have been commissioned to create a sculpture that examines its legacy. They talk about their struggle to get the work built among a culture of local violence and international condescension.

Grand Rue is a broad, anarchic and colour-saturated avenue that cuts a north/south swathe through downtown Port-au-Prince, from La Saline to La Cimetière. At the southern end of Grand Rue, among the labyrinthine warren of back streets that run behind the avenue, is an area that has traditionally produced small handicrafts for the ever-diminishing tourism market. This close-knit community is hemmed in on all sides by an automobile repair district, which serves as both graveyard and salvation for the city's increasingly decrepit cars.

Celeur, Eugène and Guyodo all grew up in this atmosphere of junkyard make-do, survivalist recycling and artistic endeavour. Their powerful sculptural collages of engine manifolds, TVs, hubcaps, skulls and discarded lumber have transformed the detritus of a failing economy into radical, morbid and phallic sculptures, mainly inspired by Gede, the Vodou spirit of the cemetery, the guardian of the dead and the master of the phallus. Their often monumental works reference their shared African cultural heritage, the practice of Vodou and a dystopian sci-fi view of the future. Their use of rejected objects is driven by economic necessity combined with creative vision and cultural continuity.

Andre Eugène is the progenitor of the Grand Rue movement. Born in the late 50s, two years into the brutal 14-year regime of Papa Doc Duvalier, he started out as a house builder, but influenced by the creative energy of his neighbourhood he started to learn traditional wood sculpting.

"There was always something happening in our neighbourhood. The carnival band, Pep Samis, practising. There were many sculptors at work and there was Vodou all around. This made me begin the life of an artist," explains Eugène. His work became increasingly influenced by contemporary



Work using found skulls from the local cemetery by Jean Hérald Celeur

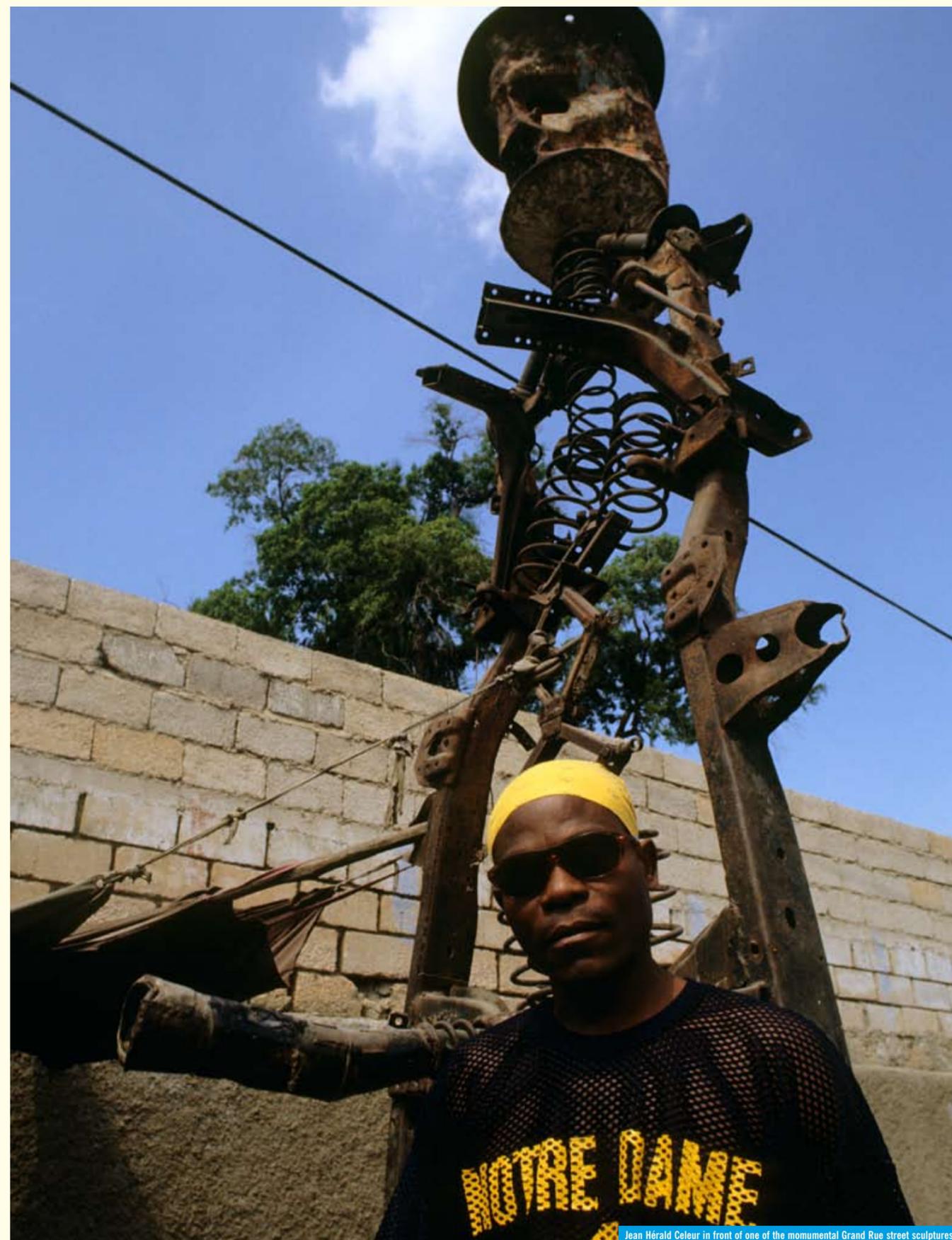
Haitian artists such as Nasson, who created wood and nail sculptures reminiscent of fetishes found in anthropological museums. Eugène fused the fetish *sauvage* with an MTV generation vision. Much of his work is figurative using human skulls for heads and is imbued with a bold sense of irony, sexuality and humour. His piece *Section Chief*, referencing the brutal rural henchmen that served Papa Doc, wears a pink dress split by a three-foot long dick made out of metal that curves up to the heavens.

Jean Hérald Celeur was born in the same neighbourhood in the mid-60s. Trained as a sculptor by his brother, he was originally involved in the more traditional touristic end of the market but gradually his work, under the influence of Eugène, slipped to the dark side. "Since an early age I was attracted

to the dream of becoming a sculptor. At first, my work was very realistic, but over time it grew more subjective. Where I am now leaves me more space to be imaginative."

His most powerful piece to date is part of the permanent collection of the Frost Art Museum at Florida International University. The untitled work evokes the Horsemen of the Apocalypse, skulls crowning skeletal equine contraptions made from motorbike chassis, the central figure thrusting a massive thick wooden phallus. The piece bristles with menace, anger and a dark sexuality that evokes the triple tragedies of Aids, political oppression and poverty. "My work has social and intellectual aspects, and represents the people's demands for change. I live in the reality that deals with poverty everyday."

Images courtesy of Christian Aho/Leah Gordon



Jean Hérald Celeur in front of one of the monumental Grand Rue street sculptures



Scrapheap challenge: Guyodo among his materials



Child's play: (above) local youths playing near the Grand Rue atelier and (below) working with Jean Hérald Celeur on the Freedom Sculpture



“There is a huge stigma about artists from our country. I’m fighting this, whenever I work”

Guyodo was born in the Grand Rue district in the early 70s. He’s the bad boy of the trio, rarely smiling and modelling a self-styled Gede-gangster look with a collection of huge black shades that would put Diddy to shame. He has created some of the most monumental works of the trio, gargantuan dense sculptures using the underchassis’ of derelict vehicles. His smaller pieces use silver paint and colour with a fresh flamboyance that is uncultivated in the other artists’ work.

“Before I started as a sculptor I was a footballer. Celeur pushed me into becoming an artist and now it’s my life. You have to have strength and maturity to be an artist in Haiti. It’s really difficult being an artist in the Third World; you don’t get recognised in your own country. Unfortunately, it is only people from far away who are take interest in our work.”

This year is the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. The Liverpool Maritime Museum is opening a new gallery to commemorate the event. The museum, along with the charity Christian Aid, decided to mark the occasion by commissioning an arts project in Haiti, the culmination of which is a collaborative work called the Freedom Sculpture.

In an heightened atmosphere of continuing gangland violence, the Grand Rue artists, Celeur, Eugène and Guyodo alongside Mario Benjamin, ran workshops for, and collaborated with, kids from Carrefour Feuilles, an area in the Haitian capital rife with gangs and gun crime. The workshops gave the local youths a chance to glimpse a potential future beyond guns and violence. Ronald Cadet, one of the young people who collaborated with the artists, felt that working with the artists made him want to show people that there was strength in being united. “When people have nothing to do, they are prone to violence.” Nathalie Fanfan, 23, another collaborator said “It was a huge new experience. I’m used to seeing sculptures made out of wood and clay. It was a novel thing to use big iron parts. My vision after this project is to keep on learning so that I can become an important citizen who can contribute something in Haiti.”

Mario Benjamin, an internationally renowned Haitian artist, who has represented the country at Biennales in Venice, São Paulo and Johannesburg, regularly collaborates with the Grand Rue artists. He is from the other side of the tracks, the middle-class area up in the hills overlooking the increasingly shambolic Port-au-Prince. A symbiotic relationship has evolved, as the artists inspire and excite him, and he helps to expose them to a wider international scene. But class differences apart, Mario is more than aware of the difficulties Haitian artists face trying to get exposure and interest from the international art world.

“When you’re not white, people have preconceived ideas about your culture. There is



Junkyard dog: Eugène, with trademark shades, in his studio

a huge stigma about artists from our country,” says Mario. “They are supposedly colourful, naive artists. I’m fighting this, whenever I work, to take a position against what they expect from an artist from the third world.” As Tom Wolfe wrote in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamlined Baby* ‘... those poor bastards in Haiti, the artists, who got too much, too soon, from the folk-doters on the subject of primitive genius, so they’re all down there at this moment carving African masks out of mahogany - and what I mean is, they never had an African mask in Haiti before...’

Mario is uncomfortable about the almost lascivious Western interest in the social context of the artists’ work. Sometimes, more attention is paid to the slum area in which they work than the actual art itself. He understands that there is a struggle for most world artists to be taken seriously outside of their bidonville milieu, and he wants people to see their work within a global art discourse rather than “Care Bear-ise” them and their forlorn struggle to produce art from the sewer. There still remains a deep irony to the title of the new work – “Freedom Sculpture” – in comparison to the lives of the Grand Rue artists. When they held an exhibition in Miami in 2004, the US refused to grant them visas to attend the opening.

The Americans feared they would stay in Miami illegally after the show. So, Mario had to represent their work for them.

“Freedom Sculpture” is a figurative work, depicting a mass of bodies their arms akimbo. The shape of the work is remarkable, a truncated metal wedge of faces, bodies and hands, a kind of container ship of fools. The work was painted with aluminium paint which was then burnt off with blow torches, giving it a burnished uniformity which distinguishes it from traditional recycled assemblage works.

Celeur hopes the project will help to counter the negative perceptions of Haiti. “If we can represent Haiti in Liverpool we hope to change the perception of Haiti in the eyes of the British. Through the images of poverty or violence we can represent something positive, because the negative image of Haiti is one of the things that is bringing this country down even further.” Their work is transformative on many different allegorical levels, the transformation of wreckage to art, of disunity to harmony and of three young men, with no formal arts training, to the new heirs of a radical and challenging arts practice that has reached down through both modernist and post-modern arts practice.

Breaking the chains

Why Haiti is so important in the abolition of slavery.

In the 18th century, Saint-Dominique, as Haiti was then known, was a hugely lucrative colony for the French, who exploited slaves brought over from Africa to cut sugar cane. But in 1791, the slaves organised a revolt. Unable to quash the uprising, the French abolished slavery in all its territories. Napoleon had other ideas and sent troops to the Caribbean in 1802 to re-establish slavery. The former slaves defeated the French army, and Haiti became the first black republic in 1804. This event gave a massive boost to the abolitionist movement in the UK and Parliament abolished the slave trade on March 25, 1807. Today, many international development charities argue that a new form of economic enslavement still exists and Haiti is a stark example. Unfair global trade rules make it impossible for local farmers to compete with imported goods. You can help change this by taking campaigning action on www.pressureworks.org www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/maritime To see a video of the sculpture go to www.christianaid.org.uk