

The Waters of Ancestral Time: the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié

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Abstract

Water has been a common theme in Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié's work since the beginning of his artistic career. Through the connection to memory and identity, this element signifies the heart of culture and tradition of the African Diaspora. It is representative of West African spiritual values expressed through the religion of Vodou, as it is the space connecting the realms of the living and the spiritual. This paper will analyze the meaning and importance of this element to the history of displaced West Africans who came to the Americas through migrations of the slave trade. Through a close examination of water in select pieces from Duval-Carrié's bodies of work, entitled "Divine Revolutions" and "Imagined Landscapes," the unification of a diasporic identity and a strong bond to ancestry is created forming a unique cultural identity. This imagery will be examined through the lens of Vodou spirituality and traditions, and compared to contemporary artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons, who cultivates a similar visual dialogue of life in the Caribbean. Ancestral memory and identity become key roles in this portrayal of aquatic imagery and help to shed light on the cosmology and conceptualization of contemporary Caribbean life.

1. Introduction

The practice of *Vodou* is a spiritual set of beliefs exercised by thousands of devotees in the United States. Haiti tends to be seen as the main gateway of this West African practice into the New World, and remains immersed in the traditions of it today. Many contemporary artists of West African heritage have attempted to embrace their roots via the exploration of this ancient and evolving practice, one being the Haitian born artist Edouard Duval-Carrié. The legacy of this *Vodou* culture on Duval-Carrié's upbringing has remained relevant to his entire body of work; he uses the language of this practice to explore the cultural identity that has formed through the assimilation of West African beliefs into Haiti. At the heart of the *Vodou* belief system is the recurrent motif of water as a map of the life cycle. Through Duval-Carrié's works, it is apparent that water is the heart of Haitian culture and tradition. It represents not only the *Vodou* spirituality, but also the experience of migration that Duval-Carrié undergoes in his personal travel from Haiti to the United States. Water also serves as a motif regarding memory and history that is so vital to the work of Duval-Carrié and the exploration of Haitian life. Through the influences of Duval-Carrié's immersion in Haitian history and politics, he has developed a unique genre of art depicting the struggles of his homeland amidst the beauty of it through iconography representative of life, death and the solid spiritual bond connecting generations of the African Diaspora. This paper will analyze the spiritual nature of water and how it forms a kind of communal unification of an African Diasporic identity through the relationship of displaced people to their homeland and ancestral roots. Evidence of this can be found through color palette, subject matter, and visual metaphors of Duval-Carrié's paintings, particularly through his more recent shows entitled *Devine Revolution* (2004) and *Imagined Landscapes* (2014), both of which encapsulate ancient *Vodou* traditions. It can also be found through visual comparisons to other African Diaspora artists such as María Magdalena Campos-Pons, and the overall cosmology of the West Africans and their descendants, which provides insight into the conceptualization of their environment.

2. Haitian History and Duval-Carrié's Migration: The Story Behind the Art

In the United States today, Haiti is generally seen as a country of great problems. It is presented in the media as poor and suffering from extreme natural disaster and frequent political strife. Education is not widely available. Problems in Haiti have been present since the very beginning of its written history, when Christopher Columbus set foot on the land of Hispaniola (consisting of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in the fifteenth century, claiming the lands for Spain and opening the Americas to colonization. In 1697, Spain ceded the land to France on account of its terrain, which seemed too harsh for cultivation or mining.¹ The occupation of these colonizers led to the displacement of millions of Africans who were brought to the Americas as slaves. It is this migration of people, along with the later movement of Haitians into the United States, which Duval-Carrié frequently depicts.

Harsh treatment and fatalities of the African slaves over time eventually led to the 1791 Haitian slave revolt, which consisted of roughly five hundred thousand slaves. The plans for the revolt were created at a secret *Vodou* ceremony, hidden from the eyes of white masters.² This became the first successful slave revolt of the New World, yet it led to more years of war. The Spanish and French fought over the land of Haiti, which by then had become known as the most profitable slave colony in the world.³ Toussaint L'Ouverture, an African slave, did not participate in the 1791 revolt yet he later distinguished himself as one of the most prominent Africans of his time due to his involvement in the upcoming Haitian Revolution (1803). He fought with Spain, in the attempts to free his nation of slavery, and gained iconic recognition for his efforts to demolish slavery in the area. In 1804 independence was declared for Haiti, the first black Republic in the Americas. The events leading up to the revolution remains the basis for much of Duval-Carrié's work, which celebrates the determination and strength of his homeland, along with cultural manifestations of Haitian life. The migrations frequently represented in his work commemorate the resilience of his homeland, shedding a positive light on the harsh trials overcome by the nation. His art presents the recurrence of several motifs that signify the duality of life and death, notably through the incorporation of bodies of water and the physical and spiritual state of the *Vodou* spirits.

3. Artist Background

Duval-Carrié traditionally paints with oil, but does not limit himself to any medium, as he is also a sculptor and works with various other media. While Haiti has become the focal point of all of Duval-Carrié's works, he not only explores the evolving history and tradition of it, but also builds upon the narrative of migrations to include suggestions of his own personal autobiography. Duval-Carrié is familiar with the story of Haitian life, as he was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 1954. In his late childhood years, the Duval-Carrié family moved to Puerto Rico seeking refuge from the Duvalier regime (1957-71), which resulted in the deaths of thirty thousand Haitians along with the exile of many more. He later studied art in Montreal and then in Paris at the Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Among these places, Duval-Carrié also traveled to Benin in West Africa, which is known as the ancestral home of the *Vodou* deities he depicts.

He not only studied, but was born into the culture of *Vodou*, which originated with the people of the African Diaspora and was spread to the United States via the slave trade and colonization. The religion has morphed over time as the old belief system met the influences of Haiti's own French-based Creole culture and Western religion to form a unique variation of spiritual expressionism. Over time, the African pantheon of *lwa* acquired the visual representation of Catholic imagery and applied it to the various deities through altars and ceremonies. Many scholars will argue that *Vodouisants* acquired these representations in order to disguise their rituals with the face of Western religion, as a means of hiding their own African based beliefs. However, novelist Zora Neale Hurston argues that this is not an accurate depiction of their intentions, but that they have used lithographs of the saints because they wish for a visual representation of the invisible ones, and yet no Haitian artist of that time had given an exact interpretation of the concept of the *lwa*.⁴ Therefore, these depictions were used as more of an approximation to help connect to the spirits in a more physically accessible manner.

The legacy of *Vodou*, along with the catalyst of Hollywood film, has formed a stigmatized persona of Haitian life as one of magic and mysticism. While this preconceived notion is not accurate, Duval-Carrié does seem to portray elements of mysticism throughout his work. His work is reminiscent of the spiritual divinity dispersed throughout Haiti's morphing culture, but also related to the trials that it has faced over time. *Vodou* plays an important role in his body of work, which focuses largely on the migration of the spirits, or *lwas*, from West Africa to be with their people in the New World. Elements of life and death are strewn throughout his work using symbolism relevant to the *Vodou* practice, and alluding to the death of the West African peoples along with the birth of a new culture in a

regenerative cycle of life. This circle of life also connects the people of the living realm with those of the spiritual world, creating a strong relationship between worlds. The melding together of West African, Caribbean and French cultural influences have helped to form his unique visual dialogue of Haitian past and present. Duval-Carrié not only uses the influence of *Vodou* to explore Haitian history but also to paint a picture of Haiti as a strong and resilient country, worthy of sharing its story.

The combination of Duval-Carrié's *Vodou* infused ancestral background and interests in the revolution of Haiti as the first black republic have formed a rich body of work that deals with the history of revolution on the island. His focus for his body of works regarding migrations relate to the tremulous history of the African slave trade to the Americas. The *Migration Trilogy* triptych (2004) (Fig. 1) is a set of images that tell a more contemporary version of the journey from Africa to the New World. It seems to bear connection to the deep wounds that have been left on Haiti as an effect of the takeover and the treacherous use of the Middle Passage as a roadway for Africans in bondage headed to new lands. This piece is part of his body of work entitled *Divine Revolution*: a series of paintings that reflect back on the events of the Haitian revolution of 1803 in particular, and speak to black empowerment in the Americas. In 2004, he was asked by President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to curate a show for the bicentennial celebration of Haitian independence. He did so, portraying images of Haitian past that, "are testimony to its inner strength and ability to transcend seemingly impossible challenges."⁵ The festival unfortunately turned into a violent political uproar, with angry Haitians burning artwork and other cultural artifacts, including some of Duval-Carrié's works. The violence was due to the removal of democratically elected President Aristide, along with unrest from frequent flooding in the area. Most of the destroyed pieces have been remade; however the event seems to serve as a metaphor for Haitian life. It is a place worthy of pride and celebration, yet remains in frequent turmoil. This is the overarching theme that is portrayed in the works of Duval-Carrié.

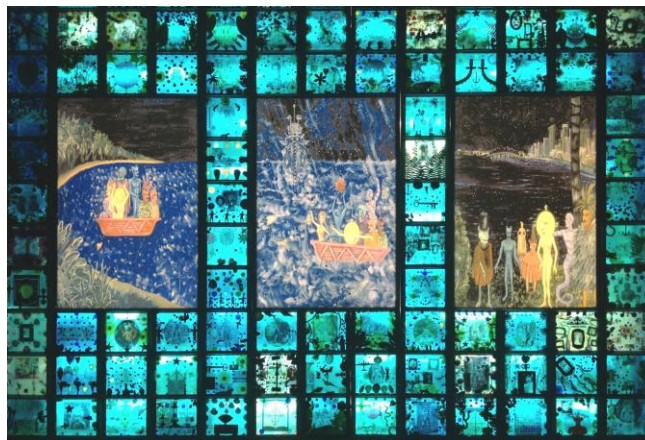


Figure 1, Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Indigo Room-Is Memory Water Soluble (Migrations Triptych)*, 2004, oil on canvas with mixed media frame, 150 x 150 cm (each separate panel of the triptych)

<http://www.caribeartsfest.com/the-artist/>

Duval-Carrié's triptych is an imaginative surreal depiction of this *lwa* journey to Duval-Carrié's current residence in Miami, Florida in a neighborhood called "Little Haiti." The neighborhood was coined with this nickname due to the large amounts of Haitian immigrants that fled to the area throughout the twentieth century, and was originally a very poor locale that has since prospered. In recent decades, the area has evolved into a hub for contemporary art.⁶ He moved to this area in the 90s, seeing as it was the only place outside of his homeland that bore a direct connection to it. To Duval-Carrié, place seems to bridge the gap between his own life and the relationship that connects him to his ancestry.

On speaking of Haiti, Duval-Carrié states:

My spirit is there! My whole family is there, so I don't think anything could cut my links with Haiti. I came to Miami to be closer. The whole dialect of being from Haiti doesn't escape me: it's a complicated country, a country with an enormous amount of problems, and these days it's living through a drama that could almost be called biblical. So it's a country that really needs all its children and everything it can find in terms of support. But I feel like I can serve better from elsewhere in the region...⁷

This area, along with Haiti itself, became prime areas of interest to Duval-Carrié through his entire body of work concerning migrations of the African people and their belief systems. Many practitioners and observers of Haitian *Vodou* believe that the spirits will always go wherever the people of Haiti go, a theory which Duval-Carrié appears to embrace as his paintings depict the traveling of the spirits through the realm of the living, engaging equally in the pain of the past.⁸

In his *Migrations Triptych*, the *lwa* are escaping the "legacy of slavery and its emancipation," leaving behind their previous homeland because of events in Haiti that have created turmoil.⁹ *Lwa* travel like the West Africans of the Diaspora, taking physical human form, with similar feelings of anxiety for this journey to a new place. Duval-Carrié is a modern painter of Haiti in that he has chosen to depict these spiritual deities as personified beings. In *Vodou* tradition, the images with a representative face of the *lwa* are predominately borrowed Catholic saint imagery. These cosmic forces are sharing in the experience of the West African people that were in cognition of the *Vodou* spirituality. The idea that the piece is a triptych alludes to the nature of Western spirituality in itself. It not only is a visual timeline, but connects to the traditions of Catholicism where the number three relates to the Holy Trinity. The reflection of the use of this number in Duval-Carrié's work suggests a Christian influence on his otherwise Haitian inspired works.

The spiritual forces on board the ship are a selection of deities from the *Vodou* pantheon, creating a kind of advance party for the rest of the spirits who have not yet arrived (Fig. 2). *Danbala* the snake god is one of the members on board, depicted with a pale blue serpent or mermaid-like tail, and covered in red decorative patterning. Also present is the golden *Ayida Wedo*, who is the *lwa* of fertility, rainbows, snakes, water, wind and fire. Her head appears to have exploded into a radiant halo of sorts, which is adorned with characters resembling Chinese script. *Ezili Freda* is the goddess of love, beauty, flowers, luxury, jewelry, and dancing. The manner in which she is depicted bears resemblance to Brazilian singer and dancer Carmen Miranda; she is pictured in a long and shiny golden skirt with a headpiece usually made of fruit. This is one example of how Duval-Carrié uses the spirituality of this religion, morphing it to fit more contemporary stylization. Also among these spirits are two representations of *Gede*, the deity of death which is in control of the cemeteries. *Gede* is a dark force present among the other passengers of the ship, depicted in skeletal form. He is represented twice; once in sickly green demeanor which adds to the image of infection and death within the current situation of escape. The other, a skeleton, appears to be dressed for Carnival in the costume of dunce cap and cape, or possibly he is being depicted as a witch or sorcerer. Here even the lord of death has to make his escape to Miami, following in the journey of artist Duval-Carrié and other Haitians who fled to Florida. *Gede*, "whose eyes can see nothing and everything at the same time" is often a reminder of the fragility of human life, as explored in Duval-Carrié's migration based works relating to the Middle Passage.¹⁰ Because of the omnipresence of death regarding the Haitian history of slavery, *Gede* remain particularly relevant to Duval-Carrié's body of art. It is a spiritual clan, comprised of at least thirty entities, which are guardians over all things related to death. At the head of this family lies one of the most prevalent spirits in *Vodou*, *Baron Samedi* (or *Bawon Samdi*). He is the sanctified lord of the cemeteries and the governor of the dead. The common visual attribute associated with this *lwa* is a skeletal body wearing a black top hat and suit and adorned in the colors of black, white and purple. He wears sunglasses that usually only contain one lens, which many devotees of the religion believe is representative of having one eye watching over the land of the living and one eye in the land of the dead. Other symbols commonly associated with him are the coffin, gravestones, shovels, phalluses and the Latin cross.



Figure 2, Edouard Duval-Carrié, *The Landing* (3rd panel from *Migrations triptych*), 1997, oil on canvas, 150 cm x 150 cm, image scanned from *Divine Revolution* by Cosentino.

The role of *Gede* is of particular interest to the art of Duval-Carrié, as he is portraying a culture devoted to the legacy of the *Gede*. Those who practice the religion of *Vodou* are dedicated to pleasing these *lwa* in particular, because of their ability to seize life. Avant-garde experimental filmmaker Maya Deren (1917-61) studied dance and ritual of *Vodou* ceremonies, becoming very close with the practitioners of the religion in which she filmed. Once engulfing herself in this culture and learning about the *lwa* through the Vodouisants, she described the *Gede* as such:

This is the *lwa* who, repository of all the knowledge of the dead, is wise beyond all the others. And if the dead enter the depths by the passage of which *Gede* is guardian, the *lwa* and the life forces emerge from that same depth by the same road. Hence he is the lord of life as well as of Death.... He is the cosmic corpse which informs man of life. The cross is his symbol, for he is the axis both of the physical cycle of generation and the metaphysical cycle of resurrection. He is the beginning and the end.¹¹

She refers to these *lwa* as both the tomb and the womb of the world because they are not only representative of death, but of the entire circle of life.¹² This regenerative circle is one of great importance through the telling of Haitian past and present. It is this circle of life and the relationship that it creates that is at the heart of the Haitian story. Duval-Carrié's work has always revolved around Haitian inspired life and events, the most prominent motif being of oceans. He began incorporating this imagery into his work from a young age, which makes sense when observing the omnipresence of water around his hometown and the effects it would have had on his memory. The water depicted throughout this *Migration Triptych* is reminiscent of a journey in itself, as it seems to have a soul of its own. It begins uneasy yet steady, changing in the second panel to a turbulent sea of fury in the midst of an armed coast guard ship. It seems to represent the agitation of the *lwa* as they are being pursued by violent forces. The sea is a personified force, capable of protection and reminiscent of the power of the gods in which it transports to safety. The final panel of the piece encapsulates the feeling of peace and serenity through the depiction of calm, quiet water in a magical paradise of sorts. Light is projected through the darkness and resonates in the portrayal of *pwen*, which are points of power, energy and heat as believed by the West African people.¹³ It is often represented by means of star-like dots strewn across the artworks. This suggests a strong presence of divinity in the air surrounding these powerful *lwa*.

4. Water/ the Crossroads

The circle of life lies at the heart of Haitian spirituality. The crossroad between worlds, as portrayed in this triptych, is visually speaking of a body of water. Water is a symbol of utmost significance to the West African people and their descendants, in terms of spirituality. Water is the physical road between the land masses of Africa and Haiti, and of Haiti and the U.S. However, it is also representative of the line between the realms of the living and the dead, as can be seen in West African cosmograms (Fig. 3). These are visual maps of the circle of life, as believed by many descendants of West African tradition. The symbol of the crossroads can be shown through a diagram that is representative of the *Vodou* belief system (Fig. 3). It is in the shape of a Greek cross in which the horizontal line represents "the profane world of the living and the vertical line the medium of communication with the sacred

abyss” according to Scholar Leslie Desmangles.¹⁴ The outer circumference shows four small circles, representative of the moments of the sun or the phases of human life. The inner circle at the heart of the diagram represents the movement of water throughout the land of the living and the dead, as it is the divider between worlds. This particular diagram is derived from the Bakongo people, who make up the largest ethnic group in the Republic of Congo in Africa; however, the representations of cosmograms vary little in belief throughout West African tribes. Communication with the spirits is of utmost importance to *Vodouisants*, which explains why Duval-Carrié would choose to represent these motifs of water as the crossroads in his depictions of the Haitian story, as well as the continuation of migrations to Miami. This value placed on the element of water is in stark contrast to the general Western belief that indicates the celestial terrain as the highest level of spirituality. Haitian artist and *Vodouisant* Andre Pierre stated that one should “believe in the terrestrial. Do not have faith in the celestial. It is the terrestrial which judges man. Not the celestial. Do not exaggerate the celestial. Live well on the terrestrial.”¹⁵



Figure 3, Bakongo Cosmogram, <http://www.tomgidwitz.com/main/id273.htm>

Terrestrial imagery is recycled over and over in the works of Duval-Carrié, signifying an important relationship between these *Vodou* deities, Haitian experiences and the afterlife. This imagery resides fervently with the use of bodies of water, which are the primary sources of life on the terrestrial. Water has been used as a representation for rebirth in other religions such as baptism and the cleansing of sin, or the use of holy water in Catholicism. It resonates fervently as well in connection to the practices of *Vodou*, however its spiritual connotation is of more ancient origin than Christianity.

In the water realm lays the land of *Ginen*, mythological homeland of the African Diaspora and the place that they shall all return to upon death. Anthropologist Kim Huggens states that “it must be remembered that ‘Africa’ is not only the one from which the slaves were taken, but also scientifically speaking the home and origin of the bloodlines of every living human.”¹⁶ It is therefore a passage into life in itself, while also an awaiting grave. The installation of the *Migration Triptych* piece seems to relate heavily to the presence of *Ginen* at the bottom of the ocean floor. Here, the three panels are accompanied by a border of underwater imagery, each square laden with symbolism. The frame was assembled with the help of high school students of Miami, who collected objects from the area that were brought over via the Haitian movement of people or that represented it (Fig. 4). Each student created one square and dedicated it to a specific *Vodou* tradition, *lwa*, or a particular event of Haitian history in relation to the migrations of people, slave trade or revolution. These physical objects hold a powerful history for those who have ties to Haiti, connecting the residents of Miami with their ancestral past and reigniting the bond between them. The blue luminescent quality of the frame itself gives the appearance that the audience is looking down into a treasure trove at the bottom of the sea floor. It is filled with buried memories of the Haitian story that are now being exposed. The installation encompasses an entire wall, with blue light bouncing off of the surrounding walls and ceiling. Standing inside of this room, one could feel the omnipresence of surrounding water, and the engulfment of it; it is almost as if drowning under the sea and experiencing the land of *Ginen* in a more personal manner. Each individual square, upon examination, seems to tell a story of transcendence into a realm of spiritual ecstasy.

The transparency of light and objects throughout the border seems to relate to the thin line between life and death, along with the soluble nature of memory in regards to the revolutionary past. An antique looking key lays in one square, possibly representing the entrance into the mythological realm below or a foreshadowing of the entrance into the new world they are seeking. It metaphorically evokes General L'Ouverture, who became the key to independence through the revolution of 1803. Anchors hide in shadows, possibly a line of communication between the realms of life and the afterlife. Planes and guns are strewn across the waterways; symbols of revolutionary fights that have taken place on Haitian soils in the fight for independence (Fig. 4). These tiles pay homage to the memory of the lives lost in the struggle for independence and the connection that this brutal past may have to the reoccurring political turmoil in the modern region. They also bear connection to the more modern politics and economics that have caused many Haitians to flee, many of which make up the population of the town Little Haiti.

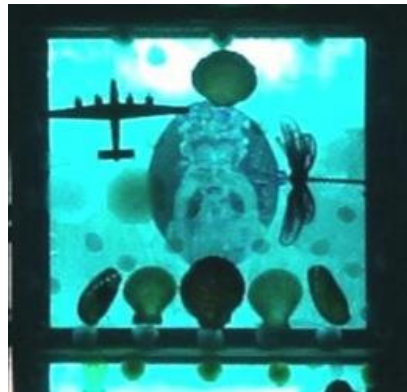


Figure 4, Edouard Duval-Carrié, close up of one cell in the frame of *Indigo Room or is Memory Water Soluble (Migrations Triptych)*, 2004, mixed media, size unknown, <http://www.caribeartsfest.com/the-artist/>

Among these elements of death lay symbolisms of spiritual nature and life. Catholic images of saints and lush greenery all allude to the idea that this underwater experience is in relation to *Ginen*, as it is supposed to be a place of luxury and beauty where all the spirits reside. This imagery is accompanied by a multitude of crucifixes and the representation of the royal palm tree, which is a symbol of liberty as represented in the Haitian coat of arms.¹⁷ This mixture of imagery is proof of the melting pot of influences that have transformed the *Vodou* dialect. These influences include the incorporation of Catholicism which was culturally synthesized by the slaves, the original belief systems of the West African people, and the tremulous events that took place in the creation of the black republic. This conglomeration of symbolisms floating through the sea are a reminder of the reoccurring trials faced by the people of the Haitian Revolution and the power and strength that can be found in the divine nature and spirit of Haitian tradition. However through all of this, the installation provides a visual narrative of water as the heart and soul of the Haitian culture and spirituality.

While Haitian tradition is a conglomeration of African and Western values, some elements of West African belief have remained preserved. Writer Paul Jerome argues that “in African culture everything moves under water contrary to the Western culture in which (everything) goes in the cosmos.”¹⁸ An ancient funeral rite of the African Diaspora includes sending bodies underwater to travel back to the homeland via underwater travel.¹⁹ It is interesting then that these spirits in Duval-Carrié’s triptych are traveling by unconventional means, within the realm of the living, sharing in the hardships of the West African people. The idea that they wish to endure the journey with their people gives a new and communal point of view of the migration story, displacing the general idea that the spirits travel under the line of water. Even more unusual than this need to endure with their children is the overall fact that these *lwa* are depicted all together in one frame to begin with. This seems to be a stylization that is unique to Duval-Carrié, as they are generally not shown united through tradition and art, but are called upon individually. This reflects the familial connection that seems to have always been present through the passage of time in the Diaspora.

The representation of the *lwa* journey above land is again represented through Duval-Carrié’s piece entitled *The Migration of the Gods* (1996) (Fig. 5), which was exhibited in the same show as the *Migration Triptych*. These are the first two panels in a set of four, showing another version of a spiritual journey. The first panel shows a selection of *lwa* bound in chains, reflecting the treatment of the slaves that were brought onto ships in bondage. They survey

their situation, unaware of what misfortune might befall them and their children. A forest spirit leads the group, followed by other *lwa* clad in ravish headdresses including a feathery sombrero and a golden diadem. *Gede* wears a fetish jacket covered in miniature objects such as shells and other various pendants. *Gran Bwa*, represented by a large tree, takes the rear. He is master of the forests and holder of man and gods' deepest secrets. In the second panel of *Migration of the Gods*, he points downwards to the lives lost in the Middle Passage as does his shipmate *Gede*, who is again depicted in skeletal form. They seem to mourn their children, showing the intimate bond between the spiritual and human life forms of West Africa. This bond creates another unique perspective on the values of the *Vodou* belief system and the importance of relationship.

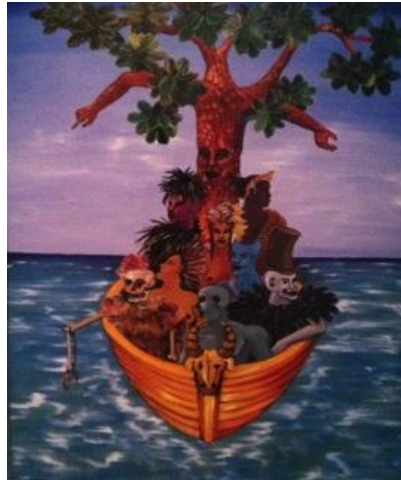


Figure 5, Edouard Duval-Carrié, *Migration of the Gods* from *Migration of the Gods*, 1996, oil on canvas, 241.5 x 165 cm, image scanned from *Divine Revolution* by Cosentino

Edouard Duval-Carrié again depicts the rich underwater experience of *Ginen* in his mythological painting entitled *La Vraie Histoire des Ambaglos*, or *The True History of the Underwater Spirits* (2003) (Fig. 6).²⁰ This piece in particular was created for display in the bottom of a pool, signifying the presence of this divine space occupied by the spirits of the dead in the imaginations of *Vodouisants*. It again relates back to the theme of life and death, as the water is both a grave and a paradise in celebration of the renewal of life. A network of mysticism is shown here, connecting spirits of the underwater realms through a visual paradise of lush greenery and floating lotus flowers. These elements allude to the beauty and lush environment that is believed to inhabit the afterlife. The underwater spirits of the dead, or *Ambaglos*, are essential to the practice of *Vodou*, taking an expansive domain in relation to other *lwa* deities. Because of this, water spirits are frequently included into the works of Duval-Carrié as a way of connecting to his identity and roots. The water deity in *Vodou* is represented by a host of water spirits that go by the name of *Mami Wata* or *Lasyrenn*. Scholar Henry Drewal states that “every child swims in its mother’s womb before taking a first breath of air. In this sense and in others ‘water is life.’”²¹ This seems to accurately depict the devotion of the African people to the oceans surrounding them. *Mami Wata* is often portrayed as a beautiful mermaid like woman with a range of different personalities. She is sometimes described as jealous, generous, seductive and potentially deadly among other things. It is no surprise that she is one of the most revered deities, considering *Vodou* tradition developed along coastal regions where rivers provided fertile life, and was spread to the Americas via transportation across spans of ocean via a ship.



Figure 6, Edouard Duval-Carrié, *La Vraie Histoire des Ambaglos*, 2003, mixed media on wood, 244 x 366 cm, scanned image from *Divine Revolution* by Cosentino.

The color palette generally used by Duval-Carrié involves many intense blues contrasting bright pops of color such as saturated golds and reds. Although it is never constant, color does play a large part in his depictions as can be seen through one exhibition in particular, *Imagined Landscapes* (2014). This show focuses on color through a singular pop of pink or blue protruding from the darkness. It contains a set of images that portray the landscape of Haiti, as seen through the lens of the artist. Duval-Carrié was originally inspired by paintings of earlier artists; in particular he based his collection off of *The Landing of Columbus* (1893) (Fig. 7) by Albert Bierstadt. Bierstadt was using his painting as a marketing technique for the colonization of Haiti. He depicted the land as a kind of new Eden: fertile and lush. Duval-Carrié found that his personal interpretation of Haitian landscape was very different than this colonial perception, and attempted to recreate his vision through this series of work. Duval-Carrié's recreation of this particular painting is entitled *After Bierstadt-The Landing of Columbus* (2013) (Fig. 8) While showing the same event, Duval-Carrié's piece contrasts that of Bierstadt's most notably through the dark and eerie setting which opposed the former bright and day lit scene. Haiti has been transformed through the art from the beautiful fertile Eden to a still beautiful, yet dark place of mystery. The materials used include black and silver glitter on aluminum, which glimmer in the dull lighting of the installation. The sparkling reflections cast off of the work suggest that a supernatural force is present, adding a spiritual component to the former interpretation of Haitian landscape. While Duval-Carrié is playing off of this voyage of Columbus, his own painting of the event includes a different selection of passengers on board. His boat is filled with cartoon characters Minnie Mouse, Mickey Mouse, Batman, Bugs Bunny, Mr. Potato Head, Daffy Duck and Mary Poppins. This alludes to the contemporary nature of the piece and to Duval-Carrié's own autobiographical characterizations of Western pop culture. These characters represent the arrival of Western globalization, foreshadowing the forcing of culture upon new lands and everyone that inhabited them.



Figure 7, Albert Bierstadt, *The Landing of Columbus*, 1893, oil on canvas, 182.9 cm × 307.3 cm, www.wikiart.org/en/albert-bierstadt/the-landing-of-columbus-1893



Figure 8, Edouard Duval-Carrié, *After Bierstadt-The Landing of Columbus*, mixed media on aluminum, 2013, 96 x 144 in, <http://www.unitedstatesartists-2014fellows.org/edouardduvalcarri/>

The imagined divine forces present are consistent throughout the entire series including a piece entitled *The Crystal Explorer* (2013) (Fig. 9). A similar stylization is present with the use of materials and color. A man riding a horse stands still through a body of water, glancing back at the viewer. The subject matter has an eerie nature to it due to the use of color palette, which is reminiscent of Duval-Carrié's recognition of light as essential to life in Latin America. He explains that "the sun is fundamental to the Caribbean, and it's true that color acquires another dimension with the sun. The sun's radiation makes black blacker and red redder, and sometimes everything pales and we are blinded by its brilliance."²² In the case of this particular body of work, it is not this brilliance that reverberates throughout the art, but a void of darkness contrasted with the intensity of sparkling surroundings, evoking a magical presence. Although there is an element of mystery in the piece, it could be related back to the hidden secrets of Haitian past. The dark stories of suppression and death that have taken place on the soils of these landscapes are shown through these works. Duval-Carrié is able to highlight this history while still showing Haiti as a place of breathtaking beauty. Through the darkness also comes the suggestion of a lurking unknown presence amidst the plentiful vegetation, which could possibly reference the *Gede lwa*, since they are the forces associated with life and death.



Figure 9, Edouard Duval-Carrié, *The Crystal Explorer*, mixed media on aluminum, 2013, 96 x 144 in., <http://www.pamm.org/es/exhibitions/edouard-duval-carri%C3%A9-imagined-landscapes>.

The vibrant blue color of the lake contrasts the rest of the piece, creating a focal point on the body of water. Importance is placed on this motif of water, as it is the only colored portion of the piece. It seems to again relate Haiti to a spiritual engulfment that is present through Duval-Carrié's interpretation of his homeland, and to the importance of water to the particular divinity of *Vodou* culture. Scholar and *Vodou* practitioner Kim Huggens argues

that water is not just symbolic of purity, nurture, and life, but also maintains a fiercely destructive form that brings devastation at certain times.²³ In *The Crystal Explorer*, the foreshadowing of destruction seems to be present. This is shown through the overtaking of native life by colonizers, one of whom is represented by the lone horseman who tramples upon the waters in an act of powerful takeover. It connects the physical stream to the more surreal representation of water as a vibrant life force. In this way, the horseman is symbolically stepping into the life of Haitian culture, but the river does not lose its vivacity. The importance placed on water in this piece seems telling of the relationship between the regeneration of life, the spiritual forces hidden throughout Haiti, and the politics involving the discovery of Haiti. Looking at these pieces in *Imagined Landscapes*, there is a theme that seems to represent Duval-Carrié's own interpretation of the saga of the Haitian people. He states:

When I paint...I don't know whether I'm in the realm of the real or the world of the magical. Europeans have a history that is subject to dates and precise facts; in the Caribbean, in Latin America, things happen and there's always an imprecise, magical side to them. We're a continent immersed in magical realism.²⁴

His medium of glitter and tin seem to reflect this vision he has of Haiti, while also reflecting on the gleaming and shining appearance of the colonizers after a successful intrusion on land. It also invokes the feeling of a living presence that could be a reference to the presence of water spirits, which are so vital to the practice of *Vodou*.

5. Water Spirits

"Every child swims in its mother's womb before taking a first breath of air. In this sense and in others 'water is life.'"²⁵ An immense amount of reverence is placed on these fierce water spirits through the art of the African Diaspora because the world cannot exist without water; therefore they are almost always addressed in ceremonial gatherings or worship. While water spirits are prevalent in African cultures, their presence can be traced to a multitude of ancient civilizations across the globe. *Mami Wata*, translated as "Mother Water," is a singular being of multiple incarnations and manifestations.²⁶ The identities of these spiritual beings, however, are as slippery and amorphous as water itself, with only the framework of history and culture to contain them.²⁷ Some religious groups view this categorization of divinity as a particular school of spirits, while others see her as an encompassment of the source of all *Vodou*.

The most notable water spirit in the *Vodou* pantheon is *lwa Lasyrenn*, who has been known to capture souls and drag them beneath the waters down to *Ginen*. Others will describe this occurrence as *Lasyrenn* opening her motherly arms to embrace those who wished to escape their fate to the Americas.²⁸ These are usually descriptions attributed to tragic drowning or suicides that occurred throughout the middle passage; however the varying perspectives accurately depict her dual personality as a compassionate woman capable of destruction. Unlike Christian saints, *Vodou* spirits are not models of the well-lived life; rather they mirror the full range of possibilities, bearing a closer resemblance to true humanity.²⁹ Author Karen McCarthy Brown argues that this characteristic of *Vodou* deities has helped concoct the Western stereotype that it is a religion born of immorality- a true misconception.³⁰ Because of this dual personality of this water *lwa*, she has become a target for many religious groups who personify her as an embodiment of sin and damnation. However, she mirrors an imperfect humanity onto the spiritual realm which seems to only strengthen the bond between *Vodouisants* and their divine pantheon. Her perception as a spirit bearing multiple characteristics also relates to the distinctive qualities of water itself: sometimes a source of nurture and other times a source of devastation.

The earliest imagery depicting African water deities dates back to almost twenty-eight thousand years ago, yet it is just as prevalent in contemporary times through various media.³¹ Cuban born artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons (b. 1959) places a lot of emphasis on the maternal water arts as a way of interpreting her own identity, depicting a similar visual vocabulary as Duval-Carrié. Campos-Pons is of Nigerian descent, yet was born and raised in Cuba. Her show entitled *De Las Dos Aguas* (2007) is a series of photographs and various other media that relate to the journey across two bodies of water: from Africa to Latin America and then to the United States. One of the pieces from this show, entitled *When I Am Not Here/ Estoy Allá* (1994, Fig. 10), encapsulates a large portion of aquatic dialect that is parallel to the concept of Duval-Carrié's art, yet through a more feminist awareness.



Figure 10, María Magdalena Campos-Pons, *When I Am Not Here/ Estoy Allá*, Polaroid Polacolor Pro 20 x 24 photograph, 1994, scanned image from *María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Everything is Separated by Water* by Lisa D. Freiman.

In this photograph Campos-Pons paints her own torso to represent an aquatic scene by contrasting deep rich blues with white reflections. The sea, typically seen as a place inhabited by the divine, is now personified to make up the persona of a spiritual force. The spirit she is representing, *Yemayá*, is a *Santeria* spirit that is similar to *Vodou lwa Lasyrenn*, both of whom govern the seas. While they have much in common, one distinct difference is that *Lasyrenn* is not thought to be maternal as *Yemayá* is.³² She presents a wooden boat in her hands which reflects voyage across her literal and metaphorical body of water; however this boat contrasts Duval-Carrié's depictions in that it remains vacant rather than filled with members of divinity. This boat also differs in that it is anchored in the place of loving hands, rather than sailing through unsteady waters. The maternal nature of her figure becomes accentuated through the imagery of two baby bottles resting atop her own breasts. The milk that is collected below into the bowl is a symbol of the nurture that is given to her people that have been separated through migrations. They signify the fertility and femininity associated with *Santeria lwa Yemayá*, who is the mother of life and owner of all the seas. *Yemayá* is known for her willingness to aid women who suffer the abuses of men, punishing them for acts of infidelity among other things. She is often sought out by women who are having difficulties finding a partner with which to start a family or cannot conceive children. Under her command are mermaids and sirens, both of whom are known to drive men insane through lure and desire. Both Duval-Carrié and Campos-Pons discuss identity through the lens of spirituality and the ancient religions of their ancestors, even though Campos-Pons is expressing the imagery of a system of belief relevant to her ancestry, as well as her concerns as a woman in the contemporary world. This engulfment in the portrayal of the divine connects back to the ancestral relationships that define the spiritual life of many Latin America artists of the Diaspora. Campos-Pons uses this representation of a maternal figure often to convey love, tenderness and protection. Unlike Duval-Carrié, she uses the spiritual narratives of her ancestral beliefs to create imagery that is particularly related to female identity. Motherhood ultimately serves as a symbol of the creation of life, forming a connection between water, divinity and relationships. It is this focus on the continuation of life and the reverence for the spiritual realm, as defined through water, which creates the unification of displaced people through a common element.

6. Conclusion

Through the art of Duval-Carrié and Campos-Pons, a sense of community is constructed using imagery related to spirituality of the African Diaspora. This is depicted through the common visual attribute of water, which represents ancestry and time. These exceptionally strong ancestral relations of the African people are found through faith itself; while water is representative of many aspects of the religion, the religion is also the river flowing through the people of Haiti, bringing nurture and hope. Over time, it has inherited the medium of resistance and continuity to a mass of people who had relatively few allies in Haiti. The slaves were forced to gain strength and a sense of community

through their spirituality; they “could no longer rely on blood ties or tribal appurtenance, but reformulated a sense of family through *Vodou* and their common aspirations for liberty and freedom,” as is stated by scholar Claudine Michel.³³ Many scholars will assess that *Vodou* has been repressed by Western religions, but these attempts have really only strengthened the bond of *Vodouisants* to their pantheon of spirits; the religion actually flourished more than ever under these conditions of oppression, though underground and out of sight. It became “not a system imposed from above, but one which pushes out from below.”³⁴ This has culminated an unbreakable bond between the African Diaspora and their spirituality, regardless of the transformations religions have undergone over the centuries. The imagery of this spiritual nature still resurfaces through various medium and contexts, often reverberating new trials and pains of Latin American in particular. Through the art of Duval-Carrié and Campos-Pons, water is representative of *Ginen*, the cosmograms of life, ritual and practice, a resource of nurture, memory of the slave trade, and an identifying factor for contemporary migrations of Latin America. It has been used to create a continuing conversation of the Diaspora, serving as a vessel for the unification of displaced people. Communal appreciation and spiritual reverence is still used as a way to not only identify with ancestry, but as a way of dealing with contemporary issues of displacement and politics. In this way, a cultural bond is driven by conflict. It’s like a river that runs deep; though it may change course it refuses to dry up.

7. References

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- 10 Statement by Patrick A. Polk. Found in Cosentino, *In Extremis*, 118.
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- 15 Reoccurring statement by Andre Pierre Cosentino between years 1987 and present. Found in Cosentino, *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, 399.
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