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Author: Frédéric Lefrançois

Affiliation: Université des Antilles

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PAINTING PATCHWORK IDENTITIES IN THE CARIBBEAN

AN INTERVIEW WITH STAN MUSQUER



Frédéric Lefrançois: Good morning, Stan. We are currently in your studio in Saint-François, a few days after your very last exhibition, at the Arawak in Gosier. This exhibition left us with the impression of a retrospective. Could you enlighten us on your artistic and identity path in the Caribbean?

Stan Musquer: It's a bit normal to do so, because everything is linked, whether you want it or not. Let's say that I have been developing for about thirty years in Guadeloupe some kind of thematic declinations based on transversal life experiences in different place(s), history(s) and culture(s). The common denominator of these creative circumstances induces the environment, the creation and of course the author's own trajectory. My story, before being Guadeloupean, begins with a birth in Nantes, and this first legitimate reality may explain why my work is far from representing only what it shows.

FL: As you suggest, the freedom of the artist is also the freedom of the work and of the audience that receives it. I recently read an interview in which you talked about the concept of free figuration. What is the "necessity" for an artist with an eclectic background to link up with a movement like *Figuration Libre*?

SM: Well, it was not so much the "movement" *per se* that interested me as the specific, technical shortcut Robert Combas used. I considered this method as a springboard for detachment from the so-called classical painting and evolution towards a more direct, immediate means of expression. That's what it was all about, at the beginning. But in the end,

I realized that it was not at all incompatible with distinction. In fact, it's a false problem. I know that some people will disagree, but a Cy Twombly drawing and Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* boil down to the same thing.

FL: That's a controversial statement, indeed!

SM: The appearance or the surface are different, mind you, of course, but in the process of intention, they both point to a direction: the formulation of an idea through a method. That is what I want to talk about. As Ingres said, the technical processes can be learned... The question of formulating the idea depends on something much less accessible and much more ambitious than that of learning well, obeying well and doing well. It is in this direction that I wanted to advance rather than in that of learning the technical processes of painting.

FL: And when did you become interested in Combas' approach?

SM: The first time I heard about Combas was during an exhibition in Marseille that a classmate had invited me to visit. The gallery's name, I don't remember... It was near the Old Port, maybe in 1988. We entered this space, there was almost no one there, we were the first ones, I was maybe 15 years old when it happened: It looked like a black line was not dry?! I wanted to check, it was so innocent that no one realized it, it left no visible trace. Knowing that acrylic dries in less than an hour, it meant that the artist was not far away... it really made me realize that painting was something important, until the last moment.

We know that Robert Combas in the construction of his painting has been impregnated with the Rock culture and comics. Look at the classics like *Tintin*, *Asterix*, *Lucky Luke*, etc. you can see that each color is surrounded by a black line, like a border if you will, which is perhaps why I dropped this pictorial technique later. It was "necessary" at the beginning because I did not want to think about "how to paint".



Fig. 1: Stan Musquer, *Jiseus Rastakuaris*, 61x46 cm, acrylique on Arches paper, 1992, artist's courtesy, Marrakech, Maroc.

FL: Part of your artistic training took place in France. But between Marseille and Saint-François, there is the Atlantic, a world of uncertainties, which impregnates your first steps in painting, it seems to me ... Without wiping the slate clean on the past, has the artist of today freed himself from his models of before?

SM: At the time of the first paintings, in Guadeloupe, I was more interested in "what" to paint rather than "how" to paint it. What I meant by "necessity" was to find a way to formulate the idea. But look, I don't want to make generalizations, let's take Gauguin, it's the type of rubbing

of the canvas with the color that is this “way of” I'm talking about. He is not the only one to do it of course, but he is probably the only one to do it like that.



Fig. 2: Stan Musquer, The Unknown Soldier's Joy, 40x60cm, acrylic on cotton, 1993, private collection, Toulouse, France.

Take Jean-Michel Basquiat: it is the deconstruction of reality. Take Van Gogh: it is the wind, the air current. Take Matisse, it is the cutting. With Warhol it is the principle of reproduction subjected to the erosion of time, the passage consumer product = star, then star = consumer product. For Opalka, it is the figure, the old age and their progressive disappearance. The work of every artist has a kind of common denominator that belongs to this reflection, very personal, which develops continuously and appears - in principle - more and more clearly with the passing of time. I have never turned away from this capacity for observation. So you can see that Figuration Libre, in the end, like many other things, was a necessary step, but never an end. In any case, an artist is not someone who follows. It is rather someone who crosses! But that's another story...

FL: So, from an academic point of view, your background is rather diversified. I also observe that religion, and a predilection for themes relating to the sacred, recur quite often in your work. Hence my question: is desacralization a guarantee of originality?

SM: To sacralize is to desacralize and to desacralize is to sacralize. I don't see what the Holy Scriptures would have to do with a world that doesn't resemble them. And this is where things are at stake! We are still in something that comes under the good understanding of the form and the content. Victor Hugo had this beautiful formula: "The form is the substance that comes to the surface". When we speak to someone, what he says, what we say, is like a beam that crosses history: it has already happened but in different circumstances due to the place, the time, the culture of the moment, what we could call time... If I wanted to exaggerate, I would say that since prehistoric times, man has not changed, what has changed is the nature of his attributes, whether they are aesthetic, digital, dependent on the economic and social context, the standard of living, the look of the other, the look of oneself according to these different factors, etc. But I would say that the first instinct, the initial instinct is quite there, as in the origin.

FL: Is it necessary to desacralize in order to be original? I am referring to your series of paintings entitled Adam and Eve, which are obviously very influenced by Lucas Cranach...

SM: The creative context of the many black, non-Western Adam & Eve paintings, of which the Trinity triptych is a part, can be linked to a set of events related to a continually displaced

childhood that directly impacted the evolution of my painting, which I often refer to as "intercessional painting". But to answer your question, I would say that there is something dangerous in considering that desacralization would be a guarantee of originality. The risk, for today's artist in particular, is to fall into the good tone of having a battle to fight... Some may think that desacralization is some kind of artistic fashionable thing, that it's selling. What does it mean? It's easy to desacralize: you take something and you take away what's sacred about it and finally... you realize that it's much harder than it seems. Why is that? Because everything becomes sacred the moment you start looking at it. It is the quintessential sacredness of everything around us, including ourselves. Even if sometimes it is hidden, altered, distant, damaged, it is there. If you lose your nature, you lose everything, but discovering the nature that is within you is not done by snapping your fingers. So I would say that it is not a question of desecrating to be original, but rather to create or open spaces of understanding in that. It's not about breaking, or violating, but rather showing and that's something that painting is very good at doing.

FL: Okay. I'd like us to come now to the Caribbean influences that run through, or inform your work. Can you say a few words about them?

SM: The question of Caribbean influences is no less fundamental than those of any other place in the world, but of course you have to make choices and I think the Caribbean has more than just a role to play in all of this. I've talked about this a lot, but I'd like to explain it through another example. During my studies at the Fine Arts School, I made a short film with the means at hand, entitled "Contexts". I think it was in 1999. These cinematographic realizations were comparable to the creative processes I was thinking about for painting. It was systematically the implementation of hypotheses that were supposed to elaborate theories of creation, a bit like possible ways of thinking. It was then enough to apply them, like a transfiguration if you like.



Fig. 3: Stan Musquer, *The Real Hang Ten*, 105x169, oil on canvas, 2005. Artist's collection.

FL: Are these composite modes of creation contingent on one's location?

SM: I'm going to try to make it clear why what I'm about to say is relevant to your question. So I'll go back to the short film *Contexts*. For the script, it was about a person at work sitting at a table in a sort of veranda. She pauses and then puts the cap back on her pen and gently puts it on a wooden table. From that moment on, when we see the red pen, I chose to shoot stills (a single image) and to multiply the locations, which are very different, inside and outside, while scrupulously respecting the fact that the pen is always in the center. Projected at a rate of 24 fps, the result is to see this same pen "floating" in different contexts until a new location where we switch back to normal film and the camera comes to focus on a new object present in this new place. This will be renewed until the last object, which is a human subject, itself both centered and displaced by each image until the last place where he opens his jacket, creates the surprise by taking out the initial pen, and the loop is completed. I think I was sometimes like this character, sometimes like this object, within contexts and different influences, which by the way were not only, but also Caribbean.

FL: From an artistic point of view, is the Caribbean a dream, a fantasy or a project?

SM: This question can lead us to understand that the reality of influences is always delicate. As Deleuze said to the students of the FEMIS: "Beware of the dream of the other, because if you are caught in the dream of the other, you are screwed! He was talking about Vincente Minnelli's cinema, of course: these musicals that could make you want to dream of another life, and this is perhaps the danger that Deleuze is talking about! What influences us always has a double positive/negative effect. On the one hand, an influence can enthuse us, on the other

hand, it can send us back to our reality. So the question is how to situate ourselves in relation to our influences? And this is a question that I asked myself a long time ago here in Guadeloupe and that many artists should also ask themselves. It's complex because you can want to do something different from what you like and without realizing it, be in pure copy. On the other hand, you can want to make a copy, and incredibly, be in something completely original.

FL: So the originality would be in the intention.

SM: But then, what does it all mean? That in any case, no one can escape what comes out of the painting. Even the most remarkable or the most mediocre, the most deceptive works can hardly escape this rule. Everything counts for almost everything. So of course, everyone is free to believe that the world was created on the day he was born, but that would not be credible. Nobody is fooled for too long. The depth of the work has almost nothing to do with appearances; it is, among other things, the depth of the degrees of perception that it allows. But when we work, we cannot think about that, it would be too complicated. In fact, these famous and inevitable influences materialize in ways that are difficult to explain. Perhaps they produce intuitions that come into play in the creative process. And this is probably why they should not be ignored. They are continually reformulated according to what we experience, they generate affects. If you allow me to take the example of Basquiat: this brilliant artist did not invent what he painted or drew, it already existed. What he invented was his own way of doing it. In fact, he invented himself through it. The problem is that at a decisive moment in the process, something changed: when a friend sold a Basquiat that he had originally given, he was no longer selling a work of art but a piece of a body. I would say that this is what killed Basquiat, and that is very sad. But let's go back to this idea of finding our "own way" through our influences.

FL: Learning, transcending, paying homage. Is this your ideal of hybrid perfection?

SM: Here is the difficulty and the challenge: even if you don't do anything, you are already in the path of the ones who did nothing before you. An artist once told me: "It's not your job to do that". You don't even have to learn music, you just pick up a guitar and before you know how to play it, you smash it on the floor. You have a sound of course, but even that sound Hendrix thought of before you did. So you can see: everything mixes and blends. What is perhaps reassuring is that this mixture and this confusion create different things because our paths are different and it is advisable to be aware of it, to analyze the content, to take a step back, to distance ourselves. There is a saying: "If you don't want to be natural, you'll just have to be natural". Or, it is in your naturalness that you should explore, not in your pretence. I've always learned more after painting than before. You know, there are few new artists who are still inventing something today. They mostly take stylistic or technical paths, exploit recipes they thought they had analyzed in others, but only the best ones manage to move away from that, to really create.

FL: Is this a reason to forget one's origins, one's peers/fathers?

SM: Watch my words, what I am saying here is not a criticism. As artists, we continually reach the end of something, but who is the author of the overflow? The full one who filled the container or the drop of water that arrived at the end? Who would believe that Édouard Duval-Carrié ignored the work of Frida Kahlo or José Gamarra? That Saincilus Ismael would never have seen a missal, or an illustrated bible, or representations of a virgin and child? That Francis Bacon would not know the painting of Velasquez? You see, you have already detected a part of my own pantheon, not to mention Lucas Cranach and Wilson Bigaud!

To hide from a source or an influence is to risk living next to your own truth. I would say that what counts is less to “do as” than to “do what”. Here in Guadeloupe, I don't feel that artists quote much from those who have influenced them. Is it out of modesty, or vanity, I don't know. Personally I have never hesitated to quote Joël Nankin, Lionel Anicet, Pierre Chadru, Stonko, Edau, Bracy. Did they influence me? I don't know, but they are part of my universe, it's undeniable. Nothing can exist without nothing. The one who ignores it is lying to himself. It is visible in his work and audible in his words. Didn't Lautréamont claim that “He who sings does not pretend that his cavatines are an unknown thing; on the contrary, he praises himself for the fact that the haughty and nasty thoughts of his hero are in all men”?

Paul Valéry said something similar in a book which bears the title *Mélange* – what a happy coincidence – and gives thus something to meditate on:

- *Je comprends mal ce texte...*
- *Laissez, laissez ! Je trouve de belles choses. Il les tire de moi...*
Il m'importe peu de savoir ce que l'Auteur dit. C'est mon erreur qui est Auteur !¹

When we have forgotten what we have seen or what we have been given to see, what will be left of it all? Finally, influence is a nuance.

¹ Paul Valéry, *Mélange*, Montouge, Gallimard, coll. NRF, 1943, p. 160.