



HAL
open science

Beyond Painting or Writing: Frankétienne's Poetic Quest

Jean Jonassaint

► **To cite this version:**

Jean Jonassaint. Beyond Painting or Writing: Frankétienne's Poetic Quest. *Research in African Literatures*, 2004, 35 (2), pp.141-156. hal-04036658

HAL Id: hal-04036658

<https://hal.science/hal-04036658>

Submitted on 3 May 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Beyond Painting or Writing: Frankétienne's Poetic Quest

JEAN JONASSAINT
Duke University

ABSTRACT

Frankétienne is known first and foremost as a writer. It is his paintings, however, that this article examines, for they are the most relevant to understanding the poetics of what Frankétienne calls the *spirale*, and also to explaining how these works—produced in the wake of his literary experiences linked partly to the French *nouveau roman*—enrich and transform his writing with *Loiseau schizophone* (1993) and more radically with *H'Éros-Chimères* (2002). Indeed, this latest book, more than other francophone works, pushed to its furthest limit the integration of image and text into one great whole. Of course, no one has a complete knowledge of Frankétienne's visual production since 1973. Therefore, this first incursion into this universe is mainly focused on some paintings and key moments of this huge artistic work to show its governing principles, which are quite different from those of well-known Haitian artists such as Duffaut, Télémaque, or Basquiat.

Frankétienne apporte une nouvelle facture romanesque non seulement en Haïti mais aussi pour le Tiers-Monde, car il a réussi à faire sortir le roman de l'ornière de la linéarité.

Frankétienne renews the narrative tradition not only in Haiti, but also for the Third World, for he finally succeeded in getting the novel out of the chains of linearity.

HÉDI BOURAOUI IN *DÉRIVES* 53/54 (1986/1987): 89

[. . .] Chevaux de l'avant-jour, *d'évidence c'est une oeuvre au sens le plus fort, d'une ampleur, d'une noblesse, d'une énergie peu communes. Autant le dire, j'ai songé à Pindare, à Claudel, au Lapointe de Pour les âmes—mais la langue de Frankétienne, limpide, directe, ne ressemble à aucune autre.*

[. . .] *Chevaux de l'avant-jour* is obviously a true work of art, of uncommon scale, nobility, and energy. I must admit it reminded me of Pindare, of Claudel, of Lapointe in *Pour les âmes*—but Frankétienne's language is limpid, direct, unequal to any other.

ROBERT MELANÇON IN *LIBERTÉ* 174 (1987): 122

[C]'est en 1975 avec la publication du premier roman en créole haïtien, *Dézafi*, que la littérature créole [. . .] va trouver ses lettres de noblesse. Son auteur s'appelle Frankétienne. C'est la révolution. L'écrit en créole accède d'un coup à ce que la littérature mondiale possédait à l'époque de plus moderne, de plus audacieux et de plus talentueux, à savoir le Nouveau Roman.

[I]t is in 1975, with the publication of the first novel in Haitian Creole, *Dézafi*, that Creole literature found its letters patent of nobility. The author is Frankétienne. It is the revolution. Creole writing suddenly reached the most modern, daring, and talented aspects of world literature at this time—the nouveau roman.”

PATRICK CHAMOISEAU ET RAPHAËL CONFIAnt (*LETTRES CRÉOLES* 173)

Que peut-on représenter face à l'auteur de L'Oiseau schizophone? Cela ne m'étonnerait pas de me réveiller un matin en entendant le nom de Frankétienne venant de rafler le prix Nobel.

What one can be in comparison of the author of *L'Oiseau schizophone*? It would come to me as no surprise to awake one morning discovering that Frankétienne has just won the Nobel Prize.

DANY LAFERRIÈRE (*J'ÉCRIS COMME JE VIS* 71)

[Les Affres d'un défi] *enfin! L'œuvre d'un grand bouilleur de mots.*

At last [*Les affres d'un défi*]—the work of a great distiller of words!

GHISLAIN RIPALTY (*OUTRE L'ATLANTIQUE* 97)

FRANKÉTIENNE IS KNOWN FIRST AND FOREMOST AS A WRITER. SINCE HIS FIRST BOOKS IN 1964, *Au fil du temps* and *La marche*, he has published more than thirty works—poems, novels, plays, and spirals—some of which are among the most remarkable of the francophone space, such as *Ultravocal* (1972), *Dézafi* (1975), *Pèlin-Tèt* (1978), *Kaselezo* (1986), *Adjanoumelezo* (1987), *L'oiseau schizophone* (1993), and *H'Éros-Chimères* (2002). As the critic Bernard Loupias put it in the French weekly magazine *Nouvel Observateur*, when the French edition of *L'oiseau schizophone* appeared in 1998, “he is the greatest Haitian writer.” Indeed, he is the only one with both national and international, as well as popular and academic, audiences, and one of the few living Haitian writers whose exceptional creative force is recognized by colleagues of all leanings, such as the Martinicans Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant; the Haitians Jean-Claude Charles, René Depestre, and Dany Laferrière; the Tunisian-Canadian Hédi Bouraoui; the French-Canadian Robert Melançon; or the French Ghislain

Ripault. He is also, more than any other, a “Haitian writer,” obstinately attached to his country. Yesterday, seismograph of the much too long Duvalierist nightmare, now, interpreter of the never-ending transition toward democracy in which the country is sinking, “each of his great works is deeply rooted in Haitian contemporary history, and each of them, despite Frankétienne’s will to remain primarily an artist, bears witness to a moment of the *national consciousness*,” as I stated in the introduction of *Frankétienne, écrivain haïtien* (5). While he now claims that painting is his livelihood, it was not always the case. For a long time, his work as a teacher and school’s owner-director in Bel-Air (the historical and popular neighborhood in Port-au-Prince where he grew up) was his only livelihood, sustaining his family and his literary and artistic production. Indeed, just as he was generously offering his books to friends and students up to the publication of *Ultravocal*, Frankétienne only began selling his paintings more than ten years after his first oil paintings, in 1987, when he had already painted hundreds of canvases of different sizes.

It is this painting, which critics have virtually ignored for over thirty years, that I will examine here, for it seems to me that it is more relevant than Frankétienne’s texts to understand the poetics or the aesthetics of what he calls the *spirale* (spiral). It is also important to understand how his paintings, produced in the wake of his literary experiences, enrich his writing, and how his interest and involvement in visual arts, which started when he was an adolescent, transforms his writing with *Loiseau schizophone*, and more radically with *H’Éros-Chimères*. However, since *Dézafi*, beyond the typographic complexity that recalls Dos Passos’s *USA* (1930–36) or Butor’s *Mobile* (1962), with their diverse characters and fonts, clearly distinguished this first Haitian-language’s novel from the Caribbean or African corpus, Frankétienne integrated an illustration in his text (281) (see fig. 1). Hence, this page 281 could not be understood without decoding this visual, the drawing of a coffin and the *guédés* cross. This symbolism borrowed from the Vodou tradition is also profane, for it relates to the ritual opening statement of confrontations between Haitian adolescents: “Men krwa manman ou, men krwa papa ou, si ou pa pè vin pile l” ‘Here is the cross of your mother, the cross of your father, if you are not afraid cross it,’ words that recall the last sentence of the page, “Akasan siro! . . .” However, until 1993 this is the unique graphic occurrence in Frankétienne’s work, despite the rectangle on page 137 of *Ultravocal*, in which we read the sign of the Mac Abre’s gambling house:

<p>TÊTE CLAIRE BORLETTE SANS GRATTER TÊTE 50 - 15 - 10</p>

It is interesting to note that this popular symbolic illustration, both sacred and vulgar, is not reproduced in the French version of the novel, *Les affres d’un défi*, which appeared four years later in 1979, as well as in the revised second edition of *Dézafi*, published in France by Vents d’ailleurs in 2002. Nevertheless, I do think that those marginal graphic or visual attempts within those two major texts of the 1970s, *Ultravocal* and *Dézafi*, are determining factors in Frankétienne’s desire to jump to painting, or at least they facilitated his move toward painting, which was first a means of recharging his batteries, the answer to a crisis, as he once explained to me in an unedited interview in 1987¹:

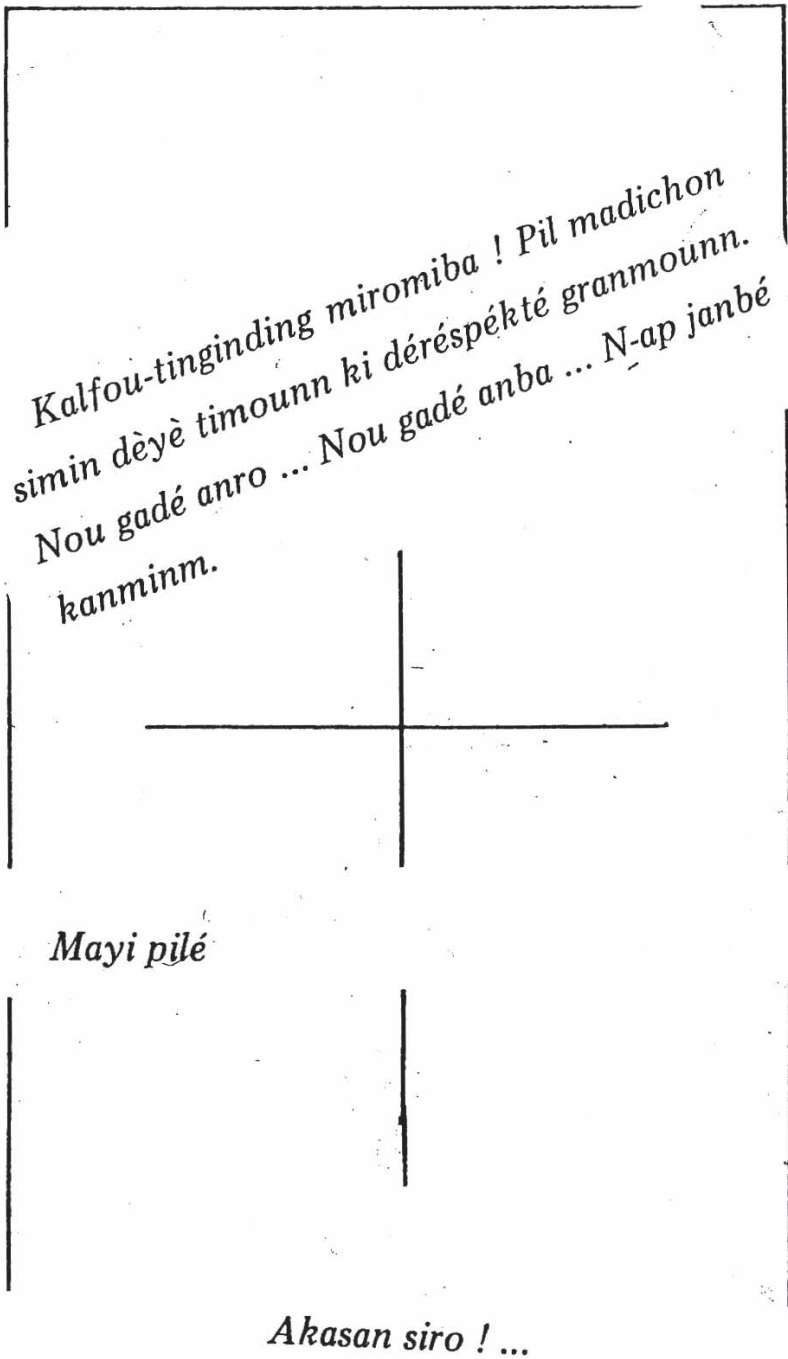


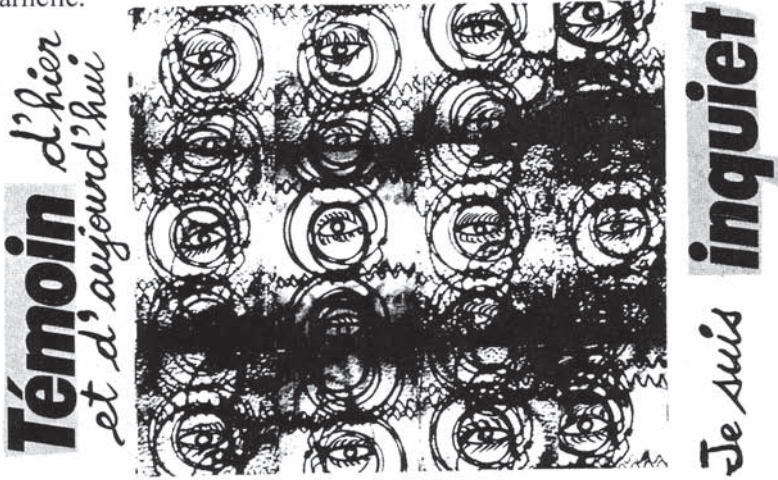
Fig. 1. *Dézafi* (1975): 281. With permission of the artist.

I started painting after *Ultravocal*, when I felt running out of steam. This is the work that probably marked me the most. I was systematically obsessed with writing. I was having to deal with all sorts of problems—existential problems on a national level, as well as more intimate problems with my marriage. I felt like a hunted animal while writing the book. When I decided to write *Ultravocal*, from 1971 to 1972, it was a moment of crisis and I came very close to leaving the country. At the time I was uprooted, went through periods of profound solitude, and writing *Ultravocal* was a therapeutic act. So I felt a real deliverance by the time *Ultravocal* was completed, and I was also exhausted, fortunately not for very long. When I finally resolved to remain in the country, I said to myself: “François Duvalier is dead, I can’t leave the country now.” But we had no idea at the time that Jean-Claude was going to remain in power for over fourteen years. We were full of illusions. And this error of judgment worked in my favor. I was able to readapt myself little by little to this never-ending situation by telling myself, “next week he’ll be gone,” “in six months he’ll be gone.” So I was compelled to create, because the only self-knowledge I have [. . .] is that I am fundamentally a creator. I don’t know if I am or could be anything else. And as I was attracted to painting since childhood, I have always known how to draw, although my paintings do not reveal it [. . .]. To try new directions, and to recharge my batteries, I started painting in 1973, and had my first exhibition in 1974. But I am unable to practice both art forms simultaneously. Instead, there is truly rotation from one to the other.

Of course, no one can claim to have a complete knowledge of Frankétienne’s visual work, not even the artist himself, who admits never to have inventoried or titled—with some exceptions—his paintings, which amount to approximately 1,000 since 1973. Nor has he recorded a list of the buyers disseminated on three continents—America, Europe, and Asia. Therefore, this first incursion into Frankétienne’s visual universe, which can only be fragmentary and incomplete, will initially focus on some paintings I was fortunate enough to see with my own eyes, and some key moments in the genesis of this large body of artistic work.² Hence, I am not interested here in inventorying the features and motifs of this production (a task that would be impossible to carry out today), but rather in understanding its governing principles: experimentation, transformation, multiplication, serialization.

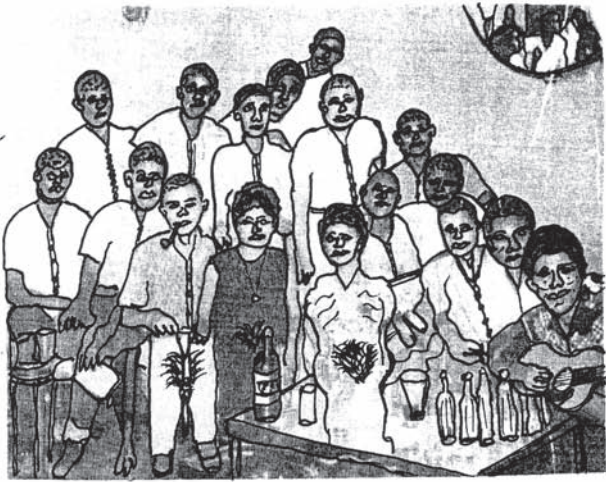
Although it does not appear evident initially, to the point that some even consider all his paintings to look quite alike, the first fundamental principle governing Frankétienne’s artistic work (to which he constantly calls attention in our conversations) is the principle of experimentation: to continuously explore diverse techniques, forms, and materials, thereby forcing the painter to experience a continual apprenticeship. Indeed, from one of his very first public works, *L’HOMME-ARBRE*, his ink portrait of Jacques Roumain illustrating *Sur “Gouverneurs de la rosée”* by Jean-Claude Fignolé (1974), to his self-portrait in 2002 in *H’Éros-Chimères* (241), there is a long process of apprenticeship, and also a shift from a classical form of representation—the drawing—to one of the most contemporary art forms—the copy-art, also known as copier art or xerox art. Furthermore, Frankétienne integrates into his scriptural and visual quest one of the most significant and determining technological developments for contemporary art, the extraordinary upsurge of computer science, which revolutionized the printing press and book manufacturing in particular, thereby making it possible to publish *H’Éros-Chimères*, with the exemplary complicity of his wife, Marie Andrée Étienne, who took care of the typesetting and layout of this impressive book of 350 8½"-x-11" pages (see figs. 2 and 3).

D'une irréalité blancheur, un os brille immobile dans la brisure charnelle.



Le temps craque du dedans sous les moites profondeurs d'un cauchemar envoûtant. *Haïti Littéraire au Bel-Air en 1962 :*

Emile Olivier
 Roland Morisseau
 Anthony Phelps
 René Philoctète
 Margha Philoctète
 Carmenta Morisseau
 Dr Isnard Volcy
 Dr Kedner Baptiste
 Maître Glodomir
 Frankétienne
 Raymond Jm François
 Wodley Henriquez
 Dr M. Orny Opont
 Péan
 Max Kénol
 Fritz Glodomir
 Bernard Wah
 à la guitare
 à la table et les
 bouteilles.



Tant de lézardes et de cassures sous les brûlures du temps.
 Mais l'amour reprend chair hors des scories du désespoir.

Fig. 2. *H'Eros-Chimères* (2002): 323 [Haïti littéraire]. With permission of the artist.

OB-SCÈNE VI

Tonton Laiï, extrêmement contrarié, fulmina d'une juste colère qui culmina en un débordement d'explosions incontrôlables. Fréquente manifestation d'irascibilité qui traduisait son hypersensibilité et sa vulnérabilité. Ses lèvres, ses joues et ses mains tremblaient nerveusement. Quelques minutes après, il se calma, but un demi verre d'eau, alluma un cigare virginien, aspira profondément une bonne bouffée qu'il rejeta aussitôt avec un long sifflement labial. Une projection de fumée odorante et suave. Le nuage brumeux de l'ivresse.

Il éteignit le cigare dans un cendrier en cristal. S'excusa poliment auprès de la petite chabine dorée, qui, elle-même, était aussi contrariée que son père adoptif. Profondément désolée de n'avoir pas pu se rendre à son premier bal, elle surmonta sa déception, étouffa son chagrin et répondit par un welcome accompagné d'un sourire. Un regard de gratitude. Un éclair de tendresse respectueuse.

Le jeune vieillard sexagénaire entra se déshabiller dans son appartement.

La jeune et candide chabine de treize ans traversa un couloir, ouvrit la porte de sa chambre, se dévêtit, enfila une chemise de nuit. Et s'étendit sur le dos, les jambes allongées à moitié sous un drap bleu.

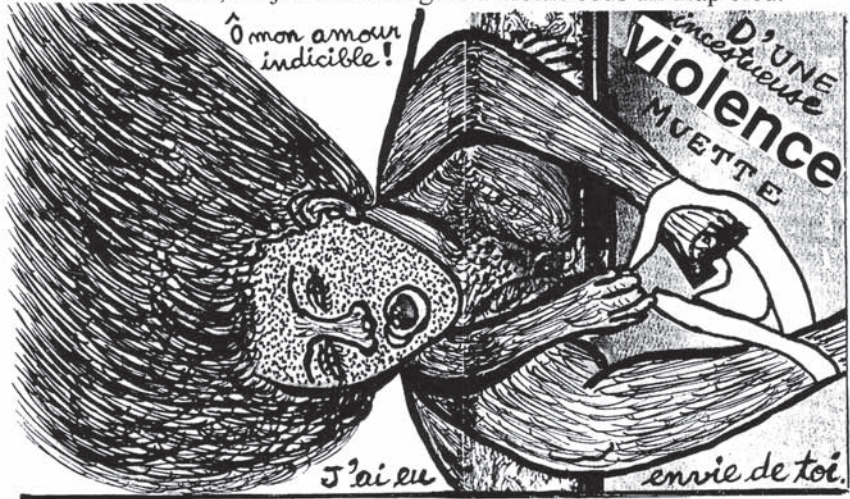


Fig. 3. *H'Eros-Chimères* (2002): 250 [Ob-scène]. With permission of the artist.

This “total work,” also referred to as an “absolute spiral,” is of course an extreme case of experimentation, and is reminiscent of, among other traditions, Mallarmé’s “Un coup de dés” (1897), Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (1918), *Compact* by Maurice Roche (1966), or *Absolument nécessaire* by Joëlle de la Casinière (1973), to cite only French-language literature. However, in Frankétienne’s artistic production one can find other more conventional or common explorations, like the various formats or diverse materials he used—from the large surfaces of the 1980s to the very small formats of the *false multiples* in 1991; from the canvases of the 1970s to the hardboard of the 1990s or paper in 2000; from ink to gypsum through oil paint and the flakes of popular Haitian art (see plates 2–9). This diversity is not only formal but also thematic. Throughout the years, Frankétienne has painted an incredible number of motifs (from the classic portrait of the family trio or nude woman, to the figurative or lyrical abstraction influenced by Georges Mathieu) and tackled a multiplicity of themes (such as the zombification and exodus of Haitians, their struggle and hope, the monstrosity of the figures of power, from reserved eroticism to unbridled or morbid pornography, etc.), as shown in his paintings, collages, or copy-art reproduced with this article. Indeed, apart from his constant black signature, always produced with the same frank and distinct line, all seems to oppose *Untitled* (1974) to *Émergence* (1999), or *Le complot* (1991). The same can be said of the copy-art portrait of the group “Haïti littéraire” in *H’Éros-Chimères* (323) in which Frankétienne, in the style of Max Ernst, lists the members of the famous Haitian group, and the oil painting representing a gallery of skeletal characters occupying its entire height and length in which the contours and structures are redefined by the spectral white of gypsum, resembling the drawings of *guédés’ vèvès*. This *Untitled* of 1981 is quite remarkable in the works of Frankétienne, and when I toured his villa-workshop-art gallery in 2002, he described it to me the following terms:

First, there is this stretched form [in the foreground], which represents flexibility, and at the same time the fragility of the artist’s take-off amidst this phantasmagoria of disconcerting forms, almost fiendish, even satanic like in a nightmare. So the central form which crosses the painting, with its two hands held high, it is the jump of the artist who seeks to transcend the jumble of everyday life. The jumble that we live here, the jumble of life, the jumble that one finds everywhere, the debris, the waste of everyday life. . . . Basically, every artist creates from an aspiration for elsewhere. This elsewhere can be physical, like a space or a woman’s body; but it can also be metaphysical, like a vague or indefinite dream [. . .]. So there is a striking contrast between these skeletal forms, these fantastical faces, these emaciated bodies, on the one hand, and this aspiration toward the dream, the transcendence, and these flakes [covering the bodies] which carry me once again back to the Vodou banners, with their almost artificial, unreal brilliance, which have always fascinated me ever since I was a child.

Despite the impression of vivacity or multiplicity of colors that these paintings leave us with, their palettes are rather restricted, limited to a few primary colors. Frankétienne’s paintings are often two-colors, even though an attentive eye seems to perceive a profusion of colors emerging from the sinuous entanglement of forms, and the abundance of coats or lines of colors, as in *Tête à tête* (1991), *Émergence*, (1999), or the cover illustration of *H’Éros-Chimères* (2002). In fact, apart from black and white, three to five colors—brown, red, yellow, green, and blue—frequently appear in diverse shades in his work.



Plate 2. Untitled (1974), by Frankétienne. Oil on canvas, 39 5/8" × 27 5/8".
From the collection of Marc-Yves and Marie-Michèle Volcy. Photo by Pierre Charrier.



Plate 3. Untitled (1981), by Frankétienne. Oil on canvas, 96" x 48".
From the collection of Franck and Marie-Andrée Etienne. Photo by Marie-Andrée Etienne.



Plate 4. Untitled [fresque Institut] (1982), by Frankétienne. Oil on canvas, 108" × 180".
From the collection of Franck and Marie-Andrée Etienne. Photo by Max Nucci.

Moreover, he seems particularly attached to the color white, which he tends to do looming up from dark or dull (black or brown) monochromatic or two-color masses, as in the typographic inversions he often employs in *H'Éros-Chimères*. Some of the most significant examples of this tendency are his *Untitled* of 1974, and particularly his series called *peintures des guédés* (guédés' paintings) (2002)—some thirty black canvases hatched, scratched, or criss-crossed with large streaks of white paint, as Van Gogh's coats of paint, Pollock's drippings, or Michaux's lines. Frankétienne insists particularly on the originality of this set that is among his favorites, stressing that its style stands apart from Haitian painting, which, he claims, "is an orgy of colors, a *dézafi* of colors" and therefore is not usually governed by such "austerity."

This continually confirmed desire to experiment with and explore the limitations of creativity makes each painting a work in progress, a work always to complete, to perfect, and one that can be used again, touched up, modified, reworked at will and at any time depending on the artist's drive or emotions in his face-to-face with the covered or blank surface. This brings us to the second fundamental principle governing Frankétienne's work: the principle of revival/transformation. This process, however, is not always carried out immediately or even shortly after a painting is completed; it can occur even years after a first long public exhibition, as was the case for the fresco of the French Institute of Haiti, completed in 1982 and touched up in 2001 with gypsum to emphasize the pillar of zombies that haunt the large brown surface.

Another interesting example of a reworked painting can be found on page 30 in *H'Éros-Chimères*. This time, however, the process of transformation is even more radical, for it is the transformation of a painting's reproduction into an original illustration. The painting in question is the classical woman's nude of April 1982, which the painter's friends recognize as a portrait of his wife (who even considers the painting as part of the family patrimony), hence the unofficial title by which it is referred to at times, *Marie Andrée*. Unlike the original painting, the copy-art version doubly emphasizes the lying body by accentuating and multiplying the lines of the drawing. The full body of the painting becomes a striped body in the illustration, whose outline is accentuated by the white lines of the original and the large black lines of the copy. In addition, the mahogany brown and white of the oil painting are transformed into the black and white of the book and a round face expressing a certain fulfillment, which contrasts with the rectangular and rather worried face in the painting, as if the writer-painter wished to express, twenty years later, a certain serenity due to the passing of time or maturing of the young mother and wife of 1982 turned grandmother. One last example of revival/transformation, which is also a copy-art, is Frankétienne's self-portrait in *H'Éros-Chimères* (241). The original photo is covered with black dots to turn it into an image that corresponds to the manuscript page declaring the burns of the artist. This self-portrait and the accompanying text, as Frankétienne himself claims, seem to follow a desire to inscribe the physical presence of the author in the book, thus emphasizing its autobiographical part of this work that Frankétienne says "is nothing more than the story [the fantasized story, I would add] of [his] obscure birth to an adolescent peasant mother, and an aged rich American father." Indeed, it is exactly this story that is mirroring, *mise en abyme* under the subtitle "Monologue intérieur en chambre imaginaire" (Interior monologue in an imaginary room) (*H'Éros* 245–54).

The third fundamental principle governing Frankétienne's work is the principle of fragmentation/ transformation/ multiplication (or serialization). Those processes of revival/ transformation did not originate from his commitment in visual arts



Plate 5. *Nude [Marie-Andrée]* (1982), by Frankétienne. Oil on canvas.
From the collection of Franck and Marie-Andrée Etienne. Photo by Max Nucci.



Plate 6. Untitled (1987), by Frankétienne. Oil on canvas.
From the collection of Franck and Marie-Andrée Etienne. Photo by Max Nucci.



Plate 7. *Tête à tête* (1991), by Frankétienne. Oil on masonite, 7 ½" × 5 ½".
From the collection of Jean Jonassaint. Photo by Pierre Charrier.



Plate 8. *Le complot* (1991), by Frankétienne. Oil on masonite, 7 ½" × 5 ½".
From the collection of Jean Jonassaint.



Plate 9. *Émergence* (1999), by Frankétienne. Oil on canvas, 11 5/8" x 19 1/2".
From the collection of Marc-Yves and Marie-Michèle Volcy. Photo by Pierre Charrier.

production, but are preceded instead by literary examples, or created alongside literary projects. Both *Dézafi* (1975), a revival of the myth of zombies liberated by salt, and *Les affres d'un défi* (1979)—the French version of the same novel, which is not a translation, but as Frankétienne insists, a new work born of the matrix of this “novel of the Haitian language”—were revised, corrected, and re-edited long after their first publication (respectively in 2002 and 2000). Although the differences between the first and second editions of *Dézafi* are striking, particularly concerning spelling and typography, they are more subtle in *Les affres d'un défi*. As for his free theater adaptation in Haitian of *Les émigrés* by Slamowir Mrozek (1975), *Pèlin-Tèt* (1978), which was a great popular success in Haiti and internationally, at least four published versions exist: three printed versions and a video of a play performed in Montreal in 2000 by Frankétienne and a young Haitian actor, Ricardo Lefèvre. The latest version in 2002, edited in the USA with the new official Haitian spelling *Pèlentèt*, and signed “Franketyèn” instead of Frankétienne or Franketienne, is the longest, and is divided into four parts named *tablo* (scenes), as opposed to the two previous editions, which are not fragmented in scenes. But whatever the versions, to borrow a comment by Asselin Charles in introduction to his 1997 unpublished translation of *Pèlin-tèt* (*The Noose*): it is always the same “dramatization of the immigrant experience,” through the dialogue or confrontation of two Haitian roommates in a New York basement: Polydor, “a middle-class intellectual and revolutionary and Pyram, semiliterate worker of peasant origin.”

However, the literary work that best performs the principle of revival/ transformation is the series of eight “movements,” of the *Métamorphoses de l'oiseau schizophone* (*Metamorphoses of the Schizophone Bird*). Concerning this rather enormous and striking venture,³ two plausible hypotheses can be advanced. On the one hand, it is possible that the failure of *L'oiseau schizophone* as a “total work,” or “object-book” (due to the mechanical integration of illustrations that seem unfinished, an unattractive cover illustration, and a rather conventional layout), convinced Frankétienne to revise the text, which is all at once narrative, poem, essay, and collage. Despite some overlong and commonplace passages (we must bear in mind that it is an 812–page text, 8½" × 11"), the text is certainly powerful, but its inappropriate typography (unfortunately reproduced in the French edition) does not serve it well. On the other hand, it would come as no surprise that Frankétienne, confronted with the dead-end situation of Haiti, was compelled toward a sort of bulimia, a survival instinct, which led to overproduction and excess: eight books, each of some 200 pages, were published between May 1996 and September 1997, each a section of *L'oiseau schizophone*. The story, among several others, of a writer, Philémond Théophile, condemned by the obscure and corrupt regime of his country to swallow up his own book, page after page, because of its hermetism, is fragmented, revised, transformed it into a new and less complex typography and layout, without illustrations, contrary to the hypertext of 1993. This fragmentation/ transformation/ multiplication of the initial object forms a disconcerting spiral, with minimal or subtle variations from the hypertext to the hypertext (in Genette's sense of these terms), following a progression that is most evident in the first and last volumes of the series: *D'un pur silence inextinguible* (*Of a Pure Inextinguishable Silence*) (1996), *Et la voyance explose* (*And the Clairvoyance Explodes*) (1997). A spiral—which spreads out into time and space, and illustrates Frankétienne's aesthetic project quite well, as he explains in a 1992 interview in *Callaloo*, using the analogy of the biological spiral, a founding symbol

of Engel's dialectical materialism in *Anti-Dühring*, but which is illustrated even more efficiently in his paintings, particularly the two series usually known as the "zombis" and the "têtes" (heads).

As early as 1991, encouraged by the need to earn a living through his artistic work, having put an end to his teaching career, the principle of revival/ transformation shifts from the *singular* to the *plural*, and a third term is added: multiplication or serialization⁴—the multiples or the series. Literature is rarely and hardly a livelihood. Hence between 1991 and 1995, he produced 200 paintings in a very small format (5½" × 7 ½") with the motifs of zombies or the Haitian exodus, directly inspired from his earlier works of the 1980s. The proliferation of such a motif on a reduced format was meant to facilitate his entry onto the art market, or at least help to disseminate his paintings.

It is interesting to retrace, even partially, the development of this motif in Frankétienne's work, for its trajectory is a spiral. Indeed, from the common and known matrix of a canvas of 1981 (portraying blurred and draped silhouettes walking toward an unknown destination—see the untitled illustration in *Frankétienne* 42), and the 1982 frescos of the French Institute of Haiti (showing cadaverous or skeletal characters wandering naked), the motif is found in a 1983–84 series of oil paintings of diverse but smaller formats (one of which features on the cover of *Frankétienne*), then from 1991 onward, it is taken up again 200 times with significant variations in a systematic manner in both modes (silhouettes or skeletons) in a very small format (a series). And, again in 1995 on larger, but still relatively small surfaces (16" × 20" or 24" × 36"), the motif is taken up, but this time it is clearly enriched. On the one hand, the silhouettes are long and slender instead of ghostly, and on the other hand, in some paintings, the silhouettes interact with a distinctive element hanging over the row of bodies, a central, dominating character (as in *Pris à son propre piège*, 1995) or an imposing symbolic object (as in *Cœur navire papillon de la dernière chance*, 1995). Moreover, in spite of appearances, the works are unique, as each painting is titled, signed, and dated in the lower right-hand corner (*ESPOIR Tête-ensemble*, 1995).⁵ This process of repetition or multiplication—(*false multiples*) is reminiscent of traditional popular art, as the artist or craftsman takes up the same motif in the same manner on identical supports, and with variations that are not always perceptible or intentional. In the Haitian context, the "imaginary cities" (*Villes imaginaires*) of Préfète Duffaut, one of which was the subject of a commentary by Maximilien Laroche in *L'image comme écho* (1978) and another its cover illustration, are among the best-known examples of such traditional popular art. Although for Frankétienne the undertaking joins the popular traditional arts of Vodou, it is more erudite and experimental in his case. Indeed, beyond the identical formats and motifs, each painting of the series is quite singular. Despite the *false multiples*, Frankétienne therefore remains within the singular and within the rotation of writing or painting, as he put it in a 1987 interview, but he is still working within the painting/writing dichotomy, of which Butor described the impact on the spectator in *Les mots dans la peinture* (1969).

As early as 1993, however, following his encounter with the work of the Mont Faucon Research Center, namely, *MANU Script*, edited by Joëlle de la Casinière and Michel Bonnemaïson (1981), Frankétienne seems to attempt—at least in part—to resolve the dilemma between writing and painting, reading and viewing, with *Loiseau schizophone*; but this first attempt fails. It is only nine years later, with *H'Éros-Chimères* (the peculiar spelling of the first word of the title already appears in *Loiseau* 312),

that he truly accomplishes a total work, the “writing-painting,” and at the same time true multiples: each page is practically a work of art, a copy-art repeated in numerous copies, which are texts to read as well as pages to see. Here, Frankétienne accomplishes at last what he announced in 1975 on page 281 of *Dézafi*, the text-image: the autonomy of the page as an image (painting or drawing). In this respect, a fine example can be found on pages 245–54, subtitled “Monologue intérieur en chambre imaginaire (Spirale en un acte)” (Interior monologue in an imaginary room [A spiral in one act]),” consisting of ten “ob-scenes” numbered from I to X. Each “OB-SCENE” is composed of a fairly long text (occupying more or less 3/5 of the top of the page) followed by an illustration as a bas-relief. Each page, image-text, or text-image, can be read irrespective of the next page, or of the sequence of pagination, but this set of pages makes sense as a narrative whole, the story of a young woman transplanted into a new environment to which she is completely unfamiliar. This complete autonomy of the fragment with relation to the whole, while still maintaining a relative dependence upon the whole, is one of the first characteristics of the spiral, which leads Frankétienne to subtitle his latest writings *fragmentaires* fragmentary).

With this work, all the fundamental features of the spiral as aesthetic principle are thus materialized (experimentation/ exploration/ fragmentation/ revival/ transformation/ multiplication), along with other more literary principles—such as the carnivalization of the biographical and the historical, of the private and political, of the sacred and vulgar, etc.—as illustrated, among others, in the copy-art portrait of the literary group *Hàiti littéraire* (*H'Éros* 323). On a photograph of the group touched up with ink, which recalls the portrait of the Surrealists by Max Ernst, *Au rendez-vous des amis* (1922), Frankétienne introduces a new and different element, a bull's eye window, or tondo,⁶ which he borrows from Ernst, from which the members are observed as in the *Vierge Marie corrigeant l'Enfant Jésus devant trois témoins: André Breton, Paul Éluard et le peintre* (1926), but the intruders are not named. Was it Duvalier's Camarilla that moved most of them toward voluntary or forced exile, as Frankétienne recalled for me in 1987 interview? We can believe so, particularly since apart from the baroque and fantastical (and popular, I would add) aspects of his work, the political or historical bias is the determining factor by which his poetics are distinct from other French avant-garde aesthetic experiences such as Surrealism or the *nouveau roman*. This political or historical bias is even more manifest when we look at certain portraits that recur rather obsessively in *H'Éros-Chimères*, where we cannot but recognize, if we read correctly, the figures of power of the past or present, namely, that of the renowned Titide (*H'Éros* 119) or other hideous figures who are illustrated in a series of paintings replicated several times in the book (*H'Éros* 324–42).

Whatever our interpretation of the representation of the literary group *Hàiti littéraire*, it must be read beyond the words that frame it or that it incorporates. In no way decorative or ornamental, like all the images in this object-book, the portrait of *Hàiti littéraire* is an integral part of the hand-written or typographic texts of the page on which it appears—at the same time completely autonomous and dependent. Both the text and the portrait are signs, image, and text simultaneously, text-image or image-text, to be decoded according to a syntax only partly imposed by the layout or the pagination. That is Frankétienne's tour de force in *H'Éros-Chimères*: to transform writing into painting, and vice-versa, to make of each page a singular autonomous piece of art (each being different from the other), as well as multiples (for it is duplicated in several copies). Thus, he achieves through the *Book* the passage from false

to true multiples, leaving behind the arts and crafts of the revival/ transformation to reach the industrialization of the singular multiplication, the print.

Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard (A throw of the dice never will abolish chance)—Would this signal the accomplishment of Mallarmé's great dream of the *Book*? Of course, it is too early to say. Nevertheless, Frankétienne, with *H'Éros-Chimères*, is without a doubt the francophone writer who pushed to its furthest limit the integration of image and text into one great whole, and who moved beyond poetry into the text-image or image-text, the written-painting, to relate, comment, communicate, and follow the movement of the spiral. He is neither the Joseph Zobel of the beautiful *D'amour et de soleil* (1994) nor is he the Georges Castéra of the exceptional *Le retour à l'arbre* (1974), nor even the de la Casinière of *Absolument nécessaire* (1973). But what of the painter? This is a difficult question indeed. So few of his works have been viewed that one cannot truly take a stance. However, a review of the "histoire culturelle" of *Black Art* by Richard J. Powell (2002), the corpus of the *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* by Donald J. Cosentino (1995), or *Peintres de la fête et du vaudou en Haïti* by Jean-Marie Drot (1974) demonstrate, at least in relation to Haitian or African arts, the originality of Frankétienne's better-known cycles, the *zombis* and *têtes*. Indeed, to remain within well-known paradigms, the rich fantastic or fantastical representation of Wilson Bigaud's *Conflicts and Tensions* (1957), which appears on the cover of *Calaloo* 15.2 (1992) differs greatly from the rather abstract and sober representation of Frankétienne's *Untitled* of 1987 or *Le complot* of 1991, which itself is distanced from the work of the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam or Haitian artists Philomé Obin, Hervé Télémaque, or Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Should Frankétienne be considered a great painter as well as an exceptional writer?

Up to you to see.



Fig. 4. Frankétienne at work (2003). Photo by Max Nucci. With permission.

NOTES

1. A version of this conversation will be published in a forthcoming article entitled “L'exemplaire trajectoire d'un créateur haïtien: un entretien avec Frankétienne” in *Writing under Siege* (ed. Bulatansky and Sourieau).

2. This corpus, even though incomplete, ranges from the first paintings of 1974 to the latest in 2002. It consists in particular of certain paintings exhibited or stored at the residence of Franck and Marie Andrée Étienne at Delmas in Port-au-Prince and of the private collection owned by Marc-Yves and Marie-Michèle Volcy at Laval in Québec, who generously granted me access to their collection to help further my research. I would also like to thank Pauline Morel who made a first draft translation of a previously unpublished French version of this article, and my colleague Patrick Suter of Geneva for his useful comments.

3. In general, when editing a text, the contrary tends to be the norm: we gather into one volume what has first been published separately. Is this an innovative process? We would have to conduct research to provide an adequate answer. But it seems to me that in French-language literature at least, there exists no text of considerable length already published that has been fragmented subsequently for a new publication—except in the case of an adaptation for a younger public, or a condensed version (in a Reader's Digest style) intended for a large popular readership, which is far from being the case here.

4. By *serialization*, I refer to the programmed production of a series or sequel of works of identical formats, which take up a same theme or motif in a systematic manner, though with certain variations.

5. Some of the very small paintings of the *zombies* series of 1991 have been titled and numbered with a pencil on the back. According to Frankétienne, these consist of the twenty or so paintings that have been exhibited at the Olivieri Bookstore in Montreal, and were titled and numbered for the occasion. This is therefore only an exception to facilitate the marketing of these works in a specific context; generally, Frankétienne's works are not titled, but signed and dated.

6. As is often the case in the work of Frankétienne, this is undecidable. This indecision is an integral part of his poetics, which tend to demonstrate the impenetrability of the world.

WORKS CITED

- Apollinaire, Guillaume. *Calligrammes*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1918.
- Butor, Michel. *Mobile*. Paris: Gallimard, 1962.
- . *Les mots dans la peinture*. Genève: Skira, 1969.
- Casinière (de la), Joëlle. *Absolument nécessaire*. Paris: Minuit, 1973.
- Castera, Georges [with the collaboration of Bernard Wahl]. *Le retour à l'arbre*. [Montréal]: Calfou Nouvelle Orientation, 1974.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick, and Raphaël Confiant. *Lettres creoles*. Paris: Hatier, 1991.
- Chassagne, Raymond. “Dénotatif et connotative dans la peinture de Franck Étienne.” *Conjonction* 160 (1984): 9–13.
- Cosentino, Donald J. *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995.
- Dos Passos, John. *USA*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946.

- Drot, Jean-Marie. *Les peintres de la fête et du vaudou en Haïti*. Genève: Skira, 1974.
- Engels, Frederick. *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Dühring)*. 1939. Trans. Emile Burns. New York: International Publishers, 1966.
- Étienne, Franck. *Au fil du temps*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie des Antilles, 1964.
- . *La marche*. Port-au-Prince: Éditions Panorama, 1964.
- . *Chevaux de l'avant-jour*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Serge L. Gaston, 1967. 2nd ed. *Dérives* 53/54 (1986/1987): 41–86.
- Fig nolé, Jean-Claude. *Sur "Gouverneurs de la rosée."* [Port-au-Prince]: Fardin, 1974
- Frankétienne. *Ultravocal*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Serge L. Gaston, 1972.
- . *Dézafi*. Port-au-Prince: Édition Fardin.
- . *Pèlin-Tèt (Pyès Tèyat)*. Port-au-Prince: Éditions du Soleil, 1978.
- . *Pèlentèt*. Dir. and perf. Frankétienne, 13 and 14 May 2000. Videocassette. Montréal: Prod. Promodis International, VID-002, 2000.
- . *Les affres d'un défi*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Henri Deschamps, 1979. 2nd ed. Paris: Jean Michel Place, 2000.
- . *Kaselezo*. [Drama, French version in collaboration with Jean-Pierre Bernay and Jenny Leignel.] *Dérives* 53/54 (1986/ 1987): 127–63.
- . *Adjanoumelezo (Espiral)*. [Port-au-Prince]: Imprimerie des Antilles, 1987.
- . "Frankétienne." [Interview.] *Callaloo* 15.2 (1992): 385–92.
- . *Loiseau schizophone*. Port-au-Prince: Éditions des Antilles, 1993. 2nd ed. Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1998.
- . *D'un pur silence inextinguible (premier mouvement des métamorphoses de l'oiseau schizophone)*. Port-au-Prince: [Imprimeur II], 1996.
- . *Et la voyance explose (huitième mouvement des métamorphoses de l'oiseau schizophone)*. Port-au-Prince: [Imprimeur II], 1997.
- . *The Noose* [Pèlin-tèt]. Translator Asselin Charles. Unpublished manuscript, 1997.
- . *H'Éros-Chimères*. Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Henri Deschamps, 2002.
- Frankétienne. *Pèlen-Tèt (Pyèsteyat)*. [Port-au-Prince]: n. p., n. d.
- Franketyèn. *Pèlentèt*. [Lawrence]: Enstiti Etid Ayisyen Inivèsite Kannzas and Edisyon Espiral, 2002.
- Jonassaint, Jean, ed. *Frankétienne, écrivain haïtien*. Spec. issue. *Dérives* 53/ 54 (1986/ 1987).
- Jonassaint, Jean. "L'exemplaire trajectoire d'un créateur haïtien: un entretien avec Frankétienne." *Writing under Siege: Haitian Literature, 1804–2004*. Ed. Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau. Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming in 2004.
- Laferrière, Dany. *J'écris comme je vis*. Montréal: Lanctôt, 2000.
- Loupias, Bernard. "Frankétienne le flamboyant." *Le Nouvel Observateur* 1782 (1998–99): 42–43.
- Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira pas le hasard*. Paris, 1897.
- Melançon, Robert. *Liberté 174*. 1987.
- Montfaucon Research Center. *MANU Script*. Montréal, *Dérives*, 1981.
- Mrozek, Slamowir. *Les émigrés*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1975.

Powell, Richard J. *Black Art: A Cultural History*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

Ripault, Ghislain. *Outre l'Atlantique*. Auzon: Épistoles, 2002.

Roche, Maurice. *Compact*. Paris: Seuil, 1966.

Zobel, Joseph. *D'amour et de soleil*. Fréjus, France: Prosveta, 1994.

