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Six Karl Jean Petion Images

Jenny DeBell

Take a look at this drawing entitled “Poeme a Erzulie,” which recalls Erzulie, the goddess of love in the Haitian vodou religious tradition

Take a closer look. Zoom in and examine the lacy tendrils of color that form each of the compositions in this richly-colored collection of Jean Petion, a Haitian-born artist. Upon examining the connected pattern of concentric circles and the curly, whimsically styled lines, it might be easy to imagine other such lighthearted work by the same artist. Take a closer look, however, and it becomes clear that Petion’s message is as strong as his brilliantly-colored palette. Every line in “Poeme a Erzulie” forms a letter; the letters connect to form words. A cleverly obscured story lives within Petion’s capricious world of color and texture. The words are only occasionally clear, leaving the viewer to wonder at their meaning and allowing the words and letters themselves to revert to the individual marks that compose the picture into its whole shimmering image.

In the drawing entitled “Poeme a Legba,” invoking Legba, the Haitian God who is the keeper of the crossroads between the living and the dead, Petion includes symbols of the voodoo spirit, combining both the social history and spiritual iconography of his ancestors’ country. Close examination of “Poeme a Legba,” once again reveals an image composed of text, a style that Petion calls “overwriting.” Perhaps this overwriting references the strategy of enslaved Africans in the new world of overlaying images of African gods with icons of Catholicism—which ultimately allowed them to worship their gods while forced to attend Catholic masses by their masters. The not-quite-tropicality of Petion’s palette celebrates Haitian life and landscape, and the forms of hearts and circles belie the serious mystical nature of voodoo ritual.

Petion’s composition “For every three... four are. . .” refers to the shameful statistic that for every three black men in college, four are incarcerated or in prison. A collection of disembodied heads fill the surface like so much wallpaper, with three ghostly heads depicted as outlines, and each of four others crossed out at random with a thick white X. The image itself is politically and racially charged and again, the ground is composed of layered text, leading the viewer to assume its subject. To illustrate such images with a confrontational title adds weight to the picture itself, and is an indication of the emotional energy that Petion pours into his drawings.

These disembodied black heads are reminiscent of the controversial silhouettes by New York artist Kara Walker, who depicts every kind of horrific violence perpetrated upon enslaved Africans and African-Americans by their white owners—in her case focusing on the American south. Like Petion, Walker’s compositions are accompanied by derisive titles meant to shock and anger, as they identify the crime, while simultaneously denying personality to the nameless, faceless victims she portrays.

Two of Petion’s compositions in this collection back away from the political and are more formal explorations of color, recalling the richly layered color-field paintings of Mark Rothko(Link). The provocatively titled “So Black and Blue” is a patient exercise in composition, and the aptly title “A Formal Exercise” is just that, exploring the softer ocean of blues, greens, and pinks in a quiet mood.

Petion’s approaches to drawing appear to be as varied appears as his drawings are in mood and message. Take a close look.