Reflections on the Moon, Mirrored in the Moat

By Shelley Rice

In the cosmology of Haitian Voudou, the sea is male.

But he is male only in principle. Agwé, spirit of the sea, is never the water in its material sense; he is its spirit, its energy, its synthesis. That spirit cannot be totally captured in form, it can never be embodied as a definitive icon: on calabashes and flags, in drawings and ironworks, Agwé can be seen as a boat, as a fish, as an abstract design. These varying visions do not describe his diversity, but his plurality -- his protean being-in-time, the multiplicities that emerge as principle manifests in matter, to become the fluid and shifting waters of the earth.

There is an alternate symbol of Agwé, little used even among the Haitians, which seems to have its roots far away, in Africa, in the mythologies and images of the Dogon tribe of Mali. In this interpretation, Agwé is an octopus, but one who swims throughout the galaxy, among the stars. A celestial octopus, this creature is perhaps descended from those amphibious extraterrestials whom the Dogon believe came from the skies in space ships in the distant past to teach humankind the skills of civilization. Floating in a sea of gold, his “legs” transformed into aquatic tail fins that are used to propel him into the heavens, this hybrid being is the soulmate -- the husband -- of Janaina Tschäpe’s winsome sirens.

But Tschäpe is half-Brazilian, though born in Germany. In Brazil, in the African-based religion of Candomblé, the power and the body of the ocean are female. This feminine principle is embodied in the *orixá* Iemanjá, the Queen of the Waters of the Sea, whose name derives from a Yoruba expression that means "the mother whose children are fish." No longer the concubine, the helpmate, the agent of seduction secondary to Agwé, Iemanjá herself dominates the protean exercises that embody the natural forces of Brazil -- she takes upon herself the task of shaping form and meaning for her *serviteurs*. This is an enormous responsibility. In representing herself, in transforming herself, in transporting herself through water or land or sky, this Woman creates the world. Reflected in her mirror is the image of ourselves.

Janaina Tschäpe's marine creatures are Iemanjá's children, those offspring who are fish. Their strange pneumatic forms, trembling and sensitive, monitor the subtle changes of the tides; their skins, those infinitely supple surfaces, register the passage of the winds as they race across the surface of the lands. Metamorphosizing, these creatures reflect change upon the earth; moving in space, they echo the actions of the moon and stars, the growth of nations, the birth of flowers and the death of kings. In other words: as they grow and change, as they respire and expire, as their monstrous appendages crawl through the land and float through the seas, they are the embodiment of physical life itself, with all of its twisted roots and misshapen limbs. And so the narratives within which they find themselves -- the tales which Tschape is telling as she places them in forests or beaches or castles -- are always mythic fables, parables told through the medium of video or drawing or photographs.

It is crucial to understand this, that Tschäpe's is a mythologizing vision, South American rather than European or American in its mode of expression. It is tempting for Westerners whose lives are not permeated by the *orixás* of Candomblé to see her creatures within the context of their own mythology of radical postmodernism, which is always obsessed with sexuality as a pornographic or social rather than a spiritual state. In their rush to demystify such works, feminist writers (who are often both ignorant and disdainful of the belief systems so crucial to the coherence of Third World societies) label these creatures as essentialist and therefore reactionary stereotypes. Others like to place these lumpen ladies within the pantheon of Matthew Barney, like to see Tschäpe as yet another artist creating a personal cosmology, a hermetic universe of technicolor monsters and madonnas. But her Sirens are not actors in a new scenario, they are players in a drama as ancient as the earth. Creativity is not a willful act for them, it is their *raison d'etre*; and the artist follows their lead as she follows the ebb and flow of the tides. Rather than bending reality to her will to enhance her own creative force as Barney does, Tschäpe uses her art to celebrate the wondrous and monstrous creative force of that which is most profoundly real: nature itself.

But this is nature as seen through the magical eyes of Iemanjá -- the vision is female. Critics, especially men, often speak of Tschäpe's distended creatures as the feminine counterparts to Hans Bellmer's *poupées*, misshapen sexual objects whose permutations are vehicles of desire fueled by the control of the male gaze. But such a comparison misses the point. There is no male gaze in Iemanjá's primal world, the world after the rain; there is no male at all. These women are the world, the world is them. Existing in themselves, for themselves, they create the undifferentiated cosmos as they wash ashore on

the waves of the sea. In Tschäpe's universe, the men come later (Agwé, like the Christian Eve, is a consort). They arise from the bubbles that burst and disappear, and they build the Châteaus within which these female spirits will be trapped, their roots trailing behind them on the cold stone floors as they stare out the open window at the moon reflected in the moat.

The absence of the male gaze in these pictures is determinative; it changes everything. In all of Tschäpe's works, women undergo mutations -- of form, of identity, even of species. Each female depicted in her work, as Saint Clair Cemin has suggested, is an infinitely variable surface. Transformation and appropriation have been buzzwords in the art world since Cindy Sherman began dressing up in the early 1980s, though people from the First World tend to see this type of identity enhancement as an essentially neurotic response to a media world that has destabilized the boundaries of the Self. But Tschäpe, once again, is Brazilian, and in the universe of the *orixás,* transformation is the ultimate source of female strength -- and the Self is nothing, a bubble without air, without those cords entangled in the forest and sea, in the castle and in the sky. Transmutation is woman's birthright, it is the means by which She connects to the cosmos, to the social world, to the earth -- and all of Tschäpe's works, no matter how diverse they may seem, are explorations of this one seminal idea.

Sometimes she creates self-portraits, and she herself embodies the multiple lives and faces of Woman, as she did in Sala de Espera of 2001. At other times, she works collaboratively, and uses transformation as a psycho/aesthetic tool to help others understand the source of feminine power within them. Os Camaleoas, for instance, was produced in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, and each of the participants -- women who lived in very difficult

material and emotional circumstances -- was asked to “become” an image of strength and stability. One woman chose the sun, and transformed herself into its brilliant light; another wanted desperately to grow the roots of a old tree; still another dressed as a robot, so she could easily and without pain complete the tasks she needed to do every day. Whether natural or social, these images were sources of strength for these women, helping them to transcend their material realities and live in the landscape of Iemanjá -- that world where we are not fragmented and alone, where our breath echoes the wind in the trees and our voice is the sound of waves breaking on the shore. The *orixá’s* world is envisioned in Tschäpe’s recent exhibitions, in After the Rain and The Moat and the Moon. We are lucky to catch a passing glimpse of it -- before, inevitably, it mutates into something else.

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