Artist’s Priorities Are Shaken From Abstract to Concrete

MAY 30, 2014

Photo

Philippe Dodard's works — not just paintings, but iron sculptures, jewelry and photography — tap into Haiti’s rich tradition of art. Credit Ian Willms for The New York Times

The Saturday Profile

By RANDAL C. ARCHIBOLD

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — Philippe Dodard, often called the Picasso of Haiti, was searching for vibrations.
This could sound ominous in a country widely devastated by an earthquake more than four years ago. Mr. Dodard says he was lucky to have survived that day. He had left a meeting at the National Palace shortly before it was destroyed, and then his car nearly ran off a road as the ground beneath it shuddered and swayed.

“I was saved that day twice,” he said. “I said it must be for a reason.”

But in his studio here high on a hillside above the throng of the capital below, Mr. Dodard, 59, was speaking in metaphors, the vibration coming not from the earth but the “silent drumbeat communicating the energy of life.” His African ancestors used the drum, but his instrument is the paintbrush.

“The vibration I am looking for is one color,” he said, as he touched up the blues, blacks and rusty oranges of an abstract sea goddess emerging from churning waters. “One color has the vibration of another color. It is like magic.”

Photo

Magic Encounter, 2014 Credit Philippe Dodard

A few weeks later, that work would go on display at one of South Florida’s most renowned museums, adding to the acclaim of an artist whose works sell for thousands of dollars and have been exhibited in Paris, New York and Los Angeles and who counts the designer Donna Karan and the filmmaker Jonathan Demme among his fans.

His works — not just paintings, but iron sculptures, jewelry and photography — tap into Haiti’s rich tradition of art. There is a yearning for expression born from the country’s natural beauty and the hardships of slavery, disasters and years of political turmoil. His style, befitting a country of racial and cultural mixing, blends influences including African masks, the Haitian Vodou religion and European masters.

“Philippe is respectful of tradition, especially how the spirit world infiltrates everyday life,” said Carol Damian, an expert on Haitian art and the director of the Frost Art Museum at Florida International University in Miami, which is showing Mr. Dodard’s works through June 29. “But
he wanted to express that spirituality through more modern means. He is looking beyond the naïve tradition — how many palm tree paintings can there be out there? — but is respectful of it.”

Now, Mr. Dodard is working on one of his most challenging pieces, seeking to spread that influence as director of Haiti’s only public arts school, known by its French acronym, Enarts.

In a warren of dingy classrooms and studios in a rough downtown neighborhood, the school had fallen into neglect in recent years, a situation made worse by the January 2010 quake.

“I was shocked, it was a complete disaster,” he said. “It was like a Frankenstein house.”

He pulled discarded statues from the broken-down foundry and brought in more professionals to teach. He is planning a fund-raising campaign, hoping to tap into the growing circle of internationally known figures he has befriended.

He said he accepted the appointment to the school, by President Michel Martelly, a friend, out of a sense of duty and wanting to give back after the earthquake.

Many artists were killed in the disaster, and their works were damaged or destroyed. Mr. Dodard was spared the worst, but he said he did have two close calls.

To heal emotionally, he painted a vivid, black-and-white work that reflected chaos and was inspired by the cries in the dark night.

He also taught art to children in camps for people who lost their homes, using school buses donated by the Dominican Republic as classrooms. But he yearned for more. Ms. Karan, who unveiled a spring fashion line in 2012 with designs inspired by Mr. Dodard, suggested he make teaching a priority.

“Using Philippe’s bold strokes as inspiration for my spring prints was a natural,” Ms. Karan said. “His work captures Haiti’s art and soul, connecting the past, present and future with a powerful sophistication.”

When Mr. Martelly asked if Mr. Dodard would lead the school, he seized the chance. But rebuilding the school has presented challenges. There have been four culture ministers since he started, and he is never certain of the budget.

But he said the students, 300 or so, move him. They are, with a few exceptions, the sons and daughters of street vendors, craftsmen and women, and the unemployed who struggle to afford the $100 annual tuition.
Mr. Dodard is director of Haiti’s only public arts school, known by its French acronym, Enarts, where students from Belgium collaborate with local students. Credit Ian Willms for The New York Times

One aspiring sculptor, Woklo Caymitte Woodly, worked all year on a bust of his mother. He gave it to her in thanks for sending him to the school.

“How could you not be moved by that?” Mr. Dodard said.

Mr. Dodard’s own mother was pivotal to his formation as an artist.

His father was an accountant, and his mother was a secretary and artist herself, who along with a godmother who was a drawing teacher encouraged Mr. Dodard, one of eight children, to pursue his curiosity.

He recalled his first piece, done at age 5.

“I had a little car,” he said. “I would take it apart and merge it with my tricycle.”

“I said, ‘I am going to create my own car,’ ” he said when his father, taken aback, asked what he was doing. “That was my first piece.”

He got most of his professional training in the early 1970s at the Poto-Mitan School of Art under masters such as Patrick Vilaire and the artist known as Tiga, who had traveled to Africa and returned with a determination to spread that continent’s arts and culture.
“Different cultures came to meet here and created who we are,” Mr. Dodard said. “Art is a very good way to communicate. Music, dance, drawing and painting – they are very natural.”

He lists Picasso among his influences, and notes that he and Picasso looked to African masks for inspiration. The difference is that Mr. Dodard, with African ancestry, claims a closer connection and has paid homage to it in works such as “In Memoriam,” an abstract metal sculpture honoring the sacrifice of slaves in Haiti.

“Some people see a lot of Picasso,” he said, holding up a photograph of the piece. “Where did Picasso get inspiration? Africa!”

As Mr. Dodard gained international prominence, political cartoons he had drawn came to the attention of Mr. Demme, who said he fell in love with Haiti’s art while on a trip there in the mid-1980s and was particularly moved by the “visual literature” of Mr. Dodard’s paintings. He featured Mr. Dodard in two documentaries, “Haiti Dreams of Democracy” and the “The Agronomist,” giving the artist wider exposure.

“As the years went by, the cartoons featured in the documentary became more visionary and a heartbreaking prediction of the difficult road to democracy,” Mr. Demme said.

If Mr. Dodard regrets anything, it is that his jammed schedule of school commitments, exhibitions and fund-raising has cut into his studio time.

His studio is an eerily quiet place in a rambling house, where he seeks out the rhythm of the piece, and of life itself. He practices yoga and reiki, a Japanese relaxation technique, and can sound like an instructor as he explains himself.

“I have to hear the voices,” he said, taking a pause from painting and a deep breath. “I have to feel the heartbeat. It is a way to be in contact with yourself and the universe.”