UrbanGlass

Transparency and Opacity

Jacek J. Kolasiński and Edouard Duval-Carrié

Essay and Curation by Alpesh Kantilal Patel

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Historian Hayden White notes that the key difference between fiction and history is that historians insist they present the truth.[1] The works in this exhibition by two Miami, Florida-based artists, Jacek J. Kolasiński and Edouard Duval-Carrié, straddle the fine line between fiction and history and transparency and opacity as they articulate Caribbean history as pluriversal and multiple. Both Kolasiński's ongoing *Creole Archive* project (2015-present) and Duval-Carrié's plexiglass and mixed media works (often backlit) meditate on transcontinental links between North America (US and Caribbean) and Africa. Kolasiński's work also focuses on links between these continents and Europe, specifically Poland, where he was born and lived until age twenty-one.

Duval-Carrié, born in Haiti, and Kolasiński make visible often unknown or lesser-known stories connected to the Caribbean, but often by demanding we not conflate visuality with disembodied ocularity or disinterested knowledge. They do so through the often seductive and bold usage of bright colors and playing with the physics of how glass and light interact to (re)constitute knowledge as embodied, partial, and trans*. I invoke "trans" as it unsettles concepts—such as nation, region, and gender—to which it is attached and makes them metaphorically "tremble" as unknown. Per Jack Halberstam, I mobilize the asterisk mark to emphasize the capaciousness of these categories rather than thinking of them as rigid and inflexible.[2]

Edouard Duval-Carrié's *Mémoires Encastrées*: Effulgent and Kaleidoscopic Knowledge

Light filters through the back of Edouard Duval-Carrié's *Mémoires Encastrées (Memory Windows)*, 2017, mixed media works embedded in resin, that are installed along one wall of the gallery. Each work comprises one large central octagonal piece of plexi surrounded by three to four-sided parallelogram-shaped ones. They intentionally reference his previous work and feature new imagery and iconography drawn from Florida history, plantation life, the Haitian Vodou pantheon, and well-known illustrations of slavery. The works reveal the interplay and slippage between memory and history. For instance, *Memory Window #4* foregrounds portraits of enslaved, or formerly enslaved, laborers, and sharecroppers from northern Florida and southern Georgia enshrined in a watery, purple haze. The central photographs show men and women looking head-on at the viewer, their gazes unrelenting and their agency as sitters evident. While the colorful back-lit works beckon the viewer, they only offer fragments of information. Indeed, the goal here is less to stitch together the individual pieces into a narrative story than to create a powerfully affective experience that illustrates that light rarely illuminates or can delude one into thinking there is a whole truth.

For the Colored Girls is a dazzling new work Duval-Carrié made especially for this exhibition and came from conversations about Ezili with Kolasiński and me. This work is a homage to Ezili Freda, known for her luxury, beauty, flirtatiousness, flamboyance, and light skin color, and often associated with masisi, a term describing a spectrum of transfemininity. Here, Duval-Carrié focuses on how Freda recalls creole mulatto prostitutes of Saint-Domingue, the object of envy of many white colonial women and

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1. Hayden White, "Historiography and Historiophoty," The American Historical Review 93, no. 5 (December 1988): 1193–99.
2. Jack Halberstam, Trans* : A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability (Berkeley, CA : University of California Press, 2017).

the lust of many white colonial males. Revered and reviled, they were the offspring, at least initially, of African women and White men. Duval-Carrié's mesmerizing and simultaneously elusive works present truths as dreamy and kaleidoscopic. Still, an undercut of violence and inequity sometimes comes to the surface, not always seen or graspable but always felt.

Jacek J. Kolasiński's *Creole Archive*: Redux of Polish/Caribbean theystories

Kolasiński's *Creole Archive* is inspired by his visits to "Little Haiti," an area of Miami named for the many Haitian refugees of the 1980s who settled there. During his visits, he would see many depictions of the fierce and vengeful Haitian Vodou spirit Ezili Danto that resembles the doleful Black Madonna of Częstochowa, a four-foot-high religious icon of the Virgin Mary with which he was familiar.[3] Both Ezili Danto and the Black Madonna have darker skin and two slashes on their cheek. Their similarity is not accidental, and Kolasiński was aware of this. The transnational materialization of the Black Madonna as Ezili can be traced back to the presence of Poles in Haiti in the early 19th century. In 1802, 20,000 soldiers were sent by Napoleon Bonaparte to Saint-Domingue, France's wealthiest colony, to quell a rebellion led by the general Toussaint L'Ouverture, a formerly enslaved man. When the rebels won the revolution in 1804, Saint-Domingue was renamed Haiti, the island's original Taino name (Ayiti in Creole). The country's first president Jean-Jacques Dessalines famously said that the Polish were the "white negroes of Europe," given that Poles and Haitians shared similar stories of oppression and rootlessness.[4] Kolasiński has included acrylic engravings of part of the 1805 constitution that gives Haitian citizenship to Poles who fought alongside the Haitians. As the Poles settled down, their traditions began to meld with local ones. They resulted in the famous Polish icon of the Virgin Mary becoming a syncretic goddess in the Caribbean. While women attend to the day-to-day practices of Vodou, few of the religion's spirit forces, or Lwas, are feminine spirits: Ezili is an exception. Meanwhile, queer studies scholar Omise'eke Tinsley notes that Danto "transform[s] what it means to be a woman." For instance, madivin and masisi, or transmasculine and transfeminine Haitians, are often under Ezili Danto's patronage. Given that Catholic and Protestant spiritual communities do not welcome gender and sexually nonconforming subjects, it is not surprising that they are attracted to Ezili and the Vodou religion. The only successful slave revolution—the birth of Haiti—began with the appearance, in some accounts, of Elizi Danto at a Vodou ceremony at Bwa Kayiman on August 14, 1791.[5] I am using the word "theystories" (rather than histories or herstories) in deference to what amounts to an arguably trans/queer past as much as the present.

A portion of Kolasiński's *Creole Archive* is installed salon-style on one wall to encourage viewers to make their own connections. It includes everything from 3D printed objects, framed sheets of watercolor paper stamped with "EZILI DANTOR PROJECTS Creole Archive Special Collections," handmade silver jewelry, Polish fabric work with embroidered Vodou flags, and what are meant to be representations of ex votos. Collectively, they interlace Eastern European, North American, and African histories.

Sugary 3D-printed Madonnas

Kolasiński has 3D-printed over seventy Black Madonnas. A few are interspersed on the wall among other ephemera of his *Creole Archive*. One cluster appears as part of a makeshift altar, while another is situated so that it is visible to passersby walking by the window on Rockwell Place but less visible from inside UrbanGlass. Each Madonna is different – the glitches typical of printers here are not seen as errors or unwelcome.

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3. Ezili is also referred to as Erzulie and Erzuli. Ezili, though, is the most common spelling in Kreyòl.
4. Pawel Argan, "Polish Patriots Once Fought Alongside Haiti's Slaves," Newsweek, April 1, 2019, https://www.newsweek.com/poland-nationalism-new-york-haiti-slave-rebellion-revolution-1382388.
5. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, Ezili's Mirrors : Imagining Black Queer Genders (Durham : Duke University Press, 2018), 4, 9, 10, 11, and 72.

Kolasiński creates a "mise-en-abyme" through his production of multiple 3D-printed sculptures of the Black Madonna that range from being small enough to hold in one's palms to about two feet. The sculptures are hand-painted, often with patterning, a hybrid of traditional, Polish, folkloric clothing and Haitian Vodou flags. The sculptures exemplify the seemingly interminable subjectivities through which Ezili queers fixed categorical meaning. Tinsley, too, suggests as much when she refers to Ezili variously as "manly black superwoman," "beautiful femme queen, bull dyke, weeping willow, [and] dagger mistress," among other names. The plastic Kolasiński utilizes to print his Madonnas is made of sugar and corn and, in this way, references Haitian plantation culture. Haiti was France's wealthiest colony because of its sugar production. The physical process of printing his sculptures requires an incredible amount of heat – the plastic melts at roughly twice the temperature to boil water – and recalls the dangerous process of sugar refinement. The tireless work of the island's enslaved Indigenous population, the voices of which were silenced, is a manifestation of the hard-working yet muted Ezili Danto.

Glitter, Knowledge, and (the right to) Opacity

French philosopher and poet Edouard Glissant would characterize "opacity"—the right not to be known—as "the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence."[6] He believed that the possibility of an interconnected or creolized world could only happen if everyone had a right to opacity. This, of course, contradicts the West and its incessant need for transparency. Kolasiński often removes or obscures the Madonnas' faces to ensure their agency and opacity are left intact. For instance, above the altar are many acrylic Plexiglass silhouettes of the Black Madonna without faces. Many of the faces of the women of Duval-Carrié's *For the Colored Girls* are similarly obscured.

Throughout his archive, Kolasiński coats his 3D printed Madonnas, Polish soldiers, and black pig (woven into the oral history of the Haitian Revolution) with red and black glitter. Glitter particles act as little mirrors, each one reflecting light. Light bouncing off metallic glitter does so in a way that causes surfaces to shimmer and sparkle. In the process, glitter renders opaque anything underneath and plays nicely into Glissant's ideas. It is also worth noting, given how tied Ezili is to the LGBTQ community, that glitter is intimately tied to queer nightlife, including cabaret, drag, and burlesque. The more recent practice of "glitter bombing" refers to dousing politicians, such as Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum, with the difficult-to-remove material while shouting various LGBTQ rights slogans. In the early twentieth century, glitter was made from glass, but the material was scarce during World War II. It was at this time that glitter, the microplastic as we know it, was invented by American machinist Henry Ruschmann. Tellingly, even before the war, early drag queens (unable to afford glass glitter) often wore shiny jewelry and dressed in shimmering costumes.

Light, Lenses, and the Production of (Art Historical) Knowledge

Some of the artist's playful Augmented Reality (AR) experiments are projected onto the gallery floor. Via the lens of his iPhone, he has brought his Madonnas into everything from the Vatican and the recent Venice Biennial (with their "national" pavilions) to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In the process, he slyly disrupts the coherency of these spaces.

Art historian Pamela Lee has written, "Less discussed, but no less important, is the oblique contribution light plays in the evaluation of works of art, a far more slippery proposition, it turns out, than treating light as a medium in and of itself."[7] Extending

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6. Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 191.
7. Pamela M Lee, "Split Decision: Pamela M. Lee on the Demise of the˙Slide Projector," Artforum International 43, no. 3 (2004): 47.

this argument, it is not just light, but how it, in tandem with glass (lenses), has consolidated art historical knowledge so that it occludes the transnational circulation of ideas. Indeed, the slide projector has been one of art history's most ubiquitous pedagogical tools. This practice began with Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945), who showed pairs of black and white dispositives via the magic lantern, the forerunner of the modern slide projector. Through this method, he differentiated German and Italian formal styles. While PowerPoint has largely replaced slide projectors in the classroom, the compare/contrast mode often remains and tends to reinforce boundaries rather than their porousness.

Kolasiński's video projection in the back of the gallery riffs off the classical approach to art historical pedagogy to show successive pairs of his aforementioned artifacts (some of which are framed and installed on the wall) that scramble any sense of national coherency: signifiers connected to Africa, North America, and Europe are intermingled. In the slide show, he shows artifacts that gesture toward the complex transregional histories unfolding from slavery. During the early 19th century, amid the Haitian revolution, many whites, and free people of color from Saint Domingue arrived with their slaves in Louisiana. Also, Kolasiński includes artifacts with images of the Fon people, linked to the Dahomey Kingdom, of present-day Benin, who were enslaved and brought to Haiti (among other places). The Fon are known to have brought their Vodou practices with them. The Kreyòl word "Vodou" is transculturated from the Fon Kingdom, where sacred energies were called "Vodun." Finally, Kolasiński incorporates an image of a recent protest in Poland in which the LGBTQ community has appropriated the Black Madonna. It Is not clear if the protestors are aware of the queerness attached to Ezili, a creolized version of the Black Madonna, but it seems as if we have come full circle. Displayed next to this projection are Edouard Duval-Carrié's renderings of trees with visible roots through a drypoint technique on blue plexi—they are simple but profound metaphors that rootedness is born through chaotic relations.

Dr. Jacek J. Kolasiński is an associate professor of art and the founding director of the Ratcliffe Incubator of Art + Design at Florida International University (FIU). He has a PhD in Fine Arts from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and an MFA in Visual Arts from FIU. He lives in Miami, Florida, and grew up in Kraków, Poland, where he studied history and philosophy at Jagiellonian University. His work has been supported by grants from the Getty Library and Oolite Arts, among others, and exhibited internationally. He is an honorary member of the Art Academy of Latvia.

Edouard Duval-Carrié was born in Port-au-Prince. His family emigrated to Puerto Rico while he was a child during the François Duvalier regime. Duval-Carrié studied at the Université de Montréal and McGill University in Canada before graduating with a Bachelor of Arts from Loyola College, Montréal, in 1978. He later attended the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, France, from 1988 to 1989. He resided in France for many years but now lives among Miami's substantial Haitian immigrant population.

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