

Pascale Monnin, *La Dette*. Concrete, mirror, canvas, light. Dimensions vary. 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Wrapped in Images and the Materiality of Art Practices: Vladimir Cybil Charlier, Sasha Huber, and Pascale Monnin

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Pascale Monnin, *L'Ange de la Résurrection* (Resurrection Angel). Raku, beads, and metal. Dimensions vary. 2006. Courtesy of the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami.



Pascale Monnin, *L'Ange de la Résurrection* (Resurrection Angel) (Detail). Raku, beads, and metal. Dimensions vary. 2006. Courtesy of the Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami.

In his compelling study *Diasporic Citizenship: Haitian Americans in Transnational America*, Michel Laguerre suggests a re-examination and reconfiguration of the definitions of diasporic citizenship to better reflect transnational movements and the lives of those who have been marked by migration. Laguerre (1998) contends that this definition must take into consideration the residual effects of globalization, the experiences produced by inhabiting multiple locations and geographic spaces, as well as the cultural production of those spaces. Echoing Laguerre's assertion and examining the cultural complexities of diasporic artistic production, in this essay I call attention to the dynamic nature of visual production by exploring selected artworks of three artists of Haitian descent: Pascale Monnin, Vladimir Cybil Charlier, and Sasha Huber. I highlight these three artists because of the ways in which they create visual dialogues while working in and through cross-cultural aesthetics and practices, illuminating the complexities of gendered identities, historical memories, and the materiality of art practices. In effect, they offer us the opportunity to "rethink the idea of Haitianness...[within] a globalized context" (Dash 2008, 41). Furthermore, this essay is an exploratory engagement with broad, more complex Caribbean diasporic visual vocabularies that take into consideration the quotidian nature of personal archives, the permeable nature of materials, and the penetrating nature of the palimpsest. Borne through creative processes and interpretations of memories that reside in a *knowing* of Haiti that is both conceptual and representational—representative of an actual place and at the same time

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conceiving of an idea—their artworks provide new avenues for thinking about portraiture, imagery, and layered narratives as they are influenced and embedded in history. These avenues are cultivated through the effective tensions between established artistic genres (portraiture and sculpture), formal artistic styles (conceptual and realism), and discursive modes of creative production (collage and assemblage). Huber, Monnin, and Cybil do not share any prescribed or specific medium, preferring to experiment with divergent forms, media, and artistic traditions. As contemporary artists of Haitian descent, however, what they do share is a desire to express the multiple vantage points that converge and create diasporic Haitian aesthetics.

Through a series of imaginative framings, Monnin, Cybil, and Huber engage in a visual lexicon that highlights the complexities of history, memory, and the normative categories of gender while navigating the slippery slopes of transnational identities. Working with paper and book pages to create collages affords Harlem-based Cybil the opportunity to bring together recognizable, iconic images and ordinary materials that do not appear cohesive. Based in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Monnin's public kinetic sculptures are meditative processes that combine a spiritual quality with ocular splendor. Unlike traditional portraiture created in such conventional medium as paints, inks, and oils on canvas or paper, Huber uses staples and discarded plywood. She pushes the envelope of portraiture while playing with materials and challenging the two-dimensionality of painting. What we can decipher from these portraits is not the realistic rendering of individual subjects, but the stories and histories that are embedded in what the images represent.



Sasha Huber, *Shooting Back - Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier (Dictator of Haiti, 1971-86)*. Metal staples on abandoned wood, 80 x 115 cm. 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

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Sasha Huber, *Shooting Back - François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (Dictator Of Haiti, 1957-71)*. Metal staples on abandoned wood, 80 X 115 cm. 2004. Courtesy of the Artist.



Sasha Huber, *Shooting Back - Christopher Columbus (Conqueror, 15th Century)*. Metal staples on abandoned wood, 80 X 115 cm. 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

For Zurich-born, Helsinki-based Huber, Haiti has never been a lived experience, only something imagined by listening to the stories of her mother, aunt, and, especially, her grandfather, Georges Remponeau, a leading artist and one of the founders of Centre d'Art, the famous art school and gallery in Haiti during the 1940s. Huber is a multidisciplinary artist trained in graphic design. Her works range from the conceptually inspired to the formal use of materials in a painterly fashion to large-scale, site-specific

installations that stem from organic and fluid processes of aesthetic analysis. Her on-going series, *Shooting Back: Reflections on Haitian Roots*, which she began in 2004, consists of three portraits of individuals who have marked the history of Haiti: Christopher Columbus, François Duvalier, and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier. Using a semi-automatic stapling gun and approximately 100,000 staples, she punctures the grooved surface of the discarded plywood to create large-scale textured portraits. Unlike traditional portraiture, which aims to create a likeness of an individual, in *Shooting Back* Huber signals the brutality that arrived with Columbus' landing on the isle of Hispaniola through her use of the sharp, metal "paint" on the coarse, uneven surface of the wood. Equally, the heinous dictatorship of the Duvalier regime is palpable as the piercing staples rupture the dense rejected wood. It is as if the traditional methods of portraiture are not sufficient to visualize the traumatic histories that are associated with the Duvaliers and Columbus.

Through a keen sense of composition and fine artistry, Huber employs the classic artistic genre of portraiture by exploring the possibilities and nuances of a particular new art material entering ever so slightly into the realm of sculptural elements—elements that are shared in Monnin's kinetic sculptural mobile. By substituting materials such as oil, ink, and paint used on the porous surface of the canvas, Huber uses staples to underscore the ways in which the epidermis, the top layer of the skin represented by the thick density of the wood, is an absorber of memories of the past that influence the present and the future. For Huber, skin serves as a repository for the projection of collective memories and traumas. Like Huber, who challenges the assumptions that portraits are "truthful" representations of their subject, in *L'Ange de la Résurrection*, Monnin explores the materiality and possibilities of non-traditional materials through an acute sense of spatial alignment of delicately balanced components (Philogene, forthcoming). Her mixed-media mobile installations are concerned with representation and with the materiality of the fleshy surface that makes up the visage. Monnin departs from traditional portraiture to create a visually stunning body of work using glittering beads, sparkling crystals, and faux pearls purchased from a defunct bridal store in Haiti, ornately held together by wires and steel. These delicate materials come to form the shape of heads of her friends and family.

Combining the compositional skills of a painter with the technical skill of an assemblage artist, Huber creates complex and layered historical narratives by combining different materials; the effect is dramatic. The rich, lustrous sliver of the staples gives off a sheen as the staples form the facial features of Duvalier *père* and *fils*, adding a rich patina splendor to the piece. The importance of light is also paramount for *L'Ange de la Résurrection*, which rests up high—elegantly among branches of trees or from gallery ceilings. As it spins, we see the back of the mask, an intricate and beautiful assemblage of faux gemstones, steel, and wires, as light passes through the steel and wires to surround the space with eerie dancing shadows. The light that bounces off the pieces of glass and crystal creates an almost animated object. Monnin provocatively blends the elements of craft and fine arts by creating a sculptural piece that delicately moves and shimmies in space, radiating light and shadows to explore the

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continuum between spirituality and transformation, elements that are fundamental to the black diasporic experience (Philogene, forthcoming).

Since 2006, Monnin has employed a traditional Japanese pottery-making form of *rakuto* create the masks that are at the center of her mobile site-specific installations. Motivated by bittersweet childhood memories of mask-making during Carnival season in Haiti, in 2000 she began using this three-firing casting process to explore the dualities of life and death and capture the humanity expressed on the faces of friends and family at the time of the sitting.¹ Like Huber, Monnin's interest in the image rests not so much in *who* they are, but *what* they tell us, and what they *force us to remember*. For Monnin, her desire is not to create an exact replica of the sitter; instead, her goal is to capture the expression of the sitter at the exact moment his or her face shapes the mold. Here I want to signal Huber's and Monnin's astute use of the aesthetic strategy of "representation", at once to suggest it as a form of artistic practice in description and as a form of symbolic meaning, both of which, as Kobena Mercer (2005) suggests, pertain to the relationship of art and politics. Discarded plywood and the sharp surface of commonplace staples come together as reminders of a violent past, revealed as political, economic, and social issues are avowed and placed onto individual bodies, where they reside, on some symbolically and on others literally. In other words, what is subtly emphasized in *Shooting Back* by the markings made on the wood by the staples are the discursive powers of history and trauma as they are written on the epidermis and manifested on the corporal. The painstaking and fastidious nature of the work is framed within dialectics of meaning. The physical act of "shooting" a staple gun to "draw" these portraits is a metaphorical "shooting back" at the tragic history that is part of Haiti's legacy. The physically laborious nature of the work adds another layer of meaning to the work. Alone, each portrait is forceful; however, when shown together, we can understand the narrative they tell us. Together they conjure the brutal nature of colonization and dictatorship. Perhaps Huber's goal is not to use the skin as an impervious barrier that seals the interior bodies and the historical results of these bodies from the world, but to make visible the historical and global impact of these men.

A visual representation of the subject is what portraiture seeks to communicate, often through lighting, posing, use of symbols and materials, as well as through the artist's own formal and stylistic approaches. What is clear is that through portraiture, the face is the site where identity is legible, history can be read, and experiences are decipherable. Monnin's goal can be understood perhaps as interplay between incomprehensibility on the one hand and decipherability on the other. We can determine by the shape of the mobile that it is the shape of a young person's head—in this case, a young boy named Antoine. He can also be one of the many nameless and anonymous faces and bodies that lined the streets of Haiti after the catastrophic 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, in 2010. Through their use of non-traditional art materials, Huber and Monnin highlight the deep-rooted connections between the body, memory, and history. The use of non-traditional materials is also part of the work of Vladimir Cybil Charlier.

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But sometimes you have to tell your own stories, not just to understand yourself but to understand the world, to find the space between their stories and yours, to learn what's really going on . (O'Grady 2012, 8)



Vladimir Cybil Charlier, *Basket of Women*. India ink, paper collage, artist tape, graphite, and laser transfer on acrylic. 24" x 30". 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Cybil is influenced by both the textual elements of the novel, as well as its fantastical and imaginative gestures. She has drawn, taped, photocopied, and stenciled various gendered art historical references on pages that come from chapters titled “The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill” and “A Caucus-Race and a Long Table.” This is an engaging, textured, and multilayered artwork that invites us to ask, what does it mean to carry memory? Through her pointed use of mixed-media collage, Cybil presents a dense constellation of images and histories through which she allows herself to engage with western art traditions, all the while picking and choosing *how* she places these histories and images to fit her own black Caribbean diasporic self. Cybil’s artwork asks us to question not only the notion of gender, but also the *myths* and fables that are associated with the creation of gendered identities, as well as the definition of female beauty. In part, *Basket of Women* is about the difficulties of defining and coming to terms with complex identities in a postmodern world where gendered and racial identity are not simply written on the body, nor can they be determined through the visual. The images in *Basket of Women* come together as a composite portrait, a fascinating exploration of the creative process, played out in the fragmented space of assemblage and bricolage, at the nexus of *rasanblaj*. Born in

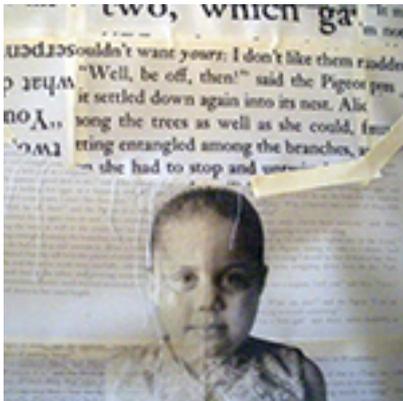
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Haiti, Cybil spent her formative years in Haiti, returning to the United States in her late teens. Trained as a painter, she is known for her deft melding of photography and drawings and works on paper with sewn sequins, large-scale fiber-based paintings, and sculptural wall hangings. In 2008, Cybil created *Basket of Women* using various conventional Western art history images of women: Sandro Botticelli's *Venus*, the classic Greek statue, *Venus de Milo*, Edgar Degas' dancer, a quintessential image of Paul Gauguin's young Tahitian girl, the wing of the Nike of Samothrace, a Japanese illustration, and two African masks are held together by white artist tape and white string and thread. Underneath the images are enlarged pages from Cybil's favorite childhood storybook, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, written in 1865 by British author Charles Lutwidge Dodgson under the pseudonym Lewis Carroll. The well-known tale is of young Alice, who falls down a rabbit hole and enters into a fantasy world populated by anthropomorphic creatures. At the bottom center of *Basket of Women* is a black-and-white photograph of a four-year-old Cybil taken by her father. For Cybil, Alice's fantastical adventures resonate on a personal level. They draw on her childhood memories and function as useful metaphors to contextualize her experiences as an individual living in the capricious world of the Haitian diaspora; a world like Alice's filled with unpredictability yet anchored by creativity.

By placing together what at first glance may seem to be disparate iconic images, Cybil examines bicultural experiences that speak to the coexistence and possibilities of difference. In the lower part of the mixed-media collage, a young Cybil displays a shy smile. On top of her head is larger text from *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*, outlined by artist tape to form the shape of a basket where feminist tropes from art history resided in a patchwork fashion. As the layers of personal history and art historical conventions link together, they generate unique non-linear narratives that yield revelations and reflections. Like a palimpsest, peeking from beneath the pieces of rice and vellum paper, the collage operates as a meditative space of artistic practices and histories that act as a connective tissue between the Haitian "self" and the American "other." In a recent conversation, Cybil remarks:

...the rabbit [in *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland*] reminds me of part of my constructed self, as an American citizen, artist self, probably one of the main times I feel American is when I think about art and feel comfortable talking about art in English that is how I think about the work. I came to the U.S. to be an artist and [that] is where I was trained, so I think about art in English, my references are in English. When I am talking about art, I feel very much American. The gesture for me is completely American.²

And why not?



Vladimir Cybil Charlier, *Basket of Women* (Detail). India Ink, paper collage, artist tape, graphite, and laser transfer on acrylic. 24" x 30". 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

Aligning her young self with the young Alice allows Cybil “the liberty to claim seamlessly that bicultural experience. The work is very much about the poetry and absolute unencumbered conceptual liberty of childhood and empowering myself to construct a mirror for my cultural experiences.”³ The palimpsest-like quality of *Basket of Women*—ink drawings laid over rice paper, then laid over vellum paper, and then laid over the machine-manufactured pages of a novel patched together by artist tape, while still allowing each layer to be seen, speaks to an important feature of Cybil’s work, layering. Layering “functions here as both technique and metaphor, as a formal strategy that mirrors and enacts the artist’s profound sense of Caribbean identities as overwritten manuscripts” (Stephens 2013, 98). Michelle Stephens (2013) has highlighted that layering paper and various porous and malleable materials into assemblages is a different kind of [hand] gesture than laying brush strokes on a canvas, and thus it requires different creative and interpretive sensibilities that invite structural ornamentation and formal qualities. Arranged in a grid pattern, “the pages are chosen purely for their visual effect in juxtaposition to other images and arranged not because of any semiotic meaning beyond what is generated accidentally from the free association of images and text” (2013, 98). Instead, Stephens claims that Cybil “is interested less in the juxtaposition of different elements than in the relationships between surface textures and what lies underground” (98). Moreover, the layering, abstracting, and manipulation of text present certain “material complexities of black life under worldly conditions of diaspora” (Mercer 2012, 214). Perhaps it is in the meaningful decorative textured element of Cybil’s collage that we can explore the under recognized history of the expressive Caribbean female form in visual culture. Furthermore, it is in this fragmented yet structural pictorial space similar to Huber’s portraits, that Cybil expands the conception of portraiture, as a formal process; one that implies signification and not simply representation.



Vladimir Cybil Charlier, *Basket of Women* (Detail). India Ink, paper collage, artist tape, graphite, and laser transfer on acrylic. 24" x 30". 2014. Courtesy of the artist.

What connects their work is a deft attention to compositional strategies that are steeped in formalism and the materiality of contemporary art practices. At the same time, they are concerned conceptually with cross-cultural dialogues and transnational connections. As transnational individuals living in transcultural spaces, Huber, Monnin, and Cybil use disparate sources and draw on their experiences and knowledge of multiple cultures to offer alternative visions of visual art practices. While each has specific cultural references and have lived or currently live *lòt bò dlo*,⁴ Monnin's, Huber's, and Cybil's works "travel" across the language" and cultural barriers to "come together in the cultural composition of the Caribbean and its various diaspora" (Mercer 2011, 12). They are engaged in exploring their cross-cultural heritage and hybrid identities that are layered in a visual *kreyòlization*, a *kreyòl* "cut 'n' mix".⁵ They provide us with inventive tools to think about innovative creative forms as inquiries that can inspire a true rethinking of the textual, of the material, of the allegorical, and of the visual. In complex ways, they challenge conventional ideas of art practices and explore the global realities of the Haitian artistic diaspora; for these critical aesthetic interventions, Pascale Monnin, Vladimir Cybil Charlier, and Sasha Huber warrant our attention and further exploration.

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of *Haitian Citizenship*, which provides a rich textual analysis of the power of the visual field and its complex relationship between violence, domination, and liberation through an exploration of contemporary painting, photography, film, and comics.

Notes

¹ Monnin's older brother died at the age of seven during Carnival season. She was three. This painful incident inspires these masks.

² Email exchange with Cybil, 13 March 2014.

³ Email exchange with Cybil, 13 August 2014.

⁴ *Lòt bò dlo* in Haitian Kreyòl translates as "on the other side of the water," loosely meaning "abroad."

⁵ I employ Dick Hebdige's term "cut 'n' mix" to reference the strategic and artistic practices employed by Huber, Monnin, and Cybil as they too bring together the various influences on their creative process. Specifically, Hebdige's term "cut 'n' mix" refers to the mixing and hybridization of reggae as it was birthed in Jamaica and traveled throughout the Caribbean diaspora in North America and Europe. See Dick Hebdige, 1987, *Cut 'n' Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*, New York: Methuen & Co.

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