

From Pop to Politics

Artist's Evolving Style Has Increased His Popularity



"Men anpil chay pa lou"

By *Cassandra Thrasybule*
Haitian Times Staff

QUEENS - At first glance, Fritz St. Jean seems to be distant. But the Haitian born artist, whose life size mural has graced the tall walls of Manhattan's Museum of Natural History, is quite friendly and charming.

On a recent afternoon at his home in Queens Village, St. Jean, 46, spoke candidly about his life as an artist and a family man. Though he has achieved international success as an artist, St. Jean counts becoming a grandfather as one of his most proud achievements. During more than an hour, St. Jean also spoke about his other artistic love: Singing.

"If I had not succeeded as a painter, I would be a singer," said the tall and robust St. Jean.

Whether singing or painting, St. Jean was certainly born to be an artist.

Like most artists, St. Jean is a bit eccentric and enigmatic. This personality trait translates into his work. When he started painting in 1972, St.-Jean's work featured jungle scenes and still life. They were largely of the decorative genre, the kind of paintings that tourists love to buy and hang above their couch.

"This was a good period to paint in this style," said St. Jean, who later adopted what is commonly known as the Jacmel style of paintings in Haiti.

St. Jean continued to paint pastels for tourists for about a decade. Then, like an adolescent entering adulthood, he did a complete change and his subjects became overtly political. St. Jean said that he wanted to depict and reveal the political and social problems of Haiti. They were being told in pastoral and vodou scenes.

"I changed because there was the need to express what I was feeling, there was the need to talk about what was going on around me and inside of me," he said. "This is my contribution to my country. It is very good that some painters try to represent Haiti by painting the countryside, but our political history has also to be told, and that is how I can tell it."

St. Jean's work is significant, chronicling the turmoil in Haiti for the last 15 years.

One of his paintings in particular describes scenes that happened from the period of the Duvalier regime to the election of Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 1990.

One of St. Jean's paintings featured the notorious Fort Dimanche prison, where thousands of Haitians were beaten, tortured and killed during the Duvalier years from 1957 to 1986. You can also see the former strongman General Henri Namphy telling people to come aboard a train. At the bottom of the painting, St. Jean wrote sarcastically "men anpil, chay pa lou."



Fritz St. Jean

That proverb, which means "with many hands the load is light," is one of the favorites of the popular Aristide, who adopted it as a slogan during his run for the presidency in 1990.

Another one of his paintings deals with the torture of Abner Louima, a Haitian man who was sodomized by the police in Brooklyn in 1997. The bucolic painting features five blue birds on the ground wearing blue stars. The birds also have plungers on their beaks. Scores of birds crowd the tall majestic trees. The scene in pretty perfect pastel colors is haunting, the statue of Liberty is falling down and the plungers, of course, are a vivid reminder of what happened to Louima in a bathroom at the 70th police precinct in Brooklyn.

"I want people to remember things that happened", said St.-Jean.

Fritz St.-Jean was one of the artists who

exhibited at the exposition "Sacred Heart of Haitian Vodou", an exhibit of Haitian art that crisscrossed the United States for about two years. That exhibit received critical acclaim for its authenticity and the high quality of the work featured.

Among the paintings exhibited "Rassemblement". The painting depicts Haitians coming from all over the country, and former president Aristide in a Vodou ceremony making a "Veve" of democracy.

By looking at St. Jean's studio in his house in Queens, you could tell that Vodou is one of his inspirations. Statuette's, images and candles are part of the decoration.

"Vodou is the religion which defines the Haitian people", said St. Jean. "If you want to describe Haiti, or talk about it, it's inevitable that you mention it."

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