

Haitian artist depicts beauty, strife

Fritz St. Jean sends out political messages on canvas from Queens Village home

By AARON RUBIN

A giant rooster touched against a water blue sky watches an endless stream of ant-like people depositing watermelons, bananas and pineapples into an oversized yellow wicker basket.

The painting, a political message portrayed in the traditional Haitian style of brave colors and fine lines, hung in the house of Fritz St. Jean, a Queens Village Haitian artist who portrays the beauty and strife of his country with a brush.

"The Haitian people need a new life," said 42-year-old St. Jean, surrounded by his work in his home on Francis Lewis Boulevard. "There is too much fighting."

The battle-worn rooster in his painting called "Main en pil, charge pa lou" (Many hands make for a lighter load) represents Ogou Ferraille, the voodoo god of war.

"That is President Aristide perched on the basket, which is Haiti," St. Jean said. "The basket is empty, but the people are coming together to put something in it."

In the painting, the god of war is a symbol of peace, he said.

Born in Port-au-Prince, the Haitian capital, St. Jean emerged as one of his country's most prolific artists, winning the Gallery Monin's artist of the year award three consecutive times.

In 1985, St. Jean immigrated to the United States, where he found a strong cultural Haitian community in Queens Village. His work which is shown around the world, is often on display at the Active Art Gallery on 179-19 Jamaica Ave. in Jamaica.

When asked why he left Haiti for the United States, St. Jean responded with a half grin.

"My paintings can be political. There are people who think they are good and there are people who think they are not good."

Some critics call his style surreal, while others tell him he is a naive artist in the longtime Haitian tradition of primitive art. But St. Jean said he just paints what he feels.

"It's just Haitian painting," he said, flashing a broad smile punctuated by two gold front teeth. "It's a big thing, man."

Often displaying a political and social commentary on his country, St. Jean said he also strives to depict the natural beauty of the Haitian landscape.

"Every second the colors of the sky change in Haiti," he said.

On his wall, a painting done for his wife, Sonine, was of earthy red tones showing a sunset.

He used to sell his work on a regular basis until Sonine made him stop.

"She told me to keep the paintings for our children," said St. Jean, who has two young daughters.

Now the full-time artist sells his paintings only when they are on display, which is about once every two years.



FRITZ ST. JEAN, (left) a Haitian painter from Queens Village and one of his works (below) "Main en pil, charge pa lou."

