

# Arturo Lindsay

## FACES FOR THE HISTORY WITHOUT HISTORY

The voyage on a slave ship not only meant the abrupt arrival of the Kongo, Mandinga, Fon, Yoruba and other African peoples to a different world, but also rupture from their previous worlds. One of the most violent acts committed against the men and women who were carried away in slave ships was to separate them from their landscapes, societies, cultures, and families turning them into "negros." This racist construction leveled out any diversity, reducing conditions into a bipolarity of dominator and dominated. Even the idea of "Africa" is a European generalization.

The slaves not only preserved their cultures of origin, readapting them to their new locations, but managed to turn their cultures into one of the more active components of what we now call the Americas. This brilliant manipulation, carried out under the lash of the whip, has been one of the greatest spiritual achievements in the history of humanity. If in Brazil and the Catholic South, the ebb and flow between the two coasts of the Atlantic created a situation that was somewhat favorable, albeit very brutal, in the North accomplishing that feat was much more difficult. As a result, a frequent agenda item in African American art in the United States is the construction of an identity with roots on the other side of the ocean. These roots are at times difficult to recognize: "an enigma between the waters" as Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén has said, but they explain and confirm the difference. Therefore, they must be studied as well as reinvented.

Guillén, a mulato with a Spanish surname, often wondered about his true family name: "Am I Wolof? Perhaps Kumbá? Might I be Guillén Kongué?" Much of contemporary Afro-North American art is a search for and a construction of lost family names; of a mythical and at the same time a real Africa that affirms cultural identity. The case of Arturo Lindsay is quite notable. A mulato of Panamanian origin, raised in New York, he can check various boxes on a survey sheet: African American? Hispanic? Native American? His search for African roots took him to Panama, a typical *mestizo* (culturally diverse) Caribbean country, where he lived in a rural community that still maintains some of the values of Kongo origin. James Clifford has commented that "perhaps there's no return for anyone to a native land—only field notes for its reinvention," from that experience Lindsay has used art to re-establish a lost family memory. He uses the structure of Afro-Caribbean religious altars to convene his known and unknown ancestors. In this way he renders homage to his family and his cultural traditions by mystically convening them, and at the same time, mysteriously recreating them.

Lindsay's altars have an ecumenical feeling; they reflect both the African and European elements of his ancestry. This appears to be a difficult concept to understand in the United States where one is either "black," or "white" according to a very Western world-view based on opposition. Lindsay's posture of inclusion is very Caribbean. It is supported by the same inclusive character of the altars which have always been spaces for dialogue and resignification of diverse or even totally opposing elements. The installations inspired by African American altars that many artists are producing today are made possible by the "post-modern" and the *avant la lettre* (pre-literate) nature of the altars themselves.

Another important aspect is the creation of a history of peoples without a history. Lindsay imagines the faces of the lost heroes of slave insurrections, deifying them through art. These works bring together a pop language associated with advertising and the media with traditional African inspired sculptures, religious Catholic and Afro-American votive objects, video, soil, and offerings. With all these elements Lindsay designs the iconography of an unofficial history that is lacking images. He harmonizes the aura of art with the religious power of the altars to legitimize the history of the marginalized of his country of origin. He identifies his heroes with angels and archangels in yet another mixture of cultural perspectives. At the same time, he provides a romantic tone to history through an approach that, as in the case of his ancestors, is invested with and characterized by personal affection.

Lindsay draws attention to the process of creating religious images, an artistic endeavor which has included the faces of Buddha and Christ. His "field notes" are minimal: some generic surnames, legends, some documentary references. This zone of historic silence augmented by his recollection of the millions of dead slaves of whom there is neither an image or name. The work of this artist makes us aware of how hegemonic our iconographic stock is. Many of us do not know our ancestors, nor our history, not even our faces. But, as Guillén said, "without knowing ourselves we will recognize ourselves."

*Gerardo Mosquera*

Gerardo Mosquera is a critic and curator who lives in Havana and New York.