

arturo lindsay

For Arturo Lindsay, art is a communal practice. The Eurocentric concept of romanticized, insular self-expression is alien to his work. In his paintings, sculptures, installations, and performance pieces, Lindsay approaches art as a social force and a corporate ritual that probes and focuses spirituality. His work speaks from the self yet for an audience, perhaps a reflection of his training in theater. For Lindsay, there are no boundaries between art and life: public and private spheres are conflated in his art. With his symbolically charged imagery, he transforms the secular arena of our daily world into celebratory, metaphysical space. More often than not, his works are ephemeral and exist in untraditional sites—a vacant lot near the Nuyorican Poets Cafe on the Lower East Side, at C.U.A.N.D.O. in the East Village, at Fashion Moda in The Bronx. When located in a museum, they undercut the authority and facelessness of the institutionalized setting and warm it with their idiomatic profusion. Lindsay casts the viewer in the role of participant; his works frequently become a kind of proprietary experience. They offer a magical place of calm in the center of the storm of contemporaneity.

As even his name indicates, Arturo Lindsay is a *mestizo*. His paternal grandfather (an Antigua of Scottish descent) and his St. Lucian grandmother retired to a farm in the jungle outside of Colón, Panamá (the Caribbean seaport where the artist was raised) and kept house in traditional British fashion, complete with portraits of the King and Queen. Lindsay vividly recalls playing in the bush during visits there and discovering clearings charged with an air of mystery and scattered with remnants of Afro-Caribbean rituals. Such diversity typifies his rich *mestizo* ancestry—an assemblage of Yoruba, Ashanti, French Creole, Latino, and European cultures and oral traditions.¹ Although he was raised a devout Catholic and at one point aspired to be a priest, the local Cuna Indian customs and the Africanisms of the *Congos* coastal culture (amalgamated freely in local rituals such as carnival) were also a primary part of his heritage. By the time he immigrated to New York at the age of thirteen, Lindsay had assimilated far-reaching influences and memories. Being a *mestizo* is at the heart of his work and its soulful expansiveness.

Lindsay began his intellectual pursuit of African culture as a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in the early 1970s, inspired by his teachers Nelson Stevens (a member of AFRICOBRA), Leonel Gongora (a Colombian artist), anthropologist Johnetta Cole (now president of Spelman College), and the vibrant, radical community of black and third-world scholars there.² His art was colored by the collective spirit of the time, by the politics of the 1960s, and by the cooperative force of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement, with its tribalistic overtones. Lindsay's art has always been about community, a characteristic perhaps heightened by his own cultural dislocation. In the mid-1970s, for example, he initiated a public mural project in Hartford, executed by students in community programs for economically disadvantaged youth. Some ten

years later, he became a founding member of Plexus, an international cooperative of artists and performers from Europe, Africa, and the Americas. The importance of ancestry and cultural retention pervades his art, as in his bronze *Ancestral Guardian* masks, 1981, and his *Ancestral Effigies*, 1988, iconic sculptures that embody traditional African forms and symbology.

In his dissertation "Performance Art Ritual as Postmodern Thought: An Aesthetic Investigation," Lindsay calls himself an "artist-researcher," a designation that clarifies his work and its ethnographic underpinnings. He explained:

My subject is the art of the African diaspora. Like the scholar, I spend countless hours researching various aspects of African art in the motherland as well as in the Americas. Unlike the scholar, my final conclusions are not literary, objective observations; rather, they are subjective, visual contributions to that same body of art which I study.³

Lindsay's art is an act of cultural reclamation and of revitalizing self-confirmation for artist and audience alike.

Lindsay models his role as an artist on that of the anthropological participant/observer. He has long been fascinated by *santería*, an Afro-Cuban religion that is rooted in Yoruba practices, recast within the dominant Catholic culture. *Santería*—"the way of the saints"—was practiced subterfugously by many Yoruba brought to Cuba in slavery in the nineteenth century (an estimated 500,000-700,000 people) who were by law baptized into Catholicism. The cult was later in fact sustained through *cabildos*, social clubs organized by the Church. Through theatrical dance, song, and herbal offerings, devotees invoke specific *orishas* (divine beings who can be both benevolent and wrathful). The personalities of African deities became fused with traits of the saints, who were seen as manifestations of the same spirit.⁴ *Santería* has an interwoven, highly evolved iconography and color symbolism: its practices have thrived in expatriot Cuban communities in New York and Miami. The visually rich religion has been a powerful source for many artists, such as Ana Mendieta, whose work has been particularly inspirational for Lindsay. In the late 1970s, Lindsay began training as an initiate in *santería*. His *madrina* (spiritual mentor or godmother) was Dr. Aleida Portuondo, a professor at Howard University. His guiding *orisha* was Oshun, a goddess of love whose color, gold, is prevalent in Lindsay's work.

Homenaje a Osanyín [Homage to Osanyín], 1991 (cat. 46), Lindsay's installation for this exhibition, is based on the legends of *santería* and rekindled memories of Panamá (reflected also in his recent series of lush tropical paintings). *Osanyín* is the *orisha* of the forest and of healing. He controls the herbs with which all other *orishas* must be honored, which he once tried to hoard. As a result, *Osanyín* was disabled in his battle with the deity Eshu, and now has only one eye, one arm, one leg, and a small, bird-like voice. Although maimed, he has the special power to heal others and thus symbolizes the lessons and spirit of cooperation.



Cat. 46, detail: *Homenaje a Osanyín* [*Homage to Osanyín*], 1991



Cat. 46, detail: *Retrato de Osanyín*, 1991

Osanyín is linked to St. Joseph, the color green, and the number three: his primary emblems are leaves, the forest, and the *osun*, a short staff with a funnel to hold herbs, crowned by a bird (often a rooster) and bells. The lore of Osanyín is especially strong in western Cuba and northeastern Brazil, and his followers are learned in the intricacies of herbal medicine. The *orisha* is often identified with beads of yellow, black, red, and white, each of which designates certain powerful herbs.⁵ In *Homenaje a Osanyín*, Lindsay adopts this specific iconography; he also enlists traditional *cantos* of Panamá and *bembe* (drum and dance festivals for the *orishas*) as a musical backdrop, like voices calling from a distant legacy. Lindsay once explained:

The [beat of] the drum is the tongue of God. It keeps alive the heartbeat and the rhythms of our people. [The beat of music is central to the life of the people.] They think about it when they first get up in the morning and turn on the stereo to listen to music. The rhythm maintains itself in their speech, in their pattern of walk—even in the colors they chose for their clothes and make-up, there is a rhythm in the color scheme.⁶

Here, Osanyín appears on the central painting, flanked by sculptural *osun*⁷ in an arrangement reminiscent of Yoruba community altars. Votive candles demarcate the ceremonial stage, and grass, herbs, and tropical plants evoke the deity and the setting of a dense, sheltering forest—a source of renewal and nurture. A bowl waits to receive petitions and offerings.

These carefully placed objects gesture to a transposed sacred arena in which Lindsay sensitizes viewers to touch, sound, and smell as well as sight.

Homenaje a Osanyín is also a tribute to painter Wifredo Lam, whose surrealist style and cross-cultural perspective Lindsay specifically reflects. Lam was Cuban, born of a Chinese father and a mulatto mother with Spanish and Indian blood. He recalled both his father's practices of sacrifice and those of his godmother Mantonica Wilson, a healer and *santera* in whose house Lam first saw African objects. Lam lived in Madrid and then in Paris from 1924 to 1941, where he associated with Picasso and a sophisticated avant-garde circle; the "primitive" forms in his work were not simply borrowed (as for his modernist colleagues), but culturally recovered. References to *santería* and African art abound in Lam's paintings, particularly after his return to Cuba. The double axe of Shango (master of thunder who Mantonica invoked in her healings), recurs in his paintings.⁸ So, too, does Osanyín, who appears in Lam's well-known masterpiece *The Jungle*, 1943 (collection of The Museum of Modern Art). Many photographs of Lam show him in his spectacular, lush Caribbean garden, which Lindsay's verdant installation may also suggest.

Lindsay fluidly embraces diverse systems of representation and meaning. Although his work overtly has the multifarious complexity claimed of postmodernism, it lacks the remote objectivity, criticality, and skepti-

cism associated with mainstream contemporary art. Lindsay accepts—indeed endorses—the possibility of experiential totality and the curative power of art, anathemas to strict postmodern theorists. Perhaps, as scholar Cornel West posits, the very notion of postmodernism is “parochial,” narrowly Eurocentric,⁹ and a belated claim to a pluralism inherent to traditionally devalued cultures not bound by linearity, exclusivity, and western rationalism. Content, in Lindsay’s work, remains unusually potent and active—enigmatically half-studied, half-lived. As he says, “I work from the head, heart, and groin, in reverse order.”¹⁰

S. K.

1. His maternal grandparents were from Jamaica and Grenada and also settled in Panamá at the turn of the century. Both of Lindsay’s parents are native Panamanians.
2. James A. Miller, “Ancestry and the Art of Arturo Lindsay,” *The International Review of African American Art* 6, no. 2 (1984): 58-63.
3. *Ibid.*, 58. Lindsay has traveled to study practices in Jamaica, Panamá, Colombia, and Mexico since the late 1960s.
4. Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), 7-36.
5. The healing of Osanyín is equivalent to the powerful divination of Ifá, in which Lindsay was initiated. Osanyín’s songs are thought by Robert Farris Thompson to be special reflections of Yoruba oral traditions in the Americas, dating back to the late 1700s. Osanyín is at times associated with ventriloquism and small dolls (dummies for his voice). In the United States, his *osun* often appears as a folk art assemblage of found objects such as hubcaps and weathervanes (frequently seen in *botánicas*). See Murphy, *Santería*, 42-43, 46-48, 132-33, and Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983), 42-51.
6. Florence Berkman, “A New Mural That Lights Up a Neighborhood,” *The Hartford Times*, 19 September 1977, 31, 33.
7. One *osun* belongs to the artist and is a modern day, mass-produced new world version. The other, from the High Museum’s collection, is a Yoruba work from Nigeria and is forged iron.
8. Lam was raised in Sagua la Grande, Cuba, and as a youth was chosen by Mantonica to inherit her knowledge (of which he felt unworthy). *Santería* was an integral part of his early life. Max-Pol Fouchet, *Wifredo Lam* (New York: Rizzoli, 1976), 34, 38, 54, 120, 196, 200, 204-5, and Evan Maurer, “Dada and Surrealism,” in “Primitivism” in 20th Century Art, ed. William Rubin, vol. 2 (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1985), 578-83.
9. Cornel West, “Black Culture and Postmodernism,” in *Remaking History*, ed. Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani (Seattle: Bay Press, 1989), 87-96.
10. Author’s conversation with the artist, 27 July 1991, notes in HMA files.



Cat. 46, detail of *Homenaje a Osanyín*: anonymous, *osun* late 1980s; anonymous, *Herbalist’s Staff* (*Opa Osanyín* or *Opa Eyinle*), late 18th-early 19th century