About the work

In 1825, the French gourmand Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin wrote, “Tell me what you eat, and I’ll tell you who you are.” Sugar Conventions heeds this call by laying bare the socio-political realities of one of modernity’s most highly prized foodstuffs, sugar. For Brillat-Savarin, taste embodied physical, moral, and material qualities. Likewise, Duval-Carré demonstrates the physical, moral, and material consequences of plantation culture and its product.

This mixed media work comprises nine gridded tiles (read left to right, top to bottom) whose overall form signifies the sacred geometry prevalent in Haitian Vodou practice. Individually, these quadrants address aspects of Haitian society in relation to the “culture of sugar”: the Vodou deities embedded in the Americas as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, the struggle for successful Haitian governance, the physical labor demanded of sugar plantation workers, and the social statuses crafted through caste systems. The work’s title further underscores the systemic conventions that participated in, and were perpetuated by, the cultivation of sugar in the Caribbean.

Sugar is not merely a conceptual participant in this work; the refined white crystals have been affixed to each of Sugar Convention’s nine tiles via Rococo-style stencils that emphasize the Western underpinnings of Haitian culture. The reality of the sugar embedded in the work also lends a material irony to the “sugary” sweetness associated with the Rococo style, revealing the sinister roots of its modern machinations.

The work begins with the haunting image of Dambalah, a Vodou spirit so ancient he precedes creation itself. According to the artist, “Dambalah is the god, the opener, the sage, the one that knows. So it’s almost like an act of faith, that this god should guide me through this project.” By foregrounding Dambalah, Duval-Carré couches the socio-political subject matter of sugar cultivation within a spiritual, Vodou framework.

Sugar canes frame a digitally manipulated photograph of a Haitian tombstone. These tombs—which have their roots in the traditions of the Congo and were brought to the Caribbean in the days of the slave trade—continue to be prevalent in the countryside. The sugar surrounding the image highlights the sacrifice of enslaved Africans who gave their lives for the sake of refined tastes. Tombs such as these demonstrate how slaves maintained ancestral ties, literally leaving their mark on the Americas.

This section depicts a scene from Polish artist Januarius Suchodolski’s painting, Battle For Palm Tree Hill, Saint Domingue (1845), which depicts a battle fought during the Haitian Revolution. A striking similarity to Francisco de Goya’s anti-imperial Disasters of War series is evident. Here Duval-Carré draws forth the racial implications of the Haitian Revolution, in which enslaved and freed Africans fought, and won, against the French colonial power.

To demonstrate the disasters that befell the government after independence, Duval-Carré embeds a photograph of the Haitian palace crumbling to the ground after the devastating earthquake of January 12, 2010. Duval-Carré situates this contemporary event along a trajectory of enslavement, plantation culture and sugar refinement. On either side of the photograph, three-dimensional busts of Vodou deities keep a watchful eye on the destruction.

Just above the glittering word “SUCRE” (sugar), a medallion contains a passage from a mid-18th century work by Italian painter Agostino Brunias. Brunias traveled to the West Indies to record scenes of daily life, such as this one, where a flower seller holds up a platter of her wares to two women, at least one of whom is of African descent. Duval-Carré has juxtaposed this scene against an ethereal background of sugar cane emerging from water. For Duval-Carré, bodies of water signify the means by which people both connect with and become estranged from one another.

Here, another image by Agostino Brunias depicts freed West Indian women of color with servants. The finely dressed women are part of the new sugar money that came to the islands in the 18th century. These women transcend their racial class by means of fine dress and jewels that align them with European aristocracy. However, Duval-Carré complicates this painting with labels that reflect the rigorous caste system operative in Haiti and across the Caribbean at this time.

A digitally manipulated photograph of a modern-day Haitian plantation worker looks the viewer head on. The original photograph was taken by Duval-Carré himself. In contrast to the images above, this man wears no shirt, only a sun hat to mark him by his trade. The worker embodies the origin point of the refined sugar that glistens around him and underscores the human toll of modern consumptive practice.

Revolutionary leader Toussaint Louverture appears time and again in Duval-Carré’s works as homage to the principles of freedom upon which Haiti was founded. This horseback rendering of Louverture references the widely circulated and anonymous portrait of the leader, Toussaint Louverture Chef des Noirs Insurgés de Saint Domingue (1802). The blue and red wreath surrounding Louverture symbolizes the Haitian flag and also stylistically parallels the laborer at lower left. Further, Louverture’s central placement frames him as the bedrock of Duval-Carré’s narrative.

To complete his narrative, Duval-Carré returns to the ever-present Dambalah, who has now gained a distinctly Creole coiffeur that amalgamates the francophone and Vodou elements from preceding tiles. The backgrounds that were so finely stenciled in the previous quadrants have here turned haphazard and thick, losing their refined appearance as though consumed by sugar. Duval-Carré embeds similar passages of disarray in his earlier works such as Mardi gras au Fort Dimanche (1993) and Le Gâteau Fort (1988), whereby peeling walls and floorboards lend a surreal presence to the scene.
Biography

Born and raised in Haiti, Edouard Duval-Carrié (b. 1954) fled the regime of “Papa Doc” Duvalier as a teenager, subsequently residing in locales as diverse as Puerto Rico, Montreal, Paris, and Miami. Parallels thus emerge between the artist’s cosmopolitan lifestyle and his artistic sensitivity toward the multifaceted identities that inform his native Haiti. Whether sculpture, painting, or multimedia installation, Duval-Carrié’s work navigates the historically rich and culturally complex traditions that comprise a uniquely Haitian perspective. At heart, Duval-Carrié is an educator: he challenges the viewer to make meaning of dense iconography derived from Haitian history, politics, and religion. Duval-Carrié also re-appropriates, inscribing historical photographs, documents, paintings, and ephemera onto his own work and thus problematizing official Haitian narratives against lived realities. Although he claims his art to be a secular and intellectual pursuit, Duval-Carrié’s work often convenes with the spiritual, via installations reminiscent of Vodou and Catholic altarpieces. In so doing, the artist explores the complex intermingling of ethnicities and socio-economic circumstances that staged Haiti’s contemporary, hybridic culture, and through which the Vodou pantheon of deities continues to pulse. Recently, the conceptual and material layering of Duval-Carrié’s works has been further emphasized through his consistent attention to translucent and reflective mediums, such as glitter, glass, and resin. The introspective effects of these mediums transform his works into spatial interventions that implicate the viewer in their historicity. At their most fundamental, Duval-Carrié’s works ask the viewer to complicate the Western canon, to consider how Africa has shaped the Americas, and how Haiti has shaped the modern world.

Selected Bibliography


www.edouard-duval-carrie.com