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Telling Ancient Narratives with New Media: The Art of Christian Usera

Kelly Baker Josephs

Introduction

In the Fall of 2007, the Department of Comparative Literature at NYU ran a series of events to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the British Slave Trade. The series, which included events under the umbrella title “Abolition Marassa,” began with a two night presentation by ÀJA, a performance poet from Barbados. For these two nights, however, the focus was not on ÀJA’s performance, but on his ventures in new media. On the first night, he presented an e-book entitled *Don’t Let Me Die* that contained poems and photographs, taken by himself, on war and poverty in various nations. The following night, ÀJA showed an extract from his six-hour documentary, *Journey of ÀJA*, which captured his travels during the making of *Don’t Let Me Die* and debuted across the Caribbean on CBC.

It was fitting that I met Christian Usera, a visual artist and writer of Hispanic-Caribbean descent, at Abolition Marassa. Firstly, there was the Kamau Brathwaite connection. Brathwaite introduced ÀJA, with praises for his fellow Bajan’s oeuvre and current project. Brathwaite was also Usera’s teacher during his undergraduate years at NYU and continued to mentor him after graduation. In fact, Brathwaite arranged time on the second night for Usera to present some of his own work because he saw connections with ÀJA’s e-book and documentary. Secondly, both ÀJA and Usera are experimenting with non-traditional forms of Caribbean expression. It is this second connection that I find intriguing because they both attempt new ways of comprehending long-standing concerns, particularly those significant in the cultural *mélange* that characterizes the Caribbean. Usera himself embodies this blending of culture. As he states: “I am Hispanic and Irish. Two island nations with a lot of character. The diaspora affected Latin culture in ways I can’t even begin to describe. I am a child of the diaspora.”

Although he is a relatively new artist, Usera’s first major project is just that – major. It encompasses a mythical trilogy depicting the cycle of creation, fall and redemption. Heavily influenced by his involvement in Santeria, he blends original visuals and texts in his self-published books. The first book, *The Ones*, was published in early 2007 and depicts what Usera terms the “macrocosm” of the trilogy because it contains the full cycle. Usera utilizes spray paint for the images, which produces soft edges for the dream feel of the narrative and sharp shapes for the fierce moments. The second book, *Gate to Eden*, followed soon after the first in late 2007. In this narrative, Usera switches to acrylic, the brilliance of which appropriately contributes an immediacy to this version of

the fall segment of the cycle. The third book will close out the trilogy by focusing on redemption. Usera will turn to a third technique – airbrush – for the images that reflect this narrative and he plans to release the as-yet-unnamed text in 2008.

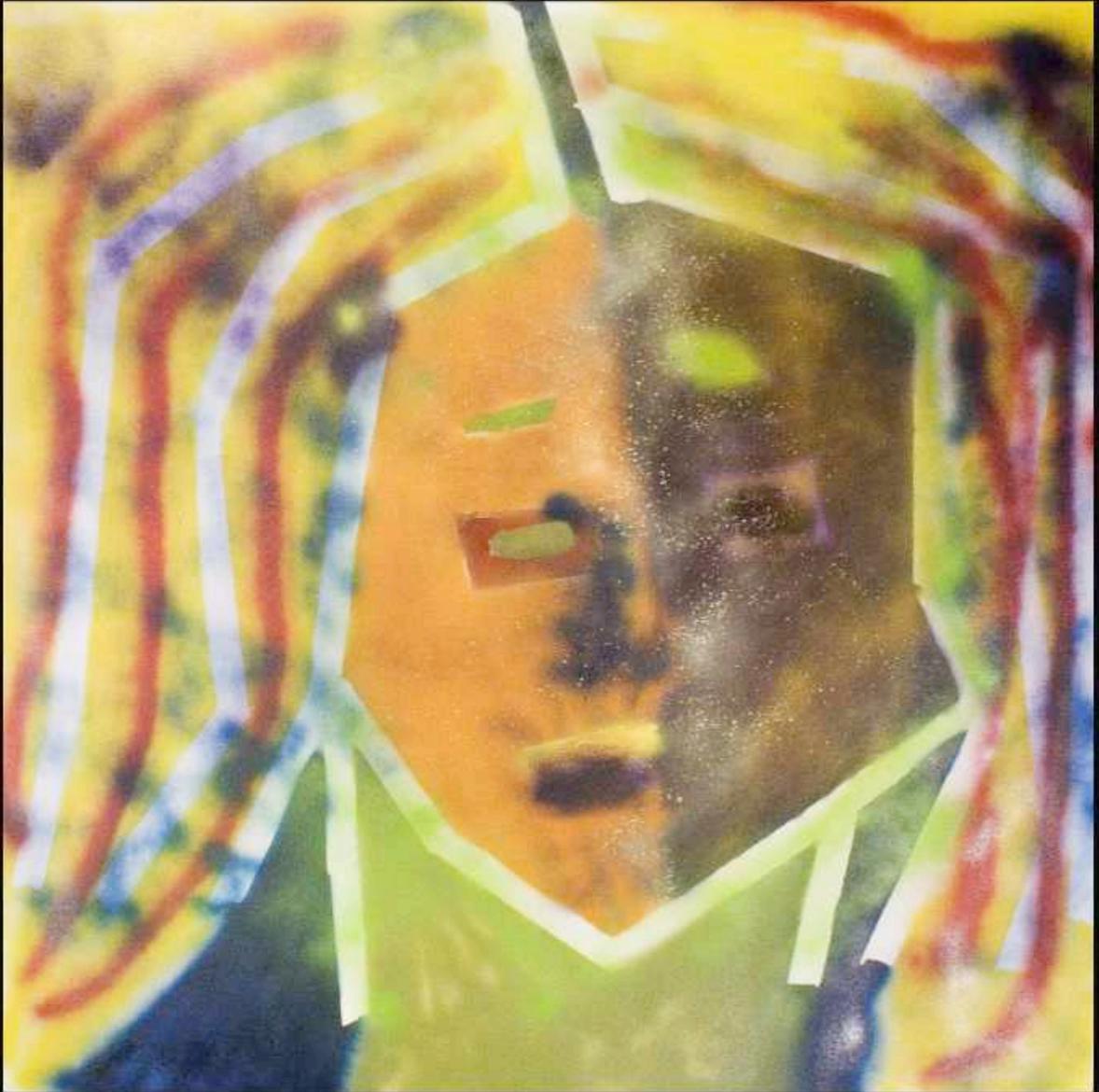
In December 2007, Usera sat down with me to discuss his work, the many interests that influence his art, the challenges he faces as a new Caribbean artist, and his future plans.

Interview

Kelly Baker Josephs: Let's start with an overview of your work and what brought you to this subject and this form of expression. Why a trilogy and why the mixed media approach?

Christian Usera: The first book out of the series was *The Ones* – that was done before *Gate to Eden* – and basically the medium was completely spontaneous, I wanted to learn spray painting so I said, I'm just gonna learn this. And, without a second thought, I just picked up spray paints and grabbed a canvas and I started on the canvas.

As far as the storyline, it came about through several different means. I think I came up with kind of a vague idea of the story and then painted that. But it was kind of concurrent, I guess. I had this idea of this mother figure, this mother aspect of God, and then I started dealing with the ritual involving the initiate, the “Montado con Yemaya,” which means ridden by Yemaya and so I got to speak with her, and that moment never left me. The advice I received and the personal message I got from that really affected me in a lot of ways.



Mother Nothing

Mother Nothing, spray paint on canvas, from *The Ones*

And I also wanted to explore the spiritual side of nihilism, which I found to have a deeply Zen/divine meaning. What is the nature of nothing? Is this another cosmic aspect of God? How does the concept of blankness enter into spirituality? I knew all these nihilistic writers and I always got this impression that a lot of them had many spiritual things to say. Like Chuck Palahniuk, for instance, in the book *Fight Club*. I watched that, and I read the book, and I said, on the one hand, he has a nihilistic style, and on the other hand, he's really trying to get at something very visceral. At the core of it, there seems to be something extra that's there. And so I thought, well what's the core of nihilism? And the core of nihilism would be this idea of nothing, and then I thought, well, what is nothing? And if you go down to it, every single major world religion speaks of this.

People would say [to me], "How could you speak of nothing?" I think some people took it the wrong way, and I said, no, it's more like the void – the void of potentiality. And that's the blank canvas. It's this idea that human potential, in the creation of reality, really was so broad, that it's almost incomprehensible. It's beyond...it's something that's beyond...well everything.

KBJ: It's beyond words right now.

CU: It's beyond words. It's just – it's this idea of that which is...beyond.

And the interesting part is, these two characters [Mother Nothing and Father Infinity] coexisted at the same time. In a way, she didn't really create time, time was already always there. But it's almost as if, if you think of two sandwiched figures and on one side they're like, "Hmm, nobody's around"; but on the other side, you have Nothing.

But, at the same time, when you have this concept of nothing, you have timelessness. So, whether you go here, or you go there, you're not going to get away from Nothing and you're not going to get away from Infinity. So you get these concepts in religions of the Alpha and the Omega, and this idea that there is no time – there's no beginning, there's no middle, there's no end. It's just one, continuous, homologous mass. And from that, comes this creation, in the womb of this boundless potentiality. And so, that's really what I was talking about... that sort of sums it up.

KBJ: But your choice of materials seem so appropriate for each text. It is difficult to believe that you began with simply a desire to learn spray painting.

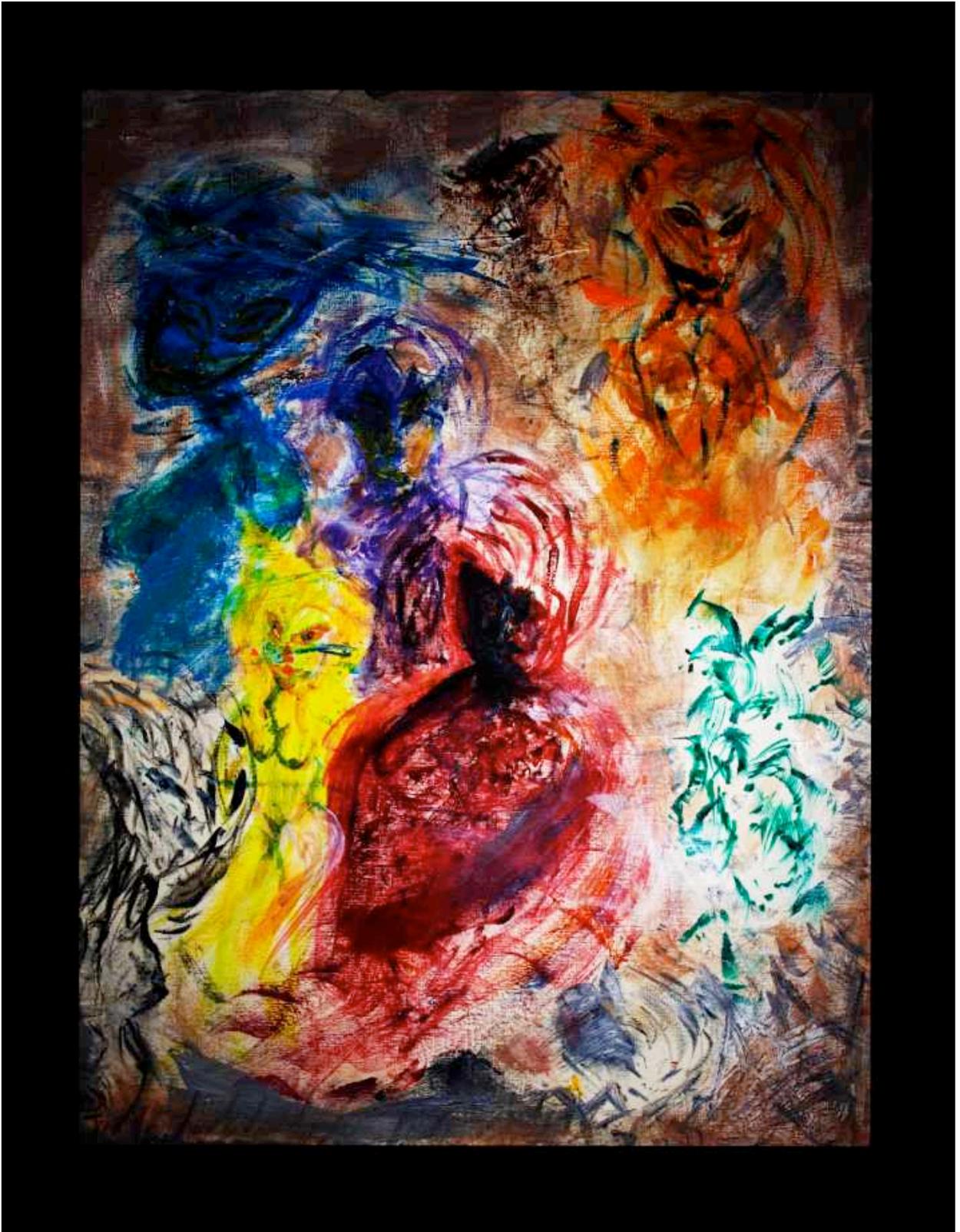
CU: I really wanted to learn it. I think that the story was so avant-garde and so out there, that I wanted to use a medium that wasn't traditional. I wanted to use a medium that spoke to people on a very direct level. Some people were very captivated by it. A lot of people thought I used airbrush, and I didn't use airbrush. I used, tape, I used the different caps – sometimes I used broken caps – and what I came up with was just that on canvas. And I think that's why I came up with spray paint as opposed to another medium.

KBJ: Why did you switch to another medium for the second book?

CU: Part of that was financial. I'll admit, I couldn't afford buying spray paint and canvases. Most of these canvases are huge. You're talking about thirty to fifty dollars a canvas and then you figure sixteen canvases, and spray paint. In fact, a bunch of these I sprayed over and over and over and over, till I got it right.

KBJ: And so the second book was cheaper to create because the pieces are smaller?

CU: These are on paper, these aren't even on canvas. All these were done on paper and all these were done using acrylic and brush. It's a different story. And I think it just had a different feel to it.



Untitled, acrylic on paper, from *Gate to Eden*

KBJ: It certainly does. You mentioned the response to the art in *The Ones*. Can you discuss that further?

CU: It's funny, because the first day I did this – and you have to appreciate people from the Midwest – because I painted this, and I'm just watching it dry and this guy rolls down his window – I don't know this guy from anybody – and he shouts "that's really cool!" And I said "Thanks" and thought, that was random, but cool.

KBJ: So did you create them on the street then?

CU: I did. I didn't have a studio.

KBJ: Was it while you were in Denver?

CU: Both of these were created while I was in Denver. This was created outside of one of the art institutes. Actually, most of the people watching it were homeless.

KBJ: Did that influence you?

CU: I thought it was just kind of cool because most were so grateful to able to watch that process. And it's, you know, pretty.

KBJ: Explain a little more the material conditions of your creation of *The Ones*. Were you on a major street? A back alley? What were your surroundings?

CU: This is kind of like a little from column A and a little from column B. Imagine a brick building, and then behind it you have concrete tables and spray paint on the tables already because it's an industrial design building. So they're spraying polyurethane and everything else and I'm sitting there with my little mask and spray paint. And sometimes people would sleep there, because it has an overhanging porch kind of thing. It's an open air thing, and so in the winter would get really cold, and sometimes it would get too cold and I had to wait. I completed it before the really bad winter came.

KBJ: How long did it take?

CU: The whole thing in its entirety, the illustrations, the rewrites, the drafts, the editing, everything else, took me about a year, for *The Ones*. This one [*Gate to Eden*] took me a couple months. I think part of the reason was, I had done this one. I'm not going to say I had a cookie cutter approach, but I had a better idea of what was going on. I had to literally learn a little bit about graphic design, a little bit about publishing. Which is another reason why Kamau [Brathwaite] was so cool, because he said, "Does anybody realize how difficult it is to do the publishing? And do the kerning..." Even in the digital world, and he had no access to the digital world. So he had to sit there at the printing press, or whatever they had going on, and say ok, it's gotta be this way. If you look at the books, they're all very meticulously done. And, in the same process, I had to really look at that.

KBJ: What is the connection between the two books? How are you envisioning the trilogy?

CU: This [*Gate to Eden*] is a story almost within this [*The Ones*] story. Because this [*The Ones*] has the beginning, middle and end, whereas this is almost these few pages that talk about man, and man dissolving into physicality and having to deal with all that, all the ramifications of rules...and how do you survive within the physical universe despite being a spiritual being. That's explored in this [*Gate to Eden*]; what came about to make that transition? How is it that we were so seemingly perfect in our conception? The idea of man is, when you think of it, really a novel concept. Something that has cognizance of its own existence, something that has the ability to create. Something that has the ability to respond to one another. Man, in its conception, is boundless in what it can accomplish. It really is. And even though it doesn't seem that way all the time.

KBJ: Ok, because I was thinking of your books as a sequential trilogy. Not chronologically, because there are no years, but like *The Ones* is first, *Gate to Eden* is second. But now that you tell me *Gate to Eden* works within *The Ones*, that makes so much more sense to me because I was trying to fit it into a post story, and it's not.

CU: Right, because this [*The Ones*] does mention the fall, and this [*Gate to Eden*] is the story about a fall. The difference is, the falling here is more about the rules and the regulations. But then if you take a step back further, it's the idea of their ability to create. And their ability to create comes out of the fact that they have physicality, this idea of physicality is where all the errors start.

KBJ: Yet both are linked to symbolism. How will the third book fit with these two?

CU: The third one now has to discuss the ending. Because you always have this cycle of creation, falling, and redemption. Not just within the Christian universe, but within all universes. It doesn't matter whether you're talking about African, Aboriginal, Indian, Far East, you always have this cycle of there was a creation, something bad happened along the way – falling, falling, falling – then, oh, there's a silver lining over here. For the Christians, it was Jesus Christ; for the Hindus it's gonna be Vishnu, the last incarnation; for the Muslims it's the arrival of Mohammed; for the Jews, it's the Torah. You can go into Native American religion, there's different epochs of time. For the Hopis they have the fifth generation. There's all these different narratives. Even if you also look at the Egyptians, they have Osiris. This idea of creation, then tragedy happens. Osiris gets killed, but then, the actions of his wife – putting him back together and reassembling him – gave him the burial rites by which he could then go on to the next realm. There's always this kind of trinity of sorts. Of creation, fall and redemption.

I think I'm working on that redemption part. And I think that's the most difficult part. Because how do I sum that up? How do I sum that up in such a way that, no matter where somebody's at, they go hmmm....

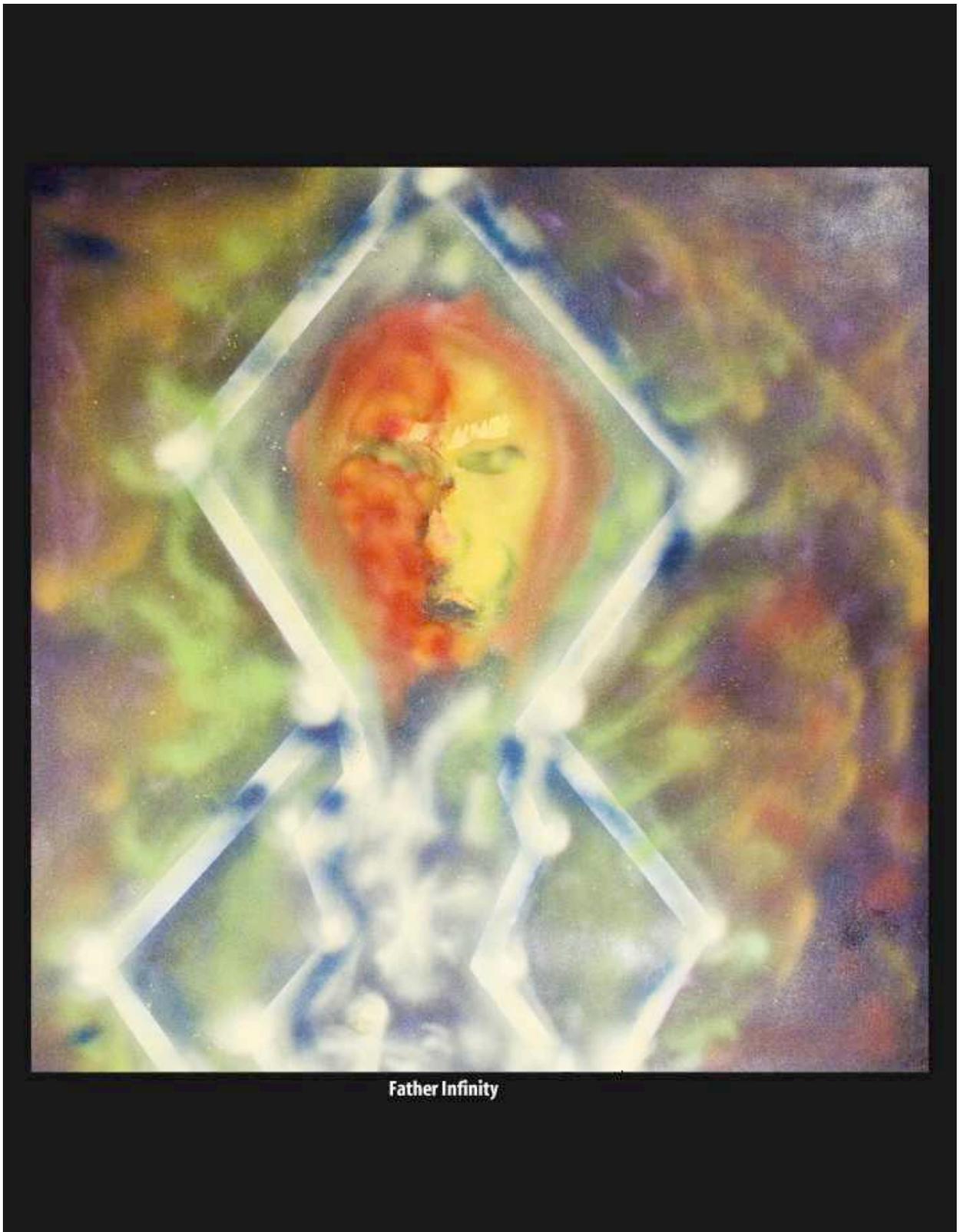
KBJ: So you seem to be ending on a positive note, which is also where *The Ones* ends – on contentment. But I notice two thematic strands in *The Ones* that do not seem to get resolved in the birth of “Anything.” These strands are the negative aspect of man’s creative power and the pervasiveness of loneliness. Can you speak a little more about this? Why this vision of man?

CU: Man’s possibilities are dualistic. Potentiality in and of itself has the potential to be destructive. But given the opportunity, given the choice to have anything possible, why would you bother with just focusing on the destructive? And it’s not saying the destructive isn’t part of the process, it’s saying why would you focus on it? Man wouldn’t stop fixating on it. Not just saying there is a problem, but saying, there’s a problem, why don’t I fixate on this. Because wherever your attention’s going, that’s where the energy’s going to go. And people say that’ll be ignoring the problem. And I say, no, because then you’re not fixating on answers are you? You’re just fixating on the negative on top of the negative on top of the negative, which just snowballs.

Potentiality is begging for disaster – but, it is also where we shine. This potentiality is where all our joy, our desire, our dreams coalesce into something wonderful, which is enthusiasm and this kills apathy which is the opposite to love. And love is a huge theme of this work.

KBJ: And the pervasiveness of loneliness?

CU: Loneliness is always an aspect of creation. Something or someone got bored, a form of loneliness and that’s when creation was made. The funny part is that Infinity always existed, it was only when she [Mother Nothing] acknowledged Infinity that his presence was made known.



Father Infinity

Father Infinity, spray paint on canvas, from *The Ones*

Because you always have this idea of duality. People look at the world in a dual universe but it's only within a triad, or a trinity. And this is within a bunch of different religions, the ancient Celts for instance, had a mother, a father and a child. That was the Celts' version of creation. You have an Egyptian aspect that's also redone. You have Ra, his wife, and their son, Horus and that's also a triad. And of course you have the Hindu: Brahmin, Shiva and Vishnu. And then of course you have the Christian: God, Jesus and the Holy Ghost. But that once again is mirroring other places too. Because you have the masculine father, the androgynous son – the Christ consciousness – and then you have the feminine spirit.

KBJ: That is interesting, because in both books, your characters and beings are very noticeably gendered. Why is this? How is this related to the religious underpinnings of the work? Especially, the creationism aspect of *The Ones*.

CU: In *The Ones*, each being represented a different spirit, a different loa, orisha, a different aspect of God. Mother Nothing is representative of Yemaya and the mother aspect of God. Yemaya was said to have birthed, not only humanity itself, but the orisha, all the angels, all the angels came from her. You have Father Infinity, which is a version of, I suppose, the Western view of God. And if you look at him, he's just, he's really fierce. And you look at her expression, and it's almost placid. And you look at him, it's much edgier. And then you get to their son, Everything, and Everything is more like a trickster character. So he would represent somebody like Elegua. And Elegua is a character of dualism; where on the one hand, he represents all the problems of the world and on the other hand he represents all the solutions of the world.

And in the West, the only thing that we have that even comes close to that is St. Michael on the one side and the devil on the other. You might say, "Ok, why would you need that?" Well, we really wouldn't be able to have the human operating system without these two concepts, these two polar extremes because it's only in that operating system that we are able to make choices, which are for better or for worse. It's only when another stabilizing force comes in, that Everything is ok. So it's this concept of duality of two going into three. The reason why three is so important is that three is coalescing two, to work as one.

KBJ: So it's a synthesis?

CU: Right.

KBJ: And how does gender work in *Gate to Eden*, which seems "conscious" of not only gender, but sex as well.

CU: In the second book, I expanded on that. If you're wondering why the women are particularly "voluptuous," it is twofold: one, the model who inspired the work happens to have a similar physique and two, more importantly, it is a story about sexual maturity, breaking taboos and living to one's potential to claw one's way back to the source and find one's ultimate meaning.

KBJ: You seem to be drawing on several different sources to convey these meanings. What did you study at NYU?

CU: English, fine art and creative writing.

KBJ: Do you plan to go further and possibly pursue an MFA?

CU: I'm still actually in quite a bit of debt from the other schools. I'm not going to give you a dollar figure but...

KBJ: But so much so that starting again right now is not attractive?

CU: So much so that starting again would scare me. I am in excruciating debt.

KBJ: So how, along with this, do you pay the bills?

CU: I am still job hunting actually. I might be working part-time for my dad, who is an attorney. And I might actually be working at a retail store, believe it or not.

KBJ: Do you foresee this as a profession?

CU: I do, but it's just so much work, marketing. I mean the best I can do for marketing is interviews like this. I have one with *Elan* magazine coming out. It's a local art magazine. Actually, it sells real estate, but it also sells artwork and mentions artists. It's local, so it's just the DC-Metro area. I also have a MySpace website that's set up for this book. [www.myspace.com/theonesbook] I'm computer illiterate, so that was one of the coolest ways I could think of to spread the word. It has a link to buy my book and download it, and my illustrations and some other stuff on there.

KBJ: Do you see any increase from when you opened the MySpace page to now?

CU: I've gotten about 500 hits on the MySpace, which in a month's time is not that bad. I think that as far as marketing, that's probably more difficult than the process of making the books....

I mean, you get a whole degree just in marketing. I think that's a huge, huge part.

KBJ: Are you applying for grants and fellowships? Are you thinking of going the academic route? Or not yet?

CU: Maybe. We'll see if I have enough money to do that

KBJ: But why would that require your having money?

CU: Because I already have debt in student loans out. I went to the Art Institute [in Denver] for a little while, but they were really not supportive of this, at all. They

basically said: “We just do commercial art, we do not do fine art.” And I sent this [*The Ones*] out to a bunch of professors in Denver. I sent out the actual book. I said, “Hey, this is what I’m doing now. Can you support me in any way possible?” I got one response.

KBJ: What was the one response?

CU: She actually was really nice. She said, “I don’t know of any way I can help you right now, but if anything opens up, I’ll let you know.” And she actually sent back my books, which I then resent out to someone else. Probably the most generous response I got was Kamau. And I thought that was really cool. I think Kamau was probably the only type of person that could appreciate this, with regards to my background. And I’m sure he saw the illustrations and saw – how do I describe it? – if you look at this, the color usage is very much a Hispanic and very much a Caribbean inspired color scheme. If you look at all the bright colors, there’s a certain kind of – I know this is going to be a generalization – but Latins tend to be colorful, they just do, in their artwork. And I mean that’s a broad generalization, but...

KBJ: Was that something you were conscious of while creating your books, or did you notice it afterward?

CU: I think that’s just something I’ve naturally become aware of. Because as somebody of Caribbean origin, your aesthetic happens to lean that way. And I just find that when I look at artists like Basquiat, when I look at artists like Dali and Picasso, you’ll notice that there’s vibrancy. There’s a distinctive difference between that and say, some of the western artists. As far as the aesthetic, as far as the color usage, as far as...even perspective. The use of perspective is just different. And some people appreciate that, and some people don’t understand it. They don’t get it. When I did this, I just said “I can’t worry about that.” Because if I do that’s going to drive me insane. Because then I’m just going to be worrying about somebody else’s aesthetic. And I said, I can’t do that at all.

I know that this may sound like a stretch, but if you look at Hispanic culture in general that’s actually a perfect example. Because if you look at Peruvian culture vs. Mexican, vs. Puerto Rican, vs. Cuban...even the islands within themselves, very, very different. And that has to do with which cultures came together. That has to do with different symbols, different foods, different climate, different culture. So even though this whole area is called Latin America, it’s very vast. It’s kind of like looking at the continent of Africa and going “Africa!” Northern Africa is very different from Southern Africa – Nigeria vs South Africa – very different as far as symbols and everything else. You can’t just take a whole continent, even Europe for that matter, and say “This is what it is.” You can’t do it. It’s too broad.

But how we color the world is through these archetypes, through our symbols. And that’s really really important. I was thinking about this the other day, and I guess maybe it was your questions and I think maybe even part of it had to do with AJA’s statements

on genocide...I was thinking about the importance of symbols and this concept of genocide. Then I was thinking about colonization and all that. And I was thinking, well why did that happen in Central America? Why were the Spanish so brutal with regards to Central America? And I would say, one of the biggest reasons was something symbolic that couldn't have been avoided, which is this idea of the worship of the snake. And in western culture, that's bad, that's really bad, that goes all the way back to Egypt, it goes back to the Middle East, it goes back to Judaic culture, simply put, snake equals bad. And the idea of human sacrifice with that. There was a visceral response to that, which even included genocide. And when I say symbols are important, it's literal in a thing like that.

And I think that people need to understand that it's not just a minor thing that we understand symbols, that we understand how symbols work across cultures, how symbols work throughout the world. And I think the Caribbean as a whole is an excellent example of that because it is the largest melting pot of every single culture you could possibly imagine. I mean, you have people speaking Chinese in the Caribbean, that's half a world away. And you have the Spanish, you have the English, you have the Dutch, you have the French, you have the German, you have the African, you have, all the Americas, you have Pakistanis, the middle of Europe, and you even have Asians as well.

KBJ: But then what happens when you have to take the symbols you already had and create new meanings, or make other people understand what these meanings are?

CU: I think what I'm trying to do is kind of elaborate, or make something new out of the end portion.

KBJ: And yet you're working in these spaces that – maybe because I'm an outsider – that seem so *not* Caribbean to me. So Denver, and now Virginia; how do you work in such spaces where these symbols may be missing or misunderstood?

CU: I actually moved when I was eighteen. And I lived in Rhode Island, I lived in New York,, I lived in Madrid, Spain, I moved back and I lived in Denver. Even in Denver – I'll tell you a funny little story. I developed some friendships within the art community there and I got invited to this party. And they said "This is going to be a party regarding Capoeira." Which is basically Brazilian dance/kick-boxing. Little did I know that the people there noticeably practiced Candomble. Noticeably. My jaw hit the floor. I am in the middle of the mountains, I am in the middle of the Midwest, I am very, very, very far away from anything even remotely related to this and I am watching people speak – definitely Yoruba – in a setting that was very familiar that was latin, that had aspects of Candomble and Santeria within it, and that was emphasizing that. My jaw just hit the floor and I thought "Wow, there really are no coincidences in this world." There's no way, that's impossible. That's like finding a water gourd in the desert. It's not supposed to be there. That's not right.

KBJ: So did you develop a relationship with these practitioners?

CU: I actually had family emergencies back here, so I had to come back. My mother got sick. I had a death in the family. Imagine, as these were completed, everything that could have gone wrong, did. My lease was coming to an end, I had a roommate that wasn't paying the rent. I had those two tragedies that were happening, concurrently. My mother was in the hospital and I had a death in the family.

KBJ: And your school wasn't supporting you

CU: And my school wasn't supporting me. In fact, I literally had my counselor from that school look me in the eye and say, "You'll starve, have fun." He was basically like, "You will not be successful, you're not going to get anywhere and you'll starve."

KBJ: So, now that you are back in the DC/Virginia area, how does the religious community, or lack thereof, affect your work?.

CU: There are...there are botanicas here.

KBJ: Explain that to me.

CU: Botanicas are places to get Santeria supplies, which would say that there is a community here. I haven't really been digging too much. Because there's actually a trust issue, as far as that. Because you have to be really sure that people are on the up and up, within that community. It's a very tight knit community that's, I don't want to say overly secretive, but I will say that they are very protective of rituals, what they know, who they trust. Because just as in any religion, people are people and, if somebody can take advantage of you, it's kind of human nature that they will. I wish it wasn't that way. I do have a tight knit community but it's centered more in New York than here. I don't know if that helps.

KBJ: Well I'm just wondering how it affects your thinking space for your work. Because I consider community as helpful, or as necessary, for such work.

CU: I actually had a few Cuban friends that were in New York, that also practiced, that helped me with the initiation process and helped me to start. And I think that that really colored my views. I've always had a philosophy that never just centered on one thing. But the cool thing is, within the religion—they allow you to—they want you to, explore. They want you to find connections because it is a religion of syncretism. It's a religion where you are in a world with things within tribal culture, within Christianity [where] this symbol is almost identical to this symbol. It might be said in a different way, it might be colored in a different way but it's the same symbol, it's the same intent, you know, and that's huge.

KBJ: And what about your Caribbean connections? For you, are the two the same? Do you make a distinction between the Caribbean community and the Santeria community?

CU: It's different. Because not everyone accepts that community within the Caribbean community. And this is going to sound kind of jaded, but part of it is – I want to phrase this in the right way – part of it is a racial thing within the Caribbean community. It is this class kind of thing. And, this goes back to superstitions within Spain.

KBJ: In Denver, then, you were almost in a safe space when you finished the first two books. How will being home affect your work on the third book? Will your art be influenced by this new location?

CU: Do I think I'll be in the same artistic space? I think I will be, probably, in a different head space, because of all that's happened. And I think, personally, one of the biggest tragedies was losing my godmother, this year, she died of Lou Gehrig's disease. And when that happened, it was like somebody had punched me in the gut. And on the one hand, she was suffering a lot, and on the other, she was like another grandmother to me.

KBJ: So that is going to affect your work on the third book?

CU: I think that that has. And being home. I feel very much a like stranger here.

KBJ: More so than in Denver?

CU: Yes, actually. Denver, it's got a very different vibe than Washington DC. You feel like a part of the community no matter what. People come up to you and they go "Hey, how're you doing" and they'll talk to you. Here, if you do that people look at you like you're fucking crazy. For lack of a better word.

Even people that are on the street are different in Denver. It's a different world. It really is. I'm not saying that everybody's perfect there or anything, I mean nobody is perfect, no community is. Yeah, it has its set of problems and poverty and whatever else, but it really felt like home. It was a place to set my head. And I think part of that even has to do with climate, believe it or not. I am reminded by ÀJA's speech, when he was talking about Sierra Leone; and he said, originally that a lot of Bajans came from Ghana.

KBJ: Yes, I remember this, but when he went to Ghana it didn't feel like home.

CU: Right, it didn't feel like his community. And then he went to Sierra Leone and as soon as he got off the plane, he felt like home. He felt like he knew people. And when he went there, he then learned that a lot of people were taken from Sierra Leone, moved to Ghana, and then taken on ships to go to Barbados. That same principle is kind of like me with Puerto Rico. When I go to Puerto Rico, I say, this is the land of my ancestors, this is where my family has been for four hundred years.

On the other hand, on the island, the only thing that keeps you sane, I think are two things. One is the people there and the other is the culture, and it's the remembrance of culture. And this is the reason why there are certain customs that are literally crystallized from Africa, crystallized from Spain, crystallized from England, or wherever, on the

island, and it's almost like a time capsule. Where, when they go back, they're like, oh yeah, we used to say that word – two hundred years ago we used to use that word. We don't use that word anymore. What I mean by that is that it's a bubble of culture, of the home country.

So when I got off the plane in Spain, I felt completely at home. Immediately. The customs, the work ethic, the warmth, the community, even the squares where people would just come and congregate. You have to go back to realize how multicultural that nation truly really is. When you say, I am Spanish, what you're saying is, I am German, Russian, Arab, black, gypsy, Bosque, Phoenician, Iberian, Celt. I just ranted nine different, unique, very distinctive cultures, very distinctive groups that all coalesced into the end. You have for instance, Morocco, right there. You sneeze and you're on Spanish soil.

I think that that's kind of part of my cultural influences. On the one hand, I respect and love Puerto Rico, but on the other hand, inside Puerto Rico, lies Spain. And in the same way, the African story. Inside Puerto Rico, inside Cuba, inside all the Caribbean islands, lies Africa. Lies other cultures, you see. And you just would not, without the diaspora, you wouldn't have had salsa, you wouldn't have had meringue, you wouldn't have had all this color or vibrancy, you wouldn't have had this communication of cultures that's just staggering. And when people think of history, they always think of it as this large lump, like it's a solid mass but it's not. It's constantly moving, it's constantly growing. I think that's really important.

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