

Skunder

I think that it was 1968 when I met Skunder Boghassian. In Atlanta, probably somewhere on Hunter St. He was easy to like, relaxed, humorous, brilliant and knowledgeable in an off-handed way. The Atlanta of that time was not wealthy in important Black artists and that made a vacancy in my life that he filled comfortably.

When he took me to his place all of my questions were answered. Paintings, drawings, carvings, sketchbooks, prints, filled every spot in the small room that he called a studio. I remember thinking that they sang to each other, a metaphor of the moment that stuck. But they were indeed harmonious – you could always spot a Skunder because his style (I'm tempted to write "vision" but I hate that use of the word) was so inherently his own, though he was technically and thematically broad. His work housed recurring images of birds, snakes, snakes that were rivers; African masks, designs and textile graphics; Egyptian, Coptic and Mali symbols; creatures that seemed to unravel into streams of spirit design; and organic beasts of the imagination that grew their own environment. With all of their range, they obviously flowed from the same deep source. I knew a lot of visual artists during my prior years in the Lower Manhattan art scene, some quite prominent, but here was a master who could stand among, if not above, the best of them.

I bought a sculpture. It was of a bird of course, its wings carved from planks of wood, the circular portals in the wings were illuminated by an illustrated translucent material that I chose to name skin; the wings attached to its torso by ornamented brass sheets; its head crane-like, mounted on Skunder's version of an Ashanti stool.

The purchase turned out to be fortuitous, for Jeff Donaldson, recently appointed Chairman of the Art Department at Howard University, visited Atlanta shortly thereafter, saw the piece in my living room, and asked, "what's that?" I told him about Skunder, Jeff asked to meet him, and immediately offered him a job at Howard where Skunder worked until he died.

It was at Howard that Skunder's influence on African American artists took hold. Jeff was a member of the mighty Chicago-based collective, AfriCobra, and had assembled a faculty that comprised members of the group and others who were committed to the PanAfricanist esthetic that was the root orientation of the collective, indeed, of most of the artists of the Black Arts Movement. This prompted an imperative to identify and meld the visual elements of the African diaspora in all of its historical misery and glory. The artists sought stimulation from religious iconography, fabric design, fashion, symbolism, the so-called "kool ade colors" that inner city swells sported, hairstyle and physiognomy and any other features that were identifiably Black. They might set them in fantastical environments that blended possibility and heritage and thereby claim a "new realism" that was in fact anti-realism in the way that it spoke of alternative worlds. Infuse this with the music of Black people from African percussion and Afro Pop through Caribbean music to blues, gospel and jazz, particularly John Coltrane, the muse of every Black artist I know. He certainly was for Skunder.

Skunder had it all. He freely and organically abstracted the imagery, iconography and design from the entire continent of Africa, north to south. According to the most excellent artist James Phillips, a pillar of AfriCobra, Skunder declined an invitation to join the collective after Jeff Donaldson pitched the group's esthetic, saying, "I am AfriCobra". He already had what they aspired to.

He was an excellent teacher, beloved by his students who were in awe of his mastery of technique and materials, his discipline, and his endless creativity. He let them get away with nothing. James Phillips: "He would tell them in a minute, 'that's bullshit. Get that out of there'." Skunder initiated the practice of painting alongside the students. Other members of the department soon followed suit.

Skunder's foundation in diasporan esthetics was sound. He came to The U. S. from Paris, where he caught the tail end of the Negritude movement. Negritude was what we got when a group of brilliant artists from around the diaspora, e. g., poets like Leopold Senghor (incidentally, the first president of Senegal), Aime Cesaire of Martinique, and Leon Damas of Guinea asked themselves why they were hanging out with each other in Paris and not with all the fashionable intellectual luminaries who populated the Left Bank in those days. They had to conclude that they had found a unity in blackness, anticolonialism, and the love of all that was beautiful about African peoples.

(This is, of course, a gross reduction of Negritude. If Skunder and his kind appeal to you, you should look into the movement. One of my favorite essays by Jean Paul Sartre is his introduction to the Negritude poetry anthology which begins: "Did you think they would like you?")

A brief note about Negritude and Skunder: The primary influence of French modernist art on the Negritude artists was Surrealism. They were attracted to the way that the Surrealists tried to combine Marxism and Freudianism as a means of creating new thought. Thus, Surrealist poets would attack linear reason by writing "automatically", in a "stream of consciousness", text floating naked in time, perhaps without punctuation. Adjectives would be set lyrically next to nouns that they would not modify. The visual artists painted from the far side of dreams. Set this kind of thinking on Negritude art, infuse in it the juju (Skunder's favorite word) of the African soul, and you have Skunder.

In 1965, he became the first African modernist to have his work purchased by the Musee d'Art Moderne in Paris. The Museum of Modern Art in N. Y. C. also bought a piece in 1965. But then the wall came up. No big museum exhibitions followed. None of the major galleries that usher painters into wealth called. I am convinced that cultural orientation is a determining factor in how even the most highly trained individuals see art. "They" do not see artists like Skunder as "we" do. I once stood in front of a Skunder masterpiece with a woman whose erudition on the subject of contemporary art I have the highest respect for. Her taste in the field is broad and deep, her curatorial credentials were impeccable. While I was trying to identify the living thing that Skunder obviously had bled into the picture, she was dismissive. I felt as I did in the early

'sixties when I was writing in defense of Coltrane and the jazz avant garde. I would leave a Coltrane set limp from having my very essence pulled out of me, rinsed clean, and reinstalled, only to read the reviews of the critical establishment, who called Coltrane "anti-jazz", detrimental to the music. Either I did not have this catharsis, or they were wrong.

Please, I am not writing that white people can't dig Skunder; just that if one hasn't made an effort to look sympathetically into the cultural base of an artist, one might not hear his/her voice. Call it the mile you walk in the shoe.

I do not know if Skunder will ever find the acclaim that he deserves. As more Black people rise in the art industry, perhaps someone will set themselves the mission of a comprehensive Skunder exhibition and catalogue. Perhaps others will follow. I do know this: There is no pedestal in contemporary art that is too high for the image of this master.