

# Capturing the soul of Haiti: SERGINE ANDRÉ

*Among Haiti's huge pool of painters, writers, musicians and cinematic talent, Sergine André or 'Djinn' seems to evoke the soul of Haiti.*

**S**ergine André is all that is captivating about the country: vibrant, creative, sensual, a free spirit. Her paintings reflect the country's extreme mix of hope and despair, optimism and pessimism.

Sergine André's early work features barely discernable figures lurking in the background of the canvas. Some are solid with visible, smiling features surrounded by an orange background. They are almost protectors. Other figures are hardly perceptible, their ghostly skeletal features which leave a mere trace on the canvas are more menacing. Are all these different shapes and forms perhaps the artist's representations of Voodoo's Iwa spirits?

'Vodou' or 'vòdu' in West African Fon and Ewe, meaning spirits or divine creation, was brought to Haiti when the Bkongo of Central Africa and the Igbo and Yoruba of West Africa arrived in the country as slaves. In voodoo, one god 'Bondyé' is worshipped, but spirits are served (Sèvis Lwa). There are literally hundreds of spirits or 'Lwa' which are broadly divided into Rado, hot spirits, which are more congenial and 'Petwo', cool but restless spirits. Neither group is purely good nor evil. Voodoo too incorporates some influences of the country's original settlers, the Taino Indians and also uses imagery of Roman Catholic saints to represent spirits. This is thought to originate from when slaves had to hide their religion from colonial masters. During voodoo ceremonies, food, drink and gifts are offered to the spirits when voodoo priests, 'Houngans', and Priestesses, 'mambos', try to make contact with them and the spirits of blood ancestors, with songs and prayers. The spirits may take possession of individuals who in a trance-like state then act like and speak through the spirit. Everyone is thought to have a special relationship with one spirit but can serve many.



"I'm influenced by voodoo, of course it's part of me" says Sergine André but explains that the figures she paints may just be the shadows or dreams of dark nights in Haiti's Artibonite rural region where she grew up.

After studies at the 'Ecoles des Arts' in Ottawa, Canada, she returned to Haiti. In December 1997, she was winner of the competition, 'Connaître les Jeunes' (which showed the work of young painters) of the French Institute. She was subsequently invited, in April-June 1998, as visiting artist at the 'Ecole Nationale des Beaux Arts' in Paris. In April-June 2006 she travelled to South Africa with the 'Bag Factory', to work with young artists where she was saddened by the rifts in South African society. Among her inspirations, she cites recently deceased Haitian abstract artist Jean Claude 'Tiga' Garoute, whose 'Solèy Brile', a method using ink and acid produces a burnished look to artwork, a method she has paid homage to in her own work.

Oranges, reds and other vibrant colours put over her energy and passion. She is currently working on a series of paintings in blue hues. Using broad bush strokes, symmetrical shapes appear in the background, almost like windows. Perhaps these are the cool Iwa spirits? "Perhaps, I just paint what I see" she says, moving over to an open window in her studio. Sergine André's eye is a window to the soul of Haiti.

D.P. ■

Sergine André in her studio in Petionville with one of her paintings. © Debra Perchal

Sergine André, "Untitled", Oil on canvas, 30 x 40cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Debra Perchal

In background: Sergine André, "Untitled", Oil on canvas, 30 x 40cm. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Debra Perchal