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Cristina Garcia Rodero's 'rituales' create arresting, lingering memory

By George Fishman
Special to the Miami Herald

"I photograph what thrills me, what gives me a blow to the heart, what captivates me." That deceptively simple *modus operandi* has taken photographer Cristina Garcia Rodero around the world and into some very unsettling locales – notably to document occult ceremonies in her native Spain, and in India, Venezuela and Haiti.

In Haiti, there's a common saying: 80 percent of the population is Catholic, 20 percent Protestant, but 100 percent is Voodoo. The island's first non-indigenous, non-European residents were brought as slaves from that part of Africa that is today's Benin and they carried their religion with them. Voodoo is one of the branches of African-based religion that evolved in the Caribbean and Latin America. It has a 500-year history in Haiti, where many of its original stories and images were hidden from colonial masters behind the colors, symbols and faces of Catholic saints and liturgy.

Rituales en Haiti, the exhibition of photographs by Cristina Garcia Rodero at Miami-Dade College's Museum of Art + Design, is an immersive introduction to the diverse practices of voodoo in sites and ceremonies around the country and around the calendar. For those unfamiliar with religious practice involving spirit possession and animal sacrifice, confrontation with some of the exhibition's images can be arresting and even shocking.

As Museum director Jeremy Mikolajczak says, "You're hypnotized from the beginning. That's one thing about Cristina's work; it has that ability from the get-go. You are transfixed and you are sort of wrapped up into those images... mesmerized by them." He continues, "Obviously, there's some strong content, and some of it's challenging for young children, but outside of that there's some really beautiful images that for me personally encapsulate the show."

Mikolajczak has been planning the exhibition in consultation with the Spanish artist and with Spain's Consul General, Cristina Barrios, since October, 2011. It took time to decide which, among Rodero's numerous bodies of work – and when – to present. "She is one of the most celebrated photographers in the world," he explains, "and probably the best known photographer from Spain in the current era." But this is her first solo museum show in the U.S. and the first time this full exhibition has been shown in this country.

Ultimately, he said, "Its timing was perfect, as it coincides with celebrations of Spain's 500-year history in Florida and it opened in early December during Miami's Art Week, when the world is your stage."

The stage provided by the museum, located in the historic Freedom Tower, is generous and allows 120 images to create a physical, as well as esthetic and emotional experience.

The exhibition – all black and white – begins with the waterfall series, Saut d'Eau, a suite of images set in thick tropical foliage with crowds of figures, young and old, in various stages of undress, immersed in cascading streams of waters and bathing in the river they form. As explained by the photographer on her Magnum agency site, "This waterfall is the pilgrimage place best representing the syncretism between Catholicism and Voodoo. The pilgrims, raising their hands to the sky, ask the Lwas (spirits) of Voodoo for favors under the waterfall. On the 16th of July, when tens of thousands of pilgrims gather there, they ask the Virgin, who appeared under the waterfall once, for the same favors in the nearby church built in the 19th century."

This is the historical context. The experience of the photographs is something else. In Mikolajczak's words, "As you enter into the exhibition, into the space, there is that removal, that cleansing that happens. You sort of take all the bad and let it wash away, and it's about that transformative experience to open your mind, to open your heart, to open your life."

The journey begins here and continues through various sites and ceremonies, each with a different geographical setting, psychological mood and artistic focus.

Plaine du Nord, near the island's north coast, was the location of the 1791 slave revolt that would eventually lead to Haiti's independence from France. It also marks the location of a mud basin, considered by the Voodoo faithful, to be curative. Believers flock there in late July to immerse themselves. Rodero portrays them in various states of extreme rapture, ranging from beatific states to images of grimacing stiff-armed paralysis, eyes rolled back. Coated in thick mud, some figures resemble those of Pompeii, arrested in time. We see offerings of rum, special herb mixes and food; we also see animals sacrificed, captured in poignant resignation.

Mikolajczak explains, "A lot of comments we've had... are less about nudity than about the states that the individuals are in, and a lot of people refer to the eyes as the most disturbing thing. For example, there's a woman encased in mud, and you only see the silhouette of her face... it's all monotone stark grays, and you only see the whites of her eyes." However, he says, "This is history being documented, and we're not here to censor or to judge. We're looking at it from the aspect of this artist going in and having a relationship with her subject."

The nearby ocean shoreline, Bord de Mer provides another setting for cleansing, as worshippers gaze into the waters and roll in apparent ecstasy in its surf. Rodero's photos combine vivid documentation of ritual practice with often penetrating portraiture. It's surprising how "invisible" the artist seems to have been to her subjects, who rarely acknowledge her presence.

Rodero's first major series to gain critical attention was her Spanish occult documentation. She has continued to explore religious practice that is outside the mainstream – in Cuba, Brazil and India. *Rituales en Haití* was selected to represent Spain in the 2001 Venice Biennale. Her career straddles the categories of art, documentary and commercial photography, as she places herself in challenging conditions to capture some far-flung

subjects while also creating portraits of Spain's royal family – in presumably more comfortable surroundings.

Naturally, for Mikolajczak, the local community's response to the exhibition – especially that of Haitian-Americans – is vital. Voodoo has been both romanticized and vilified in the popular media, mostly by those unfamiliar with its reality.

“It's been an interesting dynamic for [Haitians] to come and visit, because they feel very strongly, and some have a more negative reaction and some feel very positive that we're bringing this to light,” he says. But the consensus view by Haitians that Mikolajczak describes is, “this is part of our culture; we cannot deny this. Whether we support it or not is our own prerogative, but this is part of who we are as a people from history.’ And those sorts of thematic dialogues are fantastic for the museum to engage in.”

Ambassador Barrios' colleague, Ana Zabía, who is curator of Madrid's Museum of the Americas, praised Rodero's achievement of “showing the Voodoo rituals with respect and trying to get similar respect from the public.” The museum engaged Haitian-born artist Jude “Papaloko” Thegenus to create a large Voodoo symbol in pigmented flour on the floor during the opening, and the band Rara Lakay's performance added an immersive auditory dimension to the event.

Over the centuries, among Caribbean-based peoples of African ancestry, carnival celebrations – especially those preceding the Catholic Lenten period of abstinence – were marked by raucous revelry.

The photos of Carnival in Jacmel show men's bodies covered with various mixtures of oil, molasses, soot, ash and other colorants to render the participants even darker. Traditionally, masks concealed identity, while music and rum reduced inhibitions and heightened the celebratory, erotic spirit. Some revelers wear bull horns, carry dead snakes and phallic staffs and wrap chains around their bodies – all symbols laden with meanings in the sociology of slavery, Christianity and animist religions. The confrontational, carnal aspects of some of these figures contrasts with the contemplative, prayerful photographs of white-garbed women and children, holding candles in patient reverie and the Miracle Calvary of Ganthier, where the faithful raise their arms and ask for miracles.

Those spread arms produce compositional echoes throughout the exhibition. We may see reverberations of Jesus' crucifixion; also of Goya's Third of May execution of Spanish citizens. As a plea for help and mercy, the symbol resonates with Haiti's struggles.

The Rembrandt-like light within the Caves of St. Francis of Assisi and the “biblical” timelessness of many scenes are gripping and reinforce the artistry that underlies the documentation.

Gorgeous tonalities from pure light through pitch black masterfully expose religious experience at its most visceral and personal. Some viewers may find that it overwhelming or best experienced in modest doses, but the images will linger in the memory and the exhibition is a bold one for the museum.

Rituales en Hait í is also presented in a large format book.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Rituales en Hait í: Photographs by Cristina Garcia Rodero

WHEN:through March 29, 2014; Wednesdays through Sundays 12 p.m. – 5 p.m.

WHERE: MDC Museum of Art + Design, 600 Biscayne Blvd., downtown Miami

INFO: 305-237-7700; www.mdcmoad.org

Three additional exhibitions are also on view:

[The Influencers I: Prominent Works from the MDC Permanent Art Collection](#)

Following Your Own Sense of Justice. Leonard Turkel: Pioneer & Activist.

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