

Studies for a 16-diptych installation to be called *Flowers Of Evil And Good*

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Written for the first exhibit of "Studies #3 and 4 for *Flowers of Evil and Good*" at Thomas Erben Gallery, NYC, this discussion of the father of modernism Charles Baudelaire and his Haitian common-law wife Jeanne Duval, as well as Picasso and O'Grady's mother Lena, places their relationships in the postmodernist moment.

Charles Baudelaire is often referred to as both the West's first modern poet and its first modern art critic. It would be no exaggeration to say that Baudelaire created his most important poetry out of his responses to an allegedly destructive relationship with Jeanne Duval, his black common-law wife of 20 years. A close reading of his poetry would indicate that he may also have developed his aesthetic theory, that of a beauty which is contradictory and ambiguous and of its time, based on the example she provided as well.

Les Fleurs du mal (Flowers of Evil), published in 1857, was a turning-point for European poetry, like that given painting 50 years later in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Each work embodies the psychologically complex ways modernism constructed itself out of Europe's encounter with the worlds it colonized. Seen in this way, *Les Fleurs du mal* is the more interesting: whereas the *Demoiselles* struggled to contain already mediated forms of art, *Flowers* was dealing with the body and psyche of a live and messy human being.

None of Duval's own words remain: she does not speak for herself either in Baudelaire's poetry or prose, and there is an indication that Charles' mother may have destroyed her letters to him. In addition, there are no civil documents permitting a reconstruction of her life, though most evidence points to her

having emigrated to Paris from Haiti in the 1830s. They met in 1842, when Baudelaire was 21 and she was possibly the same age.

The language component of the final installation, *Flowers of Evil and Good*, each of whose 16 diptychs contains one panel representing Baudelaire and one Duval, will be in sustained disequilibrium: Charles speaks in poetry, Jeanne "speaks" in prose.

On Baudelaire's side of the diptychs, the language is taken from my own translations of *Les Fleurs du mal*—I found it necessary to do my own because later translators, like the critics, erased and demonized Jeanne in a way that Charles had not. On the Duval side, her words are a fiction, written by me, to fill the silence of this woman-without-speech, and I know that I am as guilty as Charles. I too am using Jeanne. Perhaps to understand my mother, Lena—who emigrated from Jamaica to Boston in the 1920s, when little had changed for the metropolitan woman of color—and, in turn, to understand myself.

Jeanne's demonization began almost immediately in the memoirs of Baudelaire's friends and has continued for 150 years to a greater extent in the writings of his critics. John D. Bennett, in a book published by Princeton University Press in 1944 and frequently reprinted, in describing Baudelaire as a Louis XV out of time made the following extreme but symptomatic statement: "This Bourbon Louis took his pleasures not in the *Parc au Cerfs* but in a cheap furnished room with a mulattress. His *lever* was elaborate; he took two hours to perform his immaculate toilette every morning. But the only courtier was the maniac on the bed, the raucous gesticulating Jeanne, rolling her white nigger eyeballs, chattering incoherently like a monkey."

Charles often admitted his need for her—and his debt to her—speaking in one prose poem of "his beloved, delicious and execrable wife, that mysterious wife to whom he owed so many pleasures, so many sorrows, and perhaps too a large part of his genius."

Because Baudelaire was a great poet, even at his angriest and most petty, although Jeanne is presented externally it is surprising how well she may be discerned by the sympathetic reader, not just in the "Black Venus" cycle but throughout *Les Fleurs du mal*. I am not so much interested in the literal Jeanne as in the figurative one—the hybrid woman caught up in the dilemmas of diaspora. We all are now from some other place, trying to orient ourselves, using and being used, struggling to gain a foothold.

One frustration in trying to present Jeanne and Charles's relationship as that of a complex couple at a particular historical moment, i.e. the apex of Europe's political and cultural empire, is that the attempt to show them as pictorial equals is constantly subverted. Baudelaire was photographed by some of the greatest photographers of the day, Neys, Carjat, and Nadar, but all we have of Duval is a few casual pen-and-ink drawings by Baudelaire himself and an indifferent painting by Manet from the end of her life. For me, layering images of Charles and Jeanne with that of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, while hardly eliminating the obvious differentials in power, is a way to show that they were both subject to forces outside their control. Another device for equalizing Jeanne and Charles's humanity is the use of color: a single hue across each of two panels, changing from diptych to diptych throughout the installation, with the colors also taken from *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

It's not a fair match. Charles is the master of a tongue charged with the power of its historical moment; he can afford the luxury of exploring his language's vulnerabilities. Jeanne's struggle is for a language to comprehend a situation which has, for all purposes, never before existed: a post-modernist condition in a modernist time. As a chart of her struggle, her side of the diptychs may often be difficult to read, wavering between obscurity and clarity. For the viewer, this is a project in which she may or may not succeed.

Study #3, digital cibachrome diptych, 1998.

RED JEANNE DUVAL:

background text:

The place not what I expect, it lonely and cold. Windows stare, courtyards close, doors frown. If I could I would go home, stretch out my hair like a bridge and cross the abyss.

headline:

stretch out my hair like a bridge

RED CHARLES BAUDELAIRE:

background text:

Her belly, her breasts, those grapes on my vine, moved forward, cajoling more than angels of evil, disturbed my soul from its sleeping retreat, tumbling it from the rock-crystal throne where, calm and alone, it was seated.

headline:

tumbling my soul from the crystal throne

Study #4, digital cibachrome diptych, each panel 40" x 30", 1998.

YELLOW JEANNE:

background text:

They said, he'll use you. I said nothing happen unless you
take a chance in this world. When he touch me, my skin
felt like it scraped by stars.

headline:

he scrape my skin with stars

YELLOW CHARLES:

background text:

I prefer to opium, to wine, to aperitifs the elixir of your
mouth where love dances the pavane; and when, by
caravan, my desire sets out for you, your eyes are the well
where my boredom drinks.

headline:

your eyes the well my boredom drinks