

An illustration of a woman with dark skin and long, dark, curly hair. She is wearing a red top with a yellow and green patterned shawl. A large green snake with white and black spots is coiled around her neck and arms. She is holding the snake's head with her right hand. The background is a solid blue color.

mami wata

Arts for Water Spirits
in Africa and Its Diasporas



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chapter twelve

Mami as Artists' Muse

HENRY JOHN DREWAL

In addition to their continually transforming histories of influence in Africa and its diasporas, Mami Wata and other African and African Atlantic water spirits have gained an even wider audience, as well as new meanings and import, by capturing the imaginations of a number of contemporary artists. This chapter will serve as a brief introduction to the work of several artists—men and women from Africa, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean—who have found in Mami Wata and her cohorts a highly intriguing subject matter. It will examine as well the nature of the unique understandings and involvements of these artists with water spirits and how they employ Mami Wata and other underwater denizens to address issues of gender, race, morality, identity, economics, environment, and politics.



In a large, bright blue canvas entitled *Yeye Odo (Mother Water)*; fig. 12.1), Nigerian Yoruba artist Bolaji Campbell pays tribute to Oshun, the goddess of cool waters. She is one of innumerable “aquatic divinities (*orisha*) that straddle the landscape of the Yoruba universe.” *Orisha* represent the source of existence, and Oshun is regarded as a provider of children. Her presence thus evokes such praise names as *abeja gbooro* (owner of countless big fishes) or *yeye omo eja* (mother of fish; Campbell, personal communication, 2007).

The ambivalent attributes of these water divinities and the ways in which they deal with human weaknesses preoccupy Campbell. He likens his painting *Yeye Odo* to an African American tradition associated with Simbi, a Kongo aquatic goddess from Central Africa. Simbi was brought to the Americas by enslaved Africans and reinvented there, particularly in Haiti and

- 12.1 Bolaji Campbell
(b. 1958, Zaria Nigeria;
active Providence,
Rhode Island)
Yeye Odo (Mother Water),
1996
Acrylic on canvas
91.4 x 61 cm
Private Collection

the low country of South Carolina where Campbell spent a year as a scholar in residence at the Avery Center for African-American History and Culture at the College of Charleston. He notes that Simbi and Oshun celebrate the power of women. At the same time, they test and punish human aspirations and weaknesses. For Campbell, the mermaid icon represents opposites: disruptive consumption versus regeneration and survival. It also stands for unrestrained passion and seductive sexuality. Simbi, Oshun, and Mami Wata wait at the bottom of oceans and rivers occasionally surfacing to entice the weary or misguided traveler who may be unaware of their ability to dominate, terrorize, and destroy using the lure of material wealth (Campbell, personal communication, 2007).

In *Yeye Odo*, Campbell pays particular attention to the brass mirror that Oshun holds. Although it shines like gold, it should serve as a caution against being seduced by possessions (Campbell, personal communication, 2007). He further explains that the painting “is a metaphor for transformation and change.” Oshun presides over two realms of existence, the world of the living and the unfathomable realm of the departed. Given this distinction, she cannot be ignored and requires constant recognition in the form of sacrifice and praise. Only in this manner can her potentially transgressive activities be turned to positive purposes. *Yeye Odo* is a painted prayer urging caution, self-reflection, and beneficial transformation (Campbell, personal communication, 2007).



Oshun also appears in the work of another Yoruba artist, Twin Seven-Seven. One of the seventh set of twins born to his mother, he embodies the extraordinary and troublesome spiritual powers attributed to twins (*ibeji*) among the Yoruba. Twin Seven-Seven multiplies these unpredictable powers by a second seven (a number evocative of energy, potentiality, and action), thereby asserting his uniqueness. He is at once a singer, dancer, musician, composer, magician, fashion trendsetter, politician, entrepreneur, storyteller, and artist. In many ways he epitomizes the artistic flowering that took place in Nigeria at Ibadan, Nsukka, and Oshogbo in the 1960s and 1970s during the heady first days of the country’s independence.

Nigerian universities at Ibadan, Ife, Zaria, and Nsukka were among the very best on the continent at the time, and they attracted artists, writers, performers, arts advocates, and patrons—including John Pepper Clark, Duro Ladipo, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, Uche Okeke, Obiora Udechukwu, Demas Nwoko, Ulli and Georgina Beier, Suzanne Wenger, David Driskell, and others—who created an artistic fervor that fostered remarkable work. After discovering the artistic movement and center known as the Mbari Mbayo Club in Ibadan and Oshogbo (founded by Ulli Beier, Duro Ladipo, and others), Twin Seven-Seven began to flourish, bringing his many talents together to create daring and outrageous performances in local nightclubs, as well as striking mixed-media works on board (oil, pastel, and ink), such as his folktale-titled piece *The Fisherman and the River Goddess with His Captured Multi-Colored Fishes and the River Night Guard* (fig. 12.2).



Twin Seven-Seven's imagery unfolds like the stories he heard as a child growing up in the Yoruba town of Ogidi. These narratives incorporated fantastic forest spirits and deified kings and queens like Shango and Oshun, the patron divinity of Oshogbo where the artist came to settle. Oshun, whose sweetness cuts like a knife of honey, provides sustenance for her children, the people of Oshogbo, through the "multi-colored fishes" that issue from the sacred waters of the Oshun River (Murphy and Sanford 2001). In his painting, Twin Seven-Seven also incorporates the figure of a river night guard. Night security guards became a common sight in rapidly expanding Oshogbo, which faced a burgeoning crime rate. Usually such guards were elderly hunters, or non-Yoruba peoples from northern Nigeria (Kanuri and others), who had reputations as fierce warriors. Mythic goddesses, fishermen, and night guards populate Twin's compositions, mixing cosmic and worldly forces in fascinating ways. This particular work, painted and drawn on plywood, anticipates his later pieces in which he adds several layers of board, cut-out figures, and other media, including newspaper clippings and bottle caps, to create relief collages and intricate inked line patterns over the entire surface. The final effect energizes the work and powerfully expresses the restless and unpredictable personality of the artist.

12.2 Twin Seven-Seven
(b. 1944, Ogidi, Nigeria)
The Fisherman and the River Goddess with His Captured Multi-Colored Fishes and the River Night Guard, circa 1960
Oil, pastel, ink, on wood
67.5 x 108.5 cm

National Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution, 97-6-1;
Gift of Merton Simpson

Photograph by Franko Khoury

Born in the small farming village of Ijesha-Ishu in western Nigeria, Moyo Ogundipe was raised in a succession of Christian school compounds where his father served as an educator. His knowledge and experience of Yoruba culture and history were minimal during those years. Instead, he immersed himself in his family's library, which reflected the assimilation of English customs and Christian values that occurred during the colonial era. Surrounded by books on ancient Greek and Roman history and mythology, Ogundipe focused his studies on Eurocentric material.

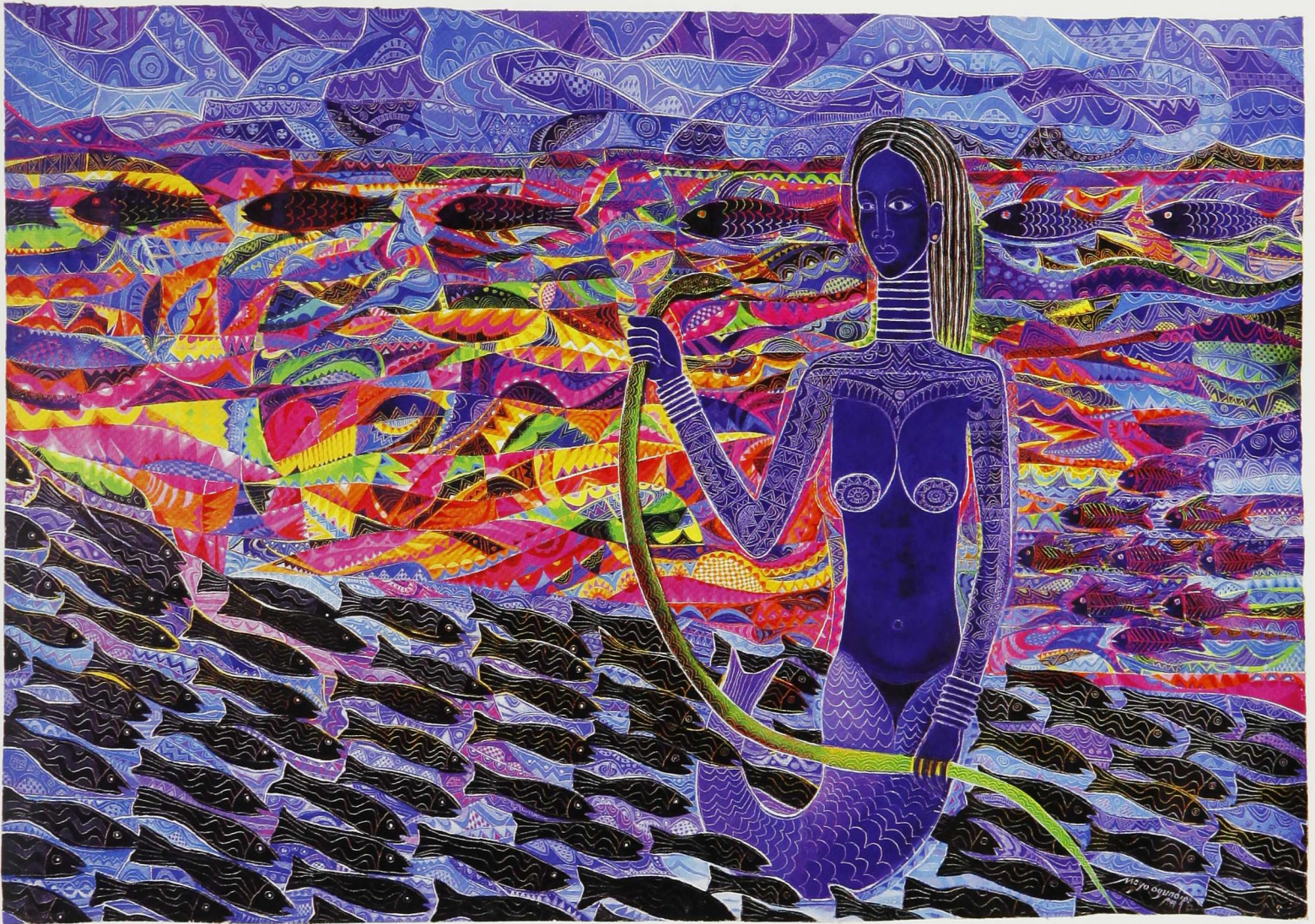
He nonetheless recalls two important moments that opened his eyes to Yoruba art (even if he was inclined to see it through the prism of Cubism). One was the annual Egungun (ancestral masquerade) festival:

Between the months of June and July, when the food is plentiful and the sweet potent sap of the palm trees is abundant, ancestral spirits descend from their celestial abode in the skies to wine, dine and dance with mere mortals.... The Egungun festival and its intricately carved masks of cubism is the invocation of the supreme powers... It is a sight to behold! [Ogundipe 2003]

The second moment occurred when the artist saw the majestic carved posts that embellished the palace of the Ogoga, or king, of Ikerre. It wasn't until he attended the University of Ife, however, that Ogundipe began seriously to explore Yoruba aesthetics. Following his studies, he joined the Nigerian National TV and became a filmmaker. By the early 1990s, however, he had relocated to the United States, fleeing Nigeria's oppressive military dictatorship. Time and distance spent away from his homeland have become major factors in his work. As he explained to fellow Yoruba artist Moyo Okediji:

When I was in Nigeria, in Yorubaland...there were a lot of things I took for granted because they were always there.... It was not until I left my cultural home in Yoruba and came here to the United States that I really began to miss these things.... They now have more impact on my life, on my attitude and beliefs than they had when I was in Nigeria. That is the irony. Now that I am physically removed from home, the things of home mean so much more to me. [Okediji 2002, 109]

Ogundipe's exile gave a major impetus to his emerging Yoruba consciousness, breathing new life into his paintings. When asked about his identity as an artist, however, he has replied that "It is futile to classify me as a Yoruba, African, or Nigerian artist. I am a human being.... We try as human beings to express the deepest joys and sorrows, the feelings and emotions of this [cosmic] harmony" (Okediji 2002, 100). He finds those harmonies and rhythms in a creative process that fuses Western and Yoruba sensibilities. He often begins by splattering many colors on the canvas, citing the spontaneity of the Abstract Expressionists as his inspiration (Sytsma 2006). Then, he imposes a kind of loose irregular grid over the entire surface. Finally, he blankets this surface with a second layer of colors that interpenetrates the first. His forms evoke Yoruba sculpture—simple, firm, and direct—and the rhythmic pulse of the composition's fluid lines and vibrant colors recalls his childhood experience of Egungun festivals:

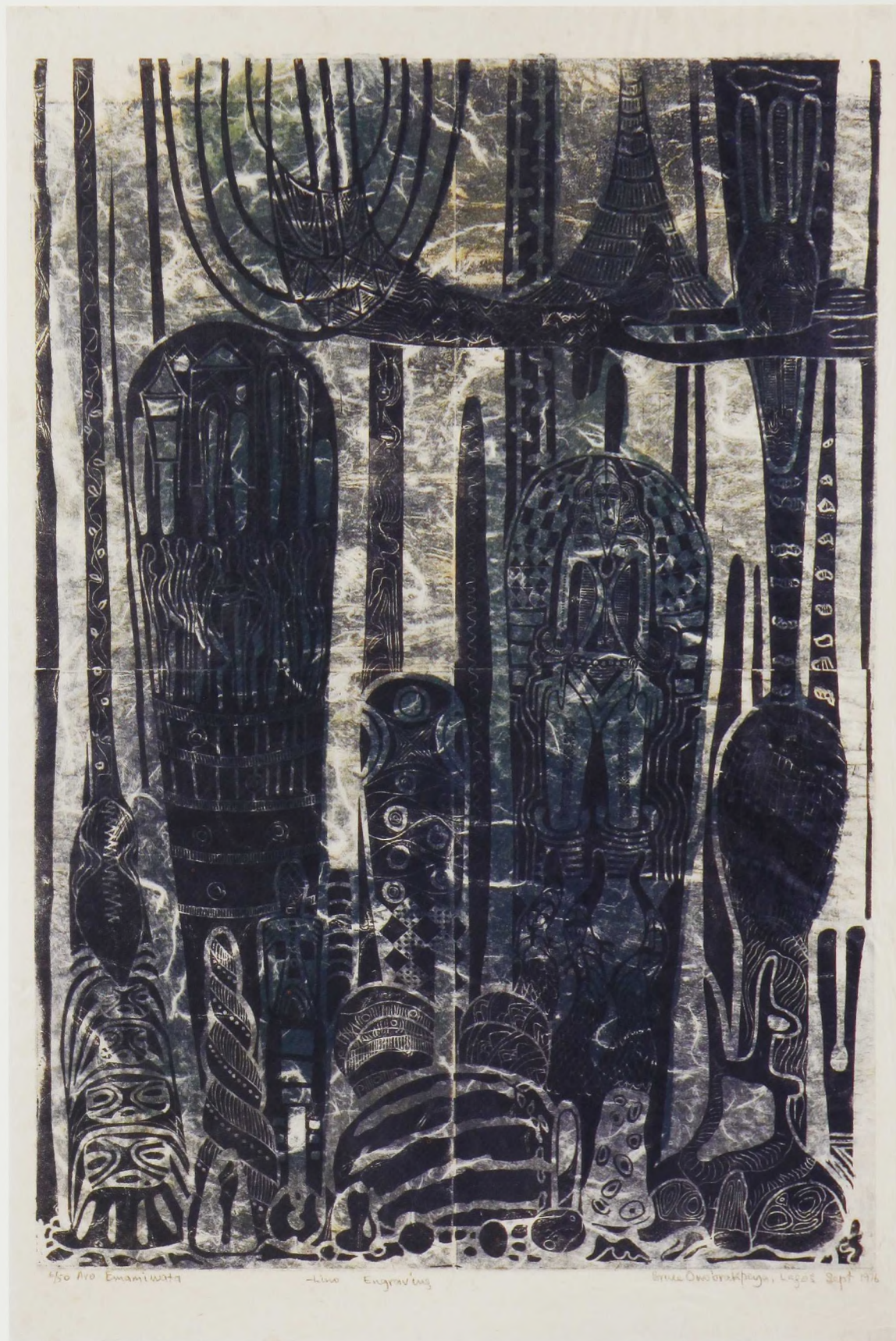


I try to simulate in my paintings, the montages of imagistic and kinetic possibilities that the participants of this sacred ritual of the Egungun festival often experience. I want my paintings, like the Egungun festival, to reflect the vastness of the stage of life and the depth and complexities of human drama. I have borrowed and adopted the spirit and energy and the colors and motions and textures and patterns and sounds of the Egungun spectacle. [Ogundipe cited in Sytsma 2006]

- 12.3 Moyo Ogundipe
 (b. 1948, Ijesha-Ishu,
 Nigeria; active Denver,
 Colorado)
Mami Wata, 1999
 Acrylic on canvas
 121.9 x 152.4 cm
 Collection of Chike Obianwu

Ogundipe's painting *Mami Wata* is filled with streams of patterns, colors, fish forms, and undulating waves that flow across the surface of an aquatic world (fig. 12.3). A band of warmer colors floats in the middle, suggesting the various depths and temperatures of the ocean's waters and the fickle temperament of Mami Wata, the queen who rules over this realm. Her clean and distinct image unites the water's foamy surface with its depths. Mami's clearly delineated form follows Yoruba canons of abstraction, likeness, visibility, and completeness. Her elegant long,

12.4 Bruce Onobrakpeya
(b. 1932, Agbara-Otor,
Niger River Delta, Nigeria)
*Aro Emamiwata (Mami Wata
Shrine)*, 6/50, 1976
Three-color lino engraving
on unbleached rice paper
95.6 x 63.5 cm
Museum for African Art, New York
Photograph by Karin L. Willis



ringed neck epitomizes beauty. The delicate patterns etched on her torso are inspired by Yoruba indigo-dyed textiles known as *adire*. Making *adire* is a woman's art that resonates with the presence of Oshun whose home, Oshogbo, is one of the centers of *adire* production. The deep blue-black luster of indigo evokes the depths of a river or ocean.



Bruce Onobrakpeya, an artist known for his humility and generosity, was born into a family of artists in the Urhobo town of Agbara-Otor in the Niger River Delta. Onobrakpeya graduated from the College of Science and Technology in Zaria, Nigeria, and taught art at St. Gregory's College in Lagos until he opened his own studio, school, and cultural center in Lagos in 1979 and later helped to establish the Society of Nigerian Artists. He has been strongly influenced by the art of Benin and, like Moyo Ogundipe, by Yoruba *adire* patterns. Urhobo oral traditions, rites, myths, and body art traditions associated with the initiation rites of girls are also at the center of his work.

After beginning his career as a painter, he decided to master printmaking and developed an original technique that he refers to as "plastography," which employs epoxy or polyester resin to build up surfaces for engraving. Using this method, he has been able to create flat or low-relief lines, textures, and colors, as well as higher-relief sculptures that he calls "plastocasts." Artist and art historian Dele Jegede has described Onobrakpeya's art as "like the riverine Delta region from where he hails, fluid and shimmery. Its strength stems in part from expected accidental streams which wind their way this time not through the green, swampy forest traversed by the tributaries of the Niger River but through chemicals and plate, onto paper" (1992, 10).

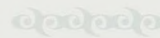
The fluidity of his approach to form and line served Onobrakpeya especially well in a series of four works on the theme of Mami Wata completed while he was an artist-in-residence at the famous Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Maine. The series explored ways to create the illusion of underwater worlds in his plastographs, which he populated with real and imaginary sea creatures. As the artist has noted, "Although I have always wanted to work on this subject [Mami Wata] with my own interpretation, the idea did not mature until I saw blurred figures of bathers under the warm waters of Echo Lake, near Bar Harbor in Maine" (Onobrakpeya 1992, 230). He transformed those ethereal images of swimmers into the fish-tailed Mami Wata inspired by the stories and dreams of his childhood in the watery world of the Niger Delta.

One of the ubiquitous Mami Wata stories that circulated in colonial Nigeria inspired three of Onobrakpeya's Mami Wata works completed during his stay at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts. He has given these works the general title Mamiwata Jebba Bridge Myth (1976). The works were individually titled *Egodo Emamiwata* (*Abode of Mami Wata*), *Mamiwata v'oyibo* (*Mami Wata and the White Man*), and *Aro Emamiwata* (*Mami Wata Shrine*; see fig. 12.4). As Onobrakpeya explains, the Jebba Bridge Myth series concerns one of the major British colonial construction projects to link northern and southern Nigeria across the Niger River at a location that also happened to be the abode of Mami Wata:

The story says that the mamiwata (water spirit) who resided under the water over which the Jebba bridge was to be built took offense at the disturbance caused by the construction works. The engineer (a white man), himself spiritually versed, went under the water to have a dialogue with the goddess. When persuasion failed, he resorted to the use of magical power. He transformed himself inside a bottle and mysteriously came out of it. Responding to the challenge, the water spirit did the same but before it could come out of it, the engineer had placed a lid on the bottle, so he won. After that encounter there was peace, and the famous Jebba bridge was finally built over river Niger. [Onobrakpeya 1992, 233]

This is another wonderful example of Mami's complex relationship with strangers from overseas. In the first of Onobrakpeya's lino engravings in this series, the engineer appears inside his spirit bottle wearing a pith helmet, shirt, and shorts and smoking a pipe as Mami swims around him; in the second (fig. 12.4), set in Mami's shrine, she holds a three-headed vessel with the engineer inside; and in the third, Mami, having accepted the challenge, has entered the vessel as the engineer wearing his magical pendant dives down to trap her inside (Onobrakpeya 1992, 234–235). Like the clever engineer, Onobrakpeya has “captured” the fantasy and presence of Mami Wata in creating a vibrant and fascinating series of works in her honor.

A work that Onobrakpeya created in 1980, *The Hydras Head* (fig. 12.5), also known as *Izobo* (*Sacrifice*), demonstrates his sustained interest in the potential of Mami Wata as a subject. While the Hydra of Grecian mythology is a metaphor for relentless battles fought against myriad negative forces, for Onobrakpeya, the multiheaded monster represents the countless economic, social, religious, and political challenges that the newly independent nation of Nigeria had to face. As the artist explains, the work “draws attention to the multiplicity of human problems. A priest offers sacrifice to a deity, and as one of its many heads seems satisfied, another makes a demand” (Onobrakpeya, personal communication, 2007). For the artist the Hydra evoked the snake companions of Mami Wata and her potential for both positive and negative actions, as well as Mami's voluminous head of thick wavy hair, which is often rendered as long, serpentine braids. Among the Urhobo, Yoruba, Igbo, Edo, and others, such abundant hair has deep and widespread associations with African water divinities (See Drewal 1986; Jell-Bahlsen forthcoming).



Geoffrey Nwogu grew up in Ibgoland in southeastern Nigeria and spent his childhood watching his artist father carve “great and beautiful” images of Mami Wata for the many devotees and communities that patronized him in the 1950s (Nwogu, personal communication, 2007). Although as a very young child he was not permitted to work in his father's studio, by age seven he began to play with the knives and chisels. He recalls that “At that time Mami Wata was one of the major images my father created often for worshippers, admirers, and collectors. I loved to help father with the finish as far as applying the underpainting or priming of his pieces. My interest in Mami Wata derives from this early exposure” (Nwogu, personal communication, 2007). Nwogu's father worked “assembly style,” carving a torso out of one block and the arms separately. Geoffrey,



575 The Hydras head - Deep Etching - Bruce Onobrakpeya, Lagos, Sept. 1980.

12.5 Bruce Onobrakpeya
(b. 1932, Agbara-Otor,
Niger River Delta, Nigeria)
The Hydras Head, 1980
Deep etching on paper
52.3 x 39 cm

National Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution, 91-11-1;
Gift of Warren M. Robbins

Photograph by Franko Khoury

In 2007, the artist suggested
an alternative title for this work:
Izobo (Sacrifice).

however, now carves an entire piece, whether three-dimensional or a relief, from of a single block of wood. In the relief illustrated here (fig. 12.6), he created the illusion of an aquatic environment with bubbles popping up around Mami Wata in order to capture what he refers to as “the elegance of the water queen.”

His own vision of Mami Wata derives from his research into the pantheon of Igbo gods. He found that Mami Wata was somehow “alienated” from the “native deities of the Igbo.” Even in Mbari houses (see chapter 5 of this volume), she was different from the indigenous divinities among whom she resided. Nwogu determined to “naturalize her in the family of Igbo deities by assigning her an Mbari personality,” which he felt gave her “more dignity and freedom in the land of her residence. She has become one of us and can now eat ‘gari’ [cassava] and...‘kolanuts’ instead of Coca Cola and cookies as offerings” (Nwogu, personal communication, 2007). In his relief sculpture, the artist enthrones Mami Wata, presenting her in the way that the revered Igbo

12.6 In this relief carving of 1992, Igbo artist Geoffrey Nwogu (b. 1949, Ezinihitte-Mbaise, Nigeria) attempts to treat Mami Wata in a manner resembling other Igbo deities. He thus portrays her sitting majestically as if she were a figure in an Mbari house.



earth goddess Ala might be seen in an Mbari house. As he explains, “By making Mami Wata look like the natives, it is easier for them to pay her homage from deep down, thereby heeding the musician Victor Uwaifo’s advice—‘If you see Mami Wata, never, never, you run away’” (Nwogu, personal communication, 2007).



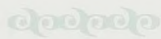
Obiora Udechukwu presently lives and works in the United States, but his passion for Mami Wata goes back many years to the 1970s when he would see her devotional images in his Igbo homeland, hear the countless stories and songs about her that filled the air, and observe the passing references to her in the fiction of Chinua Achebe and especially in the exquisite poems of the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo. Udechukwu’s *Watermaid I* (fig. 12.7) was inspired by Okigbo’s poem of the same name. The artist found the following excerpt from that poem particularly moving:

...BRIGHT

with the armpit-dazzle of a lioness,
she answers,
wearing white light about her;
and the waves escort her,
my lioness,
crowned with moonlight.
So brief her presence—
Match-flare in wind's breath—
So brief with mirrors around me.
Downward...
the waves distil her
gold crop
sinking ungathered
Watermaid of the salt-emptiness,
Grown are the ears of the secret.
[Okigbo 1962, 25]

Udechukwu has called “The Watermaid sequence...one of the most beautiful in Okigbo’s work.” He goes on to explain that by the early 1960s in Nsukka, Nigeria, the Watermaid or Mami Wata had become something of an “African Muse,” inspiring many artists for “Mamiwata is capable of giving certain gifts in exchange for love or devotion.... I listened to a female singer with an *Amala* dance group from the riverine area recount the origin of that music/dance. She told of a certain woman who went under water for four days during which period Mammy Water taught her the dance” (Udechukwu 1984, 82).

In Udechukwu’s *Watermaid I*, Mami Wata floats on top of swirling waves, her slender torso and arm parallel to her rectangular mirror. The moon shines overhead as she makes her sudden “match-flare” nocturnal appearance before, “sinking ungathered” as in a dream. The briefly glimpsed, ephemeral qualities of Mami and her inspiration are captured in this aquatint etching.



South African artist Claudette Schreuders became fascinated with the contradictions and complexities inherent in the character of Mami Wata after having read essays on the subject. Subsequently, she began a series of works involving Mami Wata. In these she also fused references to female religious figures (such as Christian saints and martyrs) and to prostitutes and thieves who pray for protection and prosperity. A visit to Mexico also contributed to the inspiration for this body of work. While there, Schreuders learned about a saint of the *barrios*—actually a skeleton in saint’s clothing. As the artist has explained, “you could pray [to this saint] that your robbery goes successfully, or that you get a lot of clients.... It’s a saint that won’t judge you.... It’s not virtuous; it’s like good and evil aren’t that simple, they’re connected” (Murinik 2004, 128).



- 12.7 Obiora Udechukwu
(b. 1946, Onitsha, Nigeria;
active Canton, New York)
Watermaid I, 6/25, circa
1993
Etching, aquatint
65.4 x 48.9 cm
Collection of the Artist

- 12.8 Claudette Schreuders
(b. 1973, Pretoria, South
Africa)
The Lost Girl, 2000
Enamel, wood
68.6 cm
Collection of Sue and Joe Berland



In 2004 Schreuders was invited to create a piece for a major exhibition of South African artists organized by the Museum for African Art in New York. Inspired by Mami Wata, Schreuders sculpted a wooden figure surrounded by a circle of glowing white candles, calling it *The Free Girl*. In this installation the artist combined Mami Wata of West Africa, the Watermeisie (water spirit) of South Africa, and the Madonna. It's "a confusing saint—you won't be sure what it stands for," Schreuders has commented (Murinik 2004, 128). *The Free Girl* stands with a snake wrapped around her shoulders. Her raised left hand holds the neckline of her plain dress and seems ready to caress her snake-necklace, while she presses another snake underfoot. Schreuders muses "I guess its about the idea of either acting on something or repressing it" (Murinik 2004, 133). Good/bad, positive/negative, white/black, African/not African—these are the contradictions that Schreuders struggles with in her own life and identity as a white South African woman. These very same ambiguities have swirled around Mami Wata as viewed by academics as well as devotees. Her hybridity confounds categorization, for she is beyond simplistic dualities, being all and none of them simultaneously.

The Lost Girl (fig. 12.8), created in 2000, stands as a prelude to *The Free Girl*. In creating the earlier piece, Schreuders, who used the mermaid form of Mami Wata/Watermeisie, may have been inspired by a story she heard in South Africa about a man who had Watermeisie in his house. The account says the man kept the spirit in water and fed it blood or semen. He made sacrifices to the spirit to get what he wanted and promised never to wear shoes to demonstrate his devotion and never to bring any woman to his house. One day his girlfriend, who had become jealous, went to his house to see what was preoccupying him. When she entered, she heard something, and “when she opened the bathroom door a big snake came out and chased her out of the house.” The fact that this story contained elements of “truth and myth” fascinated Schreuders (Murinik 2004, 131). *The Lost Girl* shows Mami sitting on her fish tail, gesturing with the open palm of her right hand. The left hand is bent over her breast, similar to the pose of *The Free Girl* of 2004. Mami’s snake companion circles around her tail like a ripple as she emerges from her watery home. Perhaps the title, *The Lost Girl*, marks a moment of indecision and personal struggle in the artist’s life or underscores the perpetual ambiguities embodied by mermaid, Mami Wata, and Watermeisie.

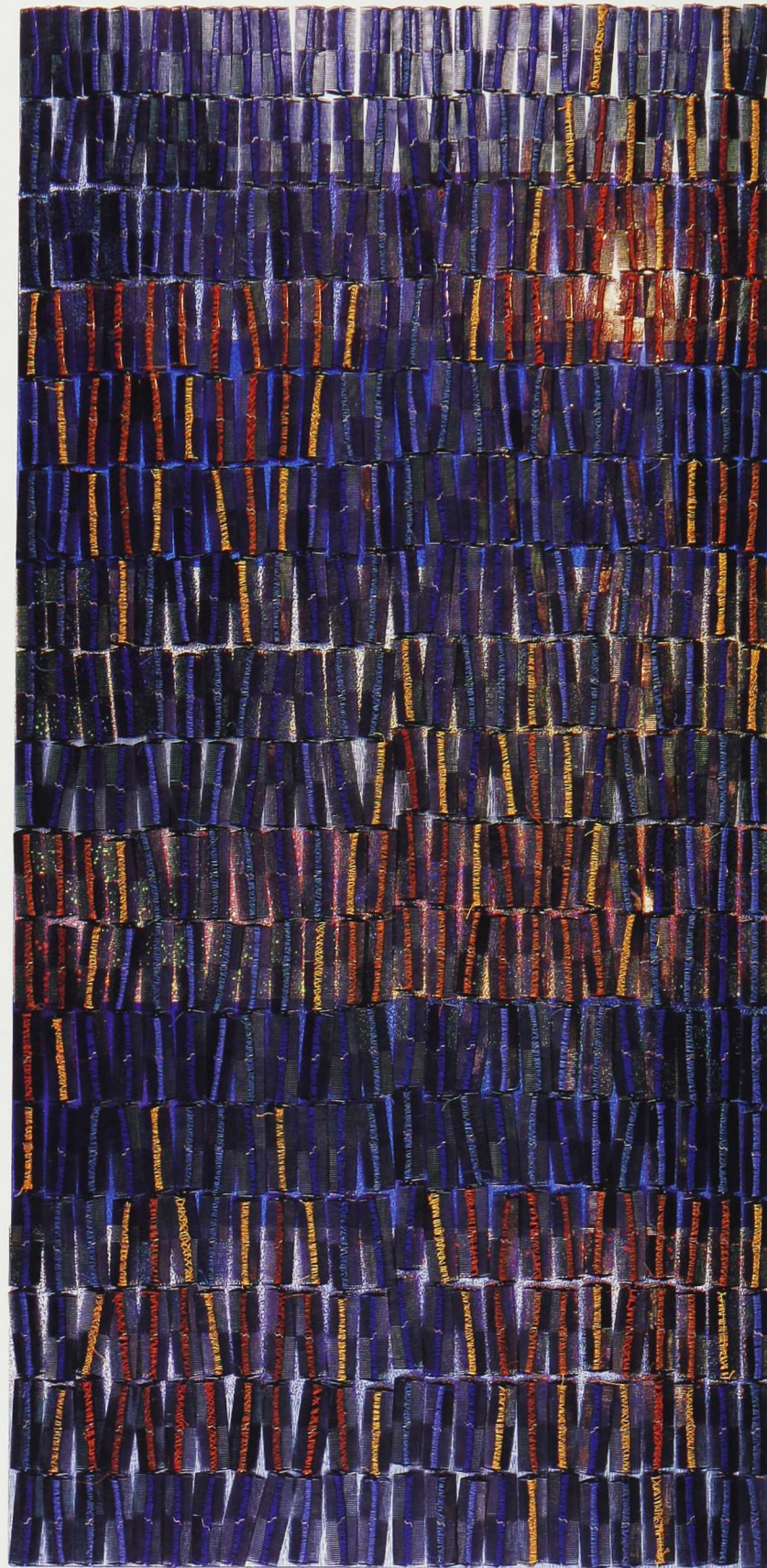


In *Aqua Allure* (fig. 12.9), Sonya Y. Clark creates a sparkling surface composed of plastic combs on holographic paper. The work is “inspired by the reflective quality of water, the dramatic luminescence of underwater life, and the narcissism of Mami Wata” (Clark, personal communication, 2007). Embedded within the work is another message, written with combs whose forms are mirror images of each other: MWMWMWMWMW, a Mami Wata mantra evoking the ubiquitous, infinite presence of the water spirit through time and space. The letters M and W are also sewn into the combs themselves. Beneath the calligraphic combs, the holographic paper “creates an illusion of depth, glistens like sunlight on water, and flashes brilliant color like that found in phosphorescent marine life” (Clark, personal communication, 2007). Inducing memories of what draws us to the seductive beauty of water, *Aqua Allure* embodies the essence of Mami Wata and the sound of her siren serenade, MamiWataMamiWataMamiWata.

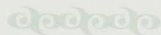
This interest in “hidden” texts began in 1997 when Clark began to ponder the power of the unseen. As she explains, “text that is not readily available to the eye asserts its presence provocatively.” Amulets found throughout the African continent and Diaspora containing hidden text (e.g., *ejoka* of the Ewe of West Africa, *tiraa* of the Hausa, the *mojo* of the southern United States, and the *pakèts kongo* of Haiti) further piqued her interest. Out of these ideas she created a contemporary collaborative art project based on amulets with hidden text, the Beaded Prayers Project. Between 1999 and 2004, over four thousand participants from thirty-five nations created beaded amulets containing secrets, aspirations, or prayers that are now included in a worldwide, traveling exhibition (Clark, personal communication, 2007).

As a woman of African Caribbean heritage who grew up in Washington, D.C., Clark has a very personal relationship with combs. Her visceral multisensory memories of hair culture include: oily pomade on palms and fingertips massaged into parted hair; the buzz of clippers; the smell of lye in relaxers; the pungency of burning hair; the slice of scissors through thick

12.9 Sonya Y. Clark
(b. 1967, Washington, D.C.)
Aqua Allure, 2005
Thread, combs, holographic
paper, foam-core board
208.3 cm
Collection of the Artist

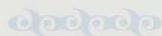


locks; the rhythm of braiding; the sound of bristles against a scalp; and the tug of a tangle being forced into conformity. Growing up, she disliked having her hair pulled, combed, and plaited, a tiring and painful process. Now she works through those unhappy memories in her art, creating a series of sculptures that transform the dreaded combs into works of beauty.



African American artist Gerald Duane Coleman was born and raised in Milwaukee beside the vast watery expanse of Lake Michigan. Several years ago he created a large multimedia wall hanging, *Lady on the Lake*, which honored Oshun, the Yoruba goddess of sweet waters, as part of a commission for the Midwest Convention Center. In another of his works, a mixed-media shrine house called *Our Lady of the Sacred Waters* (fig. 12.10), Coleman honors Mami Wata who, as has been previously noted, shares many affinities with Oshun. Inspired by certain African Mami Wata shrines that create the illusion of her aquatic abode, Coleman images a sparkling blue-green underwater realm populated with fish, dolphins, swimming maidens, and seashells, some of them painted gold to evoke the riches Mami can provide. Mami as snake charmer dominates the center and circus posters of her as an animal tamer emphasize her control of nature and the environment (Coleman, personal communication, 2007). A string of blue beads, amulets, and *milagros* (symbols of miracles and cures) remind us of Afro-Latin and Afro-Brazilian religious practices. Just below the peak of the roof of this shrine house is Mami's fan. On the beam above and the floor below, Coleman has clustered a diverse array of offerings to Mami Wata—perfumes, toys, shells, and combs, whose marks are shown undulating on the blue-green background. Details of Kuba raffia-textile patterns cover the walls, roof, and ceiling of the shrine, as well as snippets of sentences from articles about Mami Wata. A playing card tucked into one side reminds us of her role as the fickle “Lady Luck” (Coleman, personal communication, 2007).

Coleman's art has been inspired by his participation in the practices of a variety of African and African American religions in Senegal, Brazil, New Orleans, and other locales. As the artist relates, “historically water has played a dominant role in black faith, music, and literature. African Americans have always believed a river or ocean could take them “home” spiritually and physically” (Coleman, personal communication, 2007). In Haitian Vodou, the way back to Ginen (Guinée), the African homeland, and to the ancestors and ultimate freedom was across the wide waters they had traversed in chains. “Enslaved African-Americans would implore the river or ocean to return a lover, to grant a pregnancy, to find a lost loved one, or to cure a disease or disorder.... water has given us tragedy and hope.... we ask Mami Wata to help us overcome the obstacles in our lives” (Coleman, personal communication, 2007).



Eve Sandler's *Mami Wata Crossing* (originally presented as part of the exhibition *Soothsayers: She Who Speaks the Truth* at the Painted Bride Arts Center, Philadelphia, 1999) incorporates live fish, sound, video and still projections to evoke the sea as a site of crossings, loss, and continuity. Calling upon her ancestors, Sandler, an African-American, creates a powerful allusion to the

12.10 Gerald Duane Coleman
 (b. 1948, Milwaukee,
 Wisconsin)
Our Lady of the Sacred Waters,
 2003
 Mixed Media
 122 cm
 Private Collection





horrific Middle Passage, legendary African mermaids, and the legacy of slavery. Using multiple senses, we are led on a journey through an aquatic realm, a labyrinth of suspended glass vessels with live fish, moving toward an ethereal video image of the artist performing a water ritual, a “Baptism” with water being poured over her head. The water is saturated with brilliant blues and greens signifying the presence of the mermaid. Moving closer, we catch a veiled glimpse into a cloistered space containing an altar laden with branches of cotton, tobacco and peanuts, all crops grown in Halifax County, North Carolina, by relatives of the artist since the time of slavery. An open drawer contains family artifacts amid mementos of the African mermaids who protect and destroy (fig. 12.11). Rare and precious images of the artist’s great-great-grandparents Luke and Ludy Wade, who were born into slavery, are projected onto the wall above. The empty frame between their images memorializes all those African ancestors whose names are unknown, and whose faces we can only imagine and conjure up in our thoughts of a distant, yet ever-present past (Sandler 1999b). Sandler’s poem-prayer, which accompanied the original installation of *Mami Wata Crossing* reads:

12.11 The interior of the altar drawer from the original installation of Eve Sandler’s (b. 1957, New York, New York) mixed-media work *Mami Wata Crossing* (Painted Bride Arts Center, Philadelphia, 1999) contains a perfume bottle, snuff, cowries, and jewelry, all objects coveted by Mami Wata and other water spirits, as well as a statue of the Madonna, who, like Mami Wata, is frequently petitioned by those seeking protection.

Photograph by Eve Sandler.

Mami Wata
African mermaid/goddess/siren
Her nature
Snatch you up
If you not careful
Who can live without water

Mami Wata/Olokun/Yemeja/Oshun
African mermaids converge
swim with fish women
sing to you
Wooden carvings
on the bows of tall ships
bound to cross over

Mami Wata
wash your trouble
swim
siren song
embrace wood
and flesh
the water

Halifax County
North Carolina
tobacco plow fields
cotton/bo weevil
arrowheads
and peanut

A place down the road
marked by a tree
read by starlight
build a church
Wade land
Deacon/midwife/farmer

African woman
name unknown
bound to cross over
with a shell
Cole got land
got maps
got her
at Jamestown

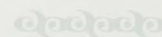
African mother
woman
name unknown
Cole got her
with child
African woman
with baby
Luke born in tides
bound to cross over

Ludy
swim
siren song
embrace arrowheads
African/Indian
medicines
names unknown

Luke and Ludy
plow fields
plant babies
grade tobacco
nurse
the water

[Sandler 1999a]

For the Fowler Museum exhibition, which will accompany this publication, Sandler will create an adaptation of *Mami Wata Crossing*, one that retains the themes described above.





12.12 Nancy Josephson (b. 1955,
New Jersey; active
New York, New York,
and Chicago, Illinois)
La Siren, 1999
Sequins, beads, rhinestones,
mannequin
228.6 cm
Private Collection

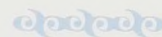
12.13 Artist Bertrand Grosol created the vessel *MamiWata L820L650H320* as part of his larger work *Le MamiWata—Projet de navigation intérieure (The MamiWata—An Internal Navigation Project)*, 2004–2007. Photograph by Bertrand Grosol.



Nancy Josephson, who was born in the United States, has been working in Haiti for the last decade, integrating her spiritual and artistic sensibilities. She first visited Haiti because its arts, materials, and ways of working felt so familiar. On her initial trip, she was “yanked into the spiritual path that is Vodou.... It made total sense to me that the spirits would take me as I am, with nothing left out” (Josephson, personal communication, 2007). The spirits worked with her, interceding and mediating to help her be “cooler.” As she reflects,

I call on La Siren to help me flow.... I’m a [New] Jersey girl. I think there’s something in the water there that made my cylinders rev at a higher speed than sometimes is necessary. I’m sure La Siren chose me because of this. She cools me down. My work centers on my appreciation of the blessings I have been given and the knowledge I receive as I go forward. The power in the work is an offering to the spirits who help me negotiate the weird and wonderful. [personal communication, 2007]

Josephson’s large-scale beaded and sequined sculpture *La Siren* began as a male mannequin that had been relegated to a dumpster in Chicago, a casualty of the downsizing of a sports store. Her friend, artist David Philpot, rescued the fiberglass hunk from the crusher and made Josephson the recipient of his treasure. She remarked how the form was “terrifically strong-looking with beautiful musculature.” She added breasts, a tail, cascading hair, a crown and snakes to turn this former sports figure into an homage to the power and beauty of her *met’ tet* (head spirit or spiritual guardian), La Siren.



Across Atlantic waters in France, artist Bertrand Grosol received inspiration from conversations he had with two friends, Frederic Khodja and Francois-Victor Lepargneur, in 1995. Subsequently, over a three year period (2004–2007), Grosol created a fantasy vessel and performance event entitled *Le MamiWata—Projet de navigation intérieure* (The Mami Wata—An Internal Navigation Project).¹ Born in Fort-de-France, Martinique in 1959, Grosol now lives and works in Lyon. His *MamiWata L820L650H320* is an extraordinary tripartite vessel, a tubular skeleton of wood and metal covered in a skin of clear plastic (fig. 12.13). It is a fusion of spaceship and submarine, a vessel that knows no boundaries. It undertook a fictitious voyage in 2004, and in 2005 it floated on the Rhône and Saône Rivers before being exhibited at the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon in 2007. An excerpt from the poetic text that Grosol composed about the Mami Wata project (2006) gives a sense of his musings on displacement (literal and figurative), the north/south global divide, and moving “against the current”:

On an imaginary floating structure

To join three seas: the Mediterranean Sea—the North Sea—the Baltic Sea through waterways and canals.

A path against the current from the South to the North. A reversed flux. A unique experiment

Toward a fiction of displacement

The Mami Wata project,

Project of internal navigation, contains in itself its share of fiction: the itinerary, its mental space.

....

The journey of displacement is two-fold. There is the real time, through some selected itineraries. A fictional time, where the fiction of the locations increases, amplifies the experimental possibilities, the creative charge.

....

The invention of this journey against the current motivates the invention of a tool of displacement specific and made to order: *MamiWata L820L650H320*.

....

Mami Wata L820L650H320 allows a navigation on internal waters, on waters without depth, linked to the behavioral flow of the river.

....

2005 the MamiWata project becomes a solitary embarkation.

The Mami Wata, fiction-voyage has been transposed in its entirety to an elaborate embarkation, and allows one to see the floating structure. It passes from the surface of the words to the luminous depth of the structure.

[Bertrand Grosol]



12.14 Hochi Asiatico (b. date unknown, Dominican Republic; active New York, New York)
Santa Marta la Dominadora, 1998
Drawing, iron, whips
274.3 x 177.8 cm
Collection of the Artist



As a child in the Dominican Republic, Hochi Asiatico, who is of African, Spanish, and Asian descent, learned very little about Vodou (Vodou). The religion was disparaged by his family who characterized it as “devil worship” practiced by “maids,” that is, dark-skinned, lower-class people. Although his grandmother was African, his uncle was black, and his aunt was nicknamed “*la negrita*,” his family warned him that if he ever brought home a black girlfriend, he would be ostracized (Asiatico, personal communication, 2000). These views are characteristic of the deep denial that many Dominicans maintain about their African heritage.

On a visit to the Dominican Republic from his home in New York undertaken in 1995, however, a friend invited him to attend a Vodou ceremony. The first person that Asiatico saw become possessed was a man who turned into Santa Marta la Dominadora (see chapter 10 of

this volume). Asiatico recalls that the man crouched in a corner, twitching in a dramatic way, his tongue flicking in and out like that of snake. Then the man slithered across the floor. Soon after he stood up twitching and moving like a snake, and finally, he began to pray and prophesy. He spoke to people about their partners, relationships, and lovers (Asiatico, personal communication, 2000).

Deeply moved by this experience, Asiatico began to research Santa Marta la Dominadora. He learned that she was the only black saint in the Dominican Republic and that she was juxtaposed with Saint Martha of Tarascon and the popular and powerful Santa Anaisa, regarded as the patron saint of the Dominican Republic. Santa Marta epitomizes the dominatrix who controls men. She works for women who want men, men who want women, and those who seek same-sex relationships. She also offers protection, and one tale recounts how she saved a lost child from forest snakes. Her prayer specifically describes her protective powers and requests that the person named be rooted to the spot until he or she submits to the will of the one reciting the prayer.

Vodu soon became a major source of inspiration for Asiatico's work. In May 1998 he opened an exhibition at the Museo de Arte Moderno in Santo Domingo titled *Pantheon de los dioses* (Pantheon of the Gods). It included altar-like installations for several Vodou "saints," who are more commonly referred to as *misterios*, or mysteries, in the Dominican Republic. One altar was dedicated to the Mater Dolorosa/Ezili, one to Yemaya, goddess of the sea, one to Santa Anaisa, a fourth to Shango, god of thunder, and the last to Santa Marta la Dominadora (fig. 12.14).

For Asiatico, the name "Santa Marta," specifically her initials, S and M, evokes the saint's dominating personality and deep involvement in sexual matters. She personifies the dominatrix, the sadomasochist who mixes pain with erotic pleasure. The artist visited a *botánica* (Latino religious goods and herbal medicine store) to ask about her and what was needed to work with her. Though he received little information, one person mentioned leather whips, explaining they were used at the start of rites to "chase away negative forces," a ceremonial act in Haitian Vodou. For Asiatico, whips were perfect symbols of Marta's domineering character so he added them to his piece along with her name in metal letters. Certainly her work is about using forceful even violent action to get something accomplished. Santa Marta la Dominadora does not compromise or negotiate. She is a warrior. On viewing Asiatico's altar to Santa Marta, art critic Gustavo Valdes wrote:

Hochi Asiatico [is] arm in arm with Saint Martha Dominatrix: half woman, half snake. Her complexion is the most brilliant color of ebony. She is a post-modern centaur, sheathed in a very tight corset and lustrous stiletto boots. She resembles a heroine fabricated by Almodóvar. Her garments seem to favor sin rather than holiness and to stimulate the mortification of the flesh through pleasure [which brings to mind] the thought, if Christ loved sinners so much, wouldn't He love us more, the more we sin? The saint is a masterful absurdity, an impossible article in an absurd inventory. [Valdes 1998, 11]





12.15 Charo Oquet (b. 1953, Dominican Republic; active Miami, Florida)
Mami Wata Dream, 2005
 Paint on canvas
 172.7 x 151.1 cm
 Collection of the Artist

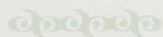
Like Hochi Asiatico, Charo Oquet comes from the Dominican Republic, a country divided and richly hybrid, like Mami Wata herself. The island of Hispaniola is half-Haitian, half-Dominican; half-black, half in denial of its blackness. It is Creole/French, Mestizo/Spanish, Vodou Catholic. These Caribbean multiplicities give Oquet's works their vibrancy and impact.

Oquet has had a long and tempestuous love affair with the idea and imagery of Mami Wata. It began in the 1980s while she was living in New Zealand with her husband. Far from

home and the nurturing presence of Mami Wata, Oquet began to confront and explore her own African roots and mestizo identity. At one point, however, the artist decided to leave her husband and go to New York. After her move, she began to experience vivid dreams of women with long flowing red hair, snakes, and mermaids. Only later did she realize that the spirits of Mami Wata and Santa Marta la Dominadora were calling her.

Out of these indelible dreams and visions she created an important series of paintings. The work illustrated here, *Mami Wata Dream* (fig. 12.15), is actually a newer version of one of the very first Mami Wata/Santa Marta works she had created in New Zealand. The original was lost during her move. As she explained to me, the painting “had to do with love and separation.” Oquet remarked that after she had to leave him, her husband “was lured by many but he stayed faithful to me” (Oquet, personal communication, 2007). Mami Wata and Santa Marta, who regularly insinuate themselves in affairs of the heart through feelings of longing, desire, temptation, jealousy, and loss, filled Oquet’s mind and canvases with images of floating females, snakes, passages, and bleeding, enflamed hearts. One critic likened Oquet’s early paintings to the *salve*, a medieval liturgical musical form, consisting of devotional chants to the Virgin Mary. These chants are “interpreted by Dominican women workers as love songs” (Birbragher 2002, 21). Oquet’s paintings certainly sing, their colors rich and resonant. Cool blues and striking reds suggest violent mood swings and heartache, feelings of longing, anger, loss, and ultimate redemption.

Oquet has continued to pursue a variety of projects, including performance pieces and installations, that revolve around Mami’s role in relationships and issues of identity. Recently, she created a series of pieces in the Dominican Republic as part of *ReMapping the Caribbean*, a collaborative project undertaken with other artists (Oquet, personal communication, 2007). Her portion of the project was titled *Los caminos de Mami Watta (The Paths of Mami Wata)*. For it, she held several children’s workshops, showed photographs, and performed. The photographs were part of an interactive event in which she told Mami Wata myths and described her as having long red hair. She also explained that if Mami possessed someone, the person would become beautiful, powerful, and rich. She passed out red wigs to symbolize possession by Mami Wata and then asked audience members what or whom they wanted to become. In her performance piece Oquet impersonated Mami Wata complete with a mermaid’s tail and a bright red wig. She held a snake in her arms while lounging in a plastic swimming pool.

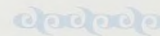


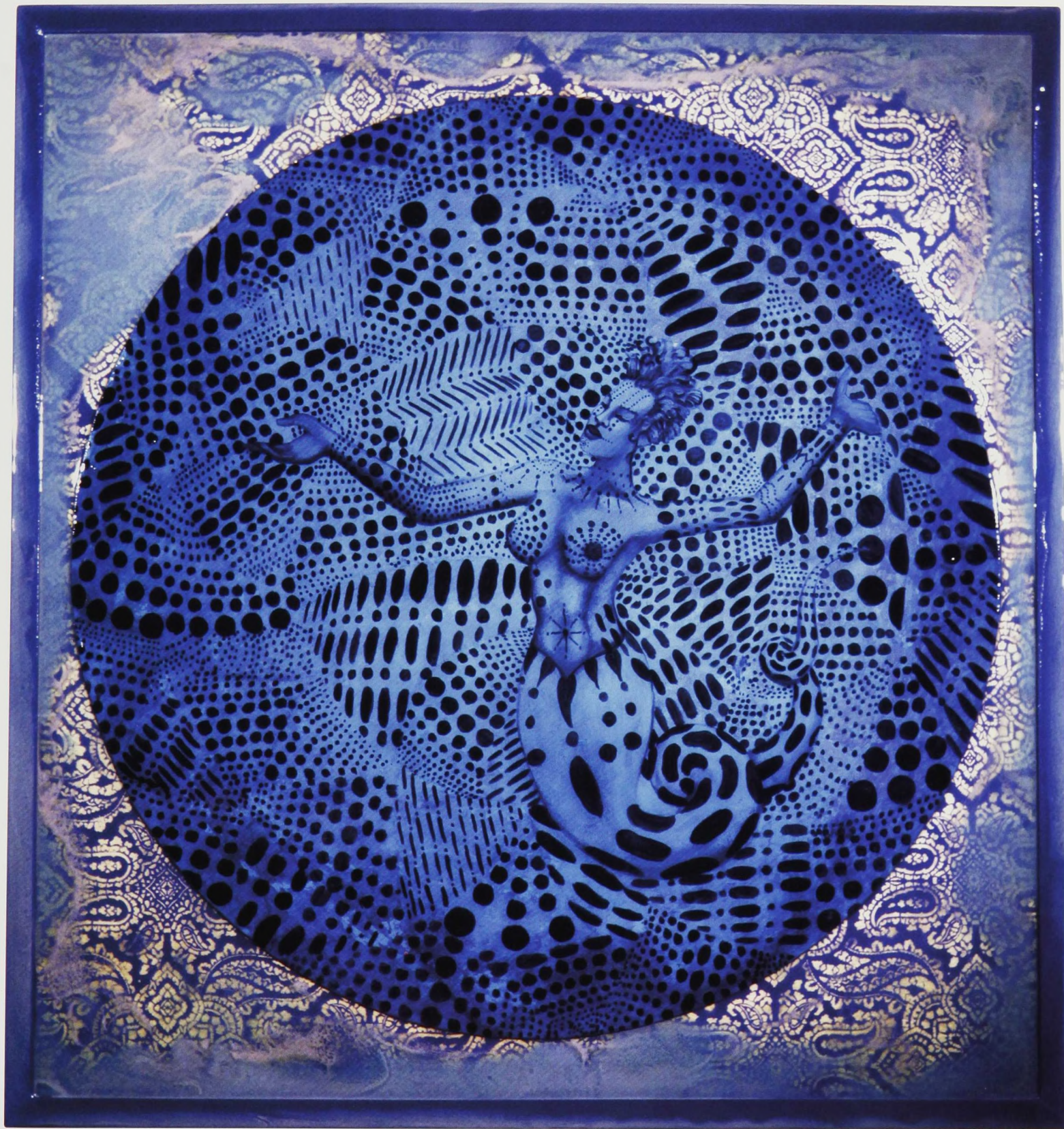
Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié strives to give concrete form to the ancient gods and goddesses of Africa, mysterious and unknowable spiritual entities who are venerated in Haitian Vodou and referred to as *lwa* or *loa*. Two of these spirits are Ayida Wedo, the celestial serpent whose rainbow colors glisten through drops of illuminated water, and Ezili, one of several water divinities in the Vodou pantheon (see chapter 9 of this volume). Duval-Carrié has titled the work reproduced here *Aida Whedo* (fig. 12.16), yet as he explained to me, “the name...could be *Ezili* if you are so inclined. They are all goddesses, after all” (Duval-Carrié personal communication, 2007). His own words eloquently express his personal perspective and artistic intentions:

I've always been enthralled with Aida Whedo. I have painted her many times since I began my project of giving the *Mystères*, the *Loas* a more concrete look. Though quite a spectacular art form, the *Veves* [ritual ground drawings used to invoke the *lwa*] are the way in which these spirits are commonly represented. I thought those magical symbols did not do them justice...truly it's been two hundred years since Haitians took their independence so I don't see why we have to perpetuate solely a form designed to be erased quickly in case a [Vodou] religious service was discovered by some dreadful slave master. These masters are long gone but the tradition, which in no way I mean to disregard much less alter, has come down to this day unperturbed by meddling artists.... It will probably continue for a long time for they are symbols steeped in magic with a very rich and quite ancient history. But in all innocence I truly believed that there was an urgent need to give Loas, these dreamy creatures that I had concocted in my head, a face worthy of their importance. This has been a program that I've adhered to for the longest time. But as I learnt more about those divinities the concept that describes them best is that of *Mystères*. I think that they have revealed themselves to me at times but ultimately they remain quite inaccessible and somewhat rather distant. They are truly big teases. But again my incantations are probably not so strong and as heartfelt as they should be! Or maybe the case can be made that they are mysterious and as such should remain distant from a mere mortal such as I. But I won't be deterred and I will merrily continue to pay them my humble homage and hopefully they will drop the haze that envelopes them most of times. [personal communication, 2007]

12.16 Edouard Duval-Carrié
 (b. 1954, Haiti; active Miami
 Beach, Florida)
Aida Whedo, 2004
 Mixed media in artist's frame
 127 x 127 cm
 Collection of David Wallack

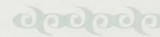
The Haitian Vodou pantheon is divided into two grand families of *lwa*, the hot and aggressive Petwo spirits, generally thought to derive from Central African Kongo/Bantu religious traditions, and the cooler, less aggressive Rada entities that came to Haiti from several West African “places of no return,” among them Ouidah and Allada (both in present-day Benin), the latter is considered the origin of the term Rada (Cosentino 2004, 40). Duval-Carrié's deep, cool Rada blue circle holds the mysterious Aida Whedo/Ezili. It seems that she floats in a droplet of water, yet opens her arms to embrace the whole world. Her snake tail curls and spirals until it almost disappears into the optical maze of dots and dashes that may be references to the Vodou tradition of *pwèns*—points of light and mystic energy that signal the presence of the *lwa*. These points of light or energy bejewel Aida Whedo/Ezili, creating an exquisite corporeal art that merges with and emerges from the “haze” that surrounds these barely glimpsed mysteries. Duval-Carrié pays his “humble homage” in images worthy of their presence and importance.






California artist Alison Saar loves to play with the idea of transformation, turning old, abused, and discarded materials into inspiring art. Her “recycling” makes us reflect on the past and confront the future. For Saar, Mami Wata is “a bridge between past, present, and future” (Saar, personal communication, 2007). She is as ancient and eternal as the oceans, yet as modern and fashionable as a Nigerian “Cash Madam.” The title of Saar’s sculpture *La Pitonisa* (fig. 12.17) is a name invented by the artist to suggest a “pythoness,” a woman dancing with snakes, not merely charming them. She wanted to convey the kind of contemporaneity in this work that she had captured in two others involving female snake dancers, *Boa Agogo* and *Mamba Mambo*, the latter piece a sequined banner inspired by Haitian Vodou flags.

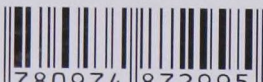
Guided by two water guardians, Yemaya and Mami Wata, and by the fiery powers of Ogun (since she employs iron and other metals), Saar creates works evoking the cleansing, cooling power of water as well as the purifying power of fire and the forge. She has also created a number of pieces in which female figures balance a series of water containers on their heads or stand in basins meant for water. As she explains, these basins on the head or below suggest the *lave-tête* (a head purification rite from Haitian Vodou) which purifies, empowers, and spiritually balances the person (Saar, personal communication, 2007). Alison Saar balances too—between past and present, fire and water—forging imagery that sings and dances for our pleasure.



Like the unfathomable depths of the world’s oceans, the imagining of Mami Wata and other water deities in Africa and its Diasporas appears limitless. Over a five hundred year period, Mami has surfaced in the guise of a mermaid, snake charmer, Hindu god or goddess, African-Catholic saint, and dominatrix, as well as other intriguing and magical characters. She has seduced and charmed many, who have given visible form to this spiritual entity as an integral part of the process of self-definition, self-realization, and empowerment in countless cultural worlds over time and space. Where, when, and in what form she will next swim into our mind’s eye remains anyone’s guess. 

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