Cordelia Larsen

Gray

Haitian Vodou has long been stigmatized and tainted, warped by Western projections that connect the religion to witchcraft and death. Historically, Vodou, a syncretic religion practiced chiefly in Haiti and the Haitian diaspora, is rooted in ceremonies and offerings to spirits of lwa in an effort to bring clarity and prosperity to the lives of practitioners. Haiti's violent history of colonization and enslavement has forced Christianity into many aspects of Vodou—for example, lwa such as Erzulie Freda and Baron Samedi are figures comparable to the Christian saints. While I was not raised to practice Vodou I have long been mystified by the stark difference in its representation in American films versus what I know to be true.

My father was born and raised in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and my mother has Irish and German roots. I have often felt torn between these two sides. When approaching my project, I knew that I would focus my illustrations on creating contemporary representations of Vodou spirits, while using my biracial identity as a lens. While my racial background is certainly a source of joy and pride and I feel enriched by the broad cultures it has allowed me to explore and engage with, biracial is also a word fraught with confusion as it holds anxiety, responsibility, tension, and anger.

Through my senior project, I explore the broad notion of what being biracial looks and feels like, while drawing inspiration from Haitian folk art, graphic novels, contemporary artists, and Vodou. I have put heavy emphasis on themes and symbols prevalent in European paintings and Haitian folk art in an attempt to juxtapose the two very different and often clashing cultures and styles.

My series also considers the different ways in which biracial students identify with and how our physical appearance often determines our selfhood. I have worked primarily in gray tones to reflect that author Naomi Zack uses the word gray to popularly refer to biracial individuals. The word gray is significant, as it is specific to a black and white racial mix. By illustrating on wood, in addition to paper, I have tried to draw attention to these materials’ middle-toned materiality and raw quality; these traits are comparable to my biracial status.

In Haiti, wood charcoal is burned to fuel the majority of Haitians cooking and heating needs—but 99 percent of the forest has been lost and what little remains continues to be chipped away. In my pieces, portions of the wood have been smudged with charcoal in an attempt to imitate burn marks to reference the charcoal material itself, as it is the primary cause of deforestation in Haiti.