

Hanging Papers

Bearden, Rosenfeld, Thompson, Gabriel.

Afro-Haitian influence on 80s Downtown Art Scene.



Leonard Rosenfeld 1926–2009 *Gu*, 1986 | Oil pastel on paper, vinyl wall paper | 26 1/4 x 26 5/8 inches.

Romare Bearden had long explored magical realms in his work — perhaps most famously in his interpretations of the Homeric *Odyssey*. The African-American collagist and painter was fascinated by the powers of unseen forces to transform — as when Circe turned Odysseus’s men into pigs. Beginning in the early 1980s, he dove deep into the Haitian Obeah tradition:

“One Obeah woman thought that she made the sun rise. Each night she held back the moon and conceived a rooster which she hurled out into the sky, and it became the sun . . . the darker side of things . . . is what the Obeah are mostly about. The Obeah go back to the Ashanti. This is magic, not religion, although it is not voodoo. Sometimes the magic and religion interweave, but as I see it, it is more about magic . . . I was very interested in the fact that the Obeah and their roots could be traced back to Africa.”¹

Bearden’s Obeah series was completed and exhibited in 1984, and won acclaim and commercial success. Obeah was not a lived devotional practice for Bearden — it represented a tether to an otherwise inaccessible home. In situating himself against this magical tradition, he became the Odysseus of his own epic. Here was a man of African heritage, working in New York but born in North Carolina, turning to Haiti and further back to the Ashanti people of present-day Ghana — perhaps nocturnal magics could achieve what a lifetime of homeward wandering could not?

II. My Friend Gū.

Leonard Rosenfeld wasn’t a practitioner of Haitian spiritualism either — a Brooklyn kid of Eastern European Jewish extraction, he was far from the West African tradition, and yet, in the early 1980s, he found himself drawn to similar themes. A series of meditations on a deity named Gū began as a break between his labor-intensive wire-paintings. The wire work was grueling physical toil, and to pause between efforts, he made simple paintings and drawings of Gū’s ceremonial *gubasa* sword. At a passing glance, the Rosenfeld’s *gubasa* is a whimsical form, ballooning like Brancusi. But in an interview Rosenfeld gave in 1986, he makes clear the more powerful context, reading from a book on “Afro and Afro American Art and Philosophy,”² describing the Dahomean people of modern-day Benin:

“Dahomeans know Gū as the personification of iron’s cutting edge, which exists in the blade of a razor, in the slicing force of machetes, in the piercing jab of an iron tipped spear. Gū’s own sword is represented by one of the monuments of Dahomean iron, the ceremonial blade called *gubasa*.”³

In the interview, Rosenfeld lingers philosophically over another passage in the book:

“The Dahomean war deity Gū was destined to live momentarily in an alien land peopled primarily by persons brought from Kongo and Angola.

Rosenfeld didn’t insert himself into an African diaspora narrative, but he was moved by the notion of a god of a faraway home finding a new path in an alien world. It appealed to the Jewish diasporic tradition — a tether back to a home that may no longer exist — and a metonym for the life of the artist, using ancient implements to hack a lonely path through new terrain. He painted the *gubasa* dozens of times, a talismanic symbol that held secret power to its humble devotee.

III. Urtext.

And that book Rosenfeld was reading in the interview? It was probably on Bearden’s bookshelf, too. Robert Farris Thompson was a huge force in popularizing the continuity between traditional African art and contemporary African-American artists, and his 1983 *Flash of the Spirit* was seemingly everywhere — “emphatically lift[ing] African material out of an ethnographic niche and into a fine-art context.”⁴ As admirer Henry Louis Gates, Jr. put it,

“Bob’s work did more to institutionalize the study of Black art *as art* than any other scholar’s work before his. When I was a graduate student . . . and asked my professor, Wole Soyinka, himself an expert on Yoruba culture and a member of the Yoruba ethnic group, for the best study of Yoruba art and mythology, to my amazement, he handed me a copy of Bob’s now classic work, ‘Black Gods and Kings!’”⁵

Thompson presented Dahomean Gū and Ashanti Obeah as *present* — and that availability was palpable in Rosenfeld and Bearden in the mid-1980s. Around that time, Thompson made another connection to a young artist finding his way, the Haitian-American Jean-Michel Basquiat. Thompson is said to have been “one of the only critics Basquiat trusted,”⁶ and Thompson later repaid that trust with a book on Basquiat.

Bearden’s questing for a missing home wins a certain denouement in Thompson’s framing. Speaking recently with Claes Gabriel, an emerging artist from Haiti, I was struck by how distant his work is from Rosenfeld’s or Bearden’s. Non-Haitians were drawn to ritual and magic, but Gabriel’s art is coolly aloof from anything that hints at *voudon*. But why would it? Gabriel’s heritage is a fact; it doesn’t need daily maintenance. His vision scans other horizons — and from time to time, it lands on Bearden. He’s done at least a couple interpretations of Bearden’s *Circe*.⁷

And therein lies the magic:

You can’t go home again; you’re already there.

Thanks for reading,

Jonathan

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- 1 As quoted by Ruth Fine in *The Art of Romare Bearden*, 2003, p. 123.
 - 2 Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: Afro and Afro American Art and Philosophy*, 1983.
 - 3 Interview video with Sheldon Cholst, May 5, 1986, estate of Leonard Rosenfeld.
 - 4 Holland Cotter, “Robert Farris Thompson, Who Transformed Study Of Cultures, Dies at 88,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 13, 2021, Section D, Page 8.
 - 5 “Robert Farris Thompson, pioneer in study of African and Afro-Atlantic art Thompson, an art historian recognized for his research and writing on the art, history, dance, and music of Africa and the Afro-Atlantic world, died on Nov. 29,” *Yale News*, Dec. 1, 2021.
 - 6 Aisha Sabatini Sloan, “On Basquiat, the Black Body, and a Strange Sensation in My Neck,” *Paris Review*, October 26, 2017.
 - 7 Scroll through [his Instagram](#) while Gabriel’s website gets into gear — his shaped canvases are inspired and refreshing.

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