

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 16 – Renee Stout – Conjure Woman

Dancing in Honor of the Gods

And now a personal word,

When Renee Stout conjures spirits and music and spells, I'm brought back to the streets of Rio de Janeiro watching Afro-Brazilian women in white crinoline dresses, colorful beads, and headdresses dancing to rhythmic percussive drums.

I was ten years old. We had moved from New York to Brazil. I really didn't know why at the time. I was the youngest in the family, and all I knew was that I had left my friends behind and was suddenly in a country where I didn't speak Portuguese and everything was strange and new. The food was different. The customs were different. It took a bit for me to adjust. I refused to talk to anyone the first month I was there, protesting a move to a new country without me having any say in the matter.

We lived in Rio for just over two years. Here is what I remember: playing paddleball and volleyball and soccer for hours on Copacabana beach; my brother and I tossing a baseball and catching it with a mitt, which Brazilians were fascinated by and could not do or understand; drinking ice cold Coke sold by barefoot vendors in the heat of the summer, eating pineapples cut by men wielding machetes, and getting sticky mango popsicles all over my hands; devouring warmed, pressed bread and butter for breakfast; going to corner restaurants and having steak sandwiches with onions for lunch; listening to the Brazilian singer Roberto Carlos sing songs that sounded like The Beatles; being wary of government soldiers in green helmets carrying machine guns; reading English out loud in class and getting a smile from my teacher, a young and attractive Roman Catholic nun.

Brazil is this crazy country of money and wealth and beauty and poverty and violence and corruption. The city of Sao Paulo in the south is larger and more complex than New York, while villages in the Amazon jungle in the north barely have had contact with civilization. The country is hot and primal and sexual. During Carnival everyone comes out to play.

In the dance and thrum and lunacy of Brazil are the practitioners of Candomble, a mystical religion derived from Yoruba and Bantu and brought to Brazil during the African slave trade. For centuries, Candomble was practiced in secret, cloaked in Catholic practices in order to protect its devotees from persecution.

Candomble means “dance in honor of the gods.” On Fridays, believers wear white in honor of the Supreme Creator called Oludamare, who is served by lesser deities known as Orishas. Fridays are sacred festival days of purification. Believers sing and dance, summoning Orishas to cross over from the spirit world and possess the chosen.

My memory of the Candomble were big-boned women wearing white dresses and having a good time dancing down the street—nothing to worry about there. The people I did worry about were the Makumba. They were African-Brazilian witch doctors who practiced black magic on the streets of the city. They cut off the heads of chickens and drank blood. Or at least I think they did.

Just as I had been whisked away from New York to Brazil, the day came when I was whisked away from Brazil to Miami. A new life began, encountering Haitian voodoo and Cuban Santeria on streets in Florida.

I don’t doubt that Renee Stout senses the spirit world in her work. She accesses and summons and directs powers that animate her work. There is a dance with the dead and a playfulness about life in her installations. Her art does what great art has the power to do: call us into mystery.

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