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BEAUTY FOR ASHES PROJECT: APPROPRIATION & TRANSFORMATION:
BRAZILIAN ARTIST DUDA PENTEADO
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Duda Penteadó's *Beauty for Ashes* Project addresses the dilemma artists have when confronting great tragedy and how to respond creatively in their art. Many contemporary artists have issues finding their own voice after the diverse art movements of the 20th century. In this project Duda frankly appropriates and transforms the work of great modern artists, creating unique imageries relevant for the 21st century. His *Beauty for Ashes* project reflects art that moves beyond the individual, into an aesthetic embedded in a network of global creativity. Much influenced by Paulo Friere and his belief in the significance of art for social change, Duda develops art projects with students and the public around the world. Here significant ideas are developed, and creative art installations built that he hopes will enable diverse people to communicate with each other, and to search for deeper meaning in life. He is convinced art holds a significant role in society and that the artistic image expresses its essence. His artwork represents a profound genre of artwork derived from ethnic tradition and religious experience.

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Duda Penteadó's *Beauty for Ashes* Project confronts the challenge contemporary artists often experience finding their individual voice, especially when confronted with horrific tragedy, social bigotry, hatred and violence. He contends that today's art, succeeding the European and American revolutionary art movements of the 20th century follows these giants of the past. They are often not on their shoulders, but at times struggling beneath their feet, searching for a means of producing original artwork in an art scene where nearly everything has been tried, justified and certified. Penteadó, from Brazil, rather than revoking or rejecting these western traditions, creatively appropriates them, and transforms them into

startling new images. He has found his voice. Duda channels his response to great art from both a historical point of view and through his unique background as a Brazilian and a believing Christian. The powerful imageries he produces are a visual language into itself; he does not find a need for elaborate theoretical justification for his work. Rather, he quotes the art historian Rookmaaker “Art has . . . its own meaning as God's creation; it does not need justification.” (Ch. 4) His work and career represent a vital manifestation of the phenomenon of globalization in the art world, and an example of Lectner’s definition of globalization as “the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organisation of social life on a global scale, and growth of a shared global consciousness.” (330) Duda represents an artist who has crossed many boundaries: ethnic, religious and artistic. Thus he is an example of Menzel’s description of globalization as a “process of the deepening and the acceleration of boundary crossing transactions . . .” (226) Duda easily appropriates western tradition and theory, and integrates it with his Brazilian persona without difficulty. He is not threatened by difference, but embraces it as an opportunity to expand his creativity, and his humanity. His religious search provided a context for expanding beyond his national and cultural zeitgeist.

Duda’s art combines his life experience growing up in Brazil, immersed in all of its cultural, religious and social traditions, with his study and living in the United States as an active contemporary artist. Duda’s success in the U.S. represents the trends of our new art world, where artists no longer come from the standard European or American cities. Some of the most vital contemporary art is produced by artists from Asia, Africa and Latin America as seen in the work of Ai Wei Wei and Anish Kapoor.¹ Curators of important exhibits now come from diverse countries, adding their perspective to the selection of artwork for important shows. Scholars of the sociology of art have observed this

¹ Anish Kapoor’s rejection of western aesthetics can be seen in his recent comment during a TV interview when he commented that how his art looked to anyone was irrelevant. Aljazeera, July 18, 2012.

phenomenon since the 1980's. (Rosenau)²

Added to this mix is his conversion experience to a profound personal Christianity as an adult, which now inspires and enriches his artwork. Raised as a Catholic in Brazil, Duda felt the need for a deeper religious experience than the ritualistic traditions of his childhood. This caused him to search both for a personal connection to the Divine and a deeper level of reality. This new reality emerged in his art, and he maintained "Art helps us to give form to facets of our life and helps us to grasp reality."

(Penteado)

The titles of his artwork reflect his journey. He examined connections: how the structures of the architecture of life connect with man and the things man creates. He used strong morphing figures to show spiritual strife underneath these appearances. *Cruxis*, an acrylic painting in 1995 was his first reference to his new religious beliefs (see fig. 1). Penteado underwent a painful period of searching, dreams and premonitions. He sought after how things connect and "explored the structures of the architecture of life that we as man create." (Penteado) He created strong morphing figures to represent spiritual strife, and the emergence of an abstracted suffering Christ in the tradition of Rouault, from a field of dark brown, purple and grey slashes.

² Among noted non-western curators are the Nigerian Okwul Enwezor who organized the prestigious *documenta 11* in 2002 and included many more non-western artists than usual.



Fig. 1 *Cruxis*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 79" x 52"

This was followed by *Kelatynus* (see fig. 2). Here its symbolic use of red as blood to suggest both death and life forces, was derived from the Brazilian palate, whose strong color is evocative of powerful ideas and emotions. Here the morphing figures appear gripped in a life and death struggle. They emerge as skeletal triumphs over pain, and drawn to the circle of light hovering at top. Duda's brutal disfigurement of form and angry impasto strokes evoke Bacon, yet the juxtaposition of light bursting through dark suggests a triumph of life over death, the rondel of a medieval stained glass window flooding light into the darkness of a cathedral. This compelling image renders words ineffectual.

Noted by an admirer of his art with a theological background is an interesting dialectic. "Although Duda Penteado inclines toward a textual conservatism, his cultural liberalism imparts his works with an understanding of Christianity that sees all of reality as spiritual, unified and diverse at the same moment, expressing the character of a God who simultaneously possesses a detailed personality and broad energy that is better expressed and understood in imagery, rather than word-based revelation." (Van Pool)



Fig. 2 *Kelatynus*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 83'' x 59''

Emorda, also part of this first series of paintings depicting his spiritual struggle, uses the imagery of a straightjacket (see fig. 3). Duda was endeavoring to find both God and meaning in life in the chaos and confusion of human realities. For him this was a painful personal journey; he underwent a tight, spiritual experience that felt like a straitjacket. The graphic depiction of this dilemma is clear from the crucified mangled form twisting in white wraps against an immense void of darkness. Flesh struggles against itself, against the confines of doubt and a cosmic abyss.

This experience of spiritual struggle is well documented for creative people, from the *Dark Night of the Soul* of St. John of the Cross, who describes the personal pain experienced in the search for the Divine, (Introduction, Ch. IV, 10) to theologians as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose writing in his *Cost of Discipleship* opposed those whose version of Christianity was too comfortable, and stated clearly that he believed that "costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke of Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light." "(45-47)"



Fig. 3 *Emorada*, 1995, acrylic on canvas, 79" x 50"

His *Last Supper* painted in 1999, was the culmination of his search, and reflects a unique combination of memory, assimilation and conversion (see fig. 4). Through this intense personal spiritual experience, memories of his traditional Christian upbringing were purified and profoundly transformed. This painting symbolically used the idea of eating and demonstrates his connection to traditional Christian religious subjects as the Last Supper, fusing it with the Brazilian art movement of the early 20th century, *Anthropophagics* (cannibalists). These Brazilian artists acknowledged the influence of European and American artists on their work, but attempted to regurgitate what they had “eaten” from abroad and create new art forms. (Amaral, Mrazek, Hastings, 21)

Here Duda’s morphing figures are shown as x-rays with God seeing through them. He explains his use of gold as the color to depict of the nature of God, from the Holy of Holies of the Old Testament, following tradition in religious art. Silver here for him symbolizes the redemption, and is used on the table, even around Judas, showing the love of Christ. The blue of the sky shows heaven opening up, the red-orange cross is a bone in the center, the price to pay for salvation. Duda observes “good is harder to do, takes time, a fight, revolutionary thinking. Natural man wants all easy.” He explains that here “colors represent the diverse kingdom of God, all colors, all races. Figures are morphing but connecting.” (Penteado) This painting represents hope: red tongues come out of the mouths, showing the power of the tongue, to educate, build or destroy, as well as the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles are not sitting around the table, but are already in action.



Fig. 4 *The Last Supper*, acrylic on canvas, 1999, 70" x 36"

Duda continued to produce work derived from biblical inspiration with this powerful combination of Brazilian, contemporary American and Christian influences. His *Sound of the Prophet* returns the artist to his historic shamanistic/priest role, as he sings to the world to call people out of mental and spiritual slavery (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5 *Sound of the Prophet*, acrylic on canvas, 2002, 31" diameter

Duda's *Beauty in Ashes Project* is a culmination of all of these influences (see fig. 6). Deeply affected by the events of 9/11, and watching the collapse of the World Trade Center Towers from his studio in Jersey City, he was compelled to use his art to respond to this massive tragedy. He wanted both to produce a powerful work of art and develop a project for art that would enable diverse people to communicate their differences, and work for social harmony.



Fig. 6 *Ensaio 1. Beauty for Ashes*, mixed-media on wood, 97" x 48"



Fig. 7 Duda Penteado, initial sketch for *Ensaio 1* and Picasso's *Guernica*.

While relying on the visual clues in the iconography of Pablo Picasso's "Guernica" in his painting (see fig. 7), his subsequent art projects derived from Picasso's painting absorb one of the most important influences on Duda: the social justice theories of Paulo Freire and his belief about the significance of art for social change. Freire emphasized the role of culture and art to provide the impoverished and native populations with an education that was not just an extension of the colonizers of Brazil. Neither art nor education could be neutral according to Freire. (Mayo, 5)

Duda is now involved in ongoing art projects with students and the public around the world. Here ideas are developed, and creative art installations built that he hopes will inspire people to search deeper for meaning in life, and harmony with their fellow human beings (see fig. 8, 9, 10). Duda represents goals that theorists of cultural globalization recognize in the contemporary phenomenon of the internationalization of art and the interconnectivity of artists both with each other around the world, and

with artists of the past from diverse cultures. The consciousness of artists has transformed from merely representing their individual historic and geographic situation. Robertson notes that globalization “refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole.” (Robertson, 8) Duda’s assimilation and transformation of artists as Picasso in his work reflects what Lechner in turn describes as “the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, (and) organisation of social life on a global scale” (330) Duda’s effort to increase communication and understanding between diverse people in his *Beauty for Ashes* project contributes to what Lechter describes as a “growth of a shared global consciousness.” (330)



Fig. 8 Duda in workshop in Jersey City Museum with students



Fig. 9 Finished *Beauty for Ashes Project*, Jersey City Museum





Fig. 10 Duda Penteadó with *Beauty for Ashes Project*

He believes that creativity and faith is not a process of convincing but an encounter. “Curiosity must be sparked to begin the process for each individual to make the journey, and begin the digging on their own.” (Penteadó) This journey today is assisted by several factors that enable the individual to expand his/her horizons, transform their viewpoints and deepen their understanding. The expansion of electronic media communication creates a density of worldwide interaction. “. . . the increasing availability of products from vastly distant cultures, the rise in migration and the strengthening of a global infrastructure that the operation of emergent globalized networks permits have a growing interpenetration of people as their consequence.” (Cochrane and Pain, 15 ff)

Duda is convinced that "Art has a complex place in society. It creates the significant images by which those things that are important and common in a society are expressed. By the artistic image the essence of a society is made common property and reality. It gives these things a form, not just in an intellectual way, but so they can be taken emotionally, in a very full sense.“ (Penteadó) His work

represents an important genre of artwork derived from both ethnic tradition and religious experience.

Duda believes "Great art comes from within, it is the true language of the soul. To create art is an act of faith in itself. In my case my faith in Christ Jesus is an endless source of inspiration and empowerment in the areas of creativity, love and hope."

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