



Catching Spirits

*Patricia Ganase has been following
Bunty O'Connor's work for more than 20 years*

Hookah Smoker. This little prince has nothing to do but chase his dreams.

Bunty O'Connor describes the personalities of her collection of demi-gods: "To me, the act of creating them – and the creatures themselves – felt like dancing, which is the best way I know of catching the spirit."

IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO, WE KNOW ABOUT 'catching the spirit'. Some of us catch the spirit drumming and dancing in practices as old as Africa, in Shango, Orisha and Spiritual Baptist ceremonies. Spirits take hold compulsively, unpredictably. The eyes of the quiet woman outside the circle roll back, her body arcs, she quivers and spins, puppet to the possession. It is this spirit, earth born and atavistic that infuses the artistic life of these Caribbean islands today. Calypso, carnival and steelband have been born of this spirit, imported from Africa with essences of India, China and Europe.

Bunty O'Connor grew up absorbing these infusions of culture amid the islands' fertile ecology. Trinidad lies furthest south on the Caribbean archipelago, separated from South America by several miles. The island's northern range is the easternmost spur of the Andes. Tobago, north-east of Trinidad is a rainforest ringed by sandy beaches and coral lagoons. Both were British colonies before independence in 1962.

Peopled by Amerindians before Columbus, the islands today manifest a vigorous and dynamic mix of European plantocracy, British order, Asian



complexity and African elementalism. Every Trinidadian absorbs the mixture like essential air. Many have a desire to investigate these roots. “African culture – their music and rhythms – has always attracted me. I feel that their art is joyful and exuberant. A few years ago in the British Museum, I came across their collection of African pottery. There were all kinds of pots, but I learnt that in many parts of Africa women are usually the potters. They seldom make their pots in human or animal form for they fear that the spirit of the pot can jump into their bodies and take over their unborn child. After their childbearing years are over, however, they are freed to make pots in any shape they please.”

The past is ever present in O’Connor’s life and her life is rooted in the countryside of Trinidad. She lives in a wooden plantation house on a knoll with an unobstructed view of northern mountains. She works in the Ajoupa Pottery workshop nearby. Home and workshop are surrounded by five acres of gardens planted with indigenous species collected during her walks through the rainforest. This is her domain, shaped by her hands and heart, as are the figures, plates, mugs, bowls, mosaics and sculptures in the workshop.

Through experimentation with Trinidad’s clays, she and husband Rory have recorded recipes that would be valuable to the other traditional potters, and to the country’s universities. “The central part of Trinidad consists of clay laid down over millennia by the mighty Orinoco River (flowing from Venezuela). We are a tiny island in its delta. This sedimentary red clay is our basic raw material. Our Ajoupa terracotta comes mainly from a huge clay pit where local brick and tile manufacturers get their raw material.”

O’Connor has tried other sources of clay on the island. “We also use a stoneware clay that occurs in seams of gravel in the north eastern part of the island. The gravel, which is quartz and used as aggregate when mixing concrete, is embedded in the clay. The attendant clay is grey in its unfired form and

Left: Ass. This foolish character holds on to his private parts in case they get lost. You can trace this figure to A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Right: Alligator Woman is both alligator and woman, a restorer. She is Ganga the goddess of the Ganges who is usually depicted riding down the river on a half-crocodile half-elephant creature called a makara, and regarded as healer or water-bearer. The alligator (crocodile) – in Egyptian mythology – went down to the underworld to find all the pieces of Osiris who had been scattered in a million tiny pieces.



Top: Shaman. With his goatskin tunic he is chanting and calling down spirits with his maracas.

Above: The Dictator. This was made after Hurricane Ivan, Grenada 2004, destroying the nutmeg estates. The hurricane is nature's tyrant, he toys with human lives, juggling them with his feet. only his bow tie keeps him looking respectable.

high in silica sand. After the gravel is removed the clay is considered waste and we are allowed to take what we need. This clay fires to a buff (cream) shade and can be fired to 1280°C (stoneware) but it is harder to work. Our pottery had been set up to use clay from our backyard but the previous owners soon found that this clay had a high rate of shrinkage, not at all useful to us.

“Once Rory had worked out our clay recipe we stuck with it. We mix the stoneware together with the earthenware and we come up with a clay that retains a warm terracotta colour, fires to a temperature of 1170°C where it is no longer porous and can be used on the wheel, used in press-moulding (in plaster of paris moulds), slab-building for small pieces, small tiles, mosaic pieces; and it takes glaze well. However, it cracks in firing if we try to make large flat pieces.”

O'Connor has always worked within the constraints of her materials, but the desire to make larger pieces, sculptures, was always there. Her journey might be seen as the craftsman's progression from utility to the imaginary; from the linear to the round; from things seen and observed to creatures called out of the subconscious.

“When I had the opportunity to make something that was not connected to the shop, I let myself go to that subconscious place using black grogged sculptor's clay. The making was meditative, uncoerced, just kneading the clay and allowing it to fall until it became an interaction between my hands and the clay.”

The essence of the artist's work is transformation – earth to pot. She says she still cannot fully account for these creatures that came out of the clay. She calls them demi-gods, and remains amazed by the articulateness of their forms, and the self-possession with which they occupied her home and space for the months after they appeared.

Here is the Shaman with his goat's skin and shac-shacs; the Astrologer; the Hookah Smoker; the Musician; the Ass; Ivan the Dictator, Juggler of People (he emerged at the time of the hurricane Ivan); Bob Marley listening to the song of the little bird singing 'on his doorstep'; the Snake Charmer; Moon Juggler; Bat Playing Orchid; Alligator Woman; and the Street Person dangling a child by its ankle. Though each is no more than 25 cm (10 in) tall, the dream-like quality and fluidity of each personality can fill up a room.

Over the past 30 years, Bunty O'Connor has worked through the limitations of the native clays, and come to understand some of her own limitations. These are fewer now, so many of her expectations have been tempered by time and by living in a tropical garden.

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