A Heavy Grace

An Interview With Daniel Minter, Artist



Exhibit Dates
February 1st – 28th, 2005
Chase Hall Gallery, Bates College

Reception
Friday February 4, 2005
Chase Hall Gallery 4:30 p.m.

Sponsored By
The Office of Multicultural Affairs, Bates College

Introduction

by Charles I. Nero



Aluja-I



Daniel Minter is from Ellaville, Georgia, and is a graduate of the Art Institute of Atlanta. He often works in the same medium used by many generations of southern African-Americans, carving and painting on wood, and his art reflects the beauty and richness of his heritage. Minter's work has been exhibited at the Buell Children's Museum in Boulder, Colorado, Bambara Gallery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, MIA Gallery in Seattle, Washington, and the Museu da Cidade in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil. Minter is also an illustrator for children's books. The United States Postal Service commissioned Daniel to design its 2004 Kwanzaa Stamp. Daniel is currently living in Portland, Maine with his wife, Marcia and their son, Azari.

My initial encounter with Daniel's work occurred in the summer of 2004 when Czerny Brasuell, Baltasar Fra-Molinero, and I went to Portland to see an exhibit by another artist. When I asked one of the workers in the gallery if there were any artists in the atelier producing African American themes, she showed us some paintings that were not in the exhibit by a fellow she thought might be from Brazil. We were impressed by the handful of works there, which we learned were Daniel's. Czerny requested the contact information and arranged a meeting with Daniel who we discovered was actually from Georgia, not Brazil. When Czerny told me that she was making arrangements for the Bates College Office of Multicultural Affairs to sponsor Daniel's exhibit "A Heavy Grace" for Black History Month, I began a plan to interview Daniel and to produce a brochure to accompany the exhibit. The faculty who teach in African American Studies readily agreed to participate in the interview. On October 25, 2004 Ms. Brasuell, Professors Charles V. Carnegie, Baltasar Fra-Molinero, Sue E. Houchins, Carole A. Taylor and myself interviewed Daniel at his home in Portland. Bates senior Victor Rivera videotaped the interview. Daniel had most of his art work in different rooms of his house. But, true to his southern roots, the interview began in the kitchen, metaphorically speaking.

This brochure is a collaborative effort between The Office of Multicultural Affairs and the Programs in African American and American Cultural Studies at Bates College.

Daniel Minter (DM): That one is named Kitchen, because it's where a lot of black women do their hair and each other's hair and also because this area here [at the nape of the neck] is called the kitchen. I don't know if it's still called a kitchen [Laughter]. There are several pieces that are in a theme that I work with about black women and hair. But you can see that some of my work deals with black women and hair, the way they think of their hair and just the issues of hair.



Kitchen

DM: I call this piece Empty Mirror. It's also called Beautiful Lady. She was one of the first ones I did from the series. I think I did this piece back in 1994. She was one of the first from the Women and Hair series.

Moving on... This piece, *Adoyo* is yet to be finished. It's close to being finished. I just wanted some pieces that had the expression of prayer in them with the body kneeled over (A Healing Weight), bent down in prayer instead of a burden.

DM: These are very recent (Aluja-I [left] and Aluja II). As a matter of fact they're not quite completed yet, they're not quite finished. These two are Xango. They don't have a title yet but they are Xango, the Orixa.

Charles Nero (CN): Your Orixas look very human. Why is that?

DM: The way I like to do my Orixas is that I like to make them more human than spirit because as the Orixas walk into us we become them and they are gone and then they come back. So, I like to put them into everyday looking people. When I first started doing figurative work with Orixas, I didn't know what they were. I was painting people or types of people who I'd grown up with in situations or in spiritually heavy situations. Sometimes I'd put some type of figure that represented the type of spiritual way that they had in the image also.



Adoyo



A Healing Weight



Empty Mirror



Aluja-II



Gift of Okra

Charles V. Carnegie (CVC): Have you studied the art of Brazil, the Caribbean or Latin America?

DM: I went to Brazil in '91. I took some of my artwork there. I was talking with some of the artists there and showing them my work. I was talking and saying "this is so and so and this is so and so." The artists there said "yeah, yeah, we know who these are. We know who this is. This is such and such. This is a farm, right? This is a farm?" I say "Yes." Then it's the spirit that lives here. And ah, I became much more acquainted with the names of the energies that I was trying to represent. So, I started using those names whereas before I didn't really use the names. I just considered them to be spirit. And so now I have a more proper name to give them. This one is Gift of Okra.

CN: What about the Okra? Is it symbolic?

DM: Okra symbolizes quite a few things for me. In this one it's more an offering for opening—for opening ways, opening doorways, and clearing paths. I like to use these three pods to add a little more symbolism by pointing the way of those paths. You have the crossroads within the okra.



Keys

DM: Let's go back to one of the boxes. This piece is not quite finished (Keys). It's sixteen doorways, sixteen keys, sixteen paths, and sixteen shells inside. Each image represents an Odu or a guiding story or proverb. The arrangement of sixteen represents another Odu. These can be arranged nearly infinitely but the 256 combinations of them can basically explain all of the things that occur to us in our daily lives. I began calling them Keys because they are to open doorways to other emotional situations that we have in our consciousness. A key will take you to a place or memory. Each person will experience it differently, of course, but the keys are here and are like a map for our existence and our interaction with each other as people.

Sue E. Houchins (SEH): What are these brooms?

DM: Ah, the brooms. These brooms are for spiritual cleaning, not for sweeping. As you can see, I placed keys all around it. So, it's for cleaning and opening pathways, opening doors.



A Heavy Grace

SEH: Is there any other significance? Is there a reason that you work with an ordinary house object?

DM: I like the fact that a broom carries a lot of cultural significance for African Americans in so many ways. I think of the broom as almost a ritual object. I just love the plain commonality of it. I like taking these common objects and exploring their spiritual significances within our culture. It's all a matter of what you do with [ordinary objects]. You can take a pocket knife which is just an everyday tool, but to me it's not an everyday tool, it's a spiritual necessity. It's this small machete. It's for eating, it's for dividing, it's for opening. I just like to take [common, everyday] objects and move them and put them into a context of spiritual usage instead of just everyday usage that has no thought behind it.

DM: This woodcarving here is a relief carving on wood and then painted with acrylic paint (Counting By Three). It is a picture of my mother. I have her holding the bowl as an offering. The seven okra are her seven fruit and below her I have a guinea fowl which is the symbol I use to represent motherhood. I've found out that it's often used in that manner. I particularly enjoyed using the guinea fowl because my father always talked about my mother in that way. He would say she was just like a guinea hen. When all of her children were grown and gone away, he said that our mother was restless. He said that she was ok as long as there were three of us at home because just like a guinea hen, she'll lay eggs, and you can take the eggs, but if you leave any less than three, she won't come back to the nest. She'll get all upset if you take all of her eggs. But if you leave three eggs, she'll come back and she'll sit on them and she'll lay more. But she'll get upset if she doesn't see at least three eggs in the nest.



Counting By Three

CN: You mentioned the seven okra, the seven fruits. That's children? Seven children. Which of the okra are you?

DM: At the time [represented in this painting] I wasn't born yet.

CN: How many siblings do you have?

DM: There are twelve of us.

Czerny Brasuell (CB): Did your mother intend to stop at seven children?

DM: You know she probably thought maybe one or two was it. [Laughter] You know, people didn't think the same way back there. It wasn't quite the same. Let's talk some more about woodcarvings. It's the father of a good friend of mine (Mr. Leaks [page 4]). I didn't know it at the time, but when I put the rooster in I just gave him that symbol because he always had that air of the rooster—he was always very exact in his speech and his bearing.

DM: In this wood carving I used the June bug (Slitty [page 4]). This is also a man who I grew up with in the community. I grew up in a real small town. And so everybody knew everybody. I enjoy it when people from home recognize characters in my works, even if it doesn't look like them, but they know the energy of that person, so they recognize it. This one is a man I knew all my life who was really about having a good time. He wanted everybody to have lots of fun, everything.



Mr. Leaks



Slinty



Girl

But I saw him at a party, a local get together, and he had this kind of this sad look on his face for just a moment. But, the next thing, you know, he was trying to liven everybody up again. So I gave him that symbol of that beetle since the beetle is closed. But when he's closed, he's also protected—he has that hard shell and he's happy.

CVC: Several of your pieces have elongated fingers that are glowing. What is the significance of hands for you?

DM: I use the hands to symbolize possession, transformation, or giving—some type of exchange.

Usually if there's something in the hands it's either being held, or held out as an offering, as something for you to keep. It goes back to the hand as a vessel. I mean it goes back to the thing I was talking about with the vessels, the boxes. I even have the hands actually making a box or holding a box. I'll use the hands to denote peace of mind, tranquility and wisdom mainly in older people. I'll have the hands in a certain position, as at rest.

SEH: What about, for example, that painting "The Beautiful Woman," or the Woman at the Mirror." Her hands change colors. And of course she is dropping the mirror...

DM: Yes, the decision has been made to give up this imagery and it has been dropped. The hands, they relax, and it denotes peace and tranquility with that.

SEH: So the hands mirror the mental and spiritual condition?

DM: Yes. That's right.

CN: I notice you use a lot of blue paint for the subjects in paintings like Girl. The subjects are identifiable as black people, but the colors are not realistic, yet they are suggestive of real people. For instance, I've heard of "blue black people," but that's really blue! I could even imagine knowing someone with that skin color. How did you come up with the technique of playing with black people's skin color?

DM: Well, we're black but it's not the color that makes us black. It's the culture. And so I would use that deep color just because I like that rich deep color. I'm looking for beauty. In the darkness of the colors and the changing colors I'm looking for a boldness in the colors and I like to keep [the colors] near the primary. I don't want to mute the colors down. I want to denote that I'm not afraid of color. I use color because I want color not because I'm working against color.

CN: That's a very provocative statement!

(Laughter)

Baltasar Fra-Molinero (BFM): Your use of color is clearly very non western; I mean very non-academic.

DM: Yeah. I wasn't trained. I consider myself a self-taught artist. I wasn't trained academically in fine art. So my values as far as what I think is beautiful may be somewhat different than and academically trained person. I taught myself to paint. I knew how to paint when I went to art school. You know I got in trouble a lot at art school because of my colors. They always told me, "don't use those, don't use primary colors." I pretty much ignored that. I'm trained as a commercial artist as an illustrator. I kept that separate from my fine art and my imagery. If I'm doing an illustration I'm doing it for someone else and so [I produce] whatever they want. But these are mine and I just don't feel that the teachers had a right to tell me how to portray my community. They don't even know my community. They don't even know where I came from, so I pretty much ignored their comments. Not until a few years ago did I even get to discuss my ways of thinking of my art work with someone who I like to consider a teacher.

SEH: Who was that?

DM: John Biggers. I met him a few years back and when I saw his art work for the first time I felt a definite connection and felt that here is someone who knows where I come from. And here's someone who can help me get to where I need to go.

CB: You mentioned not really knowing about the Orixas in Brazil, and I know you're from a small town in Georgia, so what drew you as an artist to Brazil in the absence of not really having a context about the Orixas or about art in Brazil?

DM: Just finding out about Bahia and Brazil and realizing that was a section of the country where so many black people had been brought to and I knew nothing about them. This country is right here, practically next door, and has a similar size to this country, has a similar history and population. And we are taught nothing about it. So I started looking into it. So, I had to go visit.

Carole A. Taylor (CAT): I love the way that you look at a face and you might think it was a kind of surreal color but real presentation of the figure, and yet everything about the gesture and the symbols and the presentation suggests the kind of spiritual dimension for the figures themselves. And I noticed you have some books on voudou here. I was wondering if you could say something about that combination of the affirmation of ordinary things and ordinary life activities and what that ordinariness has to do with the spirituality of religions like voodoo.

DM: Well, for example, if you walk up to a person and start combing their hair. It's a very personal thing and we do that in our family all the time. My sisters do it all the time. And they're saying a lot more than just my hair needs combing. It's not even about that because as soon as you know they start touching my head that conversation starts. We start talking and she doesn't have to look at me. She knows by my rigidness or relaxedness whatever is going on in the body, she knows. And it's almost like you know you can't lie when somebody is on your head. [Laughter and acknowledgment] So if you just walk up to somebody and just comb their hair and ignore all of their posture, then, you're missing so much. Just as if you walk into the kitchen and prepare some food, you grab your knife or whatever and start cutting some food or whatever and ah you don't take into consideration where that food came from or whatever. You're missing out on the purpose of your food. You know. You may be eating, you may be all this, but you're not getting any nourishment, you're just sustaining yourself so you can live another day. That's all you are doing. All of these acts, these small things that we do, we have to get something from them. You know. And we have to be conscious of what we do. That's why I like representing those small things in the work because it reminds each of us of our little rituals that we go through.

CVC: In an interview in the journal Callaloo I noticed again and again that you make a clear distinction in meaning when you say that what you do is art *work*. When I see your work what comes through to me is a sense of mission and a sense of your seeing yourself and your work as having this powerful communicative spiritual dimension having to do with community. Could you share how you feel about your work as an art *worker*?

DM: For one thing I feel blessed with vision, to have vision. And I have a vision that other people have; everyone has it. I take my vision and I can show them something I have seen and then they can see that they see the same thing. A lot of people don't have time to look. You know. They want to look, they really want to, but they may not have a way of expressing their joy of having seen this certain thing or whatever. And when you bring it back to them it's a gift to them. And if you can do that it's your responsibility. And with that you try to make sure that what you're bringing them is true. Images are, you know, they're for telling and they can be used to tell lies just as easily as they can be used to bring enlightenment and truth.

I'm going to move on to this series called Them Six. You know, [the African American spiritual "Children, Go Where I Send You" which contains the lyric] "Them Six, Them Six who never got fixed." And it's part of, I guess, my tree; it's my way of giving thanks to trees and also of telling the story of them six or the idea of "Them Six, Them Six who never got fixed. Them seven, them



Them Six, Them Six



Them Eight, Them Eight



Ebos

seven who never got to heaven. Them Eight, Them Eight who stood at the gate. And in it I use the gourd because gourds [are vessels that can] hold the secret. They hold our possessions. They hold what is ours. For instance, this one uses the trees and the gourds (Ebos).

CAT: A lot of film scholars talk about the gaze and the return of the gaze from audiences. Those eyes look so directly at you as though they are not allowing any type of voyeuristic view. They are really in your face.

SEH: Well, they're almost masks with flesh.

DM: I used to do masks. I used to give the people masks.

SEH: Objects are, and these are my words, a private vocabulary that has a communal aspect so that you can talk about the Orixas, for example. Some of your metaphors are shared across the diaspora. Some of them are very private to you. How do you think your work operates to tell the story to the audience who doesn't have the vocabulary?

DM: Good question. Well, this is a girl sitting in a chair. Just a girl sitting in a chair and if you don't have any other reference, you would say that she was sitting on a chair and that she was sad. But if you know, you know that she is not sad. She's just getting her hair done. It's like the okra in Gift of Okra. I feel like if you don't know that it's okra and even if you have never seen it before you can still appreciate the striving and reaching and the movement of it. Okra are always pointing. They are like long fingers pointing. Lots of people can relate to some of the energy that this image may represent.



The Kitchen

BFM: Could you tell us something about the Kwanzaa stamp?

DM: The Kwanzaa stamp came out just this week. I was able to put some of the things that you see in my other works in the stamp, but they're very subtle, such as, of course the choice of colors, the movement and, my favorite thing about this is the two women. They have the birds or their two wings on top of their heads which is like their crown. That to me was sort of homage to John Biggers because we were talking about how the woman's head always needs a crown and that it always points towards heaven. So, these birds are about to fly; this whole [stamp] is about flight. You know with the flying clothes and the birds about to take flight so it's basically about the spirit moving.

BFM: The word community has been mentioned by many of us here, and you mention it with reference to the community where you grew up. Who constitutes community to you especially as an artist, perhaps now that you live here in Maine?

DM: I was thinking about that the other day. I consider my community the people who I can have some cultural exchange with, people willing to give up some of their cultural experiences and who are willing to acknowledge and look and accept mine.

CAT: I thought about how long it took you to find John Biggers. I can't get over the haunting feeling about the historic undervaluation of African American artists and how hard it is to find mentors. I was wondering how you see your role in extending community and making it possible for young people to use your art as entrée to the traditions in a way that you didn't have that access yourself until later.



Kwanzaa Stamp

DM: That's really, really difficult. I try to make myself available if I can. It's just not the simplest thing in the world to do. You don't want to force your ideas onto younger people. You only want to lay it out for them and let them take what they can use, what they need. And then they'll come back for more.

CN: Daniel, I want to thank you very much for sharing your art with us and your stories and your narratives. I want to say that I'm looking forward to the exhibit during Black History Month. I think everyone is very excited about your work. Tonight has been beautiful, provocative and spiritual.

DM: Thank you, I enjoy sharing my work and I enjoy sharing my ideas about my work. It allows me to move that next step further. So I appreciate everyone's questions.

Contributors:

Czerny Brasuell is Director of Multicultural Affairs. She has been a frequent consultant to a range of groups within the Brazilian Black Consciousness Movement on political, cultural and educational issues, and is currently implementing an exchange program between Brazilian universities and students from Haiti. She has brought numerous exhibits to the campus that highlights art by people of color.

Charles (Val) Carnegie is professor of anthropology and current chair of the African American Studies program. He teaches courses on symbolism, the Caribbean, and ethnography; he is author of *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*.

Baltasar Fra-Molinero is associate professor of Spanish. His teachings and publications focus on the African diaspora in the Spanish speaking world, both in Europe and in Latin America, from the sixteenth century onwards. He is the author of *La imagen de los negros en el teatro del Siglo de Oro (The Image of Blacks in Spanish Golden Age Theater)*.

Sue E. Houchins is an associate professor in the African American Studies Program. Her publications focus on women of Africa and the Black Atlantic, the transformations in African religions imported to the American hemisphere, and the spiritual autobiographies and mystical texts of Black women. She is the editor of *Spiritual Narratives in 19th Century African American Women Writers in the Schomburg*.

Charles I. Nero is associate professor of rhetoric and theater and African American/American Cultural Studies and teaches courses in literature and film. His most recent publications include "Diva Traffic in Film: Lessons in Race, Nation and Gender" (*Camera Obscura*, 2004) and "Queering *The Souls of Black Folk*," (*Public Culture*, 2005).

Carole Anne Taylor is professor of English and African American/American Cultural Studies and teaches courses in literary and cultural studies. Her books and other publications reflect an ongoing work on the cultural character of aesthetic traditions. She is author of *"The Eyes Plain Vision": A Poetics of Seeing* and *The Tragedy and Comedy of Resistance: Reading Modernity through Black Women Writers*.

Original transcription of this interview by Yvette LaChapelle.



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