

BIOGRAPHY

Emmanuel Merisier was born on June 2, 1929 in Port-au-Prince. In 1956, Merisier enrolled at the Foyer des Arts Plastiques, an academy founded by artists who broke from the "popular" and "primitive" styles cultivated at the Centre d'Art. The Foyer artists claimed the right to paint with new thematic and formal approaches. Although each espoused a unique individual style, the Foyer artists, like Merisier, shared a common interest in social realism, or more honest representations of Haiti and its people. At the Foyer des Arts Plastiques, Merisier blended local traditions with international trends, creating poignant images of Haitian folk life in the visual language of European modernism.

In the late 1960s, Merisier migrated to the United States and settled in the New York City area. To support himself, the artist secured employment in construction, but he devoted his free time to art. Merisier took painting classes at the Art Students League and the Visual Arts School. Merisier also nurtured his fascination with the history of art by exploring the city's museums and galleries and by reading and collecting books about art from around the world. Merisier's greatest inspirations include Caribbean artists, like Hector Hyppolite and Wifredo Lam, and European modernists, such as Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall.

Curated by Alfredo Rivera with support from Ellen Taylor, Curatorial Assistant
Organized by Marie Vickles, Curator-in-Residence, Little Haiti Cultural Complex and Edouard Duval-Carrié, Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance



Emmanuel Merisier, *Man with Pipe*, 1985. Acrylic on canvas, 22" x 18", Waterloo Center for the Arts.

Cover image from Emmanuel Merisier, *In Memory of Wifredo Lam*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 42", Waterloo Center for the Arts.

Emmanuel Merisier mixes myth, modernism, and mysticism. His works are characterized by their vibrant colors, textured brushwork, emotional intensity, and abundant symbolism. Although Merisier left Haiti in 1968, his artistic production maintained its focus on Haitian life, people, and traditions throughout his career. Many of Merisier's canvases represent the symbols, rituals, and spirits (or loa) of Vodou, the majority religion of Haiti. Despite his international travels and influences, Merisier's interest lies in portraying the folklore experiences of Haitian peasants. The visually striking and emotionally gripping art of Merisier synthesizes global elements in innovative and distinctly Haitian expressions. Merisier was first exhibited in the United States in 1969 at the Brooklyn Museum in *Image d'Haiti*, a group show featuring fifteen Haitian Artists. Merisier's first solo exhibition opened at the Kean Mason Gallery in New York in 1982. Since then, Merisier's work has been exhibited throughout the United States and at the Musée du Panthéon National Haïtien in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. Solo exhibitions of Merisier's art have been shown at the House of Selden Rodman, VFA Gallery, Ramapo College, Mehu Gallery, Dorsey Gallery and the Waterloo Center for the Arts.

-Ellen Taylor, Curatorial Assistant

ABOUT THE LITTLE HAITI CULTURAL COMPLEX (LHCC)

The Little Haiti Cultural Complex broke ground in 2006, as a result of a long awaited vision of the late City of Miami Commissioner Arthur E. Teele, Jr. Since then it has become a key engine in Downtown Little Haiti and nearby neighborhoods to spur economic and community growth. Over 100,000 people per year visit or take part in programs at the cultural facility. The mission of the City of Miami's Little Haiti Cultural Complex is to present and preserve Afro-Caribbean cultures, inspire the next generation of leaders and leverage arts and culture as tools for transformation and community building. Our vision is to be a cultural hub where the community can meet to create, dialogue, and collaborate to build an equitable reality for Afro-Caribbeans and their descendants.



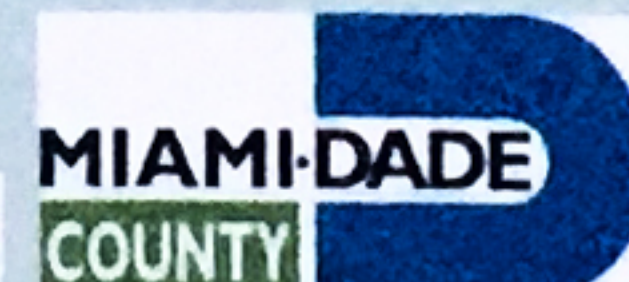
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The Elusive Master: Emmanuel Merisier, from Haiti to beyond



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December 7, 2018 - January 12, 2019

212-260 N.E. 59th Terrace, Miami, FL 33127

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OF MUSES AND MASTERS: THE ELUSIVE PAINTINGS OF EMMANUEL MERISIER

by Alfredo Rivera

The broad brushstrokes and uncanny figures of the paintings of Emmanuel Merisier reveal a multitude of inspirations. These influences range from the popular and folkloric to the avant-garde of modern painting in a trans-Atlantic context. His large canvas *In Memory of Wifredo Lam* (2009), for example, honors the Cuban “master” whose art embodies the relation between avant-garde art and Afro-diasporic religious and folkloric culture. Lam’s paintings often express the dynamism between figurative and abstract expression, with a desire to formally present the forces of self and society. Similarly, Merisier uses the canvas to express a beyond: his canvases draw from a multitude of influences to present an elusive, beguiling modernity.

The painting *In Memory of Wifredo Lam* features a prominent figure emerging from a textured light blue background. While the figure appears to float, he is grounded both by a red floor and a white animal that resembles a goat. Given the title, one wonders if this is a representation of the artist Wifredo Lam himself, as both grounded and ethereal. Emerging from the artist’s head and arms are snakes, branches, human-like faces and other flora and fauna appearing mystical and spiritual in nature. A large white cross emerges as a crown directly on top of the figure’s head. For a memorial of a deceased and celebrated painter, the central figure appears alive and vivid, staring directly at the viewer. The implied anthropomorphism of Merisier’s homage recalls Lam’s own blending of spirits and creatures, of humans, animals and plant life. The power, resistance and effervescence in works such as Wifredo Lam’s 1942 masterpiece *La Jungla* is evoked in Merisier’s homage to the artist. Perhaps Merisier sees himself within

the lineage of great Caribbean painters such as Lam: as directly rooted from the Cuban or Haitian context, as informed by and in dialogue with European modernity, and as the work of an artistic sorcerer. Like Lam, Merisier attempts to create a work that utilizes the broad strokes of modernity while revealing an inherently Caribbean underside.

Emmanuel Merisier, *The Greedy*, 1982. Acrylic on canvas, 44”x34”, Waterloo Center for the Arts.



Emmanuel Merisier, *The Drummer*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 60” x 48”, Waterloo Center for the Arts.

emigration/to uncle Sam/paradis terrestre.” The words and figures swirling throughout the canvas suggest an overall implication for greed: that of displacement.

Other works take on an explicitly Haitian content. Merisier’s 2010 painting *People of Haiti* uses symbolic images from Haitian Vodou and Christianity. The canvas reflects a sense of both chaos and rhythmic unity, including in its framing. His 2000 painting *The Drummer* also recalls Vodou traditions, with three figures striking a drum with their tongues. The role of drumming within Afro-diasporic religious traditions is notable. In this case, the drum is personified with a human face and a forehead comprised of houses. In an interview with curator Chawne Paige, Merisier comments “The house [is] where the people...” Merisier elaborates that the motif of the house as inspired by the artist Jean Michel-Basquiat. Refiguring the drum as both person and home is perhaps an attempt by the artist to connect cultural traditions to personal and spiritual understandings of place. His reference to Basquiat, whom Merisier deemed a contemporary master, enriches our understanding of this visuality.

Emmanuel Merisier, *Matisse and Hyppolite*, 1998. Acrylic on canvas, 60”x30”, Waterloo Center for the Arts.

This is to suggest there is minimal tension between visual representations of modernity and tradition in Merisier’s artwork. Rather, his work incorporates the totalizing language of modern painting to an effectively Haitian means. Merisier’s concern for Haiti and the Haitian people is evident throughout his career. Works such as his 1982 painting *The Greedy* and his 1983 painting *Hungry* reveal topics that seem to directly reference Haiti while having much broader implications. In the painting *The Greedy* the evocation of figures and the appearance of cursive text seem to draw from Merisier’s own experience of migration or exile. Appearing in front of a boat in the upper left are the words: “free

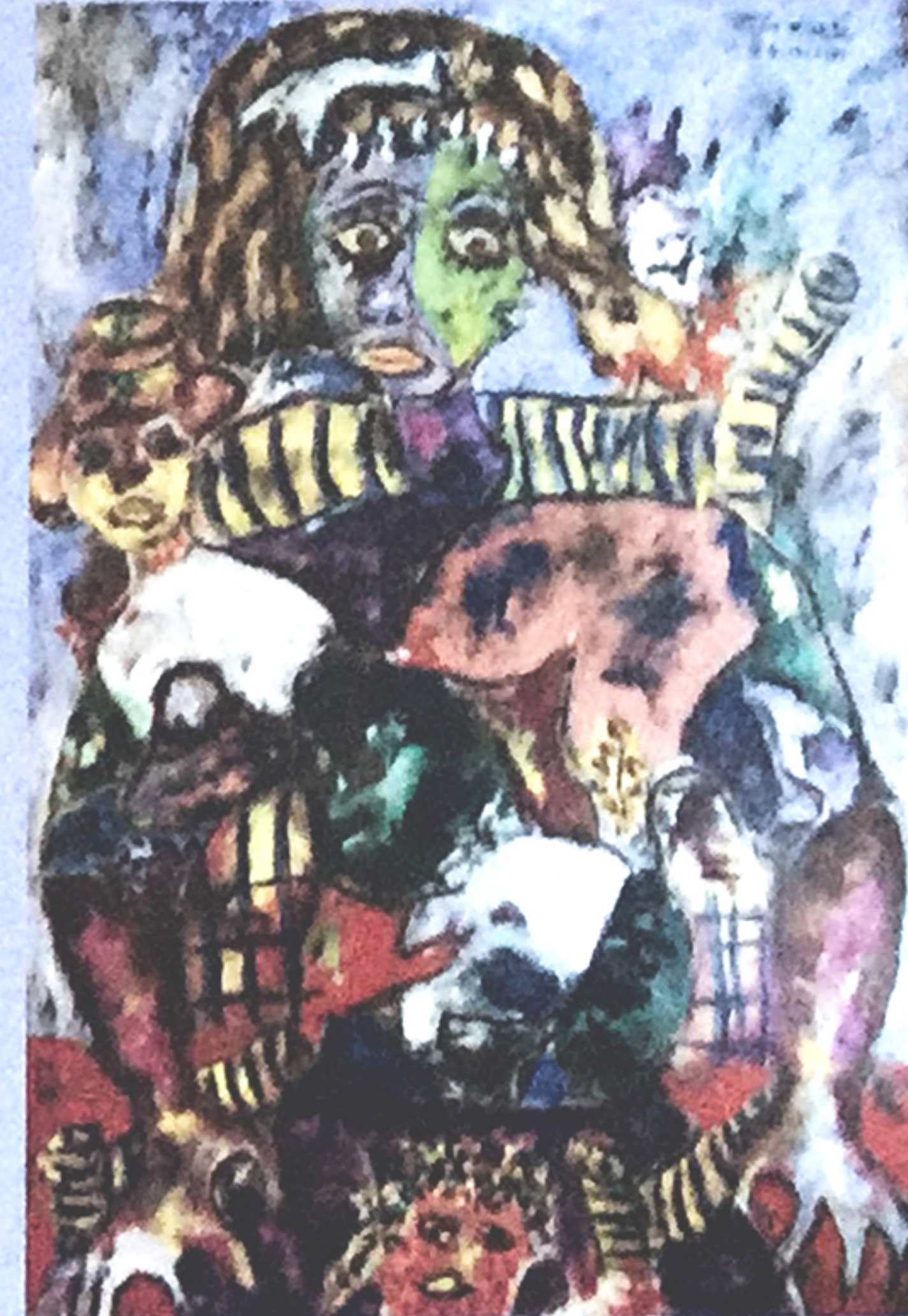


Throughout his career Merisier sought influence from modern masters and his contemporaries. He regularly attended art openings in New York City, and was known for carrying art history books around the city. This studious engagement informs many of his works, such as the experiments in abstraction featured in this exhibition. Other works reference the artists that influence Merisier in their titles. The 1998 painting *Matisse and Hyppolite* refer to the regarded French painter Henri Matisse and the Haitian master Hector Hyppolite. While the flat background and the colors may recall the work of Matisse, the female figure and the landscape within her skirt are reminiscent of the works of Hyppolite. Emerging from the background and surrounding the figure are ghoulish, flower-like faces. The directness of the forward-facing figure and stylistic references to both artists emphasizes a relation between the regarded Haitian painters of the mid-twentieth century and the European modernists of the early 20th century.

Overall, the influences of Merisier’s work are limitless, despite occasionally specific references. Throughout his work one may witness the imprint of the German Expressionists, Fauvism, the Cubists, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionists and the works of the Haitian “renaissance” masters. Works such as his 2000 painting *In Memory of Picasso and Chagal* do more than show his indebtedness to his artistic forebearers. They reference the work of European masters to present a new imagery, one as proud as it is elusive. These works also present a visuality akin to his Haitian contemporaries, be they the legacies of masters such as Hector Hyppolite, Wilson Bigaud and Préfète Duffaut, and those who lived or grew up abroad, such as Hervé Télémaque or Jean-Michel Basquiat. In their grand scale and elusive compositions, Merisier’s paintings present the modern painted form as reflective of the drama of diaspora. The works present a dialogue between old and new worlds, between Haiti and our greater world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This exhibition is made possible due to the generosity of many collaborators, most especially Edouard Duval-Carrié and Marie Vickles. We would also like to thank Mireille Chancey Gonzalez of the Haitian Cultural Arts Alliance, the Waterloo Center for the Arts, including Kent Shankle, Elizabeth Andrews and Chawne Paige. Several of Merisier’s colleagues provided crucial context for the curator during research for the exhibition, including Andre Juste, Sydney Jenkins, Albert Dépas, and Valerie Coddett. Their insights and anecdotes regarding Merisier helped bridge the relationship between the person highlighted in this exhibition and their paintings.



Emmanuel Merisier, *In Memory of Picasso and Chagal*, 2000. Acrylic on canvas, 64” x 38”, Waterloo Center for the Arts.

