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Interview with Visual Artist Sophia Lacroix

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An Interview with Visual Artist Sophia Lacroix

by **Andrea Shaw**

About the Author

Andrea Shaw, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of English and the assistant director of the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences Division of Humanities at Nova Southeastern University. She was born in Jamaica and is a creative writer and a scholar of Caribbean and African Diaspora studies. Her book, *The Embodiment of Disobedience: Fat Black Women's Unruly Political Bodies*, was published in 2006. Her creative and scholarly writing have been published in numerous journals, including *World Literature Today*, *MaComere*, *The Caribbean Writer*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Feminist Media Studies*, *Social Semiotics*, and *FEMSPEC*. She graduated from the University of Miami with a Ph.D. in English and from Florida International University with an M.F.A in Creative Writing.



Sophia Lacroix

It was a muggy Miami afternoon when Sophia and I settled down for our conversation at a Starbucks on the outskirts of Little Haiti. She was tired yet radiant as she chatted and laughed, pregnant and joyfully awaiting her first child. Our conversation was shrouded in the aroma of coffee against an aural backdrop of lilting accents from all over the Caribbean and South America.

AS: When you arrived here at 15, what was most pleasurable and most painful about leaving Haiti?

SL: The most pleasurable part of leaving Haiti was seeing my mom again. She had come a year before, so we had been without her for a while. The most painful thing was leaving my friends and the beautiful scenery of Haiti. Miami is beautiful but flat, and it took a while to get used to not having the gorgeous backdrop of mountains. It was a culture shock in general—new language, new school system. When I was put in basic math, I thought, “Oh my God, all Americans are idiots.” I had been doing geometry and algebra.

AS: When you began painting in oils in 1993, was that your first serious exploration of art or had you been painting previously?

SL: Well, I had always been painting since I was a child. I took classes for a couple of years when I was twelve—in charcoal and basic watercolor—but by the time we were starting to do oil, my parents could no longer afford it, so this is why I consider myself self-taught. No one ever taught me how to paint in oils. I took the materials and I figured it out. Art classes in high school were a waste of time. My teacher, I liked her, but she spent most of the class lecturing about how horrible life and her ex-husband were and not that much time teaching, so I always went to class but we would only draw for ten minutes. I couldn’t be rude and not listen to her. This is why I consider 1993 my official beginning.

AS: A lot of your work seems to feature nature—fruit & vegetables, landscape—as well as a lot of girls and women. Have you intentionally decided to make your work have this focus?

SL: I decided a long time ago to paint about Haiti because all artists do what they know. In Haiti, my fondest memories were of the marketplace. I went with the cook to the open-air market, and you mostly saw women there. The reason most of the children that I paint are women is because my nieces were with me all the time—

AS: Here or in Haiti?

SL: Here. I’ve always been drawn to little girls for some reason, which is probably why God thought to give me a little girl—I’m pregnant with a girl! So I’ve just been drawn to women. I’ve only painted a few boys—my nephews in Haiti. It is more about pursuing what I have access to and what I’ve found inspiring in the market scene because Haitian women are the backbone of the Haitian economy. I mostly saw the women working. The guys, the men wait for the women to do. They didn’t work as hard. My step-father did not contribute that much to household. So it means women were the breadwinners. My circumstance is different because my boyfriend is the breadwinner. We both are, but he is not like that. He was not raised like that. But I grew up thinking, okay, I guess women earn a living and men give orders.

AS: There is a documentary that a colleague of mine was involved with titled *Poto Mitan: Haitian Women, Pillars of the Global Economy* <http://potomitan.net/>, so it is funny hearing you say that.

How do you decide on the subject of an artwork, which you have sort of already answered, and do your pieces sometimes turn out very differently from what you planned?

SL: Sometimes I just see a child that is so inspiring that I have to paint this child. So I'll take my camera and just in the sun take pictures of the child in different poses doing whatever, then later I just look at what I have and compose a painting based on what I get from the pictures. Sometimes paintings come to my head, almost completely done. I just see it. My masterpiece "Maternite Sensuelle," I saw her eyes first.

AS: That's the one with the pregnant woman?

SL: Yes. That's the one where I show that pregnancy can be sensual. The third way I find subjects for my art is I send a mockup to a very good photographer. He takes snapshots of Haiti and brings them to me, and some of them are so incredible that I just have to paint them. I add stuff to them. But I will take pieces of his images and just create paintings. He has given me permission, and I pay him for the photos. Sometimes the pictures just make we want to paint them.

AS: It is interesting that you use another sort of visual medium to inspire what you are working on. The two end up interconnected.

SL: The style that I paint in is called hyperrealism or photorealism. You either spend hours that you don't have in front of a scene to get the reality or you take a snapshot. A lot of artists do that. The great masters like Rembrandt used models in front of them. Da Vinci, all these people, used models as examples so they could attain that level of realism. Artists in my generation have photography, so why not use it? You look at it; you sketch it; you paint it. It is not as easy a process as people might think. You have to do it very slowly. I paint very slowly.

AS: How long on average does it take you to complete a piece?

SL: It depends on the size. I estimate that for a twenty-four by thirty painting it will take me easily one hundred and twenty hours. But because I am always working fulltime, I would say I spend eight hours on the weekend painting and four hours during the week if I have a deadline.

AS: I see that you have a degree in nutrition.

SL: Nutrition science.

AS: Is that the field you work in?

SL: I have Haitian parents, and you don't tell Haitian parents you want to be an artist. You can try! Because I excelled academically and won several academic scholarships, they told me I could either become a doctor, a lawyer or an engineer. I liked sciences and their argument was convincing so I have a pre-med degree.

AS: Well a lot of your images have food, so in a way there is a slight connection. Which artists have influenced you the most?

SL: I would say at first non-Haitian artists. My deepest connection is to Leonardo da Vinci. The reason is because he was a scientist and an artist. And he had a warped sense of humor. He laughed at authority, from what I've read of him. I love the fact that he had a love of anatomy just as I do. He embodies for me what a human being should be: well rounded—the arts, the sciences, and an interesting personality. The fact that certain paintings were his way of laughing at the church and authority makes me feel proud. When I am in heaven or wherever, I will have a good conversation with him.

AS: With your work do you aim for that sort of anti-conventional, anti-establishment characteristic like what da Vinci had? Are you making an argument in your work against some established norms?

SL: When I started as an artist and went to galleries and said “Oh, I am a Haitian artist, this is my art,” they told me “No, this is not Haitian art. It's not primitive.” Sarcastically, I once said I am an artist and I am Haitian so therefore this is Haitian art. Now, realistic pieces have become trendy, but I started painting I think well before it was no longer exceptional for a Haitian artist to do realistic paintings. Yes, I do laugh at what is expected. I do what I want. I paint what I want. This is my art. If you don't like it, just don't look at it.

As our conversation continued, Sophia lamented what she sees as the marginalization of visual artists and the general reluctance of organizers to pay for their participation in an event. She explained that while dancers, musicians, and singers will all receive a stipend for sharing their work, very often visual artists do not. She also credited the Kuumba Artists Collective of South Florida <http://www.hugeaux.com/historykuumbaartists.htm> with playing a significant role in helping her career to develop, especially due to the networking opportunities the Collective provided. It is through these opportunities that Sophia met her mentor Larry “Poncho” Brown <http://www.larryponchobrown.com/>.

We also discussed the ways in which Sophia might have lived her life differently, if given a second chance. I asked this especially keeping in mind her initial pursuit of a career in the sciences. Surprisingly, her eyes lit up and she beamed as she spoke about the group of women she met while completing her degree in nutrition science. She explained that although they have all gone on to become doctors, she is in touch with all of them and they remain central to her life. She is looking forward to her baby growing up with these women's children. “Nothing major to regret” she reported smiling.

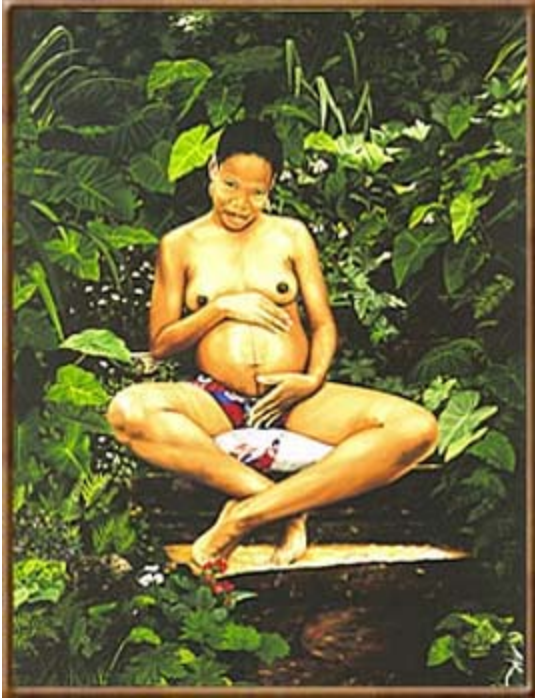
Sophia's art is most easily available via her website: <http://sophialacroix.com/theartist.htm>. She encourages interested buyers to contact her at sophialart@aol.com.



Banan Sou Tet



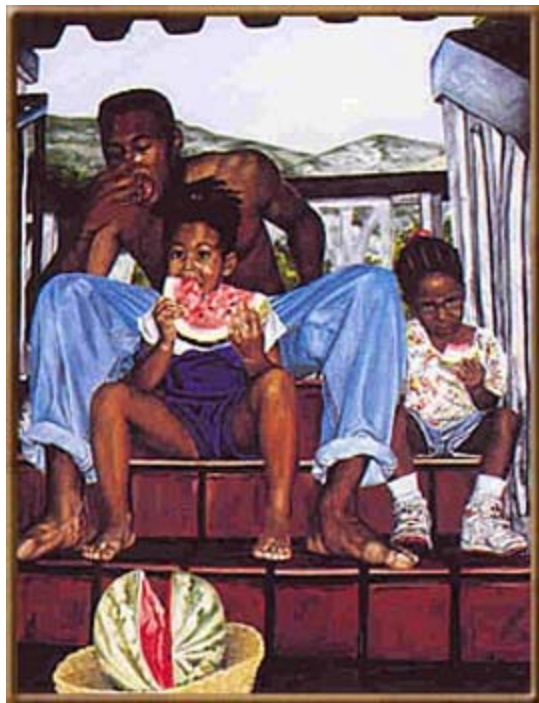
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