

EDWARD THORP GALLERY

Press Release

Haitian Masters

1950-1980's

March 9 - April 14, 2012

Edward Thorp Gallery is pleased to announce *Haitian Masters*; an exhibition showcasing the paintings of four self-taught artists never before shown together in New York. The work of Wesner La Forest, Peterson Laurent, Odilon Pierre, Bourmond Byron manifest their originality through a compellingly expressive visual language. This exhibit celebrates themes both universal and particularly Haitian; the rich cultural landscape of daily life in Haiti emerges, with its rituals and folklore, creating a detailed and poignant portrait of Haiti, its single-mindedness, resourcefulness and faith.

Bourmond Byron was born in June in Jacmel in the early 1920's, the son of a general in the Haitian army, and died in 2004. Before he became a painter, he worked as a carpenter and ship builder, but a 1948 visit to the Centre d'Art convinced him to take up painting. He practiced occasionally as a *dokte fe*, or leaf Doctor (herbalist). He was also an avid follower of voodoo and often chose to paint ceremonial scenes in addition to scenes of Haitian daily life. Byron has been called the most romantic of the Haitian painters. Best known for his luminous blues and greens and the use of silhouetted forms, Byron created an otherworldly and mysterious atmosphere in dream like landscapes. His works are included in the permanent collections of the Musée d'Art Haïtien du Collège Saint Pierre in Port-au-Prince, the Milwaukee Museum of Art, and the Waterloo Museum of Art in Iowa.

Wesner La Forest was born in around 1927 died in 1965. Not much is known of this mystery man of Haitian art, though he is said to have been a carnival mask maker among other things before he came to the Centre d'Art. In the early 1960's, record has it that La Forest, who suffered from regular bouts of epilepsy turned up at the Centre d'Art produced a small body of paintings, and died suddenly during an epileptic seizure a year or so after his arrival. Years later one intrepid collector found a small stack of works in the basement of the Centre d' Art. His subjects were voodoo and his portraits hypnotic in their startling frontality. All are painted with an evocative forcefulness and expressive style, producing charged forms with a direct paint handling. Mostly small, painted on cardboard or masonite and rarely on canvas, his paintings are permeated with a mysterious power. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut and Ramapo College in Mahwah, New Jersey.

Little is known of **Petersen Laurent**, who was active between 1940-1958, worked as a railroad blacksmith, and died at about the age of 70 in Saint-Marc. His name is often linked with the widely-celebrated acknowledged 'Masters of the Haitian Renaissance' a

group spawned to a great extent by the creation of the Centre d'Art in the 1940s, His themes included scenes of American battleships and rural life, roosters with hens, fish and flowers with vases, often drawing on themes of voodoo and ritual sacrifice. His candid drawing style combined with a textured paint application produces a sensation of high detail, to his high-keyed color, often single file compositions.

Odilon Pierre was born in 1933 in Port-au-Prince died 1998. His father was a carpenter, his mother a merchant. Pierre began carving wood sculpture as a teenager then turned to painting. Mostly active during the 1980s and early 1990s, Pierre was a resolutely independent self-taught artist who shied from the traditional Haitian themes. His highly personal subjects included portraits, field workers, animals, flowers and peasant women all joyfully executed with an intimate connection to his materials, mainly small canvas's. Often he depicts crowded scenes verging on the symbolism, turning form into design, with a fresh and imaginative subtlety of surface. He dynamically managed to capture the profound richness and mystery of the Haitian connection to the soil. Formerly Pierre's work could only be seen at only one outlet, from his encased vendor's stall in the deep recesses of the fabled iron market in the heart of downtown Port-au-Prince.

The Gallery would like to thank **Jonathan Demme** for his collaboration and assistance in putting together this exhibition. A long-time Haitian art enthusiast and avid collector, Mr. Demme first visited Haiti in 1986 and has been a fervent advocate for Haiti through the years. He has embraced Haiti both through his films and his collaborations with Haitian writers and musicians. He has stated that the spirit and depth of Haitian art is something that transcends national boundaries, works that all can take pride in and derive inspiration from.