

FRANCOISE SEMIRAMOTH CANNIBALIZES CARAVAGGIO

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“Martiniquan poetry shall be cannibal or nothing,” Suzanne Césaire, the wife of our great poet from Martinique, Aimé Césaire, loudly proclaimed. She might have said in a slightly different mode “Antillean painting shall be cannibal or nothing”. Suzanne Césaire invested all her talent in fighting the marginalization imposed by men. Nevertheless, she was sharply criticized by René Etiemble, at the time teaching in Martinique, who blamed her for defending the notions of freedom and brotherhood between metropolitan France and her colonies instead of looking after her brood of children. We know that Suzanne Césaire got her inspiration from the *Manifesto Antropofago* by the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade which he published in 1928. According to him, the Tupinamba Amerindians, who had regularly devoured the missionaries and Catholic priests come to convert them throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, should not be taken for the very incarnation of the primitive savage, but on the contrary, proof that their cannibalism was a refined form of intelligence. They appropriated the flesh and organs such as the liver, heart and brains of their victims, convinced they now possessed them and acquired their human qualities and virtues. Cannibalism was thus in fact a formidable means of fighting the imposition of ideas intrinsic to colonization. Oswald de Andrade’s iconic line in his Manifesto is *Tupi or not Tupi, that is the question*”.

Françoise Semiramoth has inherited this tradition and ingested Caravaggio. Painting is not photography. The artist does not attempt to render reality. She is not interested in remaining faithful to reality. Painting imprisons the artist’s dreams and serves them up to the onlooker. On this particular point she is closer

to literature which creates another world based on reality that is often difficult to define.

We might very well ask ourselves why did Françoise Semiramoth take on Caravaggio and what links her to his voracious and often brooding pictures. We can but draw up a series of assumptions. First of all, Caravaggio's character is amazingly appealing, especially to the colonized who are hostile to any form of submission. He is not at all the role model you expect from a painter or an intellectual. He was involved in brawls and quarrels and often landed in jail. This life of rebellion endows the painter with a character of insubordination and revolt. The subjects of his paintings catch our attention such as Love perceived not as an abstract notion or a dreamlike object but as a physical, even carnal act. Françoise Semiramoth's cannibalization goes one step further. She no doubt sees a mysterious link between Caravaggio and her native Guadeloupe. The trees become Creole mutations, loaded with life and through their thick foliage we catch a glimpse of gifts that tempt our senses.

A question of capital importance now has to be addressed. Is cannibalism a stratagem solely for the colonized in their struggle for intellectual liberation? Certainly not. Whatever Oswaldo de Andrade might think, every artist is a cannibal. All you need do to be convinced is to stroll through a museum or leaf through books in a library. Cannibalism is not always obvious. It operates through dreams, motivation and admiration for such and such a master. Even if it were obvious, an artist is perfectly entitled to transform any work however he pleases. The artist's cannibalism cannot be questioned. Every artist has perfectly the right to transform a work when he senses that its impulses and tensions correspond to his.

Françoise Semiramoth espouses Caravaggio. Quite simply she is the Creole Caravaggio, proving that through time and the difference in gender there exists a secret filiation that withstands definition and reason.