

SUSAN MATTHEWS with Kit Robinson

“The beauty of the people and their living cultures has stolen my heart.”



Amelia Pedroso, 2007.

Renowned worldwide as a virtuoso drummer and singer of Afro-Cuban sacred music.

I met Sue Matthews through the Bay Area Latin music community, where she has been active as a percussionist for many years. When my charanga band Calle Ocho needed a sub on percussion for a gig at an Oakland café, we called on Sue.

Knowing she was a painter, I visited Sue's studio, which was filled with paintings and drums. Many of her paintings depict Cuban orishas, the traditional deities of the Yoruba people of Nigeria and the Ewe of Ghana and Togo. Yoruba religious practices were carried by the slave trade to Cuba, where they evolved into the ceremonial cultures of Santería and Arará. I bought a print of the orisha Yemaya, mother of the world and

goddess of the sea, depicted as a rumba dancer dressed in blue and white, her skirt forming the undulating motion of waves.

Through her art and travels, Sue Matthews has documented close connections between West African and Cuban folklore, iconography, and instrumentation. I am struck by her mastery of both painting and music, but more crucially because of her passion for celebrating culture, community, and spirituality throughout her artistic practice. In today's world, as the message of Black Lives Matter resonates across borders of race, class, and nationality, such fine attention to the spiritual roots of Mother Africa is a life-giving tonic for us all.

Kit Robinson:

We in the USA tend to think of art and music as separate disciplines. As an artist and musician, you have demonstrated a passion for the West African and Afro-Cuban cultures of the Black Atlantic, cultures that blend art, music, writing, and religious practice. What first drew you to these variously rich traditions?

Susan Matthews:

I grew up in a Latin and Black part of East Oakland. That mix was an important part of my childhood and I scorned places that didn't have it. I fell in love with Spanish as a kid and I went to Mexico and Latin America as often as I could. In 1993, I took a class in Afro-Cuban folkloric rhythms at La Peña in Berkeley. Six months later I was in Havana studying percussion at La Escuela Nacional de Arte. I was already heavily into jazz and spoke Spanish, so the Black and Latin mix of Cuba felt like home. I was exhilarated by Cuba's history and folklore, and the energy and unity of the percussion, dance, song and ritual. My teachers were brilliant, gritty, world-class drummers steeped in the spiritual traditions of the island. Being there and seeing how the people lived their Afro roots every day was what inspired me to paint about Cuba. In order to understand what I was seeing and in some sense document it, I had to breathe in the heavy air, hear the music with my own ears, and learn to play the rhythms. That immediacy is what gave my Afro-Cuba series its conviction. When you study percussion

in Cuba, you learn about the deities and their relationships to particular rhythms. This gave me a pantheon of images to paint.



Guaguancó, 1998

This is the first painting I did about Cuba after going to study music there for the first time. I couldn't believe my eyes and ears. I studied with Cristobal Larrinaga of Clave y Guaguancó, wearing green here, looking at Pancho Quinto.

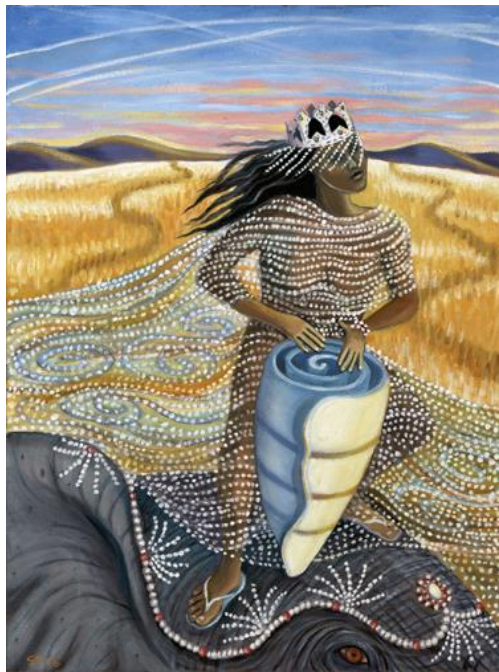
KR:

You have traveled extensively in Cuba, as well as to Niger, Ghana, and Senegal. Will you tell us a little bit about your travels? Besides Havana, have you been to other parts of Cuba? What brought you to Africa and how did your experiences there further your understanding of African cultural traditions?

SM:

Beginning in 1995, I studied percussion for five or six summer sessions with a group from the Bay Area called Caribbean Music and Dance, which later became Plaza Cuba. They held their workshops in Havana and Matanzas. In 2001 I studied with Carolyn Brandy and Women Drummers International. Carolyn took a busload of people all over the island to study with master drummers in cultural centers in Havana, Matanzas, Cienfuegos, Camaguey, Santiago, Guantanamo, and Baracoa. The level of musical expertise in Cuban rituals is astounding. Even small towns have phenomenal drummers

because the spiritual practices are decentralized and community based. You don't have a Vatican and a pope, or even churches. Ceremonies happen in peoples' homes. Musicians communicate with the spirit world through songs and rhythms, and if the drummers don't play well the deities don't come down. I soaked up a lot of information about the folklore of the island by studying percussion, song and dance, attending rituals and learning about the Yoruba and Arará traditions, which are complete systems of education in themselves. If I painted a group of drummers and dancers, I knew the rhythms they played, the deities they played for, and the colors and symbols of those deities. The paintings helped me understand and digest everything I was learning.



Obatala, 2016

Obatala is owner of all things white, creator of human beings and earth, owner of the head, and of thoughts and dreams. Obatala's attributes include the elephant, the spiral, and white beads.

The deities can often be depicted as male or female.

It so happened that during this time my brother was raising his family in a small village in Niger, West Africa. I was lucky enough to visit him there, where Hausa farmers coaxed peanuts, sorghum and millet out of blasting hot sand, and Wodaabi herdsman followed their goats to the edge of the Sahara in search of bits of greenery. I did not see traditional music in Niger,

since people in that region had long ago converted to Islam, but I painted a large series of portrait icons of Hausa and Wodaabi people I met there. I sent back money from the sales of any images I sold.



The Newlywed, 2005

A few years ago, I was invited by Ramón Adair Gonzalez to show my paintings in Pedro Bétancourt, Matanzas province, Cuba. Ramón has lived most of his life in the gardener's quarters at Cuba Libre, a now defunct sugar refinery where his father worked until his death in an accident at the age of 27. Ramón is the resident historian there. Before the revolution, the famous ethnographer Lydia Cabrera lived in the main house with her partner, Josefina Tarafa. They collected songs handed down from enslaved people, songs that were still being sung by workers in the cane fields at that time. Cabrera's recordings can be found on the Smithsonian Folkways label: <https://folkways.si.edu/search?query=lydia+cabrera>

Ramón makes figures representing the deity Elegua, one of which can be seen hiding in this painting of his garden.



The White Chair, 2017

In 2016, I was invited by Amadou Thiam to show my work at Dak'Art, the biennale in Dakar, Senegal. Amadou is a collector of traditional and contemporary African art and has a hotel, night club, restaurant, and gallery in Dakar called Galerie Yassine Arts. The hotel-restaurant is packed full of contemporary art, including one of my paintings. Amadou's complex takes the form of a lion and a pyramid, whose subterranean galleries extend several stories underground. Nothing is too ambitious for Amadou, and nothing seems impossible in the creative Senegalese mind-set. During the biennale in Dakar I had a chance to meet lots of African artists. They were fun loving, gregarious and imaginative, and we all had a great time.



Photo by Susan Matthews, 2016

Drummers played at our opening for six hours straight. Although there were other acts scheduled, the drummers and dancers could not stop. Otherworldly beings came to out to dance in the form of a careening stilt walker and a whirling raffia-covered creature with a frightening proboscis that produced screams of terror in the crowd.

In 2018, I went back to Dakar to pick up my work, but that year the biennale was scheduled during Ramadan. Most people were fasting, and the cafes and clubs were empty. Amadou told me the biennale will not be scheduled during Ramadan in the future. In fact, because of COVID-19, the Dak'Art Biennale has been postponed until further notice.

In 2006, I joined an artists' collaboration we called *Secrets Under the Skin*. Based in Cuba under the direction of Dr. Jill Flanders Crosby, we researched the connections between Arará ritual in Matanzas province, Cuba, and the Volta region of Ghana/Togo. Our team of seven artists and academics were from Anchorage, Havana, Tucson, and Oakland. We spent years visiting and interviewing spiritual practitioners in Perico and

Agramonte, Matanzas province, Cuba. Then we spent a month in Dzodze, Ghana and Adjodogou, Togo, comparing Arará rituals to those of the Volta Region. We could clearly see with our own eyes that ritual culture in the Volta Region was directly related to that of Matanzas province. It is well known that African culture is still being practiced in the remote sugar cane fields of Cuba, but we had the opportunity to flesh out these claims with our own art. Many paintings came out of that collaboration. My paintings, and the entire project, can be seen on a website out of the University of Alaska, Anchorage: www.uaa.alaska.edu/secrets-under-the-skin

I don't know how it happened that I have been pulled so often to Cuba and Africa. The beauty of the people and their living cultures has stolen my heart. I am always looking for an excuse to go back.



Hilda La Obbini Omo Elegua, 2008

Hilda Zulueta adopted our team of artists, saying she wanted us to tell the world about Perico and its Arará traditions. This life size painting commemorates the day she took us to visit a sacred place in a sugar cane field. I have depicted her holding an African gourd, releasing white butterflies to symbolize the release of her ancestors from the fields where they were enslaved. Eleggua, her patron deity is shown as a small mound at her feet. Eleggua is the deity of the crossroads and grants or denies permission to travel.

KR:

Your paintings explore realms of the fantastic, full of magic and dreams. I wonder about your influences – Medieval or early Renaissance religious painting? Colonial Mexican art? Surrealism?

SM:

Many of the paintings I have done in the past 20 years are depictions of traditional musicians and dancers as well as sacred spaces and shrines in Cuba. They might look dreamy, but they are based on performances and rituals I attended and informed by stories and myths associated with them. I tried to keep my images as accurate as possible, since I didn't feel I had the right to play around with someone else's history. I didn't have to make anything up. What I saw in front of me was enough. Whenever possible I brought prints of my work back to people I had painted, and years later I would find my images on altars and walls inside cabildos. That vote of confidence gave me the permission I needed to keep working. When I was participating in *Secrets Under the Skin*, I actually felt somewhat restricted, since I was acting as a visual reporter, bringing images back and forth from Cuba to Ghana to show the cultural connections. My paintings were not as literal as photographs, but a person from Matanzas province could instantly read their symbolism.



Yeyo Oshun, 2008

Oshun is the deity of romantic love in Afro-Cuban folklore. These drums still exist in a ceremonial house in Perico, Matanzas province. They are newly painted every year and closely resemble Ghanaian drums.

I studied art at UC Berkeley during the age of Minimalism, Abstract Expressionism, and Conceptualism. Figurative art was not in vogue, but I was hooked on making pictures. I loved the stylization of Byzantine and Medieval art. Renaissance painting is an encyclopedia of visual ideas that I continue to marvel over. Painting as we know it might be a European construct, but we use it for our own ends. Picture making is a human impulse that goes all the way back to cave painting. I tell my students that painting is a human right.

I am fascinated with colonial art throughout Latin America. It is a hybrid form, transplanted from Spain but created in the New World. When I was in my twenties I used to take the bus to Mexico every summer to search out old paintings rotting on moldy walls of 18th century basilicas. In 2017, LA County Museum curator Ilona Katzew mounted an immense exhibition of colonial art called *Painted in Mexico, 1700-1790: Pinxit Mexici*. She borrowed those old paintings from the moldy church walls, had them restored and installed in new frames, and sent them back to Mexico all

fixed up when the show was over. These are immense paintings, and sometimes they were returned to small towns. LACMA must have spared no expense to bring that exhibit up from Mexico and send those treasures back in mint condition.



Detail, Miguel Jerónimo Zendejas, *The Discovery of the Body of Saint Nepomuk*, 1793
Exhibited in Painted in Mexico, 1700-1790: Pinxit Mexici, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2017.

As a young person I was also influenced by Diego Rivera's public murals, which I would visit and revisit. I often went to the great pyramids and museums in Mexico to look at ancient, colonial and contemporary art. I marveled over in situ Mayan bas-relief at archeological sites like Chichen Itzá and Palenque, and Churrigueresque architecture, where one could sometimes see native symbolism hewn into the stones amongst the Spanish baroque whipped cream with cherries on top. I discovered Octavio Ocampo's work all over the walls of Celaya. My fellow art students and professors didn't seem to know that Mexico was full of great art and great museums. But these were my figurative influences in an age of a kind of iconoclasm, when pictures with subject, verb and object were not encouraged in art school.

Although my work is figurative, there is something "off" about it. It is not academically correct, and as a result, it lives in the psychological realm. I

am interested in the “off” aspect of art, the blind spots in our processes. I like the idea that an image enters a person’s eye, percolates in the brain and emerges as a unique, somewhat twisted vision. I am more interested in interpretation than absolute correctness of representation. Humans see differently than cameras. The space between literal reproduction and interpretation is where the individuality of the artist lives.



The Cockroach Manuscript, 2007. Sumi ink and watercolor on paper.

Hilda Zulueta told the story of how enslaved Africans brought their deities to Cuba. She talks about a lagoon that was transformed into a sacred dwelling place for Oddu Aremu. She relates a local myth about Justo Zulueta being pulled mysteriously into the lagoon and emerging with Oddu Aremu’s favorite herbs. The people then knew that Oddu Aremu lived in the lagoon.

KR:

Many of your paintings have words in them. What can you tell me about the sources and content of that writing? In making the paintings, were you influenced by any traditions that combine art and words?

SM:

I did an extensive series of works on paper for *Secrets Under the Skin* that I call “Illuminated Manuscripts.” They contain hand-written excerpts from interviews conducted by Dr. Jill Flanders Crosby in Perico and Agramonte, Matanzas province, Cuba. I was thinking about European and Islamic illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages, when the illustrations were often viewed by people not literate in the languages of the texts. *Secrets Under the Skin* participants spoke Spanish, English, and Ewe, and some of the manuscripts also contain Arará lyrics preserved through family tradition. The 20 manuscripts were acquired by the University of Florida’s Cuban Heritage Collection, University of Miami Libraries, in exchange for funding a printed version to be donated to a museum in Perico, Cuba. A book about the project, entitled *Situated Narratives and Sacred Dance: The Entangled Histories of Cuba and West Africa* by Jill Flanders Crosby and JT Torres, with contributions by contributing artists, was published in May 2021 by the University of Florida Press.

KR:

The pandemic has shaken education to its core. You teach drawing and painting at the College of San Mateo. Are you now teaching via Zoom? How are your students coping with the quarantine? How has the quarantine affected your practice as an artist?

SM:

Yes, I am teaching via Zoom. I never wanted a desk job. I am kinetic. Teaching art is a lab activity, which is why the studio environment is perfect for me. Instead of working directly with materials and students, now I am documenting my course with photos, writing out assignments that were once delivered orally, and creating projects for people who don’t have enough space to work, or who can’t make a mess on their parents’ carpet. It is harder to push students to break their own barriers when you can’t physically see their still life set up and their work in progress. Are they copying something they found online instead or working from life? It’s hard to say. Instead of teaching and making art this summer I am taking a mandatory course on computer technology to help me get my content online.

My own art practice is somewhat on hold, partly because I recently lost my Oakland studio to the dot com takeover, and partly because the shows I am participating in are closed to the public. Even so, I am working on a collaborative project curated by Peruvian artist/poet Adrian Arias (www.adrianarias.com) and dreaming up ideas for a new series that I can hardly wait to start.

Art is constantly renewing and refreshing. It has always been a kind of meditation that opens up space and time for me. These days it feels more important than ever.



Maní, 1999

This painting was inspired by a performance of one of Cuba's greatest rumba groups, Clave y Guaguancó.