

Arts and the Occult

- An interview with Michael Bertiaux

by Bjarne Salling Pedersen

Author and occultist Michael P. Bertiaux (born 1935) is an influential character in the revival of western magical tradition that began in the late 1960ies. In this interview he discusses the connection between occultism and art, his views on several occult societies and the attraction of Voodoo in the western world.



Michael Bertiaux in Chicago 2001

Docteur Bacalou Baca

Michael Bertiaux, a modern day explorer of the occult, was born in 1935. Raised in a Theosophical household he's been influenced by the esoteric approach to religion since his youth.

In 1963 Michael Bertiaux got acquainted with Voodoo Docteur Jean-Maine during a stay in Haiti that year. Returning to the USA his studies with Docteur Jean-Maine continued until 1975.

Michael Bertiaux is the author of *Lucky Hoodoo – a short course in voodoo power secrets* (1977), which he gave out under the pseudonym Docteur Bacalou Baca. The book is a course in magical techniques to gain money, love, good luck and progress. The core teaching forms the basis for his *Voudon Gnostic Workbook* (1988), a much prized collector's item today.

Michael Bertiaux has been connected with various occult and esoteric organizations during the last four decades. Some of the orders include *Ordo Templi Orientis Antiqua* (O.T.O.A.) and *Fraternitas Saturni*, at one time associated with the occult currents of English magician and *Golden Dawn* member Aleister Crowley. Bertiaux is also associated with *Monastery of the Seven Rays* and *La Couleuvre Noire* (The Black Serpent), both orders associated with Voodoo technique. Drawing heavily on French sources, he's also a Martinist and a leader of the *Ecclesia Gnostica Spiritualis*, a gnostic church of French spiritist origin.

The latter years Bertiaux has been relatively silent. He's recently retired to focus on his writing.ⁱ

- Well, I'm happy to be still on the planet, says Bertiaux. I think the important thing is that I am quite focused on my areas of interest, which I first outlined in my Monastery of the Seven Rays papers. I think I have always been indebted to the Haitian spiritist tradition. I have always been indebted to things that have come out of that tradition and I've always preferred to stay within those boundaries. But that would also include art because so many of the Haitian occultists were painters. Many Haitians, little known, express their ideas through art, simply because so many of the ideas couldn't be expressed in words only. There was such a problem of what type of energy they were speaking of; how could it be communicated? Sometimes it could only be communicated with colors like abstract expressionism.



Artwork by Michael Bertiaux

Why is Haitian art so powerful and why are artists so special?

- I think it is a high form of expressionism. I think they portray energies in a way that the abstract expressionists (1940ies – 1960ies) in America and Europe haven't succeeded in objectifying. And I think in many ways that Haitian art is similar to many of the paintings of Crowley, because they use colors expressive. Very, very strong and large amounts of colors to emphasize the dramatization and actualization of powers and force-fields.

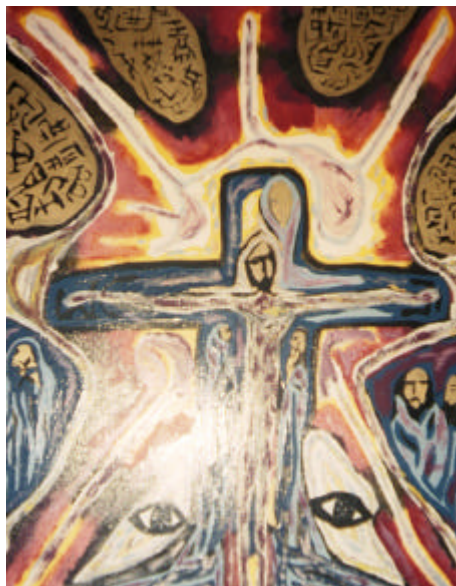
Bertiaux's apartment is filled with works of art, many of them being his own, but several are gifts from pupils and magical students. A greater part of Bertiaux's own paintings are colorful expressions of the spirit world.

- I think what's so important in Haitian esotericism is that everything can be represented in some kind of art, Bertiaux explains. If it can't, I really believe it is only a matter of concept. A lot of Haitian art comes out of the Voodoo religion, but if you look closely you'll find that it goes beyond the religious perspective. They're going into the occult science behind the Voodoo. They are taking a voyage into the spirit-painting.

What do you mean?

- They're not only artists. They are meta-physicists. I think that what they wanted to do was to talk about how spirits work. In Voodoo there is so much passive petitioning of the gods. It's a very

pious religion. In fact, it is in many ways a religion of fear of the spirits, but once you admit the factor of possession, says Bertiaux, you actually have the individual being possessed by a god, which is an infinite personal experience - of cosmic cause - for they're sharing the same consciousness. Then you overcome this feeling of petitioning and move towards a kind of pure identity where you understand the mind of the god, as if you were the god, or possessing the mind of the god for a moment. I think much of esoteric Voodoo has to do with understanding the mind of the gods, from within. I concur that possessions are facts and an accomplishment. I think that in terms of their mystical way of living – they see Voodoo not as much as a religion, but rather as an environment; a psychic occult environment in which they live. Everything about it is sanctioned by gods. It is a religious universe of mysteries possessing humans or initiates.



Artwork by Michael Bertiaux

Art and the Occult

Michael Bertiaux's interest in art as an occult form of expressionism, he explains very specifically.

- I think art is one way in which magical symbols and images can be presented to the public in a way that will not appear threatening. We know from the history of art in the past 100 years, that many genuine schools of occultism came forth to present themselves as what I am going to call mystical schools of painting, of sculpture and so forth.

- I am particularly concerned about one French school, says Bertiaux. It is the pataphysical school. It was allied to Dada, surrealism, spiritualism and trance medium ship. The whole idea was that we would explore structures of the unconscious and come back renewed with a new kind of imagery and energy we can focus through works of art. The pataphysicians are my favorites, because what they sought to do was to create a kind of alternative science. I remember a pataphysician telling me, that as metaphysics is to physics, so pataphysics is to metaphysics, which meant an intuitive extension into the abstract or the transcendental or the less known aspects of experience.

What were the characteristics of this school, I asked?

- One of the characteristics would be their drawing of inspiration from dream states and a kind of somnambulistic meditation, says Bertiaux. Another would be the idea that everything has a psychic history. This is related to "the cult of the found object" in modern art, the discovery of "*the given*."

- We know that there are many artists who will go around looking for what they call "a found object" – actually they wouldn't have to look very hard. According to the theory a found object

would “*speak*” to them and indicate to them that this was what was needed for the artwork of the artist.

- The famous American sculptress Louise Nevelson - who worked with large assemblages and collages made from wood and wooden pieces - she had what I call her esoteric school, Bertiaux explains.

- These helpers of Louise Nevelson would get up very early in the morning. She lived in a town house in Manhattan, I believe; and they would go up and down the alleys, looking for discards. They were all kinds of individuals who were perhaps misfits in the outer world, but she believed them to be tremendously psychic. They all worked for her as her technicians, her helpers, in finding objects and wrapping them up in newspapers and paper bags, bringing them home; and then when they had all these treasures before them, they would let the objects tell them where to use them. And this came from a kind of psychic dialogue with the found object – which, I might add, was very similar to what Carl Jung taught many of his patients, to engage in with many natural things in their own experience.

- I myself, have developed a kind of found object-obsession with cardboard, as you can see. I don’t like to throw out pieces of cardboard that can be used as works of art!



Michael Bertiaux 2003 flanked by a Golem figure and the front cover design to a forthcoming book.

Several of Michael Bertiaux’s works are shaped out of cardboard and painted. He’s working on a series of what he calls Golem figures intended as guardians of the magical circle, of the esoteric space of exploration.

- I will only throw out a piece of cardboard if it tells me to, laughs Michael Bertiaux.

Lost and found

Michael Bertiaux's apartment is decorated with numerous small statues, photos of relatives, magical items, huge plants, books and art in an endless symbolism that leaves the impression of a mixture between an art studio and a well arranged temple.

Michael Bertiaux explains:

- I think one of the important things about found objects and the occult is that the found object was a way of making magical art more and more dynamic, by infusing more and more mental and psychic concentration - and force the creativity of the artist - into the very fabric of the subject matter.

- And it's had a tremendous focus in a variety of spin-off types of art where found objects are now sometimes arranged in magical spaces which are defined by old wooden boxes which people find, and they create a magical universe in which the found objects or the objects from the individuals past that are re-found after many years of being lost, are placed "*to live*". They're re-found and placed into the space to convey a kind of psychic memory; but to also take on a new life and growth.

- Now many individuals would say: Is it possible for us to truly share the vision of the artist - to engage in this kind of pataphysical creativity? I think so. My own emphasis is that the pataphysicians, like metaphysicians, open things up in a very wonderful way for discovery and sharing on the part of any number of people who have always had some kind of psychic link with these objects. And in a sense, what you're doing with the found object - you've created the found object work of art and it has your own personal momentum in it - is that you place it out there and you use it for attracting the psyche or the principles of individuals to that same area of consciousness. And they see in it something they will recognize; from a kind of psychic recollection that they practice when they approach the found object.

Can this be compared to the magical techniques of Pascal Beverly Randolph (1825 - 1875), who suggested mixing bodily fluids with paint to bind a spirit to a painting?

- I think so, says Michael Bertiaux. I think he created artificial elementals. Definitely. Now, there's some questions as to whether or not the elementals in the works of art, are natural or simply they are re-arrangements of the energy. I think they are both. I have always believed that magic, rather than being a level of interpretation, and a kind of conceptualization of the subject matter, is that which gives it another direction and I will say therefore that it makes it become a new type of being also.ⁱⁱ

Do you think the same influence could occur in a mass produced form of art, such as posters that decorates the apartments of many people?

- I think so and I'll tell you why. I think anything is a break through into the spirit world or the continuum of the psychic experience. I think that if you buy something, like one of the millions of copies of Monet's paintings of a garden, that's fine. It is still a doorway into the realm of nature spirits associated with Monet and with the art of his period. You have to understand that when he recreates them, he interprets them. So he constructs them in a different way than they're given; but by so doing, he places them psychically in a new garden.

The obsession of collecting

Michael Bertiaux explains the different items in his apartment as a source of inspiration and power. I asked him about the human obsession of collecting all sorts of things from stamps to stone. Where do you think it stems from?

- I think it is because we're mammals or animals. I once noticed that various animals, especially our domestic animals - cats especially - collect all kinds of little things. They have little objects they stash away for various purposes. I think it is because of the animal instinct.

Michael smiles and adds

- I think it's very sad that socialism has made humans too angelic, because if we were more like animals we'd be more capitalistic, he laughs; but socialism is a caring mother who protects and makes safe her children.

- When I was in Japan I was associated with a lot of Japanese artists. They told me that art in Japan is really based on extreme individualism, which is very different from Japanese tradition where everybody acts in the same way in a group. So an artist has to set his own life apart from everybody else's. And while he may cooperate with other artists, he's really not part of a general class of people, who are tied into a different kind of psychic experience. The less egotistical life of family and groups.



Artwork by Michael Bertiaux

- However, what is always part of pataphysical vision is that individual reading and seeing of your energy field as your own unique vision; otherwise you're not satisfied with what you have produced. I think it is important for the artist to achieve a certain amount of satisfaction in order to motivate himself to continue, to actualize his universe.ⁱⁱⁱ

- I would say that the artistic rays of the pataphysical philosophy have permeated many avenues of modern creativity. Many writers who have abandoned traditional methods are using pataphysical inspiration for how they express their creative matter; and many modern musical compositions we know are inspired by pataphysical and radical innovation and a departure from a conventional straightjacketing of their creative energies.

Satanic inspiration

During our talks we came to talk of the different occult groups in the western world and we entered into the field of satanic artwork.

- I think it is therapeutic, says Bertiaux. I think many people were brainwashed with a lot of negativity. I think the school of Felicien Rops broke through that says he.

The school of Rops, founded by the same artist in Paris in 1888 was the nucleus in modern Satanism. Some members later left the school of Rops to start the more theistic organization Temple of Boullan, headed by Paul Michaël Guzotte, a Haitian esotericist.

- I do not really think that their viewpoint is true in the same sense that the viewpoint of the Church of England is true, he says smiling. But what I do like is that they do a lot more art-as-therapy than the Church of England. And another thing is that I think a lot of the modern psychotherapists – I’m talking about Wilhelm Reich and even J.P. Santae – a lot of their ideas are reflected into an awareness of satanic art.

- Now if we want to talk about the Temple of Boullan and Satanic art as options for spiritually minded individuals, I think they’re very exciting.

In which way?

- I think they’re exciting because they’re very challenging and they cause individuals to wanting to be creative in a different and new way. Many individuals became artists as a result of this impulse, called “*Luciferianism*”.

- I don’t think that rebellion is necessarily harmful to all individuals. I think what they do, is that they challenge ideas and open doorways faster. I think that for example the school of Rops is more creative than the Russian Orthodox Church, but the Russian Orthodox Church is more beautiful and more powerful in the long run, he adds laughing. But I still think they can co-exist and each has their work to do, says Michael Bertiaux. They exist as the right wing and the left wing and balance each other.

- And I think that the Temple of Boullan is for serious minded individuals who are interested in what we’ll call the darker tradition. I personally think that modern esotericism has for the most part been a movement of liberation of individuals from, what I’ll call, repressive misconceptions of religion; and especially from protestant or evangelical fundamentalism. But one thing in esotericism that’s always been interesting is that there’s always been a link with art. I’ve always seen this as an excellent barometer.

- As I see it, esotericism and Luciferianism – once studied – opens new worlds for the imagination. I am not saying that because you’re a Satanist you’re going to be a bad person. Most people that are Satanists actually tend to be very depressed because Satanism, like the power of Saturn, tends to be quite heavy – a heavy load or heavy burden. But at the same time it can be terribly illuminating, because individuals have different approaches, and we see new spaces and worlds.

- I think some satanic groups are important as a catalyst to the stifling effect of too much social theology, in Protestantism, says Bertiaux. I think that when an individual is programmed too much by Puritanism it is very sad. I remember hearing a story when I was a child: There was this little boy in our community and he wanted to be an artist. His parents said no, we want you to only read the Bible and not to paint. Painting will get you too close to demons. Well, the kid was of course very frustrated. When he was old enough he ran away from home and lived in a kind of hippie-like commune in California and broke out of his puritan and fundamentalist evangelical conditioning. He ran off and lived on the coast in a cave and produced abstract paintings and sold them at a truck stop for his food; but he was happy about it. He said that he was happier than he’d ever been before.

Voodoo, New Aeon and Alchemy

Michael Bertiaux, as other magicians, bumped into the works of English occultist, poet and adventurer Aleister Crowley (1875 – 1947), and the *Choronzon Club* of C.F. Russell’s work.

Aleister Crowley’s writings had a come back in the 1960ies and new groups surfaced founded on Crowley’s new religion of *Thelema*.^{iv}

- At one time I was saddened that there was no emphasis on Voodoo, says Bertiaux about this occult network; but I thought of it later as a kind of retirement of energy to return stronger, which it did. And the individuals who were strongly involved with "*the slaves*" or the Crowleyan idealism, the New Aeon metaphysics, they were just in the order as a magical retirement for the time being, as if they were getting their breath before they went on to their next adventure. So actually nothing destructive or negative happened, to the powers of alchemy and art.

- What is interesting to me is the fact that so many Scandinavian people are attracted to Voodoo through groups like "*the slaves*" Bertiaux adds, long after Dorothy Olsen's passing.

- Years ago there was a magazine called *The Occult Digest* in Chicago. They published an essay by Anna Josephine Olofsson. She was a Scandinavian woman who was a medical doctor and she was writing on the topic of whether Voodoo was an occultism. She said that it was. And she started attacking the witch coven in which she was, for being anti-black.

- Well, I though this was really quite revolutionary, because you usually do not see these kind of articles, by such diviner of fates and trends.

- Then people in Finland would set up Voodoo altars – and of course the Finns have a shamanic tradition through the Saami people and the Lapps. There's also quite a few interested in Iceland, as well as individuals in the rest of Scandinavia. So I felt that Voodoo was like chocolate – it needed simply to be put in the right package to be irresistible everywhere, as long as it was workable and pro-environmental.

- So what I try to do with my writing is to emphasis to the positive side of *positive and negative*. Of course I do not shy away from zombies and all the other hidden matters. I might add that the first book I wrote on zombies was a comparison of the zombies to the Golem, the Hebrew cabbalistic concept of the mannequin. I've always felt – I have always, always, always felt, that somehow Hebrew magic and Voodoo have many cognates, as many books have sought to show, e.g. Milo Rigaud, etc.; but found in the Gnostic Brotherhood of Alchemists in California.

- Voodoo is like closet Zionism. Almost, adds Bertiaux with his usual smile. It is the vision of the holy kingdom and the holy faith.

- I'm always amused by the way coincidences amplify life, says Michael Bertiaux. There was a little girl walking down the street and she saw a book on astrology. She picked it up and looked in it. Then an Irish nun came by and told her that it was Satanism and that she's going to be a prisoner of the demons if she continued reading it. So the girl just put it in her bag and went home. That girl, years later, moved to New York City and she was feeling quite isolated.

Then she saw one of the underground newspapers advertising for a satanic group, continues Bertiaux. And she knew how happy she was when she read the book on astrology. She called the number and said she was an astrologer and could she come to the meeting? And they said: Of course, you're more than welcome. We always welcome newcomers. So she went to the meeting and there she sat down. A young man sat down next to her and eventually they fell in love and became husband and wife. He was also an astrologer. They opened up an astrological service giving tips to stockbrokers and the stock market. Now I use this as an example of whatever is put down rises up. And no matter what it is, it can become positive. Even though it was a satanic gathering she met someone just as herself, and she wasn't ravished on an altar at the first meeting, Bertiaux smiles, as some people would think^v, just because she read a book on astrology.

You should not pass judgment on things, adds he. What you're doing is creating a mental block – and that's going to block energy flow. I'm not saying that you should be like a rolling stone and go all over the place, going to meetings after meetings; but I think that what you should do is realize that everything speaks and grows and lives, and again we get back at what I said at the beginning. It is the found object that communicated with the artist, not the object being communicated by the

artists mind. So it is with opportunities. They open doorways and energies come to us. After all, Crowley's wife, Marie-Therese, was "*the high-priestess of voodoo*"! And I'll close with that!



Artwork by Michael Bertiaux

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ⁱ Michael Bertiaux "*sees art as the most efficient way of expressing how occult energies are manifest. Art is really its own Gnosis, and the alliance between art and esotericism is more verifiable today, than a century ago*" – Commentary on Interview, from Bertiaux to Pedersen, September 25th, 2003 e.v.

ⁱⁱ "*For pataphysics, if all objects that are found are psychic or "alive" – then all elementals and parts of nature and "artificial elementals", are really natural or parts of "the continuum of nature and inquiry" which must include all aspects of art within its evolution.*" – Commentary on Interview, from Bertiaux to Pedersen, September 25th, 2003 e.v.

ⁱⁱⁱ "*In this sense pataphysics is the true child of H. P. Blavatsky's esoteric system, because she taught the "ways of world building" long before anyone in the west in her "transactions" of the Blavatsky lodge of the T.S.*" – Commentary on Interview, from Bertiaux to Pedersen, September 25th, 2003 e.v.

^{iv} "*One such group was the Slaves of Crowley, a surviving tradition of art from Crowley's sex-magical teaching through his wife Dorothy Olsen.*" – Commentary on Interview, Bertiaux to Pedersen, September 25th, 2003 e.v.

^v "*who read certain Irish born authors, who focus on Demonology!*" – Commentary on Interview, from Bertiaux to Pedersen, September 25th, 2003 e.v.