Report: Discovering the Dominican Republic

The Dominican republic occupies two thirds of the island of La Hispaniola. The other one third of the island is Haiti. This past Summer, thanks to the Otis College of Art and Design Faculty Improvement Grant, I traveled to the Dominican Republic to research issues of African folk religions and issues of identity. Haiti and the Dominican Republic have a history of political and cultural tensions dating back to the nineteenth century. After its emancipation from France, Haiti invaded the Dominican Republic and stayed from 1849 to 1850. This invasion not only brought two countries with two distinct colonial histories to a violent encounter it also allowed for the free exchange of traditions and folk practices.

Dominican folk religious practice or Dominican Vudu is a direct result of the geographical and historical closeness. The pantheon and the practices are very similar to Haitian Vodou yet Dominicans have also added their own flavor to the practice. In this context Haiti is both the invader, source of cheap labor, the boggy man, and sacred land at once.

The following images can provide a glimpse of this fascinating country.
The controversial Colombus Lighthouse built to celebrate the 500th Anniversary of the encounter and to serve as a mausoleum for Colombus' remains.

The Colombus Monument celebrates the Hispaniola as "The land that Colombus loved the most."

Representations of Africa are always associated with music and magic.

Taino (Arawak) inspired folk carvings.
Dominican folk dolls which use Africa as the source of artistic inspiration and national identity.

A thriving market that offer the practitioners the hosts of heaven for sale.

The Meninas, folk carvings that reflects the Dominican concept of being the product of two cultures: Spanish and Arawak. (Africa is not mentioned.)

The folk practices remain very visible with folk healers offering their services.

The Dominican Republic embodies all the contradictions of our postmodern Latin American ethos. On one hand celebrating its non Western roots and on the other looking to Spain for validation and identity. There is still much to be learned from the artistic manifestations of this country that in many ways remains at the crossroads of history. I am still in the process of cataloguing all the materials and field notes. I hope I can share my insights with our faculty and students, very soon.

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