

## OUATTARA WATTS | MAGAZZINO ROMA

by Massimo Carboni

There are still artists who believe strongly in painting, in its language, in its ability to create imaginative worlds. One such is Ouattara Watts, born in Ivory Coast and now living and working in New York. His work undoubtedly brings to mind the neo-expressionist painting of the '80s—that of Cucchi, Schnabel, Basquiat, and Penck, to mention a few. Watts reconnects with that period and, with great pictorial skill, investigates archetypes and symbols. For instance, he draws on the imaginative vocabulary of the Senufo religion that he learned as a child as well as modernist icons—the shorthand emblem for the atom, for example. Whatever their origin, the forms that appear in these paintings seem to be individuated and comprehended at the moment of their germination. The artist interprets space as rhythm, as a continuous blossoming of elements in perpetual transformation, and utilizes ornamental patterns to sew together various sections of the pictorial surface.

In the large canvas *Matrix #1* (all works 2003), this search for spatial complexity becomes particularly evident. A large, curved black band dominates the field. Within this curve, an enormous anthropomorphic shape—half man/half god?—painted absolutely flatly, with stylized, almost heraldic outlines, emerges from a light background. Another band, made from the letters z and a and the binary sequence “01” hypnotically repeated, cuts the composition horizontally across its entire length. The darkest section of the large canvas contains images of an hourglass, a skull, and some sticks, objects that might pertain to a shaman, as well as a mysterious chart holding apotropaic ciphers and signs that bring to mind archaic pictographic writings. *Matrix #2*, 2003, has a relatively simpler spatial organization, but it is probably the piece where the decorative inclination that runs through all Watts's work becomes most visible. A wide band of fabric with traditional decorative patterns in black and white has been applied across the middle of the canvas. At the bottom right a shape that recalls a curled cat's tail is repeated four times. An enormous sort of insect with a spectral head and long antennae that seem to probe the surrounding space appears right in the center of the painting, as if it had landed there from who knows what other world.

The smaller works on paper shown here also contain signs of imaginative apparitions. Enormous feet endowed with large eyes confront the astonished gaze of the viewer; diabolical figures are transformed into dangerous serpents with bifurcated tongues; “talking heads” engage in a dialogue, communicating through pointing arrows. The imagery in these small works is always surrounded by borders of lines or series of numbers and dots—or by contrastingly colored corners. These form a sort of visual frame—simultaneously internal and external to the image—that seems to have the function of circumscribing, enclosing, and thus revealing the mental more than the physical place of these magical visions.