

# ARTNET

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### WATTS UP

by Charlie Finch

Ouattara Watts is a beloved legend in the New York art world, close friend of Jean-Michel Basquiat and a painting rival of Julian Schnabel, who once had important solo shows at Baghoomian and Gagosian galleries. Seldom in the competitive world of Neo-Expressionist painting has one artist been so universally adored, as the presence of Glenn O'Brien, Francesco Clemente, Victor Matthews and so many others at a swinging party in Watts' honor proved last week.

Yet there has always been a sense that true greatness as a painter, not just as a person, lay just beyond Watts' grasp. Part of this is due to the residual racism in the "liberal" art world that any black artist faces. But there was also a sense that Ouattara was bedeviled by his competition from establishing a distinct style. Wait no more! At the age of 50, this jovial, passionate, introspective native of the Cote d'Ivoire has finally produced a body of masterpieces, currently on view at the Mike Weiss Gallery, vindicating the ancient paradigm that art-making is a struggle whose excellence lies in maturity.

The restrained and sober elements of Watts signage remain: lyrical lines of numbers symbolizing the passage of slaves, references to the best jazz and French symbolism, biomorphic shapes expelled from the belly of their creator, rich ovals of deep color. All of these elements are expertly integrated into a painting like *So What*, with its haunting depiction of Ouattara's grandfather, a shaman, plus a faceless bust from de Chirico and a large brown armature with white eyes.

The winged blue sphinx in *Les Fleurs du Mal II* floats downward between colorful balloonish plumes. Schnabel and Donald Baechler, Watts' rivals, are seldom as purely lyrical as this. For Ouattara, in his personality and his painting, uses play to deflect the tragedy of memory. The possibility of transcendence is always in play for him, so to speak.

*Sun Ra*, a tribute to the astral orchestra master, seamlessly employs strips of red and black in the manner of Adolph Gottlieb. *Dream Support* is a brown nimbus of brain fever, just one more satisfaction in a show that never ceases to satisfy. Those who wander the fourth and fifth floors of the Museum of Modern Art might ask themselves how many black artists are exhibited there. (I am guessing just Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden). One or two of Watts' new paintings belong there NOW! Mike Weiss, get to work!

Ouattara Watts, "For Lily," Nov. 15, 2007-Jan. 5, 2008, at Mike Weiss Gallery, 520 West 24th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.