

OUATTARA WATTS: HEAD OVER HEELS

by Walter Robinson

Let's start this review of "Ouattara Watts: Vertigo" by discussing the post-opening dinner, prepared for about 120 people by executive chef Mads Refslund at ACME at 9 Great Jones Street on Feb. 7, 2012. Salt baked beets with red grapefruit and aged vinegar, "duck in a jar" with pickled vegetables, black heirloom carrots with salted lardo and blood orange, Arctic char with leeks and sherry vinegar. No less than four custom cocktails, and for dessert, Danish doughnuts and chocolate ganache triangles.

It was pretty good. My judicious wife, the art restorer Lisa Rosen, reserved her approval for the casserole of chicken, fingerling potatoes and fried eggs. And, she drank some red wine.

In attendance was our host, Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld; his mother, the former French Vogue editor Carine Roitfeld; the elegant Alba Clemente and the Jim Jarmusch movie star Isaac de Bankolé; and several art dealers, including David Hunt (who introduced Ouattara to Roitfeld), Stellan Holm, Tico Mugrabi, Sam Orlofsky and Mauro Nicoletti from Rome; and scores of fashionable young people -- publicity was arranged by the estimable Nadine Johnson & Associates, and the event coincides with the beginning of New York Fashion Week.

The artist himself, with his lovely wife and grown daughter, were among the last to arrive at the restaurant, with the meal already under way. He was greeted with thunderous applause, as he is loved by all.

Later on, Glenn O'Brien rose to give a toast. "Socrates, Cleopatra, Napoleon, Madonna, all the greats go by a single name," he proclaimed. "So I give you Ouattara!"

The exhibition itself features 15 large paintings installed in a large space at 560 Washington Street, just below Houston Street in the far West Village, Feb. 7-Feb. 20, 2012. The show is the fourth organized in this raw warehouse by the young Roitfeld (b. 1984), a task that requires the gallery space to be built from scratch each time. It's a well-proportioned room, both humble and exclusive, as a recent visit found the gallery barely marked on the outside. So be alert, the address is 560 Washington Street, door 37E.

Roitfeld's approach may be different than most dealers -- "I have a lot to learn," he confessed -- but it seems to work. Most of Ouattara's paintings, priced between \$50,000 and \$70,000, have been sold.

In her essay for the show's catalogue, Linda Yablonsky writes that Ouattara the painter -- who as everyone knows comes to New York via Paris and Cote d'Ivoire -- is a "citizen of the world" and also a "sorcerer," inspired by his grandfather, who she describes as a "diviner of human relations" and "a man of enchantment."

Such notions sent me directly to the oldest book in my modest library, Giorgio de Santillana's *Hamlet's Mill* (1969), a new age compilation of myth that speculates that the beginnings of knowledge can be found in observation of the heavens by early peoples.

When de Santillana refers to "operative powers of the cosmos. . . the planets as they move along the zodiac. . . deities subterranean or celestial. . . signs as old as time. . . the numbers of rudimentary science," he could be an art critic writing about Ouattara. His paintings contain "tantalizing fragments of a lost whole," and hint at a "dreamed-of first age of the world."

So if the universe is a cryptogram, as de Santillana thought, with mystic clues hidden in the stars, in the elements and in traditions handed down from the ancients, why should not the artist hold the key? With a concentration of the mind, the riddle can be revealed.