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OUATTARA WATTS' NEW PAINTINGS

by Shireen Lohrasbe

Ouattara Watts is a futurist who foresaw “globalization” long before the word became trendy in pop culture. In fact, combining prophetic imagery with unusual cross-cultural symbology is necessary to Watts’ career, given his background. Born in Côte d’Ivoire, Watts moved to Paris to attend L’École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, then relocated to New York in 1989. Living in three continents and travelling across the globe, the bilingual artist continually pays homage to his Ivorian ancestry as well as his Parisian and New Yorker influences.

From early on in his career (which spans nearly four decades), Watts has taken an interdisciplinary approach to his work, referencing many cultures, adding elements of lyrical composition (he’s a jazz enthusiast) and even topography, applying drawings and collage to canvas. Watts’ work is tricky to decipher—he pushes the boundaries, and then some. Compared to his contemporaries who often dilute everything down to décor, Watts invigorates painting with an aesthetic that’s difficult to pigeonhole. Known by many as a neo-expressionist artist in the likes of Basquiat (who he was close friends with), Watts’ large-scale canvasses seem to transcend time. He also delves into mysticism. As Ouattara explains, “My work is connected to mathematics and alchemy, not religion. I am interested in spirituality—all my work is spiritually inhabited.”

Ouattara’s latest solo show is no exception. Titled “Project Room,” his newest series is a three-piece site-specific exhibition held at The French Institute Alliance Française (FI AF). “Project Room” is, in part, a collaboration between Ouattara and FI AF’s Director of Visual Arts, Antoine Guerrero (formerly at MoMA PS1). Guerrero appointed Watts to create a series that represents the multifariousness of Francophone culture. And the subdued palette is a departure from Watts’ usual swathes of neon. Here, hints of color are delicately applied to a mainly earthy-toned backdrop. And spatial parameters were taken into consideration, drawing viewers into the gallery without overwhelming them. Watts explains, “I don’t want people to panic with three big paintings in the same small room.” Though more subtle, the symbolism and mystique remain palpable. “I want to give people the chance to interpret, but I don’t want to give them all the keys. It’s time for artists to help people think more deeply about the future.”