

## OUATTARA WATTS' NEW PAINTINGS

by Olivia Anani

When preparing an interview with an artist who, in the space of several months, experienced a fascinating, close and life-changing friendship with a character as legendary as Jean-Michel Basquiat, one expects to talk about the past. Interviewing Ouattara Watts was, however, quite the opposite: we spoke not of the past, but of the present. When he tells of his encounter with « Jean-Michel », Ouattara speaks in the present tense. He even says, without hesitating: « To me, he is still here, he follows me everywhere. » And such certainty is not born of sentimentalism. His words resonate with a deep passion for spirituality, with his own conception of time, a cyclical rather than linear entity, also present in Japanese Shinto and New Orleans voodoo, where Basquiat, aware of Ouattara's passion for jazz, took him for a brief escapade. Ouattara recalls their moments together praying on the Mississippi, the river that, for Jean-Michel, represented his own connection with the history of the continent – in all its beauty and violence. There is no pessimism here, just a cyclical vision of the world and its eternal re-departures and radiant presents, like that of Basquiat, whose striking energy still resounds, open to change and a future full of promise. The legends are yet to be written, and the artists, those « guardians of the cosmos », have not yet fulfilled their mission as, aware of times beyond our reach, Ouattara's great-uncle used to stay to Ouattara when he was still too young to comprehend.

Olivia Anani: What was your first relationship to art?

Ouattara Watts: I was born in Abidjan. My first relationship to art was a combination of encounters and a great deal of reading. I am very curious by nature. I read and travel extensively, especially through Africa. This has led me to deepen my artistic knowledge. In my adolescence, the French library at the French Cultural Centre, as it was then known, was a privileged locus for discovery. I found all manner of information about the art scene at the time. Art always interested me: sculpture, traditional dance, masks... At the age of 15, I came to realise that art was what I wanted to do. Studying did not have the appeal of art. My friends were interested in mathematics, sciences, and teaching. My focus was art. I knew I would become an artist. There is great cultural diversity in Ivory Coast, from Dan to Baoulé masks. In my reading, I have seen the influence of these arts on European artists like Picasso, Modigliani and the surrealists.

Reading about them made me want to leave Paris and meet other artists. This amused my entourage. The idea of leaving Ivory Coast and moving abroad was inconceivable. To them, life was comfortable; I however felt a need to find the artistic environment missing at home. I spent a while at Abidjan fine arts school – in the late 70s and 80s, but what I found there bore no correspondence to my own desires.

OA: What did you find at Abidjan's fine arts school? The lingering traces of modernism or already some signs of conceptual art?

OW: It was still very much stuck in the past. So I wrote to the director of Paris Beaux-Arts, from Abidjan. He suggested I take the entrance exam and I was accepted. Once in France, I soon encountered a certain vision shared by some tutors who had already taught students from African fine arts schools. They had very fixed ideas about Africa. The international atmosphere was very good, but when it came to creation I was an « outsider ». Other tutors who weren't teaching me liked my work. I was however driven by a conviction and forged ahead. Later I met artists travelling the same path. We became friends and we carried on together.

OA: If I may ask, what was your financial situation at the time?

OW: Initially my family were supporting me, but their contribution soon proved insufficient. Like many students I found a part-time job which helped me make ends meet. I stayed at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts until one day I felt I had learned all there was to learn there. It had been a good experience. After 4 years, around the time of the diploma, I ventured into the Parisian art world and its galleries. I knocked at several doors but I was relentlessly told that African contemporary art did not exist. I had a strong desire to stay in Paris and work as a professional. But I was faced with an art scene – its gallery owners and dealers – who refused to understand my form of contemporary art, despite the influences of African art on the great 20th century modernists and contemporary artists.

Gradually, my work developed in character and a handful of collectors began buying various pieces. This helped me forge ahead. My first supporter was a Russian collector called Oleg. When I left the Beaux-Arts, friends and I found a studio and were able to invite people. Here I met Oleg who was crazy about Andy Warhol. He started collecting my work

OA: Sometimes unexpected encounters happen between otherwise « distant » cultures. They can lead to fascinating exchange...

OW: Yes, I am the proof of that. Oleg helped me carry on painting. We built up a strong relationship. He would even buy paintings without seeing them. He wanted me to keep working. Through friends, I then met Claude Picasso, who had also started his collection, and Andrée Putman, collectors who were eager to buy even though no gallery was interested. Andrée Putman's daughter Olivia finally became my agent and sold a fair number of my works.

OA: The people you mentioned are related to a certain culture of art and design, which appreciates the purity of forms while implying other movements like lyrical abstraction for example. Did your conversations with Oleg mention artists other than Malevitch and the Russian avant garde for example?

OW: Indeed, at the time Malevitch had a huge effect on me; he is one of the artists who helped me spiritually. There is something beyond religion, a connection that made Oleg interested in my work. The same applies to Claude, in relation to his father and the whole modern art adventure. They are people who are 100% committed to the works themselves, and to developing strong long-term relationships. It was around 1985. It was fantastic.

OA: Malevitch also expresses this huge desire for emancipation from Western Europe, a desire to invent a new spiritual language, a cultural specificity that transcends them. The « last futurist painting exhibition » in 1915 comes to mind, where for the first time Malevitch exhibited his famous Quadrangle and other suprematist compositions. The Beyeler Foundation in Baal paid a beautiful tribute to the exhibition in 2015. This same desire for emancipation is also to be found in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

OW: Exactly. My influences come from around the world. The very notion of African spirituality is what helped me. The artist is the guardian of the cosmos. This is what my great-uncle told me at the age of 10 and I avidly soaked up every word without really understanding. The idea became my guiding creative mantra.

OA: « Guardian of the cosmos » – a beautiful role, containing a spiritual vision redolent of Japanese Shinto traditions, and Korean shamanist practices...

OW: Exactly. We have mentioned Malevitch, but there is also Rothko, an important influence in my creation. Rothko is meditation. Very deep.

OA: Speaking of depth and spirituality. It was around this time that you met Jean-Michel Basquiat, in a gallery I believe?

OW: How it happened was this: At the time, a connection was made with Claude, the Putmans, art critics like Nicolas Bourriaud, Henri-François Debailleux, Gaya Goldcymer, who contributed to the exhibition catalogue at the forthcoming Cécile Fakhoury Gallery. Gaya organised my first exhibition in Paris. Back then, a friend of Oleg owned a gallery in the Marais that he loaned to Gaya, who invited me to exhibit. People started liking what they saw and the exhibition sold well. Art critics became interested in my work, but galleries were still reticent. Summer 87, I started working on large canvas sheets I had bought at the flea market. I asked a friend who has a workshop Quai de la Loire, to lend me his space for the summer because my own was too small for large format works. There I worked on my canvas sheets as I hunted for my own studio. I finally found a place, rue Marx Dormoy in the 18th arrondissement. Several months later, Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibited in Paris.

Everybody was telling me: « contemporary art does not exist in Africa, galleries won't go near you, » etc. Meanwhile on the other side of the Atlantic, there was a prodigy like Basquiat, and everybody was talking about him. I would mention him to people as a prime example, but everybody just said: « Basquiat? The graffiti guy? It's not very interesting. »

With this energy, friends and I visited the Jean-Michel Basquiat exhibition at the Yvon Lambert Gallery. My friends headed down first because I had work to finish at the studio. When I arrived, the exhibition was crammed. I looked at the crowds in amazement: for the first time in Paris, I think, there were Asians, Europeans, Arabs and Blacks in the same gallery in Paris. Totally extraordinary. As soon as I got there, someone accosted me and asked « What do you do? » I answered that I was an artist and carried on my way. I had never seen a photo of Jean-Michel, I only knew his work. I had no clue it was him. I met up with my then-partner and told her what had happened: « This guy just came straight up to me, I don't believe it! » I turn around to see the guy is still looking for me. He comes over, presents himself and says « I want to see what you do. » To which I reply: « Yes, sure, we'll see about it later. » But he insists, « No, no! Now! » My partner tries to reason with him, how it's not a good idea to desert your own private. He simply says: « It doesn't matter. Let's go! » He had a driver who drives us all to my studio. When he gets there he started leaping around. He loves my work. Jean-Michel was full of this incredible energy. I can still see him bounding around the studio, exclaiming: « That's great! That's what I want to do! I love it! » We spend some time together and I suggest we go out somewhere. My girlfriend suggests the post-private-view dinner but when we get back to the gallery it is closed. Everybody has left. There is a note on the door with an address. When we get there, the party is in full swing. Jean-Michel picks up a bottle of champagne and 4 glasses. We toast each other, drink and dance until 4 in the morning. I am still struck by the conversation we had. We talked about the condition of black artists worldwide, the influence of African art on modern art, racism, music. A real connection was made.

When we are driving around, he asks me where I come from. I answer: « Cote d'Ivoire ». He tells me about his exhibition there, how it hadn't met with great success: « People didn't like it. » He says that there was this one small town he adored, Korhogo – which just so happens

to be my birthplace. We were in a dream-world. Flying through the cosmos. Like two guardians who had just met up.

The evening over, everybody heads home. I'm thinking, that's it, we won't see each other again. Great encounter, great moment together, but it's over. But unbeknownst to me, he spends his Sunday looking for me. He gets the whole gallery on the case, including Yvon Lambert, who gets her assistants to track me down. One of them happens to know Nicolas Bourriaud who gives him my telephone number. Monday 8 am, Jean-Michel calls me. Less than an hour later, he is standing at my door and I'm still in bed. My neighbour at the studio, a sculptor, finally opens the door to this guy who has been ringing the doorbell like a madman. Imagine his surprise when he realises the madman in question is no other than Jean-Michel Basquiat! We spend the day together talking about painting, laughing, looking at my work. He likes it and buys a few pieces. Then he sets off for his exhibitions in Düsseldorf and Amsterdam then calls me to meet up with him – unfortunately I wasn't available. He then comes back to Paris and we spend two months together. We go to see Cy Twombly at Beaubourg, and Julian Schnabel. Jean-Michel is even eager to present me to Julien – we just miss him though. Being with him was a fantastic experience. We talked a lot about art; it was hugely positive.

OA: An incredible encounter, and so near to his death. So intense – a sign that something had to happen before he left this world.

OW: Yes, that was my precise impression during the time we spent together. After two months, he returned to the United States. Two weeks later, his gallery calls me to tell me about a forthcoming event. They ask me to come to New York to exhibit my canvases with his work. An hour later, I talk to him and he tells me it's his idea. So I jump in an airplane and he comes to the airport to meet me. He carried my canvas sheets for me – on his head... We immediately set off for Manhattan, where paintings are already being hung. At that point, Jean-Michel hasn't exhibited in New York for three years. He is eager to get my canvas sheets up straight away. He calls in Keith Haring, who also comes to see my work. Then a key figure, René Ricard, who wrote about Jean-Michel early in his career. There's great enthusiasm for my work, positive feedback all day, as close friends and professionals file through before the opening event the next day. That day, he tells me he has a gift for me: « Tomorrow we're heading to New Orleans, with Kevin Bray and friends. » There is a jazz festival going on – he knows I love jazz and wants to treat me. In New Orleans, we visit the voodoo heritage. There's a lot of it. We eat gumbo soup and finally he takes me to the Mississippi, where we pray together. Here, he says, is where slaves arrived from Africa. It is a place with a huge spiritual and emotional charge. It was a huge moment. He painted the Mississippi a lot. I still find there are so many details, meanings and references that haven't been elucidated in Jean-Michel's work. I hope people never stop exploring them.

After New Orleans we return to New York. I stay at his place, with his then-partner. We have an amazing time. I get to watch him at work. And we decide to go back to Korhogo together, so I hurry back to Paris to prepare our trip for Abidjan. I remember leaving New York. The car pulls away from the building and I can see him watching me go through the window. I don't think that I should have left. I think about it a lot. I was in a hurry to sort out our journey, but at the same time, there were tears in his eyes. He was a real guardian angel to me. Whenever we went out in New York, in Soho, his partner couldn't believe it. He was always buzzing around me. He wouldn't let anybody get close or hassle me.

OA: It is as though you arrived at a point in his life when he needed an encounter like that. He had to meet his double in an art world where, ultimately, few people really understood what he was feeling.

OW: Absolutely. How can you talk to people who do not understand what you are doing, what you are feeling? I understood. We had lots of projects together.

OA: You must miss him...

OW: Yes. But I know he's right behind me, saying « Keep going, let's see what you can do. » (Laughs) He was going to come to Abidjan. He died the day he was due to leave. We had the flight tickets. He was going to come with Kevin, who is still a close friend today. The three of us wanted to travel together.

OA: Do you have friends in common with whom you can meet up sometimes and talk about Jean-Michel, share your memories?

OW: I'm very close to Brice Marden and Francesco Clemente. They're good friends. We have great fun together. We play ping-pong, we know each others' families, we visit each others' studios...

OA: The artists you mention are all very demanding of their work. You have the impression they are looking for something. I saw that you had also exhibited with Gagosian during the 90s...

OW: That's right. It was 1995. At the Baghoomian Gallery. Jean-Michel introduced me. It was the last place he'd exhibited. I did two exhibitions there myself, then the gallery closed. I had worked like crazy, so after his death, people kept following my work, museums too. A museum in San Francisco immediately offered me a show. Here I met someone who introduced me to Larry Gagosian, who had only recently arrived in New York, from Los Angeles. He had a space he shared with Leo Castelli, who introduced him to Cy Twombly. That's how things took off.

OA: You have exhibited in galleries worldwide yet you remain discreet. Why is that?

OW: To me, work is essential. Work comes first. The star system has no appeal. If I could exhibit without being present, I would. Art also means healing peoples' minds. It has a certain therapeutic function. It is not me that people come to see. They come for my paintings. That is what I like to instil.

OA: In your work, there are often signs, codes, text in Amharic. I wondered why and if you can read the language?

OW: No. I started learning but reading it is still beyond me. In my work, it is a reference for African cultures. Everybody says Africa has no culture, no writing. But culture and writing are everywhere. Amharic is my message to the non-believers.

OA: How do feel about your work today? Satisfied? Appeased?

OW: There is still much I want to paint. As long as I am not dead, the ideas keep coming. I hope my work in years to come will have an element of surprise. There are some artists whose work gradually loses its impact over their careers. I feel the opposite to be the case. An artist's appeal should develop with experience. I have no intention of being an artist for 10 years and then disappearing. I want to be an artist in history. We have a great responsibility on our shoulders. Africa is a whole continent. There is too much at stake to throw in the towel or think only of oneself. If I was only thinking of myself, I would work to make a quick buck and then stop. That's what was amazing with Jean-Michel: his knowledge, his culture. We connected. We still connect.

The issues that you raise are indeed essential, I'm convinced of that. And I am very eager to see what you have in store in for us. History is a heritage, but also a duty. We have to honour our history. Thank you for taking the time to share yours.