

## OUATTARA WATTS PAINTS “THE COSMOS”

by David Esnault

The one who forged a brief, intense and decisive friendship for his career with Jean-Michel Basquiat, a few months before the latter's death in 1988, does not hide his “emotion” to finally exhibit in Abidjan.

A long-delayed return to the country, because of the long politico-military crisis that Côte d'Ivoire went through during the 2000s.

Two galleries host his large-format paintings at the same time for two months in the Ivorian economic capital, the Rotonde des Arts and the Cécile Fakhoury gallery.

Long absent, Ouattara Watts is delighted to find in his country a “dynamic artistic scene”. “Côte d'Ivoire needs art, openness,” he says.

“I really want to meet young Ivorian artists, to exchange with them,” says the artist, who left to study art in Paris at the age of 19, before settling down, 12 years later at the invitation from Basquiat, New York where he has lived and worked ever since.

Encounter, a key word in this serene man, who says he is “always at ease everywhere”, as “citizen of the world”.

“His arrival was eagerly awaited, people don't know his work here, it's an event,” explains gallery owner Cécile Fakhoury, for whom Watts is “the most popular of Ivorian painters.”

Documenta de Kassel, Whitney Museum (New York), Venice and Dakar Biennials, Ouattara Watts has exhibited in a number of major global contemporary art meetings, as well as in renowned galleries, such as that of Larry Gagosian in New York, or even in Paris, Italy, Japan ...

“Ouattara is an architect, the builder of the city of the 21st century. A city of union”, with “a universe of chaos as much as energy” in the background. This is how art historian Robert Farris Thompson describes Watts' paintings, in the catalog published by the Fakhoury gallery.

The painter confirms: his vision is “universal”, it “is not linked to a country or a continent, it transcends borders and everything that can be spotted on a map”. “It's the cosmos that I paint,” he says.

Her huge abstract canvases, in vibrant colors, present “geometric figures, myriads of symbols, biomorphic, supple and flexible shapes, but also sharp and sharp shapes,” writes art critic Gaya Goldcymer in the catalog of the Fakhoury gallery. “In the workshop, a magic happens.”

Ouattara Watts says he is influenced by both Rothko and Goya. “Painting, art, is to under-

stand life,” he analyzes.

If he claims a “universal” vision, he also recognizes in his paintings “references to African cultures”.

But “Ouattara Watts is not classified in any school or movement, he never wanted to be labeled a black American or African artist, to fall into a straitjacket”, comments Cécile Fakhoury. “He always kept his freedom. He is unclassifiable, like Basquiat ”.

Music is another key to the work of Watts, an eclectic music lover who paints while listening to jazz (John Coltrane, Miles Davis, Sun Ra), but also Afrobeat by Fela Kuti, reggae or polyphonic pygmy songs.

Showing one of the canvases on display, entitled Oté-fê , he explains: “I painted it after listening to the last album (eponymous) by Alpha Blondy”. The painting evokes “the degradation of Africa, the looting of its raw materials”.

“Sounds, notes, silences, rhythms, the complexity of the pieces of jazz which he is keen on is found in his paintings”, estimates Cécile Fakhoury. His exhibition is also entitled Before looking at this work, listen at it .

The vast spaces of his paintings are intended as a reference to the limitless spaces of the savannah of his youth in the north of Côte d’Ivoire.

“I need to breathe,” Watts concludes.