

# LE POPULAIRE

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## OUATTARA WATTS, THE VODOO CHILD OF PAINTING AT THE REBEYROLLE SPACE IN EYMOUTIERS

by Jean-Paul Sportiello

Internationally recognized since the 90s, the painter Ouattara Watts is rare in France. An exhibition is dedicated to him at the Paul Rebeyrolle space in Eymoutiers.

The name of Ouattara Watts is closely associated with that of Jean-Michel Basquiat. The two painters met in 1988 during an exhibition by Jean-Michel Basquiat, at the height of his fame, at the Yvon Lambert gallery in Paris. Six months later, on August 12, the Haitian prodigy, shooting star of urban art and new American figuration, died of an overdose at the age of 27.

The friendship between Jean-Michel Basquiat, born to a Haitian father, and Ouattara Watts, originally from Côte d'Ivoire was brief but decisive for the latter's artistic destiny. An artistic and friendly love at first sight. On Basquiat's advice, Ouattara Watts, then 31, left Paris where he had long attended the School of Fine Arts to settle in New York where he still lives and works.

Basquiat opened the doors of the New York art scene to him. The two men exchange a lot and travel. They have in common, the ancestral culture of Africa, the voodoo to which Ouattara Watts was initiated at a very early age, a spirituality based on magical rituals and an animist philosophy linking man and nature. but also and above all the love of music. For the two artists, and in particular Ouattara Watts, the music is a source of inspiration. "The basis of my work is spirituality, meditation carried by music as a motor for painting," says Ouattara Watts. For me, music is like the sun, it is light and energy. She puts the receptors on edge."

The Music, the Medium, the Matter, it is from these three M's that Stéphane Vacquier, curator of the exhibition defines the art of Ouattara Watts. "In his childhood, painting imposed itself on him in an inseparable link with masks, dances, music and the secrets of rites," he comments. Ouattara Watts strews his large canvases with signs, writings, numbers and letters borrowed from Hebrew, Ethiopian or Berber alphabets, strange symbols, like magic formulas. In this "moving painting", we meet the lightning god Shago, wrapped in a spiral, leopard heads, skulls, horned devils etc.

Like Rebeyrolle, the material of his canvases is dense, a thick mixture of pigments, glue, sand and papier-mâché mixed with fabrics, wood etc. But also record covers of his idols: Bob Dylan, Miles Davis, Janis Joplin ...

The painter himself manufactures his pigments, colors and brushes. He invented the "Watts blue" resulting from the indigo blue that he spreads with his hands. "I flatten out with my two bare hands, I like this contact with the material, the paint, I go there with my body by circular movements", like the Sudanese masons who coated the walls of houses with a mixture of clay and shea butter. For him, painting is "a ceremonial, three-dimensional place, requiring a significant physical commitment (...) It is delimited by a territory where forces, movements and energy combine. On the canvas, music is a spiral as with the Sufis, man in the cosmos describes spirals or ritornellos."