

OUATTARA WATTS AND HIS COSMOS

by Astrid Krivian

“A painting in motion,” seen as a meditation: this is how the artist, born in 1957 in Abidjan, an American by adoption, presents his work. To understand his approach, we must go back to the genesis of a vocation born early and immediately. As a teenager, he observed the dances and animist rituals of his Senufo people, in the region of Korhogo, in the north of the country. He was initiated by a member of his family into the Poro, a rite of passage. Spirituality, quest for the invisible, music and the syncretism of the arts present here will determine his approach and become the components of his future creation. “Through this first sacred vision, where dance, music, painting on masks and on wood merge, he had the certainty of his destiny: to become a painter,” testifies Stéphane Vacquier, curator of “Résonances,” an exhibition devoted to artist in 2019 at the Espace Rebeyrolle in Eymoutiers, France.

After empirical knowledge comes the bookish, rational knowledge that he acquires in the library of the French Cultural Center, where he discovers modern Western art. In 1977, he flew to Paris and joined the National School of Fine Arts. A decade later, he had a decisive encounter with a painter of Haitian origin with a dazzling career, Jean-Michel Basquiat. An artistic thunderbolt, a brief friendship (the latter died of an overdose six months later) but intense. On Basquiat’s advice, Ouattara Watts moved to New York, where he now lives. Since then, his paintings have been exhibited around the world; among others, at the MoMA PS1 and at the Whitney Museum Biennale, in New York, at the Fiac in Paris, in Italy, in Japan, and the Cecile Fakhoury gallery, in Abidjan, for the first exhibition in his native country, in 2018.

Throughout his works, the artist--“citizen of the world,” as he considers himself--pursues his goal: to paint the cosmos, to materialize his universal vision. For this, this eclectic music lover who paints to music in spontaneous, unpremeditated gesture, constructs a language accessible to all. “In his approach, which is both figurative and abstract, rejecting naturalistic or narrative figuration, symbols, shapes and colors speak directly to the senses. They lead the viewer to a reverie, to a non-intellectual understanding, as when listening to music. You have to experience the work physically to get caught up in its dimension, its dynamics, which dialogues with the viewer’s body,” continues Stéphane Vacquier. His technique combines materials sewn, glued, superimposed on the surface: textiles (bags of coffee, cocoa), wood, photos, objects, papier mache ... Passion of color - he designed the “Watts blue” - Ouattara Watts manufactures his instruments, painted with bare hands, draws on the know-how of Sudanese architecture, mixing shea butter with its pigments to create relief, a dense material.

His canvases, often in large format, combine cultural, geographical and temporal particularities to form a unit in the image of Edouard Glissant’s Grand-Tout. The spiritual transcends

religions, motifs inspired by Senoufo, Baoulee, Bambara or Dogon traditions mingle with contemporary references, such as that of Jackson Pollock. Numbers, signs borrowed from Hebrew or Berber alphabets, hieroglyphs as well as numeric punctuate his works. Rebus to decipher, bridges between worlds, his enigmatic paintings linked to the collective unconscious, offer a plural symbolism and evoke injustices, the plunder of Africa, the protection of nature... "His painting is governed by a philosophy: the fusion of man with his environment. All these elements form a cultural maelstrom addressed to the man of the 21st century, recalling the purity of art and its language intelligible to all. The juxtaposition of symbols provokes emotions, blurring borders of all kinds. It is a transnational, universal art," underlines Stephane Vacquier. And firmly anchored in its time.