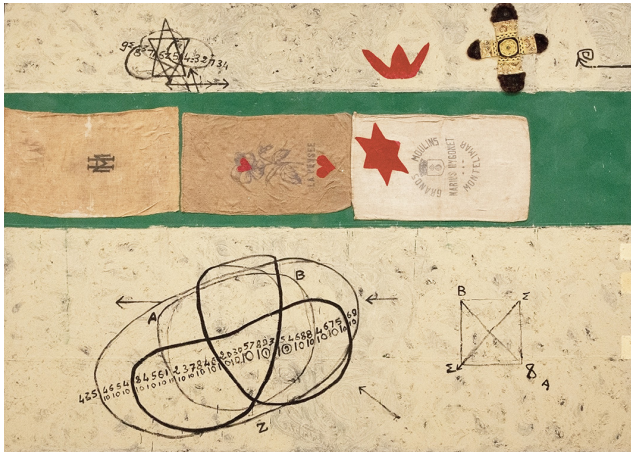


ARTFORUM SEPTEMBER 2021

MAXIMUM IMPACT: KAELEN WILSON-GOLDIE ON THE ART OF OUATTARA WATTS

by Kaelen Wilson-Goldie



Ouattara Watts, *Vertigo #2*, 2011, acrylic, paper pulp, fabric, and fur on canvas, 9' 10 1/4" × 13' 9 1/2" × 33/4".

Mythologies rarely serve the artists who inspire them. Ouattara Watts has now entered his fifth decade of painting. His oeuvre consists of the large-to-monumental canvases he has been making prodigiously for forty-five years, alongside lesser-known watercolors, gouaches, drawings, and collages. Over time, he has developed an expansive and wildly complex visual language. It is also unabashedly joyful, even beautiful, insisting on a universal purpose for painting. More than a body, his is a forest of works, too vast, dense, and important to be detoured by an origin story. And yet the origin story persists, making a circuitous route around but rarely through the work and confounded, perhaps, by some minor confusion over the artist's name: He was born Bakari Ouattara (in the Ivorian capital Abidjan), nicknamed Ouatts (in his youth) and later Ouatt (in Paris), became known as Ouattara Watts (in New York), and is referred to (almost everywhere) as simply Ouattara.

Inventive and searching, formally dexterous and deeply spiritual, his paintings deserve to be better known. Ouattara's exhibition history—in galleries and in significant institutional group shows—has been continuous, but the major, contextualizing museum surveys have not yet materialized. As the critic Siddhartha Mitter told me one day when I asked about the work in passing, Ouattara tends to fall through a number of cracks—generational, geographic, stylistic, temperamental—all of which may be, again, the misfortune of a legendary start. "He's unassuming. Oftentimes, those who get known in the art world are those who make noise. He's not that guy," explained Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, the curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York who shepherded Ouattara's *Vertigo #2*, 2011, into the museum's collection last year. A gift from Agnes Gund, a champion of Ouattara's work, it was the first of what Nzewi hopes will be several acquisitions, allowing for multiple and more complicated stories about it to be told.

The works that Ouattara was making in the 1980s oscillate between earth tones and primary colors, flat planes and thick swirls of paint. Adorned with sticks, feathers, and everyday bits of metal, like the lid of a coffee tin placed on the lower right edge of a diptych from 1989 titled *The Woman of Magic Power*, the paintings seem to slide effortlessly from patches of abstraction to obvious figuration, to the point that they remain almost impossible to catego-

rise in such terms. His paintings from the '90s appear even more sculptural. (He once told an interviewer he didn't like, "If you are born in Africa, sculpture and painting are the same.") Several are done on wooden panels heavy with textured pigments, using a range of nails, screws, hinges, and brackets to incorporate beams, tablets, picture frames, shapes like ears that extrude from upper corners, paper shopping bags, burlap sacks, coils of wire, old photographs, and whole books, such as the one (Albert Einstein on relativity) stuck to the middle of OZB, 1993, exhibited that same year in Susan Vogel and Ousmane Sow's "Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale."

Ouattara established a core iconography early on: black-and-white pictures of West African masks, echoes of Constantin Brancusi's endless columns, stylized evocations of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. But in the 2000s, the vocabulary of his work embraced an explosion of now-signature elements: These include mathematical equations, diagrams of atoms and cubes, hopscotch boxes, faded maps, six-pointed stars, lace doilies, hand-dyed textiles, and intricately painted cosmic bursts. Within this crowded field of recurring signs and symbols are characters either known from pop culture or recognizable through repetition.

A photograph of Sitting Bull, the nineteenth-century Lakota leader who was killed at Standing Rock, sits in the middle of Cultural Alchemy, 1999. A hybrid serpent anchors the symmetrical Crazy Masters, from 2002, and a man whose body seems to consist of two legs seen in profile dominates an untitled painting from 1998; together, these comprise two of the three large-scale works by Ouattara that Okwui Enwezor chose for Documenta XI. (Enwezor included the more pop-inflected Hip-Hop, Jazz, Makoussa, 1994, with its embedded images of Boogie Down Productions, Salif Keita, Aretha Franklin, and more, in the traveling survey "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994 [2001–2002].")

There are references to Alpha Blondy and Allen Ginsberg, to the 2008 financial crisis and the late-nineteenth-century conference at which European powers carved up the African continent for colonial exploitation. Ouattara's paintings delve into the last days of Rimbaud in Ethiopia and the fate of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, the West African soldiers who fought on behalf of France in exchange for a promise of citizenship, only to be killed by the French afterward. He returns again and again to images from Senufo, Baoulé, Dogon, and Yoruba cultures and to writings in numerous languages, including Bambara, Amharic, and Arabic—for example, with the opening lines of the Qur'an, BISMILLAH AL-RAHMAN AL-RAHIM ("In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate"), etched across a schoolchild's wooden slate in Nok Culture, 1993.

Ouattara mixes all of his own colors in the three-bayed ground-floor studio in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn where he has been working for nearly a decade, moving nimbly over and around his paintings as they are laid out on the floor. "It's a kind of dance with the canvas all night in the studio," he told me when I visited in March. (His comment explained how the paintings sometimes catch the tread from his sneakers, another repeated mark.) Since the early 2000s, Ouattara's palette has expanded dramatically from primary colors and earth tones to pinks, blues, purples, gold, a vivid green, and seemingly endless shades of pale to fiery orange, which Nzewi attributes to confidence and maturity. All along, the experimentation and playfulness on the surface of Ouattara's works have been unrelenting and intense, his paints sometimes thickened with sawdust, mottled over fabrics, and more recently—as, for example, in an untitled painting from 2018 with fanned and swirling brushstrokes like black clouds enclosing a central image of what may be a man, an animal, or a mask—applied so smoothly that they look like ink poured into water. That shade of obsidian-like black is one of many in his oeuvre—"anthracite blacks, liquorice blacks, blue blacks," as described by the critic Gaya Goldcmyer, who organized Ouattara's first-ever gallery show in Paris back in the '80s and has followed the "chromatic symphony" of his work ever since, noting the intensity and sweetness of his palette, as well as the obstinacy and radicality of his method.

The curators Defne Ayas and Natasha Ginwala—who selected four canvases from the past

decade for “Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning,” their joint exhibition for the Thirteenth Gwangju Biennale, which was held this past spring after a seven-month delay—were especially drawn to the rhythmic and cosmological dimensions of Ouattara’s work and the ways in which his paintings are the outcome of a sustained spiritual practice. In a sense, every piece is a portal to enlightenment, oneness with the divine, a higher plane of universal consciousness, call it what you will. What the artist provides are tools. His maximalism is therefore the mark of his generosity. He gives you so much material, so many references, in order for you, as a viewer, to pick up on something that will help you find your way.

And yet, for all the interpretive possibilities, for all the realms the artist has occupied and imagined and divined into being on the surfaces of his paintings, the thing that sticks to him, the origin story that is told almost every time his name is mentioned, is the fact that in early 1988, Ouattara met Jean-Michel Basquiat in Paris, and their friendship changed everything.

At that point, Ouattara had already been living in France for a long time, having arrived from Côte d’Ivoire in 1977 to attend Paris’s École des Beaux-Arts. In parallel with his formal studies, he pursued his self-education. That meant reading voraciously, but also seeing in museums and galleries the art he had previously known only from the books he borrowed from the library of Abidjan’s Centre Culturel Français (now the Institut Français Côte d’Ivoire). Perhaps more importantly, being in Paris meant meeting and talking with other artists in the flow of the city’s everyday life. One teacher was particularly instrumental.

The painter Jacques Yankel, who died in France in April 2020 at the age of one hundred, had his own outsize origin story. Yankel was the son of the painter Michel Kikoïne, and when he was denied admission to the École des Beaux-Arts, he trained as a geologist. He was traveling in Mali on a mapping expedition when he met, of all people, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre urged him to return to painting, which he did, eventually becoming a crucial mentor for a generation of artists arriving to France from all over Asia, Africa, and South America in the ’70s and ’80s. Because Yankel had spent time in West Africa, he was pivotal for a group of students who came to Paris from the École des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan.

At home, they were caught up in a pedagogical revolt, having turned to materials such as sand, clay, charcoal, shells, press clippings, and other heterogeneous and additive objects as a means of rejecting the Eurocentric rigidity of their training, which taught them to copy Western masterworks and never to diverge from Western methods—except, perhaps, to add a bit of local color or exotic folklore. Côte d’Ivoire had been independent from France since 1960, but Abidjan’s École des Beaux-Arts was still administered by the French, who wrote and evaluated the exams and decided which students would receive certificates of aptitude. In Paris, Yankel encouraged them to band together. They returned to Abidjan and created a movement called Vohou-Vohou.

According to the Ivorian curator and critic Yacouba Konaté, “The Vohou-Vohou artists wrote a page in the history of art in a nation that was going through a period of cultural ferment.” It was also going through tremendous economic expansion, accompanied by waves of political division, violence, and instability. “In the absence of power bases that would evolve naturally through opposition parties (which were prohibited in the country),” writes Konaté, “intellectuals and cultured individuals invested politically in cultural and aesthetic debates.” The importance of Vohou-Vohou wasn’t only educational. It was about abstraction and, perhaps, about freedom. It was, in Konaté’s view, a movement about rupture, about renouncing figuration, disengaging from naive forms of painting and using materials from the immediate environment to find the paths that abstraction would allow them, as artists working together and in dialogue, to follow.

Ouattara wasn’t one of them. All his life, he has avoided association with any specific movement. “He abhors being pigeonholed,” Nzewi told me. Bored by what was happening there, he didn’t study at the École des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan. But he did take classes with Yankel in Paris. He knew all the artists. He was even included in a Vohou-Vohou exhibition at the Musée National des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie that Yankel helped to realize. And he most

definitely participated in their dialogue on abstraction. He just scaled it up to global, cosmic terms.

Ouattara suffered in Paris, squatting in an old workshop in the neighborhood of Ménilmontant, doing miserable odd jobs to survive. After art school, he struggled to synthesize everything he had learned in France, connecting modernism and Surrealism, Modigliani and Picasso to his longstanding interests in Egyptology and ancient Greece. He combined this with everything he had known from the bustling cosmopolis of Abidjan and his family's syncretic approach to spiritualism (a little bit of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and Sufi mysticism wrapped around a core of African religions). He encountered not only the pervasive racism of France but also the refusal of players on the Parisian scene to engage with or even acknowledge the Black artists in their midst.

In 1988, Basquiat was twenty-seven and a superstar. His one and only exhibition on the African continent had taken place two years earlier at the CCF in Abidjan. Apparently, the Swiss dealer Bruno Bischofberger had lined it up for him, and while Basquiat was in Côte d'Ivoire, he had traveled north to Korhogo, which happened to be Ouattara's ancestral family village, the place where he had received his spiritual initiation at the age of seven—a second origin story coiled inside the first. In January 1988, Ouattara turned up for Basquiat's exhibition at Galerie Yvon Lambert. He was astonished by the diversity of the crowd, so unusual in Paris. Basquiat made a beeline for him. Ouattara didn't know a single Black artist from America at the time, had never seen a photo of Basquiat, and at first didn't believe it was him. Basquiat, who spoke fluent French, knew all about Ouattara's village, the culture he came from, the divination systems he subscribed to. He was interested in the connections to Africa, in the art-historical threads tying Haiti to Côte d'Ivoire. He was so curious to see Ouattara's work that he persuaded him to leave, mid-opening, for the studio.

They talked all night about art and music. Basquiat told Ouattara, "You have to come to New York. Come to New York, and we'll do some stuff together." Basquiat bought a few of Ouattara's paintings on the spot. Then he lined up a New York show with Vrej Baghoomian. Born in Iran, a cousin of Tony Shafrazi, and (why not) a man once suspected of being a CIA agent and later investigated for fraud, Baghoomian was Basquiat's last and arguably most controversial dealer. Ouattara arrived in New York. Basquiat picked him up at the airport and took him straight to the gallery (he invited Keith Haring and Rene Ricard over to say hello). Then they left for New Orleans. Basquiat wanted Ouattara to see Jazz Fest, the Voodoo Museum, the mouth of the Mississippi River. Basquiat wanted to return with Ouattara to Côte d'Ivoire and Korhogo. Ouattara headed back to Paris to make arrangements. They planned to travel in August. Basquiat died of an overdose in his studio on August 12.

For Ouattara, it was tragic. Three years older than Basquiat, he had played the role of big brother. "I wanted to protect him," he said in an interview. To this day, Ouattara says the spirit of Basquiat is still with him. And he has often noted—for example, in a revelatory 1995 interview with Okwui Enwezor—the ways in which the fullness of Basquiat's work, its cultural memory and the depths of its political resonance, has yet to be truly elucidated, having been lost in all the hype and pathos.

A few months after Basquiat's death, Ouattara picked up his life in Paris and set it back down in New York. The city reminded him of Abidjan, forward-thinking and full of potential, and also of Alexandria, the ancient Mediterranean metropolis, rolling through endless cycles of ruin and new beginnings. And in a way, the complexity and uncompromising cosmopolitanism of Ouattara's work resembles that of the late Nicolas Moufarrege, another émigré ahead of his time, who followed a similar path (New York via Alexandria, Beirut, and Paris) and made work that critics (more so than dealers and collectors, curiously enough) haven't really caught up with. Like Basquiat, Moufarrege lived the extreme highs and lows of the go-go '80s. And then he died of AIDS right in the middle of them.

The real value of Ouattara's origin story, then, may lie in the conscious or unconscious decision he made, at the end of that wild and awful decade, to survive, to protect himself, to get

some distance from the viler excesses of the market, and to renew himself through his work. “Basquiat’s death, after downcasting me, finally gave me [the strength] to surpass myself,” he said in a recent interview for a retrospective of his work at Espace Paul Rebeyrolle in France.

Ouattara had a number of interesting early advocates, including Claude Picasso (son of Pablo), Nicolas Bourriaud, Robert Farris Thompson, Glenn O’Brien, Brice Marden, and Franklin Sirmans. He did two shows with Vrej Baghoomian before Baghoomian, under a barrage of lawsuits, disappeared and then died. He had a solo show with Larry Gagosian in 1995. But then Ouattara pulled back from the commercial art world. Although he has exhibited steadily in Europe, for a while he sold his work directly from his studio in New York. Only every so often does he flash onto the market’s radar, most recently in a 2012 show with Vladimir Restoin Roitfeld (son of the French fashion editor Carine Roitfeld). Salman Rushdie, Diane von Furstenberg, and Nicky Hilton showed up for the opening, which may have clouded rather than clarified the work’s reception.

Ouattara has participated in Documenta, Trevor Schoonmaker’s “Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti” at the New Museum, Enwezor’s “The Short Century” at MoMA PS1, and the Whitney Biennial. He was twice in both the Venice Biennale and Dak’Art in Dakar, Senegal. Starting in 2018, he has had a smattering of shows in and around West Africa, at the two spaces of Galerie Cécile Fakhoury in Dakar and Abidjan, at Konaté’s La Rotonde des Arts Contemporains in Abidjan, and in the peripatetic, Pan-African “Prête-moi ton rêve” (Lend Me Your Dream), which originated in Casablanca before moving to the new Musée des Cultures Contemporaines Adama Toungara in the Abidjan suburb of Abobo, all speaking not only to the mounting interest in his work but also to the increasing number of institutions and art spaces active in the region. The curator Simon Njami included Ouattara’s work in a recent survey of contemporary African art at MAXXI: Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo in Rome. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Ouattara’s *Vertigo #2* is now on view in a room with paintings by Chris Ofili, Laura Owens, and Christopher Wool, a green steel-and-lacquer sculpture by Monika Sosnowska, and a ruminative group of manipulated photographs by Dionne Lee.

Still, Ouattara remains underappreciated. In Dele Jegede’s *Encyclopedia of African American Artists*, he’s right there, in between the entries for Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems. And as Nzewi points out, in the ’90s, he was by far one of the most famous African artists working in the West. But ask a handful of relevant scholars and curators about him, and they may recall the work only vaguely and wonder about his persistently low profile. He doesn’t have the name recognition he deserves, and his paintings aren’t as present in the history as they should be.

Nzewi argues that placing Ouattara’s work in MoMA’s collection isn’t necessarily about expanding the canon or looking to plural modernisms. It’s about recognizing what was missing to begin with from the strict New York–Paris axis, which isolated a handful of white male artists from their Black, brown, and female peers. Because, as Nzewi points out, Ouattara was and is right there too: in Paris, in New York. He can be considered part of the genealogy of francophone West African artists of the diaspora. His works can be set in conversation with those of Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, an Ivorian artist of an earlier generation who made magisterial use of pictograms, a form the younger artist has vivaciously reimagined. He can complicate the story of the Vohou-Vohou. But Ouattara can also break open the narrative of what was happening in New York in the ’90s.

“No one is able to fully contextualize him in the West,” said Nzewi. “They read him through Jean-Michel Basquiat, through primitivism. They are unable to read him through the complexity of West African cultures. Critics need different interpretive tools. If one understands the work of Bouabré, for example, if one grasps the indigenous knowledge systems of West African cultures, one can read his work along certain genealogies.”

The path through the forest of Ouattara’s work isn’t an easy or straightforward one. His

paintings are associative and allusive, and if you are predisposed to obsessive digressions, then you run the risk of getting lost in the brambles of the systems and stories at work on every single one of his surfaces. In his studio, Ouattara described his process as a séance, a ritual, his own secret. “You’ve got to look at the work in a spiritual way,” he explained. “Not religious—spiritual. For me, it’s about a continuity until you aren’t here anymore.”

Over the decades, Ouattara has established an impressive record of continuity and shown a remarkable consistency of style, as well as a steady progression and clear phases of evolution in his painting. Maybe his tendency to fall through the cracks is the thing that will ultimately push his work beyond mythologies. As Maria Stepanova writes in her Sebaldian novel, *In Memory of Memory* (2017), “No story reaches us without having its heels chipped off or its face scratched away.” Their “lacunae and gaps are the constant companions of survival, its hidden engine.”

Ouattara himself doesn’t often address such gaps, cracks, and lacunae. In his interview with Enwezor, he described himself more as a bridge, or a runner in a relay race, covering the distance between past and future, spiritualism and technology, the specific and the universal. He insisted then (and insists today) that when people learn how to look at his work, they will not only see it as universal but, more importantly, will understand the universal as African. Souleymane Bachir Diagne explores the same line of thinking in *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson and the Idea of Negritude* (2007), and Achille Mbembe makes an even more forceful argument for it in *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization* (2010).

“The art of the twenty-first century will be Afropolitan,” Mbembe writes. He describes how Africa is writing itself into a global art history, freeing itself from primitivism and ethnographic paradigms, and generating the movement of artworks (across the continent, throughout the diaspora) as Afropolitanism in motion, “a migrant and circulatory form of modernity, born of overlapping genealogies, at the intersections of multiple encounters with multiple elsewhere.” The mainstream art world may be late, or slow, to recognize such movements. But Ouattara has been mapping them out, work after work, for nearly fifty years. The paintings are there, and will be there, for viewers to see and understand and begin connecting the dots between.