

Ouattara Watts: Before Looking at This Work, Listen to It Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, 2019.

Ouattara: Master of Fire

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In the manner of painting, writing is a journey that transcends frontiers and territories, cultures and knowledge, wisdom and feelings.

Around the work of Ouattara, this text originates in the unpredictability and unexpectedness of the meeting, in thoughts and emotions, images, traces and sinuous lines.

A text thus in double progress, in the image of our life, in the image of our journeys : that of the critic, mine, and that of Ouattara, the painter.

So, slowly, thinking about our journeys, I let myself be carried by my images, I let my mind float and many flash-backs come back to me in memory as so many fluid impressions and wavering feelings, inevitably partial as well as fractional.

Immediately, I remember our drifts and our strolls, our rambles through Paris, the summer nights walking in groups of friends when the air is so sweet.

I remember the parties until the morning, at the Tango, rue aux Maires, when Serge Kruger had just taken over the place and that the music was furiously salsa, Caribbean and African. How to forget these Saturdays and Sundays, when 600 people crammed into this small space with 40 degrees, danced, laughed, danced again, again and again. With rhythm, always!

I also remember the squat rue des Panoyaux, in the working class district of Menilmontant, in a former craftsmen's workshop, with its rickety floors and staircases, and the high, brick exterior chimney.

Right there in the Panoyaux squat, real hub of young critics but especially emerging young artists, the future was taking shape without us really knowing it. This future, we were already living it, intensely, in the present, carriers of our aspirations, without calculation nor anticipation.

With a real desire, a rage and a thirst for creation and sensitive and theoretical experiments, we were already starting and working on what would happen to allow us to anchor our dream projects still to come.

This anchorage that would also allow us meetings, some of which will be decisive and guide our stories, our tales, our routes... Meetings, like the one of Ouattara with Basquiat, which will change the course of his life.

Smiling, I remember my visits to Ouatt's studio, the first one, at the crossroads of Saint-Germain, Raspail boulevards and rue de Grenelle where I climbed the steep stairs to arrive, finally, in a space of creation, a little bigger than a maid's room, under the roofs of Paris. But right there, beyond the reduced size of the place, another dimension imposed itself upon

me, another space of drawing, unfolding, taking shape before my eyes : that of a young artist whom I felt as already intensely painter.

I saw that, little by little, slowly, Ouattara was moving forward in a double temporality, one ardent of his desire for painting, and another one more zen and determined, of his production and his thought. He moved forward and day after day, he made appear primary worlds, essential forms and original colours.

Marveled, I witnessed this unfolding and I saw the emergence of chromatic variations, dark reds or bright browns, rust and pink terracotta, orange, tan-gerine, sand or copper, yellow ochres with sulfur but also tender blue and cobalt blue, overseas blue and indigo blue and always, dogon blue.

Not forgetting the black colour, so enigmatic, the one that contains all the others ... or the one that does not contain any... This colour which obsesses all the painters from Goya to Malevitch, from Ad Reinhardt to Soulages and of which Leonardo da Vinci affirms that it does not exist before retracting himself to say that it is white which does not exist or, conversely, Matisse which affirms that black is a colour.

This colour that Ouattara already worked with the same delectation as today: anthracite blacks, liquorice blacks, blue blacks like the blue black skin of the Dravidians of southern India coming from Africa where this tone is a criterion of beauty.

With method and obstinacy, Ouattara laid the foundations for a chromatic symphony violent sometimes but yet mastered and intensified by the radical gesture of the artist. A symphony based on the alliance of the colours of the Earth to that of a brilliant palette but in sweetness.

Thus creating a harmony - his harmony - Ouattara also engaged in the fabrication of an alphabet of forms and signs created by associating primary systems of representation to those that he will experiment later on : by connecting Africa to Europe and to the rest of the world.

Geometric figures and myriads of symbols that, yesterday as today, punctuates and roams the surface of the canvas. Biomorphous forms, supple and flexible, based on the ellipse, the spiral, the curve, vegetable and animal organic forms, undulating serpentine but also sometimes, clear and sharp forms : triangles, atoms or polyhedral structures.

Symbolic figures from systems of ideographic signs playing with major constituents designated by the West as animism, fetishism, immanence, shamanism which all draw in an initial time of humanity. Systems combining oral tradition, word and rhythm, pictorial representations to which must be added the marking by the letter, the number, the digit, omnipresent ...

So, confronted to such upsurges, how to resist ? How not to be challenged and how not to try to match my captivated interest with the desire to showcase this work: this universe.

Hence the exhibition I organised at Georges Lavrov Gallery, rue Beaubourg, next to Daniel Templon. We were just beginning our routes, Ouattara had come to Paris from Abidjan, was a student at the Beaux-Arts and I was starting my collaboration with Art Press International and we wanted to devour the world.

I remember the organisation of this exhibition, the exaltation felt thanks to this Carte Blanche that Georges Lavrov had given me and how much the gallery owner was delighted to have in his space young emerging critic and artists. Lucilla Catania, Laurent Baude, Max Reithman, Jerome Basserode and others formed this first group exhibition, first exhibition of Ouattara in a gallery. We were delighted because we managed to have a few collectors, a few articles and even an interview on AfricaNumber 1.

And then, in 1988, I remember a day when Ouattara told me I will go to the vernissage at Yvon Lambert to see the exhibition of Jean-Michel Basquiat; You want to come with me ? I could not go that day but Ouattara went there and that moment, which no one could anticipate, will be the day of a disruption of itinerary. An irreversible upheaval that will accelerate time, emotions and production : his meeting with Basquiat.

For Ouattara, it will be the second significant change in life, human environment, landscapes, scale and, above all, change of language. Learning will be multiple and intense and, once again, the meeting with the Radiant Child will open to other encounters, which still structure today the axes of life of Ouattara. From Abidjan to Paris and from Paris to New York.

Today, back in Abidjan in the continuity of his production, a new phase opens, a new cycle is set in motion.

Here, the work of the artist takes all its magnitude and acquires all its fullness. With this Ivorian exhibition, a new crossing takes place, a spatio-temporal crossing that reactivates a connection with the African continent that has never stopped but is intensified and (re) discovers all its meanings : all its senses.

In his large formats, Ouattara connects himself with his ancestral memory, he uses his own alphabets, those he has created but also multiple signs, figures and pictograms that he draws from African graphics. Systems of representations, images of the world that transcribe oral traditions as strong as written traditions.

And always, the number, the figure that accompany these lines, as an echo to the Fibonacci Suite of Mario Merz's igloos ... Fibonacci, this genius mathematician of the 12th century, who will be interested in the number and the letter. The letter that, for example, becomes a number in the Abjad numeral merging with the signs of nagari Indian writing. Abjad numeration that is very close to the Hebrew Gematria : where the worlds meet!

Magic of the number and the figure which makes it possible to create infinite combinations and symbols which cross all of humanity in its diversity and that Ouattara makes us experiment thanks to the unique vectors that are the canvases of the artist.

Body to body, with the painting, always with music in the ear or in the head, Ouattara paints. He paints and paces his gesture as the composer and the musician punctuate their cadences. And, in the arena that is the canvas, he clashes with the enigma of painting, he confronts it with obstinacy, with insistence, with pain but also with delight.

In this tussle - the body of the painter /the body of the painting - he applies painting, he puts it down, he projects it with all kinds of tools: the ones we buy, the ones he creates and the primary tool : the hand.

The paintings of Ouattara unfold like immense parchments where images are drawn, they are read like immense partitions where are written silences, quarters of silences, pauses, triples and quadruple quavers. As many signs that are as many sounds. It is this link that one experiments when one is faced with the paintings of Ouattara : the unwavering link between image and sound, between figure and rhythm, between grapheme and colour.

His paintings are sonorous, they make noise, they generate rhythms but they also produce silence, contemplation, meditation. As do the musicians that the painter listens to : Thelonius Monk, Duke Ellington, Charly Parker, John Coltrane and the latest Alpha Blondy album, Ote-Fe: Human Race.

In the studio, magic takes place, a magic that reveals cosmogonies telling the formation of the Universe, cosmogonies that cross and connect the spaces and stories of Dogon and

Bambara, Senufo and Baule, Nuba and Fan.

Thus, in the studio, Ouattara brings out primary forms, those of beings and minds, and links together all the African worlds, all the mythological stories and all the beliefs that merge to render visible the presence of the Universal Existence.

In connection with the spirituality of the world, like Joseph Beuys and his totems and talismans, like Mark Rothko and his levitating blocks of colours or his open doors to another world, like Barnett Newman and his zip marking his relationship to trans-cendence, to the Sublime and the incandescent fire of the oral Torah, Ouattara draws motifs and figures directly related to the Cosmos.

In his paintings, he materialises a vision of the world that abolishes categories, boundaries and demarcations and that materialises a way of being to the world that connects the Individual to the Universal. Slowly, in a gesture constantly repeated, Ouattara unrolls the thread that guides and directs all his production: this thread that braids together ancestral traditions and modern and contemporary traditions.

Thus in the painting's space unfolds this particular link which allows the painter to establish bridges from Braque to Breton, from Wilfredo Lam to Modigliani, from Jean Arp to Paul Klee. In doing so, he leaves us, viewers, the task of decrypting all these signs, all these traces which he spangles his paintings with, like a real treasure game scattered with small pebbles.

Like Shango the master of the fire, Ouattara forges totems and masks that veil and unveil, he passes from the African statuary to the flatness of the painting, composes polyphonies of sonorous and coloured tones and brings out the spirits of the old and modern worlds.

Through his alliances, his variations, his explosions of colours, symbols, pictograms, figures and sounds, the painter, a real go-between, connects heterogeneous universes to better mark the universal dimension.

As an echo to Barnett Newman affirming The Sublime is now, in all his large formats, Ouattara merges the opposites, organises the balance of extremes, harmonises the chaos of the world.

And affirms the cosmic unity.