

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

Sounding Out Painting: A Conversation with Ouattara Watts

by Hafida Jemni
Translation by Jorjane Horton

The work of painter Ouattara Watts unfolds through music. What does it capture of the nature of music? Does it transpose it through phrasing, pattern, silence, rhythm? And what about gesture? The relationship between his works? How does Ouattara Watts work on these different levels in real time?

Hafida Jemni : Which painters and forms of art inspire you ?

Ouattara Watts : A range, of course, but first and foremost indigenous arts [Arts premiers], and then those which point to the universal : Goya, Pollock, and Rothko in particular, who touches upon the omniscient, unfolds life, death, man's place with regards to the deepest of realities.

Hafida Jemni : Do your works have titles? If so, can we consider them as "clues that allow one to guess at the nature of the work"?

Ouattara Watts : Titles, yes, but not necessarily ones which convey a pre-defined, material meaning.

Hafida Jemni : You listen to music as you paint. Do you listen to a particular kind? Do you have a preferred genre?

Ouattara Watts: I listen to music when I paint, yes, and my curiosity leads me towards all different kinds of music. Improvised jazz, and in particular John Coltrane, one of the most talented artists of his generation. He has always looked to outdo himself, on every level. Technically, for example, he explores different modes of expression, seeks out new sonorities or timbres, new ways of exploring the saxophone's dynamics: his is a unique style that figures music as a spiritual quest.

Then there's Miles Davis, trumpet-player, the most inventive jazzman of all time, who also drew and painted. "Music is painting that we can hear, and painting is music that we can see," he said! Coltrane and Davis collaborated with one another for five years, a real creative alchemy.

I would also say Fela Kuti, a politicized, committed artist, a brilliant man, a singer, a composer, a conductor, and a politician in Nigeria. Sun Ra, too, for his cosmic philosophy, his spirituality, the mystical dimension of his work.

I also listen to the polyphonic singing of the Pygmy peoples, a moving experience that forcefully conveys different emotions : serious, sad, or joyful moments, moments of rejoicing, moments of intense labor. A shared practice, passed from generation to generation, which underscores the principal elements of a life through song. Its polyphony is complex, with an interweaving and blending of voices superimposed on a given tempo to create a structure where each melodic line can develop and evolve independently of the others. The songs are

constructed around both the repetition and the infinite variation and enrichment of a base pattern. As a painter, one can discover in this music a remarkable visual energy. By listening to the rhythms, to this meditative vocalization, I can seize upon a sound, and crystallize it through repetition to the point that it takes off and can become suspended. Meditative music traces out lines and concentric movements like those of Sufi dancers moving to a sonic ritornello, a kinetic, perpetual refrain...

In his work *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Levi-Strauss presents a para-digm according to which the act of listening to music takes place on two levels. One is physiological, and therefore universal, based on organic rhythms. The other is cultural, based on a scale of musical sounds, whose number and variations differ across cultures. "The musical emotion" he writes, "springs precisely from the fact that at each moment the composer withholds or adds more or less than the listener anticipates on the basis of a pattern that he thinks he can guess, but that he is incapable of wholly divining because of his subjection to a dual periodicity: that of his respiratory system, which is determined by his individual nature, and that of scale, which is determined by his training. If the composer withholds more than we anticipate, we experience a delicious falling sensation; we feel we have been torn from a stable point on the musical ladder and thrust into the void. When the composer withholds less, the opposite occurs: he forces us to perform gymnastic exercises more skillful than our own."

H. J.: So painting draws on a musical medium for its creation ?

O. Watts : Yes, if we consider music as a spoken motif of a painting, one that brings forth forms and rhythms whose nature and expressions it shapes.

Hafida Jemni : And is the impact of music upon painting an immediate, instantaneous one ?

Ouattara Watts : The state that one expects or experiences when listening to music is that of a vacancy, of a plural availability, of a generative emotion with multiple impacts: upon the rhythm, upon the sequences of gestures, upon form, upon color ... Overall, music is the combination of expressive sounds that prolong nascent or suspended emotions in time, through the silence that it creates in some moments, the noise that it creates in others, and it is in this that we can detect the echo of the same force of embodiment that is borne by line, form, color and meaning!

The production of music is linked at once to our history, our customs, our habits, our knowledge of music, our education, our circumstances, and so on. So, for some, the 'song' of the wind is a melodious, calming song and for others it is merely noise. Music resembles painting in its execution : the figuration of musical harmony, this metaphor of a relationship of love, is accompanied by a musical 'game' that takes on a veritable plastic form.

Hafida Jemni : Would it be possible to liken the interaction between the act of listening to music and the production of painted visual forms to the close relationship between text and music that we find in song or opera ?

Ouattara Watts : Yes and no! As I listen to the music of the Pygmies, the rhythm (dis)places me into a different frame of creative reference. In other words, this music, with its particular sonority, is able to silence other noises within me, background noises which would otherwise muffle or block entire creative frequencies, which would otherwise hamper any attempts to evade the ever-vigilant guardian 'self'. It is in this way that I can attain the silence which is so conducive to creation. This space of 'silence', this creative listening, is expressed through two physical moments. First, listening, and then an evasion, a shift, an arrival in another, cosmic territory, where the painter is suspended, disconnected from material constraints; an escape to a space emptied out, created for the liberating energies of the imagination, a spiritual, trance-like state induced by rhythm. In fact, my work is based on spirituality, on the meditation borne along by music which acts as a motor for my painting. I therefore listen to rhythms on repeat, a programmed listening, dematerialized, over a longer

or shorter period of time, like a crossing from one bank to another: the bank of the awakening of the senses and of the consciousness that allows one to become a creator rather than a spectator. Creative expression is a process of affirming one's individuality beyond verbal language. It allows one to access repressed emotions and sentiments.

Hafida Jemni : Music as a motor for painting. How does this energy unfold on the canvas?

Ouattara Watts : The gesture of the painter: something of great importance for me. First, music induces an intense concentration, and the painter's body becomes engaged in the painting itself. When one looks at a painting, sounds emerge from the phrasing and disposition of forms and colors, from the presence of silence, of voids ... An analogy of sequences, which appear on the canvas, like a portrait. It can also be a question of creating free forms, as music acts to liberate the artist from various tensions to which they might be subject to leave them open or vacant for a creative energy. In this case, the artist uses music as means of attaining a disconnected state. For me, music is like the sun : it is light, and energy. It uncovers receptors, leaves them open and exposed.

Hafida Jemni : Does music permeate you in the same way when you work in different mediums-sketching, drawing, painting?

Ouattara Watts : These mediums involve two autonomous, independent approaches. Painting is more complex, it is another space, ceremonial, three-dimensional, involving a significant physical engagement. Drawing is more intimate: I draw sitting down, with a stable posture, with my feet on the ground. Painting is confined to a limited territory where different forces, movements and energy interact with one another. On canvas, music, the accompanist, is a spiral, just like in Sufi culture, man in the cosmos, fixed by spirals or ritornellos. The music of humans, in metaphorical terms, is comparable to a chaos, a whirlwind of fictions, poetic through its silent voices which take on form and color and liberate drives. There is much work to do, because Africa has much to say, and so far, everything it has said has fallen upon deaf ears. Those who wish to be engaged must listen to the world: by listening to the world, they can attain a calmness which veils a kind of entropy, of social and political disorder.

Hafida Jemni : How do you work on your canvases ?

Ouattara Watts : I work on them as series. Pigments and colors are my passion, above all else. I make my own instruments, my brushes. I have invented 'Watts' Blue' -a kind magic potion !- based on indigo-blue. I paint with brushes and paintbrushes, but I often use my hands, too, levelling paint with bare palms. I like this contact with the material, with paint, and I use my body, making circular movements borrowed from Sudanese architecture, in which clay and shea butter are mixed to create houses that last for generations. I work with textiles and fabrics (cocoa and coffee sacks, for example) which I add to the surface of my paintings to add depth and create relief. In iconographic terms, my works are composite, with painting, fabric, wood applied manually, sewn on or glued on. A richness in terms of composition and a deployment of both gesture and intellect.

Hafida Jemni : What does 'Entendre' [to hear, to understand, to catch] mean to you ?

Ouattara Watts : 'Entendre' means to listen over time, to understand where music arises from, how it sings, how its silences follow one another. The act of listening to music is punctuated by memories and desires: it creates a link to the past, which I recall and which I endure, and to the future, which I create and invent. The notion of listening involves a degree of predictability, sonic illusion, the phenomenon of emergence, the associations of thoughts; ultimately, we listen to what we want to hear. Music is a language at once abstract and specific, which the composer deploys with varying levels of talent or genius, which the musician seeks to exploit as best they can to translate all that is embodied in the score, and which the listener must ultimately appropriate in their own way to appreciate all the aspects of the mu-

sical discourse: its nuances, its colors, its modulations, accents, contrasts, breaths, ruptures and so on.

Hafida Jemni: You discussed earlier your musical references and the ways in which they enter into your production. You rub shoulders with geniuses: your choice of music is as demanding as your work. I will go away from this conversation with a strong urge to listen to *All Of You : The Last Tour, 1960*, a boxset that has just been re-released by Acrobat featuring live recordings from spring 1960, when the Miles Davis Quintet and John Coltrane toured Europe, and which marked the end of Coltrane and Davis' five years of collaboration. Might I guess that one of your paintings was created as this music played in your studio?

Interview conducted in the 6^e arrondissement of Paris, 15^e October 2015 by HJ.

Hafida Jemni is a curator and holds a degree from the Institut d'Etudes Supérieures de l'Art, where she teaches classes on contemporary African and diasporic art.