

## *Ouattara Watts*

Mike Weiss Gallery, New York, 2007.

## Ouattara Watts

by Robert Farris Thompson

Ouattara was born on 27 May 1957 in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. He started painting at the age of 7 and turned professional when he moved to Paris in 1977. He came to New York in 1988. At this writing he is arguably one of the most exciting artists in America. He takes on the world as his subject matter: geo-politics, an enigmatic jazz star, Kline-like slashing diagonals, allusions to classical African clay architecture, and even an homage to Baudelaire.

Take "Farafina" ["the continent for black people"]. Over areas stained in the tones of raw earth float nicely drawn numbers. When the artist recently revealed that the numbers are names, names of African slaves taken to the Americas, names of Jews at Auschwitz, everything suddenly made sense.

"Sun Ra" honors a famous jazz orchestra leader who rejected the racisms of our planet in favor of moving to outer space. Black lines battle with a violent red upsurge, itself shooting up and right. Then three pink apostrophes break all that up and change the tempo of red. Color becomes rhythm. Globes full of stars and numbers evoke Sun Ra nicely.

Baudelaire haunts Ouattara. "In Les Fleurs du Mal I" a strange black plant blossoms with dark demon masks. In "Les Fleurs du Mal II" bouquet-like arrangements darken ominously. A figure astonishes us with a body that turns into sky. We're looking at his chest and suddenly we are in deep outer space.

"Blood Brother" salutes a black comrade with an African emblem of sovereignty, the leopard. Two red lines frame the picture. The power of the leopard ultimately comes from God in cosmos and so globes full of stars return. But this time they are drawn in three different sizes and variously placed to suggest distant revolution. Below, cascading brown lines build and rebuild Mother Africa.

In sum, Ouattara takes on the world in his own lyric voice. His command of color, the way that he draws and the speed of his mark-making, break open the secrets of rhythm and beauty.