

## A CODE MAKER CRACKS THE CODE OF THE ART WORLD

by Zoë Hopkins



Ouattara Watts at his art studio in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn. Credit Elijah Mogoli for The New York Times

The artist Ouattara Watts usually enters his studio in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn under the blanket of the night. He has often worked between 9 p.m. and 8 a.m. for most of his five-decade career. It is in the relative quiet of these hours that Watts says he can most clearly hear frequencies otherwise muted by the daytime buzz: those of otherworldly and occult elements that appear in his paintings.

Even during the day, Watts's sanctum-like studio felt a world apart from its industrial environs. On the afternoon of my visit, jazz music culled from his vast CD collection hummed quietly in the background. Several works in progress were propped up on the walls, on which hung signs that read: "No Photos." (He made an exception for this article.) During our interview, Watts spoke with laconic language and elegant metaphors that delighted in furtive indirection rather than straightforward explication.

Watts's artworks are charged with their maker's enigmatic tendencies. Animated by African spiritual traditions, mysticism and metaphysical cosmologies, his paintings — large canvases and wood panels that hover between figuration, abstraction and collage — are dense with unknown elements.

At his studio, he spoke of mixing pigments with a "magic potion" of ingredients that he wouldn't name to create a color he calls "Watts blue." The sequences of numbers on some of his canvases are "codes" that must be cracked. "Maybe one day people will know," he said teasingly. "But not today."

Several of Watts's paintings are on view through Dec. 21 at Karma Gallery, in New York, a solo exhibition focused on his work from the 1990s, the decade that set his career in motion. The gallery has also published a 570-page monograph to accompany the show — the first extensive book on Watts's work. Concurrently, at the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, N.H., several of Watts's paintings are on view in the show "Jean-Michel Basquiat and Ouattara Watts: A Distant Conversation" (through Feb. 23, 2025). The two became fast

friends and creative interlocutors after they met at a gallery opening in Paris in the 1980s.

The two shows are golden opportunities for engagement with the work of an artist who has been seminal but somehow overlooked despite his impressive exhibition history. In 1993, he was included in an show of Ivorian and Senegalese artists at the Venice Biennale. In 2002, his paintings were shown in “The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994,” curated by Okwui Enwezor at what is now MoMA PS1. The New York Times critic Roberta Smith called it “one of those rare occasions when the usually hyperbolic term ‘landmark exhibition’ is not an overstatement.” That same year, Watts’s work appeared in Documenta XI, another Enwezor production famous for its engagements with topics of postcolonial globalization.

Still, if Watts’s name doesn’t ring bells, it is because he has been somewhat guarded from the hustle and bustle of the art world. After the early decades of his career, he took on fewer shows. He was, he said, “taking a break from galleries, but never from working in the studio.” When painting, he explained, “every step I make has got to be a real one.”

Watts, who is 67, was born in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. His family is from Korhogo, a small city in the north, where people continue to practice centuries-old religious traditions. There, Watts developed a close relationship with one of his great-uncles, a shaman. “He always said to me, ‘You know what? You cannot be an artist only for your tribe or your village. No, you are an artist because the artist is connected to the cosmos.’”

In his paintings, Watts undertakes this cosmic search using a lexicon of imagery and iconography culled from African spiritual traditions. Often, these appear alongside numbers and mathematical symbols, which, for Watts, are representations of the universe and its science. Many of his pieces also incorporate three-dimensional objects — animal horns, small sculptures, photographs and textiles.

In early paintings like “OZB” (1993), Amharic script swirls above Albert Einstein’s book “Relativity: The Special and General Theory,” a copy of which is affixed to the canvas. Elsewhere, in works like “Vertigo #2” (2011), which was acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, spiral forms evoke the cosmogony of the Dogon, who are Indigenous people in Mali. In “Sacred Painting” (1990), which is on view at Karma, an insulated electric wire clipped to the panel pays tribute to Shango, the Yoruba deity of lightning.

“All of Africa is influential in my work,” Watts said, reflecting on the bricolage of cultures and countries that appear in his paintings. “My spirituality does not come from one place. It is not just Cote d’Ivoire or Nigeria or Senegal. It is Africa.”

These days, Watts travels throughout Africa regularly. But he has lived off the continent for most of his life and calls himself a “citizen of the world.” (This phrase is emblazoned on a ceiling beam in his studio.) In 1977, he left the Ivory Coast for Paris, where he studied painting at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. There, he was captivated by French surrealism and modernism, echoes of which come to life in his paintings.

In 1988, Watts met Basquiat, who, impressed by his work, persuaded him to move to New York, where Basquiat believed broader horizons were possible for artists. After a short time in the city, Watts had become embedded in its artist circles, befriending the likes of George Condo, David Hammons and Francesco Clemente. He grew hooked on the city and has remained here ever since.

Though Watts has been keeping a low profile in New York, in recent years his tempo has shifted into a higher gear. Since 2018, he has had shows in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Dakar and his hometown, Abidjan. He also participated in the 2021 Gwangju Biennale and the 2024 Shanghai Biennale.

Though the cadence of his shows has grown more rapid, the work is still pure Watts. “He’s one of those artists who has managed to be consistent throughout five decades of work. But also, the work has never stopped moving and becoming more complex,” said Lorenzo Fusi, who curated the show at the Currier Museum of Art.

Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, has been following Watts for years. “He’s a brilliant painter, but he’s understated,” Nzewi said. “We typically only think about artists who make a lot of noise but he’s an introvert, he has a very quiet charisma.” At the same time, he noted, Watts is “finding his true position as a painter of merit on a global stage.”

The early works at Karma are mostly rendered on wood panels and have a coherent palette of earthy browns, yellows and greens. The show at Currier — which includes recent and older work — tilts on a different axis, one of playful line and effulgent color. (His vibrant blues and reds are not unlike Basquiat’s.) Watts’s visual language has always been abstract, but in the past decade, his paintings have been venturing further. “Spiritual Gangster 06” (2023), for example, seems to live in a kind of dream space of layered pastel hues and unmoored abstract symbols.

Though his stylistic sensibilities have shifted over time, Watts’s idiosyncratic technique has remained consistent. He typically works on the floor, à la Pollock, sometimes leaving footprints on the canvas. He then hauls the paintings to the wall to observe and complete them.

Watts, who likens his improvisatory process to jazz, always plays music while he works. His favorites include Fela Kuti, Bob Dylan and Thelonious Monk. For Watts, these artists are essential to his process: “They give me energy to think,” he said. “I drink all of it up. And after I drink that light, I give it to others.”

Often, he uses a paint-coated glove instead of a brush, leaving a thick, rough texture behind. Organic materials like shredded leaves and paper, which Watts mixes into his paint, lend additional density and friction to his surfaces. His creative process, he said, is at once “very physical” and shot through with spiritual intensity: He describes entering a kind of trance state when he paints, recalling the shamanistic rituals he grew up observing. “I go somewhere that I don’t control,” he said.

Standing in front of one of his paintings, Watts gestured toward it, then to his own chest and said, without elaboration or hesitation: “We are intercessors.”