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ART REVIEW; Mix of Cultures, Politics and Bravado

By Holland Cotter, May 19, 1995.

Major exhibitions of contemporary African art are rare in New York City. The last one of note was the 1993 "Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale," a fascinating, tough-to-love show organized by the Museum for African Art for Europe and brought to SoHo last year.

Of its five artists, the outstanding presence was a 38-year-old painter who goes by the name Ouattara (pronounced wah-TARA). His big assemblages of paint, dirt and found objects, pierced with niches and crowned with architectural turrets, had the texture of mud-walled shrines, but their vibrant combination of graffitilike words and gestural abstraction recalled epic-minded Western pasticheurs like Anselm Kiefer and Julian Schnabel.

The artist is now having his first solo show with Gagosian Gallery, and it's a knockout. The new paintings are almost absurdly ambitious: grand in scale (13 feet across in some cases), broadly but confidently painted and packed with a dense pileup range of images in which African history and American rap music, voodoo and Joseph Beuys's shamanism, colonialist remnants and Pan African politics maintain an exhilarating coexistence.

This mix is entirely in line with Ouattara's own background. He was born in the Ivory Coast, and although by his own account his childhood was shaped by such traditional events as initiation rituals. An uncle, Draman Ouattara, was, for a time, the Ivorian Prime Minister and later an executive director for the World Bank in the United States. Ouattara himself left Africa for Paris to pursue his career as an artist. There he met the American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, who not only bought his work in bulk, but also brought him to New York, where he now spends much of his time, while commuting to Paris and Abidjan, Ivory Coast.

American, European and African cultures mingle seamlessly in the new work, though from first to last it is Africa that predominates. The first painting in the show, the mural-size "Nkrouma Berlin 1885," is a vivid symbolic precis of the continent's modern history, beginning in 1885, when European powers gathered in Berlin to carve Africa up into the disruptive and arbitrary proprietary units still in place today.

Against the form of a vermilion cross stand two dark tutelary figures, one with bound arms, the other with hands raised in prayer. Between them, written in the Amharic language of Ethiopia, is the name of Kwame Nkrouma of Ghana, who was both President of Africa's first independent nation and who urged Pan African unity. Finally, at the painting's very center is a scrap of paper bearing the name of European cigarettes, a wry souvenir of the discarded but ever-present colonialist past. Political references are still more pointed elsewhere. One painting makes allusions to the existence of contemporary slavery. A grotesque, headless, coffee-colored figure, derived from the artist's reading of the biblical apocalypse, seems to be in the process of exploding across a lemon-yellow ground. Legions of olive- and black-skinned figures -- a generic third world labor force -- stand in ranks around him, while a torn burlap bag used for exporting "naturally decaffeinated" coffee is glued to the upper left corner.

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Like the work of Beuys, Ouattara's is framed in epochal and universalist socio-spiritual terms. It is an approach generally out of fashion in New York's mainstream art at present, but he makes a vividly convincing case for it in paintings like "Mami Wata," which brings together the Afro-Caribbean deity with a Christian cross and voodoo instruments in a symmetrical composition that actually suggests a ritual enactment in progress but manages to sustain an unpretentious, street-smart pop edge.

Popular culture itself is the subject of "Hip-Hop Jazz Makoussa," with its two horizontal bands of collaged record album covers, echoed by attenuated male and female African figures. Here Aretha Franklin and Bob Marley, John Coltrane and the Rolling Stones, Queen Latifah and African bands form an edge-to-edge continuum, which has African culture at its roots and which is "blessed," to quote the Amharic word on the painting's surface.

The distinctive blend of wit and gravity in the Gagosian show, which has been organized by Raymond Foye, is most arrestingly embodied in "Dark Star." Here the figure of death appears in the form of a gold skeleton, posed with the hip-slung insouciance of a rock hero as he pounds out rhythms on a drum. A skull fused with an ahnk, the Egyptian symbol of eternal life, appears elsewhere. The rest of the huge canvas is filled with circling blood-red footprints, left by the artist as he danced across its surface, and a sea of handprints like a communal gesture of either praise or dismay.

The sense of community -- of a kind of spiritual force field shared across cultures -- is strong here, as it was, in a crankier, angrier, specifically urban way in Basquiat's work. And indeed it is easy to see why the American artist championed his African colleague. In some ways they are mirror reflections: the black American artist channeling African influences and making them his own, the African channeling American influences and making them his own. The resemblance between the two ends there -- the work of one could never be mistaken for the other -- but the connection suggests vibrant future directions for contemporary art on both sides of the Atlantic.

The works of Ouattara remain at the Gagosian Gallery, 65 Thompson Street, SoHo, through June 10.