ALMINE RECH

Ouattara Watts
Ouattara in Paris

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Like the 'intercessors' in the title of certain of his paintings, Ouattara Watts intercedes at the cross-roads of civilisations to reconcile worlds. His work bridges geographies and forms of longstanding aesthetic heritage, constructing intricate dialogues between cultural and iconographic systems. Watts' visual languages are heart-stoppingly beautiful and expansive, while retaining always a layered complexity of references, signs and correspondences. It is almost half a century since he arrived in Paris from Abidjan in 1977 to study painting at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, before moving to New York just over a decade later and making it his home. His first museum show in the United States was at Berkeley Art Museum in 1994, curated by Lawrence R. Rinder who then selected his work for the Whitney Biennial (2002). In the same year, Okwui Enwezor showed three large paintings in Documenta XI (2002), having also included his work in the landmark survey 'The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994' (2001–2002). Since that time, Watts has continued to build a remarkable oeuvre, composing and manipulating richly textured and coloured painted surfaces with virtuosity at an often-monumental scale, as well as working more intimately on paper with watercolour and gouache, and integrating found objects and elements of collage. Seen from within European and North American art history, Watts' work speaks among other things to abstract expressionism (Rothko, Pollock) and neo-expressionist fig-uration. Yet it completely exceeds such categories, and rather draws these points of reference into vast, polyphonic aesthetic architectures.

Through the iconography he conjures, Watts points to interconnected histories and heritages, overlaying systems of signs and finding corelations. From an early interest in ancient Egyptian and Greek history, as well as in classical West African knowledge systems across Dogon, Bambara, Senufo, Baule, Yoruba and Dan cultures, amongst others, he began to explore what is held in com-mon at the intersections of situated worlds and knowledges, as well as to reactivate and make vis-ible effaced cultural constellations. It was to Watt's knowledge of West African spiritual traditions that Jean-Michel Basquiat was particularly attracted when they met in Paris in 1988. Basquiat had visited Korhogo district in the north of Cote d'Ivoire from where Watts' family originated, and where he had travelled often as a child and been initiated into Senufo spiritual practice. Basquiat was very interested in exploring these sacred traditions and their relationship to Vaudoo in Haiti, planning a trip to Cote d'Ivoire together with Watts in 1989 but passing away before.

During his years in France, Watts delved into the influence of West African sculptural traditions on European modernist artists, particularly Brancusi, Picasso, Modigliani and the Surrealists. In his works, images appear again and again that relate to these investigations, joined from the 2000s, by mathematical symbols and equations, references to science and technology, as well as to Sufism and other spiritual and esoteric forms, elements of Amharic and Aramaic script, Egyptian hiero-glyphs, Bambara, Arabic. Watts notes that mathematical elements allow you to talk about many things, and also to include coded information within works, with for example numbers representing a sentence or a word. (1) In the mixed media *Farafina* (2007), the numbers inscribed on the work correspond to those given to African slaves taken to the Americas and to Jewish people sent to Auschwitz. References abound to musical figures from Fela Kuti, Salif Keita and Aretha Franklin to John Coltrane and Sun Ra, amongst others, with Swing also occupying a prominent place on his pictorial surface in the form of large foregrounded paint splashes. Poets Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Ginsberg rub shoulders with world political events, from the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, when European colonial powers sliced up the African continent, to the story of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais.

Colour is a vital element of Watts' oeuvre - orange, yellow, red, blue, brown, black, green..., colours which may recall landscape, earth, minerals, clay architecture but are also vibrant and surprising. He makes his own pigments, including 'Watts' Blue', a kind of indigo, and also brushes, though he often also uses his bare hands to work the paint:

'I like this contact with the material, paint, and I make circular movements with my body, move-ments borrowed from Sudanese architecture from the time when a mix of clay and shea butter allowed the houses constructed to last for generations. I work with textiles materials (cocoa and coffee sacks, and so on) which I add to the surface to build layers and create depth.' (2)

His rich compositions combine colour, gesture and layered textures of fabric and wood. Organic forms, cosmic spirals and geometric shapes send the eye shooting across the paint surface; elements repeat, generating vibrant spatial rhythms.

The artist has often spoken of the importance of music to his creative process, where a form of absorption in listening creates the conditions for concentration and flow in painting: 'For me, music is like the sun, it is light, and energy. It opens up all of the channels.' (3) Apart from jazz
(Coltrane, Davis, Monk, Ellington, Parker...), he has a particular love for the contrapuntal poly-phonic and polyrhythmic musical forms of central Africa, transmitted over millennia, and exist-ing long before the advent of European polyphonic music around the twelfth century. The artist says: '*The music of humanity, in metaphorical terms, can be compared to chaos, an emotional whirlwind, that becomes poetic through silent voices which take on form and colour and release energy. Much work remains to be done, because Africa has many things to say which have not yet been heard! Those who wish to be involved must listen to the world*.' (4) In Watts' paintings, decoding the myriad references is not essential to entering into the mystery. Opening the doors of the senses is the key to unlocking the works' emotional and spiritual alchemy: '*What I paint, always, is the cosmos*'. (5)

- Kathryn Weir

Notes :

(1) Ouattara Watts, personal communication, April 2023.

(2) Hafida Jemni, 'Ce que la peinture entend de la musique. Conversation avec Watts Ouattara', Afrikadaa, no.10, December 2015 – February 2016, pp.102-107, translation by the author.

(3) Hafida Jemni, 2015-2016.

(4) Hafida Jemni, 2015-2016.

(5) Ouattara Watts, personal communication, April 2023.