Waganga

Zora Mann

Curator: Éric Mangion

14.02. - 03.05.2020
Zora Mann's painting is the stuff of density: many colours, shapes that are repetitive or, conversely, divergent, intertwined or superposed in compositions that are often saturated with lines or curves. If her works do not refer to geometric or lyric abstraction, they rather evoke psychedelic experimentation in the way they make different worlds and perceptions cohabit. She says: «I paint from the inside out.»

This manner of thought and production is also very close to Art Brut (Outsider Art), precisely for its «interiority» and intertwined motifs. What makes her work even more singular is its tribal dimension. Her parents are from East Africa, where she has spent a great deal of time and whose culture has profoundly affected her. Waganga (title of the exhibition) means «healers of souls» in Swahili (Bantu languages).
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The exhibition brings together several paintings she made there. They are of different formats (one is very large: 3x9 metres) and form a mural assemblage. They are devised as travel diaries, since many were made during her journeys. They can also be perceived as reconstructed dreams. The ‘spatial synchronicities’ (a term borrowed from the psychoanalyst Carl Jung), specific to the construction of dreams, are realistic: the smaller the formats, the more striking their ‘density’.

But Zora Mann’s painting is also present in the sculptures she calls Boucliers (Shields). These objects, intended by their very nature for protection or combat, here shed their warlike purpose to become ‘physical boundaries’, serving as surfaces for more or less curved, elongated or compact motifs. The more massive Murs (Walls), made of wood, papier-mâché, resin and paint, can be seen through, which in no way precludes viewing them as distorted bodies erected in the middle of the exhibition’s main room. The bead curtains she makes with the remains of thongs collected on the banks of Kenya’s waterways are, on the contrary, more fluid objects, intended to be seen through, also acting as filters between several works.

Éric Mangion

This exhibition was devised during the artist’s residency at the Centre d’Art between November 2019 and February 2020.
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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Production</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Untitled, 2020</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ceramics</td>
<td>56x28x3 cm</td>
<td>Villa Arson Nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Shield 1, 2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acrylic and oil on canvas</td>
<td>68 cm in diameter</td>
<td>Villa Arson Nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Untitled and Unfinished, 2016</td>
<td></td>
<td>Watercolor on paper</td>
<td>200x96 cm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Untitled, 2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>Watercolor on paper</td>
<td>200x96 cm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Waganga, 2020</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acrylic on canvas</td>
<td>300x900 cm</td>
<td>Villa Arson Nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Walls (not yet titled), 2020</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 sculptures, wood papier mâché, acrylic resin</td>
<td>212x163x22,5 cm, 200x201x22,5 cm</td>
<td>Villa Arson Nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Shield 14, 2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acrylic and oil on canvas</td>
<td>105x50x4 cm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Shield 17, 2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acrylic and oil on canvas</td>
<td>162x62x6 cm</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Shield 15, 2018</td>
<td></td>
<td>Acrylic and oil on canvas</td>
<td>115x70x13 cm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Untitled (curtain), 2020</td>
<td></td>
<td>Flip flop beads</td>
<td>350x365 cm</td>
<td>Villa Arson Nice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
11. **Shield 22**  
Oil on wood  
80x50x12 cm

12. **Karl**, 2018  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
155x56x6 cm

13. **Shield 6**, 2015  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
180x40 cm

14. **Shield 21**  
Oil on wood  
70x70x6 cm

15. **Untitled**, 2016  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
200x130 cm

Acrylic and oil on canvas  
200x130 cm

17. **Shield 18 19, 20**, 2018  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
3x (208x52x4 cm)

18. 10 watercolors on paper  
76,5x56 cm each

19. **Untitled**, 2020  
Ceramics and flip flop beads  
160x174 cm  
Production Villa Arson Nice

20. 5 watercolors on paper  
24x31,8 cm  
31,8x24 cm

21. **Bodybuilder**, 2018  
Acrylic and oil on canvas  
200x420x4 cm (tryptique)

22. **Untitled**, 2019  
From left to right :  
21x16 cm  
Oil on wood  
13x10 cm  
Gouache and watercolor on wood  
16x21 cm  
Acrylic on wood  
21x16 cm  
Acrylic on wood

**Courtesy : Chert & Lüdde Gallery, Berlin (Allemagne)**

Photo: François Fernandez
Éric Mangion: Ever since I've been following your work, I've been struck by the increasing density of your pieces over the years. I became even more aware of this when I discovered the « real » works being unpacked or being produced on site. Some of them almost reach saturation point for the viewer. What does this phenomenon arise from? I imagine each painting - or almost painting - to be the result of a long, meticulous process.

Zora Mann: I think the saturation you speak of comes from a restlessness inside me, a need for repetition and a search for vibrancy. I find repetition interesting because it does two contradictory things: it makes the repeated element more important because it’s numerous, but also less significant because one regards it merely as part of a pattern. I like this fluctuation and contradiction of meaning.

My painting process is relatively slow, a canvas can take several months to paint. They’re preceded by drawings in which I find the forms and composition. Having the constraint of a design frees me to simply concentrate on painting without the dizzying infinite possibilities at every brushstroke. I used to stick much more rigidly to the design, now this restlessness makes it impossible and pulls me towards a more painterly approach.

É.M.: Your work calls forth several different painting styles: tribal painting (which we could also call African), modern western painting, as well as psychedelic painting based on visions - or rather on visual illusions. I'm not quite sure if this psychedelic aspect is a deliberate element that you choose to introduce from the start, or if it simply derives from the natural synthesis of the first two styles. I know for instance that you often strive to obtain a “rhythm of opposites”.

Z.M.: I love science-fiction and I love psychedelic art, so these are ingredients in my work, but the aspect you talk about also comes from states I’ve experienced, a feeling of the dissolution of self and loss of boundaries, when I feel I become porous and reality multiplies. Some emotional states can act as a zoom making details seem important, and others lead to a fragmentation of sense. I think this also feeds into the repetitive and fragmented aspect of my work.

As for a rhythm of opposites, as you’ve put it, I like that in painting you can put things together that have contradictory visual codes, and as a viewer you see these all at once.

É.M.: Where does this tribal influence in your work come from? In fact the title of your exhibition is Waganga, which is an African word that I think designates “healers”. What surprises me is that this is not a fabricated element of your work. It was already very much there when you started studying art, in a not so distant past when the art
world still remained generally unconcerned by non western cultures.

Z.M.: I grew up in-between cultures. My parents come from east Africa. My mom was born in Uganda and my dad in Kenya where he still lives. I'd visit him for every summer holiday when I was a kid. I didn't live in Kenya for long stretches, a year here some months there, but still it is also home and a source of visual vocabulary to me.

I found the term Waganga in a short film that my father made about George, a man who removes curses. It’s a Swahili term for curse removers. It's the plural to mganga. The curses are physical objects thrown into the body by another mganga and the curses are removed by making a small superficial incision and by then sucking them out. They're often bits of bone or teeth.

I find this completely fascinating; it’s suggestive of another dimension.

I see it as similar to the creative process where objects are also pulled into being and manifested from parallel realms.

É.M.: The “Shields” (as you call them yourself) that you make are rich in meaning and symbols. Why resort to these, as they are normally destined for protection during a battle?

Z.M.: I made the first shield to give my painting a functionality. I liked the idea of the painting having use, being something that protects and transforming the paintbrush into an arrow.

For me they stand for something between two people, an energy, as a kind of solid aura, a physical boundary.

On the first part of the series I used these primary forms that we associate with ancient or tribal shields. After that I did a series of more contemporary shields that took the forms of police shields.

What was interesting, was that because their form was immediately recognizable, I had more freedom, the form would still hold its meaning almost no matter what I painted on it. On the round one from the previous series I’d tried to paint less abstractly and symmetrical, but it just fell apart and was no longer a shield but just a decorative object. After the police-shields I did another series of shields that are more freely designed and have an anthropomorphic quality.

É.M.: You often speak of the physical dimension of your pieces. This is not easy to grasp, except perhaps with the two sculptures that you call “Walls”, created for the exhibition, that impose themselves to our bodies in the space.

Z.M.: Often my paintings depict an interiority. How could one paint the inside of a body if it were to become an abstraction. The body and mind become a scenography for an interior event. They are about permeability, the human
condition of living inside a body, looking out through a skull. I paint from the inside out.

You can find the aspect of permeability in my other works too: the curtains that you can see and walk through, the shields with their grids and slits to look through and the walls with their openings. They function as filters and as selective barriers, so in a way as membranes.

É.M. : There will be one curtain of pearls in this exhibition. Could you tell us how they are made, and what their status is both in your work?

Z.M. : The beads are made of recycled flip-flops found on the shores and waterways of Kenya. They have been produced mostly in Asia, sent to Africa, worn there and lost, or lost in Asia and swept up on the Kenyan coast.

There they are collected, made into beads and strung by the organization Ocean Sole, that I volunteered for years ago. Ocean Sole’s work is meaningful as it helps the community there and the environment. They collect tons of flip-flops every year which are a major marine pollutant on the Indian Ocean beaches. This involves the work of groups on several islands, where they are strung onto thread then sent to Nairobi and shipped to me. They get assembled into a pattern in Berlin.

In an installation the curtains work as filters, and give another layer of meaning. It’s a way of making an image through which you can pass.

É.M. : You also produce a lot of small paintings that look like drawings from afar, but in fact are watercolors. When I saw them up close during the preparation of the exhibition, I was also surprised by their complexity. The psychedelic dimension is even more obvious. It feels like I’m poring over a dream journal rather than a travel journal.

Z.M. : The watercolors are in a way a travel diary as a lot of them were made during travels. It is like carrying my home with me. I just take a piece of paper and the coloring box and I can dive into my world.

Dreams play into them as well sometimes. It’s about mixing spaces. Outer real existing spaces, and interior more abstract places. Dreams are one state in which we experience loss of boundaries and a place where different realms of our human experience merge. I rarely paint my dreams, even though I have a rich dream life, but I do use structures and spatial synchronisms that exist in dreams.

É.M. : Lastly, you produced variously shaped ceramic sculptures for the exhibition, tied together with a rope and which you would like to present on the wall in a frontal way. How did the idea for these new sculptures occur to you?

Z.M. : The idea came by accident. I was making a flowerpot. I had made the first part in one session,
and when I returned to make the second part the first was too dry to attach any clay to it, so I decided to make a wall piece instead. My grandmother on my father’s side made enamel jewelry that I always found too clunky to wear but beautiful as wall pieces. These works are inspired by this memory.
Zora Mann, born in 1979 in Amersham (United Kingdom), graduated from Villa Arson in 2009. She liveds and work in Berlin.

Her recent solo exhibitions include: Being and your own form, ChertLüdde, Berlin (2018); Statements, Art Basel, with ChertLüdde, Berlin (2017); Doppelgänger, 45cbm studio space, Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden Baden (2017); FIAC, Foire Internationale d’Art Contemporain, La Fayette Sector, Paris (2015); Coagula, Chert, Berlin (2014).

She has also participated in collective exhibitions: Freigänger, The Knast, Berlin (2019); A Shiver in Search of a Spine, Arario Gallery, Samcheong, Korea (2019); All the Small Things, Alessandro Buganza, Milan (2019); The Shrine of Friendship, BKV-Brandenburgischen Kunstverein, Potsdam (2018); Condo, hosted by Union Pacific, London (2018); Interface(s) - Tales of Babel, Haus am Lützowplatz - Studio Galerie, Berlin (2017).

Zora Mann is represented by the gallery Chertlüdde, Berlin.

+ information: http://chertluedde.com/artist/zora-mann

Translation: Claire Bernstein
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«CARTES BLANCHES» IN EXHIBITIONS
TO THE STUDENTS OF THE NICE CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC
Thursday 26 March from 6.30 pm to 8.30 pm at Villa Arson
Musical stroll to discover the Sol Calero and Zora Mann's exhibitions.

During this late opening, the students and teachers of the music conservatory and the Villa Arson invite you to an unusual visit of the exhibitions of Sol Calero and Zora Mann. Artists and performers have designed a musical program, based on classical repertoire, Latino inspiration, jazz or contemporary creations, in resonance with the paintings on display. At various locations in the art centre, groups will perform at regular intervals, in the form of musical performances that visitors will be free to enjoy at their leisure.

An appointment open to all audiences, free admission.
PRACTICAL INFORMATION
Exhibition from February 14 to May 03.2020.
Open every day except Tuesday, from 2 to 6 PM.
Closed on May 01.
Free admission.

Meet the artist:
10th March at 6 pm in amphitheater 1 and in the exhibition

«CARTES BLANCHES» IN EXHIBITIONS
to the students of the Nice Conservatory of Music
Thursday 26 March from 6.30 pm to 8.30 pm at Villa Arson
See information on previous page

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