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VILLA ARSON NICE  
EXHIBITION JUNE 4-SEPTEMBER 17 2017

## EDITORIAL

by Jean-Pierre Simon, director of Villa Arson

In partnership with the Centre Arts et Cultures Lobozoukpa, Villa Arson presents an exhibition of Beninese artists that aims to showcase an emerging creative scene marked by the artists' desire to assert their roots and culture, but also to live in the present and address recent political events. Several visually powerful works in the exhibition tackle the question of immigration, resulting both from colonisation and contemporary migration, a situation which leads to the human tragedies we regularly observe between Africa and Europe.

The overwhelming majority of the artists live in their country of origin and produce art using techniques that are both traditional and contemporary. They adapt to the economic difficulties they encounter and are keenly aware of the materials they use. The forms they create are generous and, as such, they reflect the art scene in Benin, a country that is in the process of gaining its freedom.

My aim with this exhibition at Villa Arson is to popula-

rise Beninese creativity and share its incredible energy with the public. Today, I can recognise in this art the same spirit and the same signs as forty years ago when I was in charge of the exhibition programme at the Centre Culturel Français in Cotonou. It brings together a spirit of intergenerational dialogue, traditional religious beliefs, the inspirational role of ancestors, the visual inventiveness of craftsmen in a play of tradition and modernity, profound political reflections, hospitality and youth.

This exhibition inaugurates, I hope, a period of cooperation between Villa Arson and the Centre Arts et Cultures Lobozoukpa, in particular by means of a joint artist-in-residence programme. Villa Arson would like to offer its experience and expertise in artistic training and education in as many different ways as possible. Finally I would like to thank Galerie Vallois (Paris) which not only instituted the connection between our two establishments, but is also a supportive and constructive patron to the Centre Arts et Cultures Lobozoukpa thereby ensuring its artists increased visibility.

## BENIN'S ART SCENE COMES TO VILLA ARSON

By Elise Daubelcour

Benin is a thin strip of land on the Gulf of Guinea with a population of 11 million. Wedged between its giant neighbour Nigeria and twin brother Togo, it affords Niger and Burkina Faso a narrow access to the Atlantic. Benin possesses neither gold, nor diamonds, nor even oil, or at least not enough to arouse cupidity. When it was still known as Dahomey it was nicknamed 'Africa's Latin Quarter'; today Benin's wealth is to be found in the peace that reigns there and its lively democratic spirit, in the land itself and its fields of cotton, in trade and the port at Cotonou, not forgetting its traditions and Vodun culture. Benin boasts a thriving art scene, in part inherited from the court art of past kingdoms, including Abomey.

A large number of artists from the younger generation are actively involved in the Centre Arts et Cultures, which takes a particular interest in the visual arts. The 'Petit Musée de la Récade', the artist-in-residence programme and exhibitions provide an audacious insight into Benin's cultural heritage and contemporary creation, whilst remaining strongly rooted in the social fabric of Lobozoukpa. Its actions have been made possible by the patronage of Galerie Vallois and the Collectif des Antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which affords this generation of artists a new-found level of visibility in France.

The fourteen exhibiting artists all live in Benin or in France and travel from one continent to another. They are bathed in a plural identity, an articulation that allows them to address the situation in Africa in a precise, penetrating and often ironic manner, but one that is never lacking in humour. Their works of art are an invitation to dialogue about their world view, the realities of our society and the current mechanisms of domination inherited from the colonial period. In short, a creative narration that talks of Benin, the African continent and the world as they see it today. Edwidge Aplogan's approach is political. It relates the throes of a persistent form of post-colonialism. *Bienvenue en Afrique France* wraps parts of Villa Arson's buildings and gardens in the flags of African countries or Abomey wall hangings<sup>1</sup> and covers the floor with CFA franc banknotes.<sup>2</sup> The installation questions the real economic sovereignty of these countries and the legitimacy of the CFA franc, a currency that is pegged to the euro and manufactured in France on behalf of countries that have been independent for more than fifty years.

The nail-studded table and chair in Julien Vignikin's *Dîner des fantômes* makes any idea of eating (hinted at by the empty plate and glass) impossible. This piece points at the current downward spiral that sees

unequal access to food in some parts of the world and overconsumption in the West. The austere nature of this solitary meal calls out to the spectator: in African societies, food and water symbolise conviviality and communication, both between people and the invisible world. Perhaps the ghosts in Julien Vignikin's title represent the West coming face-to-face with itself.

Didier Viodé's ink works on paper from his series *Les Migrants* and Gérard Quenum's installation, which comprises a pile of dolls' heads retained within a narrow, poorly tied-up dugout canoe, unequivocally illustrate the pitfalls associated with travelling and the suffering caused by involuntary or forced exile.

Zinkpè has taken hohô figurines that symbolise twins in the Fon culture to make a gigantic globe. Stripped of any cultural references and hanging by the thousand, the royal blue, fuchsia or emerald green figurines appear suddenly before us, floating, timeless and elusive. Steeped in poetry, this installation seems to recount the ceaseless circulation of human beings in a world that is henceforth global.

The future of the planet's environment is also cause for question. Richard Korblah's clay bust, topped with a headdress of empty jerrycans, illustrates the kilometres that are covered in search of water and serves as a reminder of the vital and exhaustible nature of this precious resource. The *Robe bleue*, a haute couture dress by Prince Toffa, is sculpted from a multitude of used 'pure water' sachets that are sold all over Cotonou by young girls carrying an improvised stall. It first evokes the multiplication of waste from day-to-day consumption and then transforms this waste, moved by the artist's desire to create unique and luxurious objects.

Charles Placide's photos are the reflection of the ritual ceremonies that reveal the wealth of cultural expression inherent to the practice of Vodun, which is deeply rooted in present-day Benin. Kifouli Dossou's multi-coloured and whimsical sculpture belongs to the Guede tradition and echoes an anecdote, a social or satirical message. A scene carved at the top of a mask shows a man looking at a woman with light-coloured skin and holding his nose. It denounces the ravages of skin-lightening, a major public health problem.

Three pieces from the Petit Musée de la Récade's collection have pride of place at the centre of the exhibition: the king's sceptre and attribute of royal power has been revisited by artists in contemporary récades that evoke the spirituality of current and ancestral practices. Azebaba's récade is covered in white, red and black yarn. It symbolises peace, misfortune and the invisible world of Vodun. Aston's récade is incrustated with bunches of keys and coins. It draws its strength from the buffalo and the protective power of the bocio<sup>3</sup> and illustrates the flourishing reign of King Guezo, who worked to unify the kingdom. Benjamin Deguenon combines Hêviosso's axe<sup>4</sup>, a Christian cross and an Assen<sup>5</sup> altar to express the syncretism of spiritual values in contemporary Benin.

African creativity has the wind in its sails at the moment and events showcasing the energy of its artists abound. Villa Arson is an art school, an art centre and a residency centre all rolled into one. It is attached to discovery, research and transmission and it is in this context that it has chosen to present a creative exploration of the rapidly evolving Beninese art scene.

## AT THE CROSSROADS - BENIN AND CONTEMPORARY ART

By André-J. Jolly, co-curator of the exhibition

Describing the production of African artists as 'primitive' has been a constant: the term unequivocally translated the certainty of people in the West that anything which did not originate in their own culture was inferior. When the Europeans first arrived in Africa in the 15th century, they discovered its population of 'savages'. Christian missionaries set themselves the

task of 'saving' these primitives, of endeavouring to tear them away from their 'barbaric' beliefs and practices and the age-old forms of worship that were likened to witchcraft. It wasn't until the end of the 19th century that masks and statues made their first appearance amongst the trophies of colonial conquest "considered at first as very rudimentary productions that bore witness to a low level of art and culture". (1) And then, at the beginning of the 20th century, intellectuals and artists visiting colonial exhibitions discovered traditional African art, or 'art nègre' to use the derogatory term employed at the time in France. With Picasso and the cubists this marked the beginning of a fashion that would have a notable influence on western creativity at the time, as well as financial consequences that would contribute, in exchange for trifling tips and small gifts, to emptying African countries of the major part of their artistic heritage.

The art market gave a certain level of credibility to these ancient sculptures and masks, but mainly in commercial terms. Africa had to make do with taking a back seat as far as art categories were concerned. Its production was described as: naïve art, primitive art, ritual art and craftsmanship.

Until the 1970-80s, contemporary art was the West's exclusive preserve with its stars and gurus who were promoted and adulated by both the media and New York art critics. The popes of art criticism decreed that painting and sculpture were on the verge of extinction, so people turned to video art in search of something new. Contemporary art biennials were flooded with works of art that were supposed to satisfy the tastes of a society fascinated by money, show business and communication, a society imprisoned by aspirations for security that curbed freedom. These aspirations distanced society from art. Art requires a wide-ranging freedom and the more you distance yourself from this freedom, the more you lose your reference points. Perhaps it was to find them again that attention began to focus on installations, which were perceived to be a return to something tangible. In addition to the interest that had been expressed by a rare few cultural institutions in Germany, the United States and France, not forgetting the remarkable work accomplished by La Revue Noire in Paris in the 90s, this vogue for installations was one of the reasons that led to the current visibility of contemporary art in Africa. Another key factor of course was *Les Magiciens de la Terre* (The Magicians of the Earth), a 1989 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou curated by Jean-Hubert Martin. This exhibition was a paradigmatic moment that helped begin to break down barriers and tackle the problem of the marginal situation of African artists: it was nothing less than the founding act of the recognition of African contemporary art.

Art is everywhere if you are willing to open your eyes and see it. Art is in the streets. And if there is one country where this assertion is self-evident it is undoubtedly Benin. If you wander through Dantokpa Market, the largest open-air market in West Africa, or stroll down the 'vons' (2) in Cotonou, the economic capital of Benin, you'll find yourself at the heart of a kingdom of trade, a trade that is unjustly described as informal. In this outdoor market, open to the skies above, you can buy absolutely anything. Sellers display their wares on boards, against a wall, on a grating, hanging from the branches of a tree, on trays (elegantly) carried by women, or on the ground. And that's when they are not directly worn on the seller's person. You can't imagine a more diverse array of products and objects. Is it then any coincidence that one of the most sought-after African artists in the 1990s and 2000s was Georges Adéagbo, a Beninese installation artist who managed to portray this incredible hustle and bustle and incredible jumble of objects, the selling of which led the salesmen (actually more often saleswomen) to deploy so much ingenuity and creativity to attract customers? You could say that the 'vons' and markets of Cotonou constitute the largest contemporary art installation in the whole world.

This accumulation of objects is in fact not totally unconnected with the fact that nothing goes to waste in Benin, or rather that like almost everywhere else in Africa everything is collected and recycled, However young artists "are not rag-and-bone men, (even if they) share with the latter a spontaneous desire to pace back and forth through rubbish tips on the look out for that rare item. In this case, the item in question is a bit of wire, a piece of cloth, plastic, leather or any other object

that is missing from the construction they have dreamt up, necessary for the harmony of an unfinished painting or a mask in the making". [Florent Couao Zotti, Beninese writer.]

It would indeed be reductive to simply qualify the art of Beninese artists as upcycling. The found objects are transcended. By means of the artist's actions they assume the status of works of art that are infused with the culture of the country where they are created. "Salvaging is a deliberate act that leads to the elaboration of a work of art. It is a means of telling a story". [Dominique Zinkpè, Beninese artist.]

If we indeed need to pay attention to our inclination to look down on art made from reclaimed objects, we should also stop talking about 'African culture' and 'African art', terms that suggest that there is only one side to the continent. It is probably, on the contrary, the continent where culture is the most diverse. Cultures and their corollary – traditions - which contrary to western countries are not considered to be mere examples of outdated folklore. In Africa, traditions underpin different types of behaviour and infuse daily gestures with spirituality, in particular the artist's creative act.

Let's not forget that Benin is one of the countries where traditions are the strongest and the most present in daily life. As far as religious practices are concerned (Vodun), the country is also deeply spiritual.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the religion of the Yoruba people, who originated in the Kingdom of Dahomey (located in the area of present-day Benin), managed to survive the vicissitudes of slavery and the passing of time. Even today it still constitutes the dominant element of the Candomblé religion in Brazil; Santería in Cuba; the Shango worshippers of Trinidad and Tobago and voodoo in Haiti. The addition of these beliefs to colonial societies was a source of enrichment that gave rise to the original multicultural cultures of which these countries are so proud today.

There are no art schools in Benin. All the artists are self-taught and the streets are their only art academy. They learn in the 'vons', in the markets, observing the painted walls of convents (3) dazzling Egun finery (4) Gelede masks (5) wondrous Zangbeto (6) the sacred forests, the words of storytellers and ancestral songs and dances.

But at a time when information is everywhere, finding its way into every nook and cranny of our global world, artists in Africa are not just in tune with their inner world, but also immersed in this constant flow of information. Whilst remaining rooted in tradition, their work acquires a universal dimension. African artists are in touch with the world and its turmoil.

"Henceforth the destiny of the African artist meets that of the Western artist. The former is no more than an artist, someone whose geographical origins only count for him/herself and whose work is there to be looked at and judged independently of any considerations of origin or race." (7)

"The only African thing about my works is me! Don't confuse my work with Exoticism." [Tchif, Beninese artist.]

"In our opinion, the many cultural referents that could be considered as belonging to the realm of irrationality, such as Fa, Voodoo and myths, as well as all the mysticism and symbolism that surrounds the creative act, do not suffice to define an 'Africanness', neither do they bestow, so to speak, an African identity on a creative work. These referents have become objective elements that can be found in art works and which are identified by the observer as being 'African'. In this period of globalisation, trying to shut oneself away from or on the contrary specifically referring to these cultural elements would be, in our opinion, a way of indiscriminately labelling these works with the criteria of 'Africanness', of taking these elements out of context without even making the distinction between cultural and ritual aspects. Such an attitude would only endorse once more the false specificity of African art that is constructed today around much more secular and contemporary, not to say political concepts." [Edwige Aplogan, Beninese jurist and artist.]

And indeed the younger generation, the people who express their Beninese culture, are at the meeting point

of these influences. On the one hand tradition, which they either take on board or reject (but in which they remain immersed) and on the other the global village in which they are just as completely immersed.

The works of these Beninese artists created at the crossroads of these influences seem to possess a strength and an emotion that speak directly to our heart and feelings, whether we are African, European, Asian, North or South American. These often politically committed artworks vigorously denounce the suffering that afflicts African society and to a greater extent humankind in general.

"People say my work deals with the human comedy. What I am trying to do is to find identifications between animals and human beings. My raw material is emotion." [Dominique Zinkpè, Beninese artist.]

"I denounce what is unacceptable, the innocent victims. Children are not responsible for war and yet they are its first victims. How can a generation that has been left on the sidelines be tomorrow's future?" [Gérard Quenum, Beninese artist.]

"When I work on a contemporary, bocio-inspired piece (8), it's as if I were continuing the work of our ancestors. I collect wood from houses that are being demolished and find the dolls in the streets: these objects are therefore steeped in the individual stories that they have experienced in families, things they have witnessed. I take an interest in everything in other cultures that makes an impression on me, in world current events and politics etc. I freely choose my sources of inspiration; my work knows no borders." [Gérard Quenum, Beninese artist.]

It is therefore no coincidence that this small country boasts so many artists who have exhibited on every continent, taken part in major contemporary art biennials, whose works are present in the most prestigious collections and in world-famous museums. Works by Gérard Quenum and Romuald Hazoumé were purchased by the British Museum and works by Tchif are now in Washington's Smithsonian Institution.

Yes the African continent boasts impressive cultural and artistic wealth: art is destined to become an essential factor in its economic development, in particular in Benin, this small African country whose nickname in the past was 'Africa's Latin Quarter'.

- 1 – 'Anthologie de l'art africain du XXe siècle', published by Revue Noire, 2001.
- 2 - Vons: abbreviation from the colonial period that designated roads (voies in French) with a north/south orientation. Today a 'vons' is usually an unmetalled street, whatever its orientation.
- 3 - Convent – Traditional place of worship for the Fon and Yoruba religions.
- 4 - Egun (or revenants) – Secret societies that worship the spirits of dead ancestors who regularly return to visit their descendants in the land of the living.
- 5 - Geledes - Secret societies led by women. "Eyes that have seen the Gelede have seen the ultimate spectacle" (oju to ba ri Gelede, ti de opin iran).
- 6 - The Zangbeto are considered to be the guardians of the night. They dress in cone-shaped straw costumes that spin and twirl apparently with no human presence inside.
- 7 - Jean-Loup Pivin, director of the Revue Noire in 'Anthologie de l'art africain du XXe siècle', 2001.
- 8 – "Bocio are simple sculptures with a protective role. They comprise a long piece of wood, whose upper part is roughly carved into the shape of a head and represent a living or deceased person, or a spirit. Today 'bocio' have almost completely disappeared because they have been robbed of their spiritual value and are bought and sold on the western art market." [Gérard Quenum, Beninese artist.]

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## BENIN

Area: 112,622 km<sup>2</sup>. Population: 11,000,000 (50% under the age of 20). Administrative capital: Porto Novo. Economic capital: Cotonou. Benin counts more than 50 different languages and cultures including: Fon, Yoruba, Adja, Mina, Bariba, Fulani, Somba and Dendi. Official language: French. Economy: cotton, subsistence agriculture, cashew nuts, fishing, an important seaport (import-export trade for part of Nigeria, Niger and Burkina Faso), the large Dantokpa Market.

## THE LOBOZOUNKPA ART CENTRE

Situated on the outskirts of Cotonou, the Centre Arts et Cultures de Lobo-zounkpa is devoted to contemporary creation, art education and promoting Benin's cultural heritage in every shape and form. The art centre has developed rapidly thanks to the commitment of Galerie Vallois (Paris), the Collectif des Antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Près and L'HeD (an NGO). The artist-in-residence programme began even before the centre was officially inaugurated in February 2015.

The centre comprises a library with more than 6,000, mainly art-orientated volumes, an exhibition space, three workshop/studios for creative and educational residencies, a stage, an exceptionally convivial bar and cafeteria and a museum (inaugurated in December 2015) devoted to 'Récales' (royal sceptres), which are highly symbolical objects in the history and traditions of Benin. This modular space can also be transformed into a gallery to host temporary exhibitions.

The objective of the Centre Arts et Cultures de Lobo-zounkpa is to provide facilities for local artists and to be a place of exchange. The workshop/studios are organised so that artists can share their know-how with young people. In addition, by returning the 'Récales' to their country of origin (these veritable jewels of the nation's cultural heritage once belonged to the kings of Benin's historical city Abomey), the museum establishes a dialogue between tradition and contemporaneity.

The centre's events programme is organised by a young team and implemented around the residencies that bring both Beninese and foreign contemporary artists to the centre. Throughout the year, the three artists taking part in the monthly residencies create their works of art in studios whose doors are wide open, thereby fostering discussion and exchange between the resident artists and the Beninese artistic community, but also more widely with the general public who enjoy visiting the studios and meeting the artists. Pupils from neighbouring schools are particularly interested and are regular visitors. Some forty people visit the centre every day. At the end of their residency, the artists exhibit their production in the studio that they occupied during their time at the centre and as part of a group show in the exhibition space next to the library. As a result, there is a vernissage every month to launch the exhibition featuring the three artists' work. The events programme also features theatre, concerts, storytelling evenings (with tales and fables taken from the oral tradition of Benin), film screenings and even salsa classes! Regular dates such as the 'Cinema Fridays', 'Children's Wednesdays' and 'Play hours' provide an opportunity for locals to come to the centre and share a convivial moment that brings together members of different generations.

The centre also hosts occasional activities, such as drawing classes with François Geissmann from Dijon School of Fine Arts. The centre has a partnership with the school which means that two young Beninese artists per year can go to the school in Dijon for a two-month residency. Another example was in 2015: the violinist Luc Roche came for a 30-hour master class to introduce eight young Beninese musicians to a non-African instrument, the violin. In return, the Auvergne region will soon be welcoming a Beninese musician, who will introduce French musicians to Beninese musical instruments. Yet another example from 2015 was when the centre hosted a cultural journalism training workshop that was attended by around thirty young trainee journalists.

In less than three years, the Centre Arts et Cultures de Lobo-zounkpa has become a key venue for artistic activity in Benin. This rapid development can be explained firstly by the determination and generosity of Robert Vallois and the Collectif des Antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Près. Their commitment to Benin is no coincidence. They have realised that although Benin is one of the smallest countries in Africa, it is also one of the richest on a cultural and artistic level and one of the leading countries in terms of the production of contemporary art. Benin's leading role is far from insignificant at a time when, as illustrated this year in Paris by the multiplication of events and exhibitions showcasing African art, contemporary African creation is finally beginning to take its rightful place on the international art scene.

## FOCUS ON THE 14 GUEST ARTISTS

By **André-J. Jolly**

### EDWIGE APLOGAN

Edwige Aplogan is an 'activist'. She organises exhibitions in Benin, invites artists in residence to visit and exchange on her large terrace, encourages them, writes about their work and expresses her opinions. *"Whoever the artist, he/she has a vocation to attain a certain universality, however African, Asian and European artists also have a geographical and hence a political existence, one which leads them to claim an identity rather than a nationality. It is the artist's vision of the world and its peoples that bears witness to his/her reconstructed identity."*

At the beginning, she used to paint on paper cement bags fixed onto pieces of mosquito net. Her works portrayed the sensitivity of an artist with a penchant for sharing, someone who cared about others as she proved during her work as a lawyer at the Paris bar by endeavouring to help disadvantaged people and migrants in difficulty. And then in 2007, Edwige Aplogan created her first luminous Légba statues in acrylic, followed in 2010 by her first large in situ textile installations.

*"This wrapping of monuments and places of memory with the flags of African and Caribbean countries was connected to the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of seventeen French-speaking African nations. The project has evolved over the years and now also addresses slavery. My last draping was in August 2016 at the Récade museum founded by Robert Vallois at the Centre Arts et Cultures de Lobo-zounkpa. The installation related the personal history of a man, an antiques dealer, who chose Benin to establish a centre for artistic creation, which also included a museum containing the symbols and objects of royalty he had collected and returned to their country of origin."*

*My intervention at the Villa Arson in Nice, both in the art centre and the gardens, will also feature African flags and those of the continent's diaspora. The message aims to underline a plural African presence in a multi-cultural city, which still leaves communities that are an integral part of France on the sidelines. France is a country that is still timorous when it comes to its turbulent history with French-speaking African countries."*

*The art centre's interior walls will also display this assertion of a globalised, worldwide community, one which while expressing dissent is also open and close to others, to the host. I have placed CFA franc banknotes on the floor (the currency in those West African countries which were former French colonies). This currency, which is pegged to the euro and therefore to France, maintains French-speaking African countries in a relationship of subordination and is one of the last vestiges of colonisation, one which should already have been abolished a long time ago."*

Edwige Aplogan has had 10 solo shows in Africa and France and taken part in numerous group exhibitions (Benin, Brazil, France, Senegal, Morocco, Cape Verde, Portugal, South Africa, Haiti and Ghana).

### ASTON

#### Serge Aurélien Tehogbola Mikpon alias 'Aston'

Aston is a musician. For more than 20 years, between rehearsals or early in the morning, he has walked along the beach, down streets and alleys, along highways and byways and through rubbish tips, picking up everything he finds along the way. Well almost everything, and in any case a multitude of abandoned objects. Back in his Ali Baba's cave, he creates thousands of figures from these found and salvaged objects. His message is sometimes slightly frivolous, but can be critical, one example being his installation of more than 4,000 pieces to denounce slavery.

His work also conveys another message: our overconsumption of trifling, disposable things that are polluting our planet and smothering it under the sheer accumulation of waste. Are we not the victims, the more or less willing slaves and accomplices of a society that only shows contempt for nature and in which man is now nothing and money everything? Aston has exhibited in Africa, France, Brazil and Portugal. His installation 'Stupide et inutile' (Stupid and Useless), which revisits the question of the slave trade, was purchased by the Museu Afro Brasil in São Paulo

in 2007. It has received particularly flattering critical acclaim from both the Brazilian press and general public. In 2012, he won 1st prize at the 'Biennale Regard Benin' for his installation 'La solution finale' (The Final Solution) about the holocaust.

In 2015, he showed his Skulls & Bones installation for the first time at the UNESCO building in Paris. "My installation comprises 7 levels. At the top there is the G8, the ultra rich, the World Bank, the Vatican, the political dogs and religious sects. Instead of financing schools, hospitals, culture and housing, they set the world on fire, plundering, oppressing and killing. The second level is an abyss: it's not easy to reach the first level. Level 3 is fire, war and extermination. Level 4 is for the dead. Levels 5 and 6 are the diseased and disabled, orphans, prisoners and all those who have been left by the wayside. Level 7 is the oceans and the deserts. People set off not knowing where they are going. They go looking for an Eldorado, but instead encounter death on the way. Below the installation is the sea, but even in the sea there is fire: Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Libya, etc. The Skulls & Bones start the fires and then return to play the firefighter. Everything has strings attached and it is the rich who pull the strings and call the shots for everything in our lives."

After 'Stupide et inutile' in 2007 and his first 'slave trader's caravel' in 2011 (Musée du Nouveau Monde in La Rochelle, France), Aston returned to the theme of slavery in 2016. Last December, he exhibited a new version of his 'slave trader's caravel' at the Centre Arts et Cultures de Lobo-zoukpa: Le Voilier des temps has been transported to Nice for the current exhibition at Villa Arson.

### DAAVO

#### Gaël Sankara Daavo

Daavo's teachers noticed his gift for drawing at an early age and used to ask him to do sketches on the board to illustrate the subjects of their lessons.

He would have preferred to study art, but his father considered that his talents would be best put to use in drawing plans and buildings and obliged him to enrol in a school of civil engineering. Six years later he graduated with a university diploma in construction and public works and took his first steps as site manager for a hotel construction project on the border with Togo. However he never gave up his passion for the visual arts. He painted and did wood carvings, encouraged in this by his first sales and the reactions of his entourage. In parallel, in 2012 he enrolled in a visual arts degree course at the new Institut National d'Arts et d'Archéologie at Benin National University. His thirst for knowledge also took him to see the artist Euloge Glèlè to learn about terracotta pottery and to a workshop at the Bruce Onokrahpea Foundation in Nigeria to learn metal sculpture techniques.

Daavo rebels against the habit of burning rubbish anywhere and everywhere, which is common practice in Cotonou. *"I salvage things to try and find objects I can use in my installations, but also to play my part in cleaning up my home town and stop all these things from being burnt. People don't think about the danger that the increasingly deteriorating ozone layer represents. In my opinion, there's no difference between big and small polluters."*

Reclaimed objects are the basis for his installation entitled *Tomiton*, which means 'our country' in Fon; reclaimed objects and his awareness of architectural and urban planning issues (acquired thanks to the education chosen for him by his father). *"The idea is to use a mock-up to show the environment we live in. This ensemble represents an imaginary neighbourhood in an African city: Cotonou. It takes into account the reality of its situation in detail."*

*With this piece, I first of all wanted to urge the population to take action to clean up their environment and make it more pleasant to look at. The town authorities only show off the more attractive side of the city, the chic neighbourhoods, whereas people on grassroots level live in insalubrious conditions and an unprecedented state of urban disorder due to poorly structured development. In this installation, I am presenting a global vision. Those who have seen it are of the opinion that it looks just like their city, except the current mayor who said it was absolutely not his city. However we are happy because, even if he won't admit it, he has heard the inhabitants say that it is indeed an accurate picture*

of their town. As far as I'm concerned, I hope that the authorities will take the necessary initiatives to provide an environment that does not endanger future generations, because the future depends on the choices we make today."

### **BENJAMIN DÉGUÉNON**

When he was a teenager, Benjamin used to draw on walls and tree trunks with chalk or charcoal, but did not consider this activity a form of graffiti. In 2004 he began attending Dominique Zinkpè's studio to learn sculpture.

Cans, cut or torn off sheets of metal, multicoloured pieces of pagne fabric fitted together and then glued or sewn. In Benjamin Déguénon's hands metal and fabric are transformed into hybrid beings, part human, part animal - 'chimeras' as he calls them. Benjamin Déguénon does not see each sculpture as an individual work of art. The sculptures are like a multicoloured, protean people that he brings to life from the waste products of consumer society. There is a strong humanist and environmental commitment to his approach. For Audience, one of his first solo shows, he created a courthouse made up of iron animals who had come to judge actions perpetrated against them, like throwing stones, something he had himself been guilty of when he was a child: "I brought these injured and mutilated animals to life so that they could judge me and finally grant me their pardon."

"My installation is called *Stop, Ma Pa Ta* [My raw material is not your material]. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's... and to God what is God's. With *Stop, Ma Pa Ta*, I wanted to denounce the way in which the resources of the African continent, in particular its mineral resources, are exploited by foreign companies in total disregard for the population. When will someone put an end to this manipulation of Africans, who are treated as if they were puppets? For me, this installation is also an opportunity to pay tribute to the victims of slavery in the past, which explains the presence of cane sugar that represents forced labour on plantations in the Americas." Benjamin Déguénon has several solo shows in Africa and France to his credit, as well as a large number of group exhibitions.

### **KIFOULI DOSSOU**

Kifouli Dossou works in the Nago Yoruba community, which is immersed in the Gelede tradition. The main events that accompany the life of the community (harvests, marriages, births and deaths) are marked by ceremonies featuring songs and masked dances. According to the Yoruba people: "Eyes that have seen the Gelede have seen the ultimate spectacle (oju to ba ri Gelede, ti de opin iran)". For several generations, Gelede ceremonial mask carvers have mainly come from the Dossou family, it was therefore only natural that Kifouli learnt the delicate art of carving from his brothers and that he went on to teach his nephews this art.

All the masks have characteristics in common, such as almond-shaped eyes and the three short scarification lines on the cheeks or the forehead. The lower part of the mask is evocative of a woman's calm face. The upper part showcases the carver's creativity and is, on the contrary, full of life. It symbolises women's spiritual powers.

Kifouli Dossou has transcended the strictly sacred and ceremonial function of Gelede masks, giving them a totally new artistic character. He uses them to portray scenes of daily life, as well as totally imaginary scenes in which animals – snakes, rats and birds – play an important role. However if many of his masks could not actually be used for the ceremonies, there is nothing irreverent about his approach as his inspiration comes from the Gelede tradition. "I am a Gelede carver. According to my traditions the Gelede is sacred. It is displayed at ritual ceremonies. I find inspiration in my traditions to educate and develop awareness."

Kifouli Dossou carves mainly Beninese woods such as hlan can cui, kpon-kpon and mérina. After carving the mask, Kifouli Dossou either paints it or more rarely leaves it in its natural state. Now he also produces large sculptures or 'columns' that are over two metres high, such as those that were purchased in 2008 and 2015 by the Museu Afro Brasil in São Paulo. Today Kifouli is an internationally renowned artist. His works are to be found in numerous public and private collections (Museu Afro Brasil, Fondation Zinsou museum of contemporary art and the Jean-Yves Augel

collection, amongst others).

In 2008, UNESCO inscribed Gelede ceremonies to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

### **EULOGE GLÈLÈ**

#### **Euloge Sénoumantin Ahanhanzo Glèlè**

After starting with drawing, it wasn't long before this descendant of the kings of Abomey decided to devote all his efforts to ceramics. After spending time as an apprentice to the master artist Cyprien Tokoudagba, Euloge Glèlè soon won his independence. He now works and paints terracotta in a singularly meticulous manner.

Euloge Glèlè finds inspiration for his pottery in the day-to-day life of his fellow citizens: dancers, hair braiders, drivers, market gardeners and entire families balancing on a zemidjan motorbike taxi provide the models for his figurines, which are carved with a knife and then painted or left in their natural state. Worship has a special place: several of his sculptures are devoted to Vodun gods and Egun revenants.

Talking about his installation 'Esclaves, nous le sommes tous' (we are all slaves), Euloge Glèlè explains: "There are 5 heads in the middle. Each one represents a continent and its leaders. The statement that I am making is that it is the leaders who treat their people as slaves. The hands represent the people forming a circle around their leaders. Black hands, yellow hands and white hands. It's to talk about colour. People are suffering, whether they are in Africa, Asia or just about anywhere else. They are reaching out to their leaders to claim their rights. Some hands lead to the big sculpture entitled 'Je veux' (I want). I want my rights. The hands forming a circle have been coloured, the hands on the sculpture are earth-coloured - this is to say that on our planet, whatever our colour, we are One. The same blood flows in all our veins."

Behind the apparent African folklore image that an inattentive spectator can get from Glèlè's work, the artist is endeavouring to sculpt the "things that lie behind things". That is how, whilst continuing to immortalise Beninese life, he has developed a more symbolical means of expression that is illustrated here by Bonheur (happiness) in which cowries – these shells to which fortune-telling powers are attributed – or coins bestow upon the artwork a powerful strangeness.

His work has been exhibited in Benin, Belgium, Brazil and France.

### **KORBLAH**

#### **Richard Afanou Korblah**

Richard Afanou Korblah is of Beninese, Togolese, Ghanaian and Ivoirian origin. Could this mixing of cultures be the reason for his openness towards others and the compassion that typifies his art? Korblah (alias RAK) is a committed artist dedicated to defending environmental and humanitarian causes and fostering dialogue between different cultures.

When his family returned to Benin, RAK took part in various workshops, notably those organised by Dominique Zinkpè at Boulv'Art. Next he worked in a monastery in Abomey and took part in work at the Dassa-Zoumé basilica, where he first came across the Fula people.

That was how in 2012, he came to witness the discrimination against the Fula, who are marginalised in Benin and in the other countries of West Africa where they are present. In the role of artist and ethnographer, Korblah set off to discover the rites and customs of this nomadic people. He attended their ceremonies, in particular the Coodja ceremony, a rite of passage to welcome young men into adulthood. The term means flagellation in the Fula language and here flagellation is a metaphor for transcending physical pain as part of the quest for an ideal.

From this moment on, he glorified this largely unknown culture in life-size sculptures made from metal, wood, cloth and natural pigments. He gave the rarely shown Fula culture visibility with his first major solo show entitled 'Coodja' at the Institut Français de Cotonou in 2012. In the same way he addresses other contemporary issues such as the displacement of populations, male domination and child exploitation.

"The installation that I am presenting is entitled 'Des ponts, pas des murs' (bridges, not walls). It deals with the victims of conflicts, enslaved by border restrictions and regulations that aim to control the movement of populations. It evokes those who are displaced, the victims of war, religion, politics and economic problems. The same people who also become victims in the regions and countries where they seek refuge. Suffering is their daily lot. In the installation there are four figures surrounded by their parcels. They are immobile, as if waiting for a freedom they are not certain will come." His sculpture 'coiffure paysanne universelle' denounces the problem of the lack of water in Africa. "There are regions where, all day long, you can see women weighed down with jerrycans walking long distances to fetch water. They are carrying so many that you can't even see their hair."

In Qui suis-je ? (Who am I?) Richard asks himself a vital question: "A friend looked at my work and told me that it was primitive not contemporary. I answered that I was no more trying to be contemporary than primitive. I was simply working. And all of a sudden, I wondered: Who am I?"

Korblah has exhibited in Miami, France, Cuba and several times in Benin.

### **CHARLES PLACIDE**

#### **Charles Codjo Placide Tossou**

Charles Placide is a photographer. When you think of photography, you think of images and the first image of him that comes to mind is his dazzling, beaming and permanent smile and his unchanging, communicative good mood.

Charles Placide started out apprenticed to Eric Ahounou and went on to continue his education with various courses and workshops in Benin, Senegal and Mali. In 2001, he studied digital image processing at Agence Enguérand in Paris.

In Benin, press photography, which was his main activity for a long time, has today become completely devalued and he has had to find other activities: photos of shows, weddings and the art works of his artist friends. To keep on smiling in such difficult conditions you need to be optimistic and passionate about what you do.

And it is his passion for photography that makes him walk the streets of Cotonou, through the markets and past ancestral places of worship and traditional celebrations, storing up thousands of pictures along the way. His eye is tender and critical when taking pictures of street children, proud when his photos reveal the dignity of people of a certain age during traditional ceremonies and rites - whether they are Fon, Yoruba or Mina, or any other of the peoples that comprise Benin's ethnic kaleidoscope making it such a 'large small country'.

We chose the images presented here from amongst hundreds of photos taken recently by Charles Placide during the big traditional Vodun celebrations that took place in Abomey, Porto Novo and notably on the beach at Ouidah in January, at the very place where, for four centuries, hundreds of thousands of slaves were forcibly embarked and deported to the Americas. It was a difficult and painful choice considering the sheer profusion of colours and images featuring exuberant dancers performing amazing feats or in trances: there is something Dionysian about the popular fervour that Charles Placide has succeeded in capturing.

When you think of photography in Benin, you inevitably think of Pierre Fatumbi Verger. In the 1930s, this French photographer was the first to show Africans in a different light i.e. not photographed from the front, in profile and full-length in static, anthropological portraits for colonial catalogues. Verger's black and white photos are full of movement, dancing, celebrations, joy, freedom and life. His revolutionary work changed people's perspective of Africa. In 2009, Charles Placide spent several months in residence at the Pierre Verger Foundation in Salvador de Bahia (Brazil), where he carried out his own pilgrimage to the source of African photography, taking photos and collecting the testimonials of friends of the old sage who died in 1996. Charles Placide's colour photos prove that the revolution initiated by Pierre Verger has borne fruit.

## PSYCOFFI

### Stéphane Vlavonou alias 'Psycoffi'

After obtaining his literary baccalaureate in France, Stéphane Vlavonou started studying to become an art teacher. Disappointed by the aesthetic concepts that his teachers imposed on him and which he sensed he would be obliged to teach his future pupils, he dropped out of the faculty and enrolled at the École des Gobelins in Paris, where he studied animation, before beginning to work on animated films.

Three months later, he had a very serious motorbike accident that left him in hospital for six months. The resulting visual disability meant he had to give up animation. He decided to turn his hand to painting and so Psycoffi was born.

*"It was because of my accident that I turned to painting. After the accident I went to visit my family in Cotonou and that's when I realised something. Before I used to draw realistically, but in a 'twisted' manner and now, because of the problem with my field of vision, I still draw in a 'twisted' manner, but much less realistically! In 2012 I decided to settle in Benin, which is my father's home country.*

*Of course I would like to continue painting and earn a living with my art. Until now, I have never given my paintings a title so that everyone was able to identify with them according to their own perspective."*

Now when he does put a title it is a passing vision that does not limit the spectator, but which is more an invitation to travel. *"I aspire to portray man's physical and psychological substance. My ambition is to combine them so that people can sense my subjects' instincts and feelings, their humility. At the moment, I am trying to combine painting and animation to make animated paintings."*

Psycoffi asserts his approach by combining a more or less cartoon-like realism and a rough rendering that tends towards abstraction. It is illustrated in the 4 paintings exhibited at Villa Arson, as well as the large fresco that he is currently working on based on the idea of *"human corpulence in all its splendour: men, women and children of all ages expressing different moods in connection with the theme of birth. For me, art is both a way of shutting yourself away from the world, of hiding, but also of becoming more demonstrative"*.

## GÉRARD QUENUM

### Gérard K. Spéro Quenum

Gérard Quenum is one of the main representatives of the generation of Beninese contemporary artists which followed on from the precursors in the 1980s-90s - Cyprien Tokoudagba, Georges Adeagbo and more recently Romuald Hazoumé - and who have exhibited both in other African countries and further afield.

In 2008, the British Museum purchased his sculpture *Femmes Peulh* (Fula women). Today his work is present in numerous public (Brazil, the United States, Switzerland, etc) and private collections.

Gérard Quenum began his artistic activity making unusual assemblages from found objects, amongst which were old dolls left lying around in the streets of Porto Novo. Was it because he had to leave school to go to work at a very young age that, once an artist, he became so attached to this iconic symbol of childhood? The fact remains that these figures are to be found in his entire body of work, from his sculptures to certain canvasses.

The artist burns the dolls' heads with a blow torch: their eyeless sockets and partly torn out hair give rise at first to feelings of fear. It is impossible not to think of Vodun religious rites, whether real or imagined. However even if the artist's grandmother was a priestess of Dahomey's ancient animist religion, that is not what Gérard Quenum is portraying in his artworks. In fact, he is trying to represent the persistent weight of the influence of Vodun symbols in Beninese society.

Boats, mass immigration... *"I also call this installation Voyage vers Mars (journey to Mars). When you see these people who are leaving their country to travel to another continent, it's as if they were leaving earth to go to another planet. It's like fiction. It's as if those people with the necessary wherewithal were fighting to leave earth in order to escape from pollution and global warming, because it is impossible to live on earth any longer. They*

*leave in the hope that it will be better on another planet, for example on Mars. Fiction becomes reality with all the people who are trying today, by any means possible, to cross the seas and escape from war, poverty, pollution and the advancing deserts. People are desperate. They are risking their lives to travel to Mars."*

*L'Equilibriste* is one of Gérard Quenum's first pieces. Is it a scene from a circus? Perhaps, but it is also a metaphor for the fragility of human existence.

## PRINCE TOFFA

Boris Abbas Prince Toffa from Porto-Novo is an atypical artist, painter, fashion designer and costume designer as his name - which is a homonym of the last king of Porto-Novo - suggests. He literally sculpts costumes from beer and soda cans, packets, hessian bags and plastic materials.

*"Admittedly these are materials that have been used and thrown away, but they haven't said their last word. I reclaim them and give them a new lease of life. People who have got lovely houses, galleries or other appropriate settings buy them to decorate their interiors."*

When it comes to Prince Toffa, it's actually difficult to talk about salvaged materials seeing how he works with their texture to make their original appearance completely unrecognisable. He honours these objects by using them to create remarkably beautiful and delicate garments, elegant, sparkling dresses to be precise. The metamorphosis of objects informs his work in a way that is reminiscent of *El Anatsui* (Golden Lion at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015), a Ghanaian artist who lives between London and Nigeria and whose immense and sumptuous metallic tapestries are mainly made from bottle tops. For these two artists, we cannot talk about salvaged materials or environmental questions: we are confronted with a display of elegance and brilliance, of grace, style and transcendence.

Prince Toffa is not satisfied with just designing and making costumes: he brings them to life himself in performances in which, sporting his creations, he progresses aloof in the midst of the spectators. The contrast between the feminine characteristics of some of his pieces - dresses with plunging necklines, skirts and trains etc - and the artist's athletic body (he is a keen athlete and the bulging muscles of his body have been sculpted by boxing and working as a bouncer in the prostitute bars of Cotonou's Jonquet district), intrigues and gives rise to questions. This dissonance transgresses the codes of African patriarchal society.

Amongst his more recent appearances (which always cause a sensation) were performances in the entrance hall at UNESCO and in front of Galerie Vallois, rue de Seine in Paris, in 2015; at the Centre d'Art Contemporain du Château de Tanlay in 2016, and a fashion show at the Institut Français de Cotonou in 2016.

*"I want to become immortal. It's not that I don't want to die, I'm not talking about that, but I want to leave my mark."*

## JULIEN VIGNIKIN

Julien Vignikin left Benin for France at the age of 10. After leaving school, he enrolled at the School of Fine Arts in Dijon. In 1990 he began to exhibit regularly in Burgundy and Paris. In 2014-15 his installation, *Le Dîner des fantômes*, (the ghosts' dinner) presented at the Musée Dapper in Paris as part of the 'L'art de manger, rites et traditions' exhibition, attracted considerable attention. *"Nails just like those which seem to be digging into your stomach when you're starving hungry: this politically committed artist denounces malnutrition in the south and overconsumption in the north."*<sup>1</sup>

*"The table is full of nails expressing pain, contrary to Africa where they are used to ward off bad spells. There is only one empty plate and glass, which means that the meal is not only inaccessible, but that it is intended to be eaten alone. Some people aren't invited to eat and become ghostly shadows, hence the title: Le dîner des fantômes."*<sup>2</sup> In his latest creations, Julien Vignikin takes wooden staves from barrels and uses them to evoke his life. Piling up these boards, he creates different strata from which his sense of belonging and multiple roots emerge: France/Burgundy and Benin. This duality also explains why his work comprises masks that are obviously African, as well as colourful, festive and almost abstract structures (that he also calls masks) and behind which are perhaps concealed the many faces of

an artist playing with his plural identity.

*"Julien Vignikin has this quality of being able to revisit beliefs with exceptional genius. Each of his pieces immerses us in a world full of mysteries and secrets. Nails, colonial objects, war archives, amulets and cowry shells compose a skilful new take on folklore, one which is part of a contemporary discourse that dialogues effortlessly with the past. In his series of paintings entitled "Croix" (2009), Vignikin questions Russian Suprematism in the 1910s as embodied by Malevitch. His installations and his paintings also address current metaphors and traditional Beninese beliefs. In his paintings, nails form patterns in their own right and become a raw material, whilst referring to their dual significance, the first which is proper to Vodun culture and secondly their artisanal usage. This play of symbolism, mystical energies and objets d'art pushes back the limits of his artistic expression to establish a new, rich and unique cultural heritage."*<sup>3</sup>

1- *Détours des mondes* (27/10/2014)

2- Julien Vignikin on TVNewsartToday

3- Virginie Ehonian on africanlinks.net (09/01/2017)

## DIDIER VIODÉ

*"It wasn't until I was in college and after meeting several Beninese artists that I really began to take an interest in art. Thanks to these exchanges I took part in my first group exhibition, 'Sid'art' in Cotonou."*

After a brief period at INSAAC (Institut National Supérieur de L'Art et de l'Action Culturelle) in Abidjan, he enrolled at Besançon School of Fine Arts in France. Didier Viodé is a painter, visual artist, video maker, photographer, caricaturist and comic strip artist. He finds inspiration in the media, the street, his surroundings and the relationship between the north and the south, without however letting his origins inform his means of artistic expression. *"An artist is above all a universal citizen. I like man's humanity: even if sometimes 'Man is a wolf for other men', human beings can also be good. It is this humanity which motivates me day after day and which encourages me in my artistic combat."*

It is this sense of otherness that one can see in drawings from the *Migrants* series in which he expresses his feelings of revolt when confronted with the distress of populations forced to take to the road because of war or famine, walking towards the western world whose only solution is to place barbed wire in their path.

*"The very essence of his pictorial and artistic approach, his spirituality and humanity, is to be found in the French verb 'Soudre' and more precisely in its Latin meaning. The first meaning of 'Solver' is 'to detach' and 'to untie', followed by 'to pay' or 'to settle a debt'. Next comes 'to disintegrate' and 'to dissolve' and finally 'to solve a problem' or 'to find a solution'. It is all about becoming a conveyor of meaning, a clairvoyant and a thief of fire by giving a large reserve of meaning to a world that is disintegrating before our very eyes. A world where the quest for meaning keeps tormenting us, faced as we are by the unbearable images of these walkers who appear to have been set free by the stomach of the Atlantic. The painter's creative genius transforms 'the walkers' - these migrants in search of hope, braving the elements, defying death and facing indifference and scorn as they flee Alep and the wars in Syria, Iraq, Africa or elsewhere - into an allegory for life itself, the quintessence of mankind: the inestimable value of life in its infinite beauty."* [Jean-Michel Nzikou]

## DOMINIQUE ZINKPÈ

It would be impossible to talk about contemporary African art and Beninese art in particular without talking about Dominique Zinkpè, considering the extent to which his body of work and his personality have had a lasting influence on contemporary African creation. This painter, sculptor and installation artist made it possible for a whole generation of Beninese artists to express their vision and create art. Back in 1999, he established 'Boulev'art, artistes dans la rue' which helped several young talents to emerge. In 2012, he opened UNIK, a place for creating art and hosting residencies in his home town, Abomey. Since 2014, at the head of the Centre Arts et Cultures de Lobozonekpa, which is open to artists from every continent, Dominique Zinkpè plays more than ever before the role of catalyser of present-day African art.

*"Zinkpè's paintings feature characters who seem a bit crazy [...]. Genre scenes, battles and even 'gallant'*

*scenes take shape little by little, giving these gods of strange worlds an almost human aspect. They touch each other, speak, copulate and finish up by resembling us [...] There are no coincidences on the surface of the canvas as they rub up against each other, love and devour each other in a magical space that is as warm and alive as a woman's body. The faces are living and contorted masks because there is something of Ensor in this painting.”* [Bernard Dulon, Tribal art expert and collector.]

Since 2006/7, Zinkpè's sculptures have been characterised by his use of carved wooden 'lbeji' dolls, which are also called 'hòhò' in Fon, his mother tongue. These objects of worship are symbolic figures representing twins and are thought to be vested with a special power. As a result, Zinkpè considers this doll to be one of the African statues that is the most representative of man. He uses it as the very material of his sculptures in an approach that builds bridges between, or clashes with traditional and contemporary elements, between the profane and the sacred and between Animist and Christian religions.

*“The dugout canoe that I am exhibiting here symbolises travel, which is usually the result of a personal choice, a pleasant and amusing project. But there are journeys we do not choose, which are imposed upon us. The subject of slavery is often treated by using chains and showing people suffering. I wanted to treat it in a somewhat lighter and more poetic manner using characters who are standing and wearing clothes. In our contemporary lives, travelling supposes digitised passports and sophisticated means of transport, but in this work it is the opposite: the travellers have been dispossessed of their identity, they are heading for an unknown destination and have lost their bearings.*

*As for the globe, it represents the world that contains all the elements: earth, air and the seas. It was given to mankind, to all men, to be shared, but the lands have not been shared out fairly. We have to work for more harmony. We need to stir people's conscience.”*

Dominique Zinkpè has nearly 30 solo shows to his credit and has taken part in around fifty group exhibitions all over the world: Benin, Germany, France, Belgium, Canada, Cuba, South Africa, Japan, the USA, Brazil, Austria and Portugal to name but a few.

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## COTONOU PAYS TRIBUTE TO RÉCADES

By **Elise Daubelcour**

### The origin and evolution of the récade

The récade, specific to the Kingdom of Dahomey, is one of a Fon sovereign's seven symbols of authority. It is also referred to as a *makpo*, which means 'staff of rage' in Fon. According to Abomey oral sources mentioned in the book by the ethnographer Alexandre Sénou Adandé<sup>1</sup>, the récade's origins can be traced back to an attack on the *Houegbadjavi* (or the *Agassouvi*). Surprised whilst working in their fields, they used their hoes as weapons and defeated their enemies. And so an agricultural tool became a weapon and then a ceremonial object: when worn over the shoulder, it reminds adversaries of the bearer's victory and courage.

Over time, the récade became an essential part of life in the kingdom. It was one of the attributes required when the King appeared in public, in addition to the woven pagne and the parasol. The récade was an insignia of royal power representing the king even after his death. A veritable staff of commandment and a symbolical representation of the royal person, it also served to guarantee the authenticity of a royal message delivered by messenger. In fact the origin of the sceptre's name, récade, is taken from the Portuguese term recado, which means message.

Fourteen sovereigns, thirteen men and one woman, succeeded each other on the throne between 1600 and 1900. Each had a 'nom fort', an assumed name that was the motto of his/her reign and which was based on an allegorical sentence in connection with the sovereign's qualities, political vision or projects. This 'nom fort' was inscribed on the récade's more or less finely carved blade, together with a motif depending on the emblem.

### The museum and its collection

The Petit Musée de la Récade is the first museum in the world to focus on this symbol of power. Designed by the architect René Bouchara, the museum is majestic: its minimal lines, white walls and glass openings that allow daylight to filter through onto the collections, grant it a resolutely contemporary aspect. Its entrance featuring three steps leading up to a massive, solid wood door plainly evokes the outline of a throne.

The Petit Musée de la Récade's collection was constituted thanks to the generosity of Robert Vallois and the Collectif des Antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Près. The museum, which was inaugurated on December 1st 2015, presents an ensemble of forty-five pieces comprising sceptres and other symbolic objects from the Kingdom of Dahomey. The collection includes thirty-nine récades and a sumptuous stately throne from Benin City, the former royal city of Edo in present-day Nigeria. This collection materialises the return of works of art belonging to the cultural heritage of Benin that were previously in collections in the West.

Not all the exhibits are 'historical' as Robert Vallois points out, but they are truly 'marvellous'. And some of them are indeed remarkable, notably the royal récade representing a shark, the heraldic symbol of King Béhanzin (end 19th century) and the ivory récade topped with a lion's head that belonged to King Glélé and whose handle bears an old handwritten label indicating that it was found near his tomb in 1892. Of course the stately throne with its rich iconography and carved armrests (end 19th century) is also quite remarkable.

### A dialogue between old and contemporary pieces

“A new rope is plaited at the end of the old” as the proverb goes. It is in this spirit that the museum has called upon Beninese artists to give a contemporary take on the royal sceptre. Modern-day objects are freely associated with the récade to express the artist's intentions. Aston's récade for example is incrustated with bunches of keys and coins. It draws its strength from the buffalo and the protective power of the bocio 2 dotted with small fuses. It illustrates the flourishing reign of King Guezo, one of the most famous Fon sovereigns who worked to unify the kingdom and who inspired the symbol of the cracked pitcher. Benjamin Deguenon combines Hèviosso's axe<sup>3</sup>, a Christian cross and an Assen<sup>4</sup> altar to express the syncretism of spiritual values in contemporary Benin. Prince Tofa's récade has a sharp blade and is decorated in the colours of coca-cola in an allusion to American hegemony grounded in its economic and military supremacy. Azebaba's récade is covered in white, red and black yarn. It symbolises peace, misfortune and the invisible world of Vodun and underlines the spiritual power of Fon sovereigns.

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## L'ÉQUILIBRISTE

By **Eric Mangion, co-curator of the exhibition**

African art is in vogue and if any proof were needed, the countless exhibitions devoted to the continent since the start of the year amply bear witness to the current trend. It is also noteworthy that, despite conflicts and political crises that come and go, many African countries boast important rates of growth. Africa is becoming a market and has therefore become 'bankable'. This observation may well be rather cynical, but it aims to remind us that the West still hasn't put an end to its ambiguous relationship with Africa. What we call 'post-colonialism' from a conceptual viewpoint could also be described more prosaically as 'latter-day colonialism'.

And that's why it is so difficult to put on an exhibition of African artists without all these ideas crossing your mind. How can one avoid playing the falsely candid card, indulging in a well-intentioned form of exoticism, taking an over simplistic approach, or simply applying judgmental shortcuts, whether sociological or aesthetic? All of that is not easy, especially if you have no concrete experience of the realities of African life.

This exhibition is above all a tribute to Beninese artists and the Centre Arts et Cultures de Lobozonepa, which has been working in the field since 2014 to provide training in a country where there are no art schools. The idea behind the centre's creation was not to reproduce western academic teaching models. The

centre invents its own methods, in particular by putting the emphasis on in situ production and dialogue with visiting foreign artists as part of the artist-in-residence programme. The general public can also come and discover a collection of récades in the centre's museum, these symbols of authority which are part of the country's political and cultural heritage.

The museum collection was constituted thanks to the support of the gallerist Robert Vallois and the Collectif des Antiquaires de Saint-Germain-des-Près, who together donated around forty pieces. This donation takes on a particular significance if you think that, last March, France refused to return works of art to Benin that had been despoiled during the colonial period or by other kinds of commercial plundering. The reason advanced by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs was that these ill-gotten gains are now part of public collections and are as such inalienable. The Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè is of the opinion that his country's museums are not sufficiently structured to receive such a heritage in any case. Be that as it may, it would have been preferable had the French state replied in a less formal manner and opened a more constructive dialogue on this tricky subject. France certainly does find it difficult to look its colonial past in the eye!

The gesture of Robert Vallois and his friends is therefore much more than patronage. It is a political gesture. Even more so because most of the artists working at the centre possess a very keen understanding of their history and the current times. The exhibition title, *Stop Ma Pa Ta (Ma matière première n'est pas ta matière / My raw material is not your material)* is taken from a piece by Benjamin Déguénon that ironically portrays the way in which large Western, Russian and Chinese industrial companies exploit Africa's mineral resources in total disregard of the local population. However above and beyond economic exploitation, artists are more preoccupied by the displacement of people. Four boat-shaped sculptures can be seen at different points during the visit in a recurrent reference to immigration that is obviously not innocent in a country which, from the 18th century on, was one of the main sources of slaves. Needless to say that the minds and spirits of Benin's inhabitants have been lastingly affected by the events of their past and their art reflects this. The past is on the prowl and current events, with the flow of migrants between Africa and Europe and the ensuing conflicts and tragedies, are bringing old and bad memories to the surface.

Benin is also the birthplace of voodoo, which is nothing like the folklore that the western vision confines to a mere obsession with death. Voodoo (or Vodun in Benin) refers to all the gods and invisible forces, whose powers man tries to tame and whose benevolence he hopes to win. Vodun asserts the existence of a supernatural world and the many and varied ways of entering into contact with it. It is above all seen as a heritage, a philosophy and a language, music, dance, medicine and a form of justice, a power, an oral tradition and rites. Most of the works on show in *Stop Ma Pa Ta* – starting with Charles Placide's photos – are informed by this culture that represents an animist relationship with the world in which “there are always things behind the power of things”. (Euloge Gléglé).

However this spirituality in no way prevents artists from being aware of everyday life. What is often defined as a DIY art form using salvaged objects is really a criticism of overconsumption. This may seem paradoxical in a country that does not enjoy the same level of economic wealth as the West and which therefore 'consumes' less. And yet Benin is confronted today with a deluge of small, cheap and useless objects from China that are rapidly used and just as rapidly abandoned. It is also confronted with galloping and uncontrolled urbanisation that is threatening traditional (and essential) agricultural practices. More than an environmental or economic issue, the current state of affairs is a double source of concern for artists. Since its independence, Benin has founded its development on a constant duality between its ancestral values and a desire for modernisation – embodied in the dual nature of contemporary Beninese as so perfectly portrayed by Dominique Zinkpè's lbeji dolls: twins torn between contradictory desires.

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