

Bouvy ENKOBO
"Tala -Ye "(Look at him)



Bouvy Enkobo - Lifuta, acrylic and collage on canvas, 78 3/4 x 47 1/4 in, 2024

Exhibition from 3 October 2024 to 7 January 2025
Opening on Friday 4 October 2024

What are all these people looking at? What are they waiting for? What do they hope for? Do they still remember their ancestors, and those 'millions of men who have been skilfully inculcated with fear, an inferiority complex, trembling, kneeling, despair, larbinism', as Aimé Césaire put it? Aren't they themselves still caught up in a kind of voluntary servitude that subjects them to the diktats of fashion, the temptations of gambling and the new vanities, whose logos or advertising slogans, covering their canvases like the depths of their souls, act like illusory watchwords.

In fact, the painter represents himself in the guise of two people who are as similar as they are distinct in their skin colour. This pictorial splitting of the personality undoubtedly testifies to the confusion about identity that can overtake the artist when he uses his painting as a medium for questioning himself. Is he not similar to the poet who keeps a diary, trying to define the contours of his soul through daily writing? Does he not become a stranger, a stranger, when he 'speaks' to himself through his paintings? Isn't painting a self-portrait, like writing a diary, an experience of the double, whose desperate search Narcissus symbolises? And if the writer seeks to fix his elusive identity through the words of language, doesn't the painter do so by tracing the changing reflections of his being on canvas? Does he not, in this way, repeat the inaugural gesture of painting, similar to Dibutade's daughter tracing the shadow of her lover's profile on a wall?

The artist's questioning posture, with his hand placed over his mouth, is as much a reflection of the perplexed expression of one who is seized with astonishment at the otherness of his own self, as it is of the silent nature of his condition as a painter. Didn't Plutarch once say that 'painting is silent poetry'?

Moreover, the silent character of these paintings is all the more intense because it is counterpointed by a hubbub of visual rumours rising from the depths of the canvas. While Bouvy Enkobo develops a realistic portraiture in the figurative style he learned at the Kinshasa Fine Arts School, he also elaborates the backgrounds of his motifs with expressionist glee, playing with the gap between explicit figurative painting and the plastic decomposition of backgrounds, giving his canvases the look of torn posters by Villeglé or Hains.

This highly personal technique, combining collage and acrylic, allows the artist to intensify the presence of his characters, who seem to float, strangely detached from these tumultuous backgrounds of gaudy colours. To achieve this, the painter uses commercial and election posters and graffiti-filled newspapers, which he collects mainly in Kinshasa, to accompany his canvases with a sort of urban soundtrack that lends them an astonishing rhythmic tone.

However, unlike poster artists, Bouvy Enkobo is not content simply to display the shreds. Through a subtle process of collage and decollage, the painter uses them as plastic clutches that contribute to the dynamics of colour and the duality of his painting.

Using the laceration technique so dear to poster artists, Bouvy Enkobo is able to reveal the effects of superimposing pieces of different posters, revealing misunderstandings of meaning, hijacking advertising messages and playing visual games with the legibility of signs, graphics and photographs, slogans and other logos once they have been torn apart, peeled off and stuck back together. And while his

work bears a clear kinship with New Realism, it is also reminiscent of Lettrism and Situationism, as well as looking towards Street Art.

In particular, the painter enjoys ironically revisiting the codes of Western painting software, by hijacking iconic figures from its history. The woman in the yellow jacket, for example, has all the hallmarks of a Salome on African soil, except that she is not holding the scalp of the sacrosanct head of John the Baptist, but a traditional African statuette, a symbol of the entire artistic heritage despoiled by centuries of colonisation! Perhaps she will be able to negotiate the return of this object, and protect it from being sold on the open market in a way that robs both works of art and human beings?

This semiotic richness doesn't stop there, as Bouvy Enkobo's art can also be likened to the tropism of Congolese popular painters, in their use of words and messages of all kinds. Finally, most of the paintings, like those of the young man in the scarlet jacket, seem to recycle certain Pop Art codes, with their concert of bright colours and bold lines. The title of these two paintings, 'Mbongo mokonzi' ('Money King'), refers to the world of credit banks and games of chance so common in the Congo, like playing cards that promise easy money by playing on other people's weaknesses.

The writer William Burroughs, together with the artist Brion Gysin, invented the cut-up, to free the 'hordes of words' that infect our subjectivities like viruses. Aren't we all traversed by images, information and collective statements, and do we not live in a perpetual flow of catchwords and messages that end up dispossessing us of ourselves? More than ever before, the media constitute this collective unconscious that haunts our psyches, and of which Perec said that they create 'a screen universe that is foreign to us'.

Is this what the woman in the blue loincloth is lamenting, holding her head in her hands, imploring fate, in the face of the invasion of these new 'viruses' that are invading the souls of her children in a way that is just as fearsome, perhaps, as malaria or the Ebola epidemic?

Philippe Godin