

TEMPLON



OMAR BA

ARTREVIEW, December 2018

Omar Ba *Autopsie de nos consciences*

Galerie Templon, Paris 8 September – 27 October

As one enters Omar Ba's first solo show at Templon in Paris, the extraordinary luxuriance of the painter's expressionist touch and the sociable sharpness of his reduced colour palette catch the eye before anything else. Yet the Senegalese artist's recent ensemble of 28 mixed-media figurative paintings on canvas, cardboard and paper is also thematically loaded, touching upon gloomy notions of power and sacrifice in Africa, as well as discrepancies of perception and memory between the continent and the West.

Often hybrid, the figures inhabiting Ba's enigmatic visions emerge from an all-over haze of abstract ornamental motifs – mostly white, blue and red highlights. From afar these evoke both iridescent nacre and lush vegetation, while a closer look reveals a profusion of frantic brush, pencil and ballpoint strokes. Some of them pierce the pictorial supports onto which the artist systematically paints a plain black background to begin. (Otherwise, as he explained at the opening, the brightness of a blank canvas or piece of paper fogs his imagination.) Both literally and figuratively, Ba's art thus demands from viewers that they adapt to a certain obscurity.

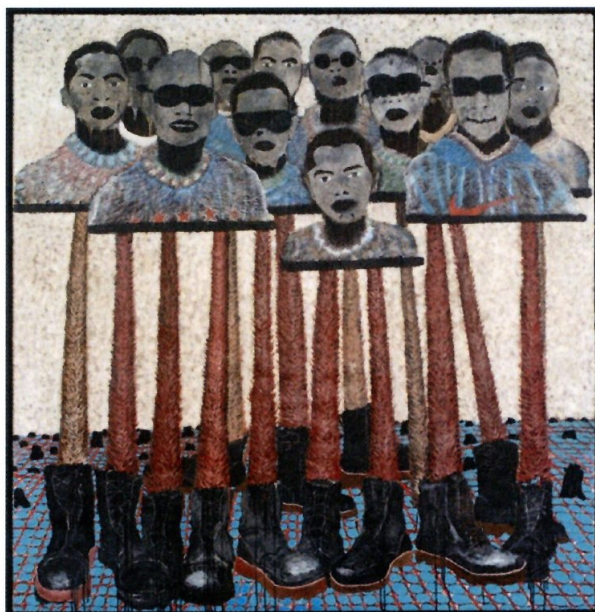
Plunging into his highly symbolist world feels like intruding on the chaotic thoughts of someone caught up in a trance, an attempt to conjure, perhaps, postcolonial traumas.

The first painting to meet the visitor, *War Junkie* (all works 2018), indistinctly raises issues regarding corruption and Western interference in Africa. Portrayed between two palm trees whose leaves have been replaced by giant beating hearts, a half-human, half-hyena creature threateningly holds a rifle, as if to claim or defend a territory of its own. It hides, though, behind various foreign forces: the weapon's stock is decorated with the flags of many Western and Middle Eastern countries including the United States, Great Britain, France, Iran and Palestine, suggesting ongoing international conflicts and more or less distant wars.

The current European migrant crisis also pervades some of the works in the show, hinting at the dreams and disillusionments of Africans who venture on perilous journeys across the Mediterranean Sea to meet (or not) better fates. In *Same Dream*, a group of confident young black men sit on an imposing, baroque-looking throne, sharing a unique body like a multi-

headed deity, which incidentally brings to mind the mythic iconographies of Ancient Egypt and even Hinduism. In *Plaidoyer d'une jeunesse* (*Plea for a youth*), a similar group more fiercely overlooks the viewers, ready to march out of the pictorial frame with black Dr Martens and, this time, exotic palm trunks for legs.

In *Clin d'oeil à Patrice Lumumba – aux tirailleurs* (*Nod to Patrice Lumumba – to the Tirailleurs*), Ba pays poetic tribute to the Congolese independence leader, who was assassinated in 1961, and the Senegalese Tirailleurs – the African soldiers from the former French colonial empire, who fought in both World Wars. In the painting, Lumumba is represented next to a skeleton in a wild, translucent field of poppies – a powerful symbol of remembrance for the people who died for peace. That being said, it would be a mistake to reduce Ba to simply a politically engaged artist. He is first and foremost an outstanding painter, and actually started off as an abstract one. As haunted as he is by the past and present of Africa, his practice doesn't offer any specific commentary about them, but rather a pure chaos reminiscent of the intensity found in the work of German expressionists at the outset of the Great War. *Violaine Boutet de Monvel*



Plaidoyer d'une jeunesse, 2018, acrylic, oil, pencil,
Indian ink and Bic pen on cardboard, 199 × 195 cm.
Courtesy Galerie Templon, Paris & Brussels