

TEMPLON

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OMAR BA

HARPERS BAZAAR ARABIA.COM, Summer 2019



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The ARTIST

Resurrection



Facing page: *Same Dream*, 2018. Acrylic, gouache, oil, crayon, pencil and gouache on canvas, 200x139cm. This page: *Première masque 2*, 2016. Oil, acrylic, gouache, pencil on canvas, 200x200cm.

DREAM

The work of Senegalese artist Omar Ba probes some of the greatest issues of our times. Rebecca Anne Proctor speaks with the artist on wealth inequality, cultural misunderstandings and the dream world we all seek

Seated on a chair on a blue and black checkered floor is a man with many heads. An African man he also has several arms, one pair which lift up his multitude of heads depicted with similar hairstyles and expressions. Out of one person can be several different people, Omar Ba, the artist of the work, seems to say in *Same Dream* (2018). It is, like so many of Ba's works, celebrative of the human spirit, the defiance of pain and an ode of the resilience of the world's youth. These same themes are currently being honored in *Omar Ba: Same Dream* (until 3 November 2019) at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) in collaboration with Toronto's Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, marking the first Canadian monographic exhibition dedicated to the artist's work from different periods of his career as well as his first institutional solo exhibition.

Born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1977, Ba's oeuvre is characteristic of the desire to merge past and present memories from both his African upbringing and European experience. Based between Geneva and

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Dakar, his canvases, now found in major collections and institutions including the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Credit Suisse and Fonds municipal d'art contemporain de la Ville de Paris, are distinct in their approach to tell stories that link African and European culture. Represented by Galerie Templon in Paris, he's shown at Hales Gallery in London, Institut Français de Dakar, Dakar, and Gallery Guy Bärtschi, Geneva, among other locations.

"When I decided in Senegal to go to the art school no one from my family agreed to support me," he recalls. It was around the year 2000 and he had been studying to become a mechanic. But he dropped out to be an artist. One day he was given the opportunity to draw. He drew a picture of a man killing another person and he gave it to the teacher. "The teacher said, 'Wow, Omar you draw very well!'" he remembers. A few days later the same teacher asked him what he was doing in the school and why he didn't go to art school. "He told me, 'I think you have a lot of talent,'" says Ba. "You can go to work in a factory your whole life but with art you can travel around the world." In 2002, he enrolled in l'École Nationale des Arts, Senegal. After several years, he was encouraged by an artist friend to pursue a Master's in art abroad. He was accepted at the HEAD (Haute Ecole d'Art et Design) in Geneva in 2005 and graduated from ECAV with a MAPS-Arts in Public Spheres Master in 2011. "Moving to Switzerland was a shock on so many levels," says the artist. Moreover, his professors were largely interested in new media, performance and installation-based work. "They told me that painting was dead," he adds. "But that was what I had always worked in. They wanted me to work in video and new media but I never liked to work in this manner. 'You need to change from painting' they told me." But he couldn't. "My paintings are about where I come from, how I see the world and the people around me," says Ba. "I needed to express myself in this way."

There's a mix of the figurative with the abstract in Ba's work, and what is surreal with what is real. "When I paint I try to repair the past, I try to talk about African history, I try to talk about life and the world in general and also the relationship between the north and the south, and also, most importantly, I speak about human nature," says the artist. "I want to educate the viewer. I know that in my painting you can see that I am African. I think the world has become a little village now. My work is not just for Africa or for Europe, it is for the world." Most people don't know that many Africans participated in World War II, he says, calling it "the

European War." His paintings portray what happened from an African perspective. "Many Africans were there but they don't want to show or publish it in the papers and in my art I try and show this history," he adds.

Violent acts permeate his explosive canvases. "I am also trying to speak about the conflicts resulting from terrorism and the young people who become implicated in these acts of terrorism. I am trying to portray this animalistic side of the human being." The monsters of human nature are relayed most articulately through Ba's paintings. Examples include *War Junkie* (2016), a man seated and holding a long gun with various depictions of national flags on the handle. His face is in the form of some incredibly grinning feline and on his feet are bright blue big sneakers, while next to him are two pedestals in the shape of hands that appear to hold other smaller guns. In *Plaidoyer d'une jeunesse* (*Advocacy of the Jeunesse*) (2018), dozens of faces are placed on long sticks or plants as they appear to have leaves of some sort. Some wear sunglasses and others don't. At the bottom of each pedestal are big black boots with the laces undone. "My work is very violent but I am trying to strike a balance between violence and beauty," he says. "For some people, it's hard to just look at violent work so I want to find a way where the works are a bit softer at times so that everyone can look at them." Yet, as he explains, there is violence in everything, for violence is at the origin of creation.

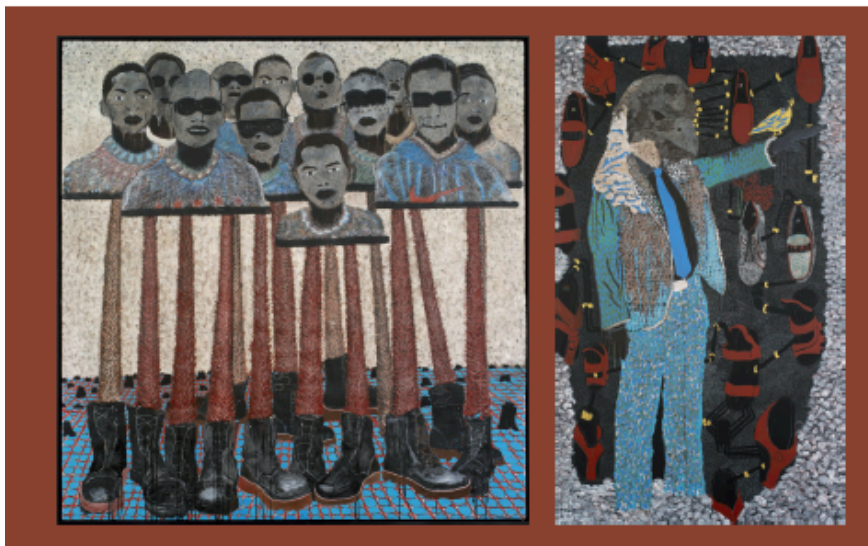
He tackles other topics too, like love. Participating in the group show *Quel Amour?* (*What Love?*) at MAC in Marseille, France (September 2018), Ba showed the work *Diafate*, portraying maternal love through an elderly African woman seated in a chair and draped in heavily patterned cloths. "I tried to show the maternal love that each human being can have," he says. "It's a different kind of love, different from romantic love." And then there is *Autopsie de nos croyances* (2018) a work that centres around problems of religion and belief and its influence on humans. Here Ba made a painting of a surreal city with a mix of churches, mosques and temples in order to demonstrate that there is a similar level of beliefs as well as, paradoxically, similar levels of differences within them.

Many often remark on the artist's acute use of colour. However, Ba states that he is "not a good colourist." Still, he says, he uses a lot of colour in his painting. "Colours are just a utensil to speak about beauty, violence, and life," says Ba. "Yet I am always worried about using too much and entering into kitsch. I almost always start with a black background and then add the colour and there's always the risk of adding too much. I feel

good when I start with the black. Maybe it is because I am also black," he laughs. "When I start with a black background it allows me to feel more what I want to do—it's like darkness and then the shapes and the figures come and I add colour—usually around three to four colours. I tried once to paint the canvas all white but it wasn't the same feeling that I received from the black."

Ba's expressive canvases introduce us to another Africa—one where the past, present and hopes for the future become one. There's anguish, pain, hope and beauty all wrapped together, as if the artist were trying to depict all the calamities that currently plague mankind. The duality of his work is also what attracts his loyal audience. "It was important for me not to forget the past," says the artist. "Because I need the past and its symbolic objects in order for me to understand the present and go forward into the future. It's important to understand the past but it is very important not to stay in the past." ■

Left: *Plaidoyer d'une jeunesse* 2018. Acrylic, oil, pencil, Indian ink, Bic pen on cardboard. 199x195cm. Right: *Ordiement-patrole* 2018. Acrylic, pencil, oil, gouache on canvas. 200x119cm.



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Way_Arabia_2019
Acrylic, pencil, oil,
gouache on
kraft polyester-
paper
25,3x160,5cm