

# TEMPLON

## II

OMAR BA

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Art

## Unboxing the Origins of Civilization

With cardboard paintings, Omar Ba honors African cultures and challenges the Eurocentric view of history.



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Installation view, Omar Ba, "Clin d'œil : à Cheikh Anta Diop - Un continent à la recherche de son histoire" (2017), oil, pencil, acrylic, ink, and gouache on corrugated card, 129 4/5 x 282 1/2 x 15 1/2 inches, main lobby of FIAF (all photos by Rebecca Greenfield, courtesy FIAF)

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Artist Omar Ba's newly presented piece, "Clin d'œil Anta Diop – Un continent à la recherche de son histoire" ("A wink to Cheikh Anta Diop – A continent in search of its history")" (2017) comprises 160 cardboard boxes stacked 11 feet tall and covering almost the entire east wall of the ground-floor gallery at the French Institute Alliance Française (FI AF) in Manhattan. The flimsy, lightweight material stands in overt contrast to the subject matter it carries: the history of Africa's status as the source of human ancestry. Ba's piece was selected to inaugurate FI AF's 15th annual Crossing the Line Festival where, at its opening reception, poshly dressed guests gathered over glasses of Pommery to take in a work about the historian Cheikh Anta Diop's efforts to break down the Eurocentric history of civilizations.

"Clin d'œil" depicts a man, a woman, and a boy walking toward us on soft, feathery quilted ground. Standing with them, à la Diop's anthropological argument that the highly respected original kingdoms of Ancient Egypt were, in fact, wholly African civilizations, are the disembodied idol heads of Ancient Egyptian pharaohs and queens: Sesostri s, Ti yi, Taharqa, Toutmosise (Thutmose), Hatshepsut. Behind them, in the receding horizon, familiar Western edifices: the Eiffel Tower, St. Basil's Cathedral, Big Ben — monuments of countries that have ignored Africa's ruling role in human history. Incidentally, Diop's *African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* is the subject of a timely new exhibition at The Met, several streets north of FI AF's gallery, which presents (finally) African art alongside the museum's celebrated collection of ancient Egyptian artifacts. (The Met's galleries of Sub-Saharan African Art — previously notably smaller than its prized Egyptian section — are currently closed for renovation.)



Against an all-black tracing of the world map, Ba's white textures, signature cerulean blues, and textiles of bold, heritage patterns hint — like archives — at a rich history of art, craft, and luxurious dress which drapes softly compared to the colorless stone buildings and empty countries in the distance behind them. The day after FIAF's opening, I visited Templon Gallery's New York location, where Ba's works were also the inaugural exhibition, and saw that this flowy, feather-like texture is a frequent feature, if not an enveloping backdrop in much of his larger portraiture. It looks pretty and cozy, a warm, welcoming paradise cloaking sadness and loss. At Templon, Ba's exhibition *Right of Soil — Right to Dream* displayed paintings that continue this emphasis and immersion of pattern and soft textiles, into which are woven flags of international nation-states and against which elements of industry and modernity contrast: large black pipes, motorbikes, railroads.

Hands and feet are often simply outlined, the black background alluding to skin tones, seemingly emphasizing how all human history is — and originates in, and should have been — African history, and therefore rooted in blackness (FIAF's gallery has been painted all black to best showcase the work). Hales Gallery, who has hosted two solo shows for Ba, explains how Ba aims to “weave a thread between” African and European culture. He presents people that both form and are formed by the work's background, a technique which, ironically, also renders them invisible. A wink to Diop's anthropological mapping of the omnipresent Africanness in the history of humankind despite the historical exclusion and exploitation of Black people.



Attendees at FIAF's Crossing the Line Festival opening reception take in Omar Ba's "Clin d'œil" (2017)

The faces in “Clin d’œil” are filled in but only with a clustering of tiny circles. Are these the atoms that make up all life on Earth — that concept about how we’re all interconnected energy? Or do these *eau gazeuse*-like bubbles of disconnected translucence convey a forgotten and fragmented identity? They’re tenuous, like the tower of boxes.

On these faces I see melancholy and boldness, persistence and fatigue. The woman’s mouth slightly ajar in disbelief, eyebrows half-raised in skepticism as she looks ahead, searching for her place. The man, calmer, is wrapped in his textiles, its knotted memories all he has, much else having been taken from him. He appears aware of his worth, just waiting for the world to notice. In the center of the work, the boy holds his head high, like a young rightful king but bearing no armor or weapons, proudly donning only soft, patterned shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals.



Artist Omar Ba speaking to exhibition visitors in front of his work

For *Crossing the Line*’s curators, Ba’s work suggests a “wholly contemporary artistic message.” Indeed, because “Clin d’œil” can be disassembled. The artwork arrived flat from Hales Gallery, requiring refolding and taping together in what must have felt like an unboxing of African history — its collage-like juxtapositions of full-bodied brush strokes versus thin sketches, large scale versus tiny detail, and its fearless cross-culturality addressing an unstable world.