

TEMPLON

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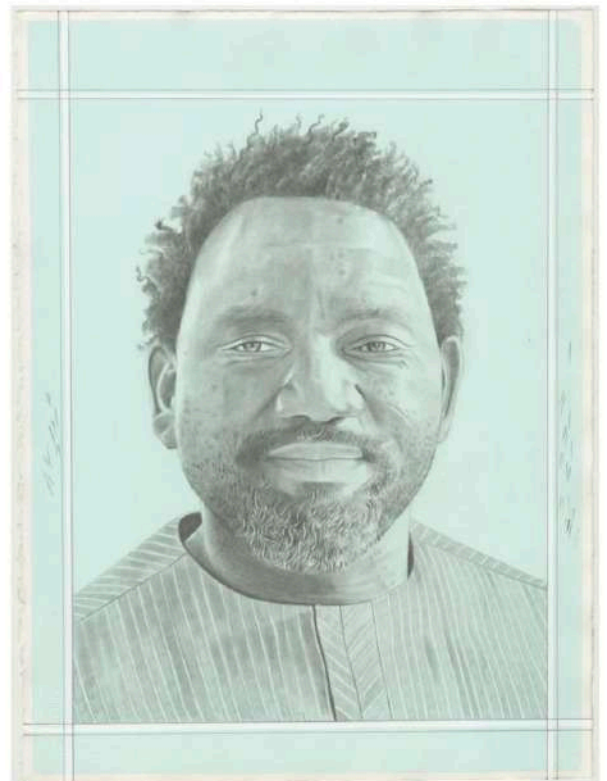
OMAR BA

BROOKLYN RAIL, décembre 2022

Art | In Conversation

# Omar Ba with Emann Odufu

“I want to build a world where we  
can find all the dreams we don’t  
have now.”



Portrait of Omar Ba, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Contemporary Senegalese artist Omar Ba has made a mark on the art world in Africa and Europe, and now he is doing the same in the US. Ba spent 2020 in New York City, and that pandemic experience became his crash course in American culture. During this time the artist came to see similarities amongst the issues that affect people back in his home of Dakar, Senegal and in the United States. This became the impetus for his exhibition at Galerie Templon in New York, *Right of Soil – Right to Dream*, and his US museum debut at the Baltimore Museum of Art, *Political Animals*.

BALTIMORE

Baltimore Museum of Art  
*Political Animals*  
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**Emann Odufu (Rail):** It's interesting that in your exhibition *Right of Soil – Right to Dream*, you wanted to engage with the simultaneous influence African American and African communities have on one another. I think that's very interesting. Especially with the popularity of Afrobeat in the US, there is probably the closest connection between African communities and African Americans at the moment. To me, that is a beautiful thing. Can you talk about that connection between African and African American communities and how you channeled it in your exhibition at Templon? Why is this cross-cultural conversation between Black people in America and Black people on the continent so important?



Omar Ba, *Droit du sol - droit de rêve #1*, 2022. Acrylic, pencil, oil, Indian ink, and Bic pen on canvas, 78 3/4 x 116 1/7 inches. Courtesy the artist and Templon, Paris - Brussels - New York. Photo: Charles Roussel.

**Omar Ba:** The connection between the African American community and the African community goes both ways. That is to say that Africa has generated the movement of Black Americans with history, the way they left Africa to go to the US. As time goes by, we notice a return of this influence from the African American population living in the US, and this influence can be found through dancing, music, dressing, and even languages. You can see that people all over Africa identify most of the time with African American people who have succeeded in the United States, whether in athletics or film. For example, I love actors like Denzel Washington and watching Spike Lee's movies and everything he has done. When I go to the boxing gym, there are a lot of boxers who I follow, like Gervonta Davis. I could keep going and quote Morgan Freeman, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, Don Cheadle, Whoopi Goldberg, etc. It's compilation that makes us dream, and this exchange goes both ways. The African Americans are soaking up the culture of Africa as Africans are taking a cue from the African American culture.

In the Templon show, what I wanted to talk about and what I find straddling the African American and African communities is the possibility that every individual, no matter where they are born, should have the same opportunities as others, whether it be in Africa or America. People need to have the same rights in education, access to work, and community life.

**Rail:** You were in NYC during the pandemic for your residency with ISCP. I think that was an especially unique time to be in the US, with everything going on, from the election to the protest movements, all happening during a global health crisis. How did being here at this time influence your exhibition at Templon and the Baltimore Museum of Art?

You are so well known across Europe and Africa and have made a significant impact in these regions. So why is it important for you to engage American audiences with the themes and messages of your work?

**Ba:** My stay in the US and at the ISCP residency allowed me to meet curators and get in touch with the American art scene. I visited a lot of collections, met a lot of curators, and met artists, and among these meetings, I had the opportunity to have a solo show at the Baltimore Museum. The second thing linked to the fact that I was in the US at this time is that I was able to witness the Black Lives Matter movement, and the American elections, which allowed me to see that in terms of civil rights, there are many things to improve. People are often misunderstood. There are still a lot of issues and things that need to be resolved on the American territory.

So I wanted to talk about this imbalance on social and financial levels. People suffered a lot during COVID. We were forced to have excellent insurance during COVID. This allowed me to see that the demands for civil rights within the African and African American communities are similar. It's just that they're further ahead in the US than in parts of Africa. But we notice that there is still a long way to go. Because we see inequalities in terms of education, things to be improved. This pushed me to make this exhibition and made me want to talk about the right of the soil. In the United States, until now, the right to land that everyone benefits from has not been seen on an institutional, cinematographic, or everyday life level.

**Rail:** Your work has been described as weaving through terrestrial, celestial, and cosmic spheres, and I can feel that when I look at your artwork. It exists on many planes. There's a definite magical realism that can be felt through your artwork. I haven't been to Senegal, but my sister has spent a lot of time there, so I'm familiar with the culture. Obviously, it's a predominantly Islamic country, but the mystical side and the traditions of ancestors and griots are always right beneath the surface. Can you speak to how your work channels this sort of spiritual duality that characterizes certain aspects of Senegalese culture?

**Ba:** Yes, the percentage of Muslims in Senegal is almost 90 percent. But there is still a strong presence of animist and Christian belief systems. Almost everywhere in Africa, in every country before the arrival of Christianity and/or Islam, there was animism. Our ancestors lived and believed in a single God, having a solid connection to nature, objects, and parental lineage. I think that with the arrival of all these religions, whether people are Muslims, Christians, or Jews, there is always this base of African culture that resurfaces. The whole world has an animistic side.



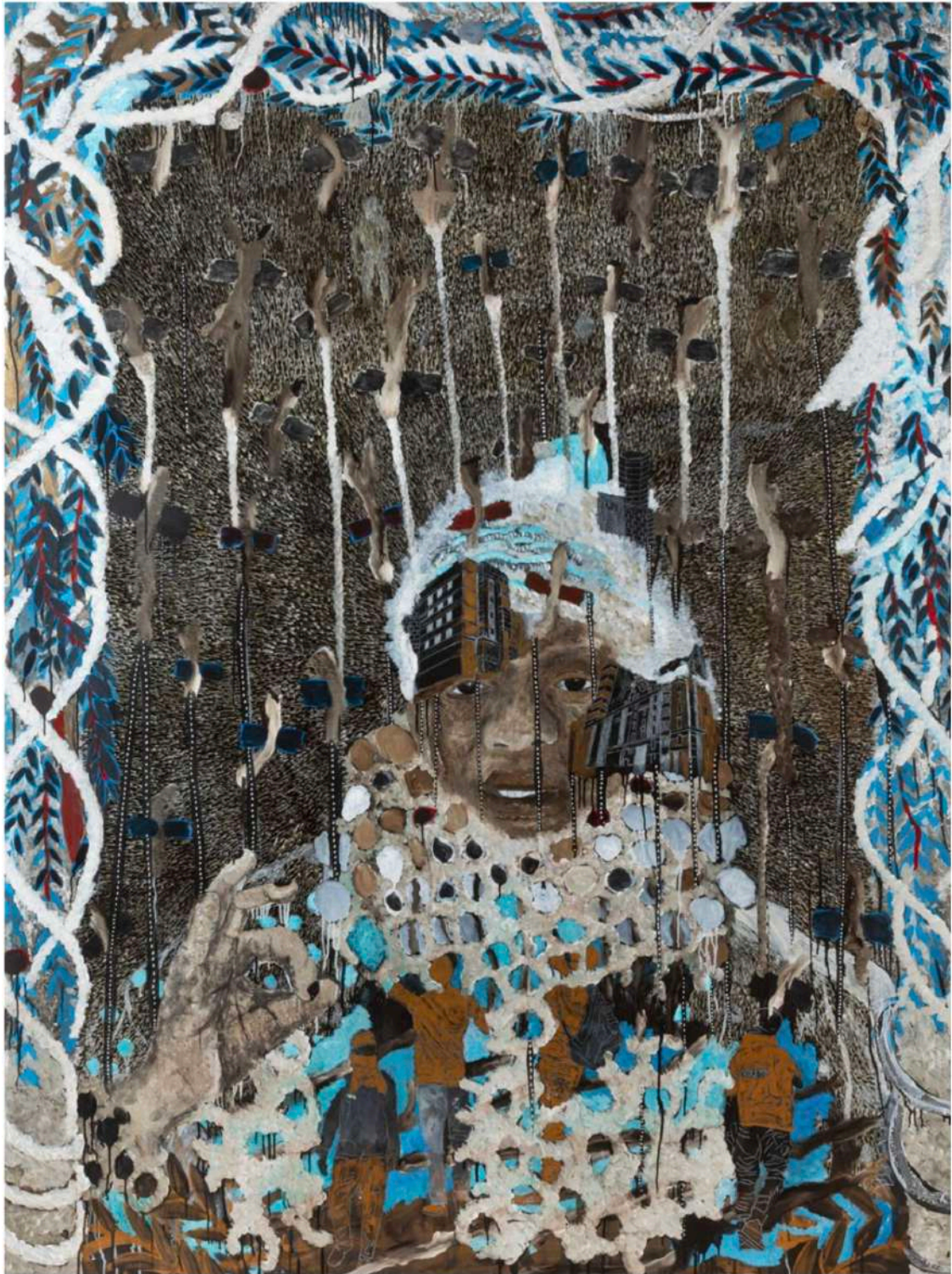
Omar Ba, *Voyage au-delà de l'illusion 3*, 2022. Acrylic, pencil, oil, Indian ink, and Bic pen on canvas, 92 7/8 × 78 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist and Templon, Paris - Brussels - New York. Photo: Isabelle Arthuis.

The morning routine is like a connection with the same deity; getting up in the morning, taking a shower, standing in front of a mirror and/or putting on makeup. This is why it naturally appears in my work. My African roots are connected to this culture even though I am Muslim. This is something that can be felt strongly in my career. In this line, when I work, paint, in the studio, I am always in a state of trance, in a meditation. I can repeat gestures thousands of times until I forget myself. I have told Muslim friends in Senegal that the only time I connect with God and the deities is when I am painting. That's when I know that there is almost nothing between me and that deity. The place of this culture, meditation, and practice substantially impacts creation.

**Rail:** Can you talk a little more about the animist religion?

**Ba:** Animism believes in a God because we know there is a unique God, the same as everyone else. The connection with this God is made through nature or parents. It is said that when a child is born, it is the reincarnation of our parents. This means respect for the ancestors, nature, and animals. I emphasize that we need nature and that it is essential not to spoil it. This is one of the principles of the animist religion. Animism is the perfect balance between human beings and nature.

**Rail:** I read that in your childhood you heard many tales in a Serer village from griots that mixed this mysticism and animism with political satire. Is that why you were so apt to take on the topics of the show *Political Animals* at the Baltimore Museum of Art? I understand that the term stems from an Aristotelian dictum. Can you walk me through the concept of that show? Why did you decide to name it *Political Animals*?



Omar Ba, *Sons of God before their destiny*, 2022. Acrylic, pencil, oil, Indian ink, and Bic pen on canvas, 78 6/8 × 59 inches. Courtesy the artist and Templon, Paris - Brussels - New York. Photo: Laurent Edeline.

**Ba:** I think the idea of calling this exhibition *Political Animals* comes from the fact that for almost twenty years, I have been working on the relationship between North and South Africa, its history, the history of slavery, the Second World War and the geopolitical problems of the world. Looking back, I notice that all my work revolves around recognition, power, domination, and success.

As a young person who grew up in Africa, I noticed that education is mainly based on the oral side. We are educated through stories and tales related to nature and animals. These tales are metaphors and are actually associated with human beings. For example, we try to talk about the world and its surroundings by giving examples related to the animal world and/or the vegetative world. And I grew up in this world. In my work, I have often mixed human beings and animals. I have noticed that human beings have an animal instinct which is even worse than the animal kingdom. It's a bit like the jungle. Domination, the act of showing force, of being able to impose power and humiliate populations, is something that I often notice in humans. We wanted to give this title to the exhibition to reference what we find most of the time in this work and that the story in Africa is often told through metaphors of animals, plants, and the plant world. With Leslie Cozzi, who curated the exhibition in Baltimore, we discussed how the mix between the animal and human being is very present in my work, so we decided we would give this title to the exhibition, as I often speak of politics through animal metaphors.

**Rail:** Your work explores many themes and iconographies: despotic warlords of the present, traditional folklore, colonial oppression, and the pharaohs of ancient Egypt. In the process, you weave a narrative that intertwines African and European histories. This is interesting because I am into history, and I know there has always been a constant flow of inspiration from Africa to Europe. How does your work break down classifications of African or Western Art?

**Ba:** The most important thing in my work is the naturalness between what I do and myself. I don't try to reproduce trends or follow what's in style to fit into any molds of art. I have always produced work that, from a personal point of view, helps me to heal myself with history. The history of Africa has always been written by the victorious. The history of Africa has been told by others. Whether it is the Europeans or the Arabs, we have always felt their influence on the history of Africa. This is why I wanted to start from the origins. When I wanted to build a language and tools, I tried to go back in time, before the arrival of all these occupants. I started with ancient Egypt to make the link to their civilization as the source of Western influence, but also to a level of spirituality, especially what we find in the Book of the Dead where spirituality is explained with a unique god which according to many people is the perfect influence of Islam and Christianity. From this, I wanted to give a base to my culture and roots. So I started to find a language influenced by Africa's history but open to the world. In my work, we see this opening to Europe through these mixtures of forms, techniques, and issues to create a unique discourse.

**Rail:** I'm interested in Afrofuturism and this idea of creating new worlds through art. How are you building new worlds or pathways to understanding the world anew through your work?



Omar Ba, *Compartment-aller simple 10*, 2022. Acrylic, pencil, oil, Indian ink, and Bic pen on canvas, 92 7/8 x 51 1/6 inches. Courtesy the artist and Templon, Paris - Brussels - New York. Photo: Isabelle Arthusis.



**Ba:** How I construct narrative surprises and fascinates me. The fact that I start from a subject and go beyond is as if windows and doors were opening in my work. The fact that I grew up with the cinema, had the chance to travel and spend time in Europe and other parts of Africa, as well as the encounters I have made in my life—all of that has taught me.

When I am in my studio I build a somewhat imaginary world. I don't try to represent what we see in everyday life, but I often try to add a narrative that is a bit related to science fiction, with characters that have feathers or two heads. All this is a way to talk about an interior, to explain things that concern me. For example, when I want to talk about the youth who are the future of tomorrow, it is a way to talk about myself, about my worries when I was their age. I use the image of children, of many children around a single character which is my body, myself. It allows me to speak of many things with a single representation.

Through my work, I want to create a world without discrimination. I try to imagine a world where there is no racism and no domination. Where people are born free and equal, as the United Nations Charter says. I want to build a world where we can find all the dreams we don't have now.

I'm building a world where there are no conflicts. For example, what we're living through in Europe or Ukraine or the war that is everywhere. I try to make a world where future generations can still dream. What worries me is asking myself, what kind of world are we going to leave to our children. When I see how we live and what happens around us, I am afraid for the youth. I wonder if they would like to live in a world with so much discrimination and power games. These are questions that I ask myself. In my painting, I create a world where the problems are always put aside and inverted to try to solve them.

**Rail:** You began your journey as a street painter creating your works on walls in Senegal. Your career has come a long way, and your work is now shown in some of the most esteemed institutions worldwide. How do you keep the essence of your beginnings, the sheer rawness of the creative process, alive in your most current work?

**Ba:** I keep the essence of my work through murals that I continue to realize. In addition, what I have kept from the essence of my work is the verticality of my painting formats. But also at the level of the change of scale and diversity. The natural pigments that I still use are those that I have always used. Also, my subjects have mixed abstract and figurative genres since the beginning of my career, as the animal to the human and the vegetative to the imaginary.

**Rail:** Your first monograph is coming out soon. How long has this book been in the making? And what was the experience like bringing that book together, which spans your career as an artist thus far? Did the process of documenting your work in a book for the public change how you viewed your work? Did it allow you to further reflect on your career from a bird's-eye view?

**Ba:** The book is coming out soon, and I am thrilled. It shows my work over the past twenty years. Most of the artwork in this book was exhibited by Galerie Templon. It shows a special recognition of my work. It is also a way to give visibility to all these past twenty years of work.

It will be a source of pride for me to be able to find this monograph in bookshops and places intended for art. I have always liked to buy books in museums, but normally it was other artists' books. Now my book will be there, and for me, that's a satisfaction and a recognition. At the same time, it shows the responsibility I take for my work and my origins. An artist is like a soldier because, during my career, I have always done a job that aims to change something.