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Cover: *Bagdad 2006–Syrte 2011 (Baghdad 2006–Sirte 2011)*, 2018. Acrylic, oil, India ink, colored pencil, white correction fluid and gel pen on corrugated cardboard, 78 ¹/₈ × 53 ³/₈ in. (198,5 × 135,5 cm) **Right & back cover:** *Voyage au-delà de l’illusion 1*, 2022. oil, acrylic, India ink, colored pencils, porous tip pen, white correction fluid on canvas, 96 ³/₇ × 78 ³/₄ × 2 ³/₈ in. (245 × 200 × 6 cm) **Page 2:** *Eternal Resemblance 1 (detail)*, 2017. Oil, acrylic, India ink, gouache, colored pencil, white correction fluid on kraft paper with polyester foam, 75 ³/₈ × 55 ¹/₈ in. (191,5 × 140 cm) **Page 7:** *Walking in the Darkness*, 2020. Oil, acrylic, gouache, porous tip pen, white correction fluid on canvas, 78 ³/₄ × 59 in. (200 × 150 cm) **Page 10:** Omar Ba, *Droit du sol – droit de rêver (Right of Soil – Right to Dream) #1*. 2022. Acrylic, oil paint, black ink, colored pencil, porous-tip pen and white correction fluid on canvas. 118 × 78 ³/₄ in. (299.7 × 200 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Art Fund established with exchange funds from gifts of Dr. and Mrs. Edgar F. Berman, Equitable Bank, N.A., Geoffrey Gates, Sandra O. Moose, National Endowment for the Arts, Lawrence Rubin, Philip M. Stern, and Alan J. Zakon, BMA R.18737.1





OMAR BA: POLITICAL ANIMALS

LESLIE COZZI

Leslie Cozzi, curator of ‘Omar Ba: Political Animals’ at the Baltimore Museum of Art, addresses both the artist’s painting process and the themes of the exhibition – belonging, biopolitics, hybridity and power.

A dense network of electric blue cylinders crisscrosses a broad expanse of mottled white paint. Delicate, white-veined leaves sprout at their crossings, lending an organic quality to these enigmatic tubular forms. Small silhouetted figures sketched in white pencil lines occupy the negative spaces of this thicket. Some gaze out towards the viewer; others face the imaginary space of the canvas as if confronting a separate reality. Individuals, couples, children, parents—all stages of the life cycle are pictured in these groupings. The scalloped white lines surrounding these silhouettes amplify their energy. Like much of the work of contemporary Senegalese painter Omar Ba (born near Dakar, Senegal 1977), *Eternal Resemblance 1*, 2017, is an image of people

bound together by forces outside themselves, and sometimes beyond their awareness. Yet the concept of affinity enacted in the formal structure of the work, and foregrounded in its title, contains a certain level of irony. For while we may see ourselves as individuals, we are defined by our relation to a wider group. These paradoxes of human nature and belonging take shape in Ba’s practice.

Ba’s painting process and use of materials embody his engagement with the local community. He typically works from photographs taken at home or around the Senegalese capital Dakar, capturing youth culture and daily life in its markets, streets, and beaches to constantly refresh his supply of visual information. From this influx

of visual stimuli, he selects particularly evocative portraits of people and animals to print on colored paper and tack up to the studio wall. He makes multiple copies of these source images, sometimes blocking out the figure with thickly applied black paint to detach it from its original context and enable him to breathe new life into its painted avatar. He then experiments with different densities and opacities of color, working on multiple paintings concurrently and building up a subject layer by layer to produce a chimerical, monumental version of its former self.

Ba's variegated colors and overlapping patterns appear to teem with life. Stylistically, this represents a major departure from the expanses of flat color often employed in representing the Black figure through the work of contemporary artists like Kerry James Marshall and others. Rather, Ba's work has a remarkable tactility and dimensionality, not simply because of the undulating surface of the corrugated cardboard he regularly employs. Using

a diverse array of wet and dry media (oil and acrylic paint, watercolors, inks, wax crayons, ballpoint pens, white correction fluid, pastels, and colored pencils), he achieves textural and chromatic effects that other artists often use beads, fabric, glitter, and appliqués to obtain. His paintings are built up of networks of short feathery strokes, skeins of dripped or brushed color, and repeating circles and other details drawn in with pencils. He often works up the composition from a solid black background. This originated as a means of subverting the inherent racism of the Western canon, which for centuries has defined beauty as synonymous with whiteness.¹

In the past few years, since his first sojourn in the United States in the spring of 2020, Ba has started experimenting with different grounds, including unprimed canvas. This more transparent surface enables the artist to capture spontaneous effects of paint and, in his words, "construct a technique from accident."²



Not Fiction but Glory, 2022. Acrylic paint, oil paint, oil stick, gouache, India ink, wood stain, walnut dye, colored pencil, wax pencil, porous tip pen, and white correction fluid on cardboard boxes, 166⁷/₈ × 462 × 10¹/₄ in. (424 × 1173,5 × 26 cm)



Voyage au-delà de l'illusion 2, 2022. Acrylic, India ink, colored pencil, porous tip pen, white correction fluid on canvas, 92⁷/₈ × 78³/₄ × 2³/₈ in. (236 × 200 × 6 cm)

Ba subsequently manipulates and superimposes different values of black on black and white on white. This tonal sophistication may be less immediately evident than his command of color, but it is arguably even more demanding. While he does not create precise, illusionistic replicas, his surfaces take on the physical qualities of the objects they depict—waxy, veined leaves; crepey, mottled skin.

Layered on top of this black and white structure, a profusion of near primary color lends a lush, densely vegetative quality to Ba's work. This is fitting for an oeuvre which so often thematizes the interdependence of people and environment. Ba's work can be understood as a meditation on biopolitics, exploring how power defined in relation to biology exercises control over life and death.³ The branchlike formations coursing

through many of Ba's compositions serve as a reminder of the shared linguistic derivations of the terms "roots" and "race" in both English and Ba's spoken French. Yet if racism subdivides people and justifies violence by establishing "a biological caesura between the ones and the others,"⁴ Ba instead emphasizes what he considers to be more important questions of connection and belonging. Ba visualizes the precarious and dependent nature of existence through the motif of the spiderweb.

The artist's intricate visual systems are rooted in a palimpsest of personal and social history. Yet it is important to note that Ba's work isn't representative of the oversimplified version of African art—often elided with central and west African sculpture—widely accepted in the United States.⁵ This has partly to do with the particularity of Senegal with respect to other nations on the continent. As the cosmopolitan former capital of colonial French West Africa, Senegal has long benefitted from and contributed to the global art market.

Senegalese artists have worked internationally throughout the twentieth century, and Dakar boasts one of the longest-running and most important biennials in Africa.⁶ Ba himself is the product of both Senegalese and Swiss art school training. So, it is not surprising that when discussing artists of interest, Ba cites Jasper Johns' handling of materials and direct appropriation of political symbols; Andy Warhol's engagement with the stuff of everyday life, from soup cans to political violence; and Chaim Soutine's self-effacing yet visceral mastery of paint.

Ba visualizes
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through
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Bagdad 2006-Syrte 2011 (Baghdad 2006-Sirte 2011), 2018. Acrylic, oil, India ink, colored pencil, white correction fluid and gel pen on corrugated cardboard, 78 1/8 × 53 3/8 in. (198,5 × 135,5 cm)

Ba describes himself as both Muslim and animist, noting that animism in western Africa predates both Christianity and Islam, and still inflects how Islam is practiced locally. Prior to his birth, his father had been Chief of Staff at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the government of Léopold Sédar Senghor. Senegal's first post-independence president (1960–1980), Senghor was also a famous advocate of the anticolonial literary and philosophical movement that promoted an idealized conception of Black civilization known as Negritude.⁷ Yet Ba's work does not naively champion cultural assimilation or hybridity as an unqualified virtue.

Born in a Serer village outside of Dakar in 1977, Ba grew up in a Senegal marred

by democratic failure and economic strife. Western-mandated fiscal austerity policies first applied in Senegal, then elsewhere in Africa, demonstrated the fragility of economies in newly formed, post-colonial nations.⁸ The devastating toll of these programs was symptomatic of the economic and political problems Ba confronts in his work today—resource dependence, Western imperialism, and humanitarian failure. Africa's misfortunes are not Ba's sole focus, however. Ba's frequent quotation of the United Nations' emblem can be similarly understood as his critique of its patronage structure and ineffectiveness as a global peacekeeper. Much of Ba's work addresses movement and migration, just as the spirals and undulating lines comprising his forms render it palpable. Sometimes Ba deals with migration in a mythic sense; elsewhere he treats its harsh realities.

Without stereotyping African art, how can we understand the particular challenge Ba's work presents to viewers in the context of his first solo museum exhibition in the United States?⁹ Famed Egyptologist and Senegalese anti-colonial activist Cheikh Anta Diop, in his landmark treatise *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, asserted, "Our investigations have convinced us that the West has not been calm enough and objective enough to teach us our history correctly, without crude falsifications."¹⁰ Deploying a similar logic, Ba's paintings suggest that the West in turn might need to revisit its own history for the same reasons. With their disarming visual splendor, his images challenge assumptions about cultural superiority and political sovereignty deeply embedded

in the European and American worldviews. They demonstrate, as Simon Njami points out, "The history of Europe in the past few centuries is an African history, whether one likes it or not. Just as African history is resolutely European."¹¹ Ba's frequent depiction of globes and his invocation of the Atlantic Ocean serve as reminders of our connectedness. They also implicate the specific responsibility of the United States, the later twentieth century's reigning global superpower, within this unequal world order. In doing so, Ba challenges American exceptionalism,

pointing to the ways in which our failures are world failures. Ba insists on the contiguity of seemingly disparate contexts, depicting in brilliant color the complex interrelation of all creation and the cycles of causality that produce a benighted present from a problematic past.

—

Omar Ba, *'Political Animals'*, Baltimore Museum of Art, until April 2, 2023.

THIS TEXT IS AN EDITED AND SHORTENED VERSION OF THE ESSAY ORIGINALLY PRODUCED BY AND FOR THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

1. "At school we always had to paint on white based on the idea that we could see colors better, properly, and at a certain point I realized that is also ideology... starting always with white, with the idea that all that is clean is white and all that is dirty is black. I wanted to do the opposite. It is a way of showing the purity of blackness and also of rectifying history." The artist quoted in *Omar Ba: Same Dream*, Power Plant Pages, no. 8 (Toronto: The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, 2019): 73.
2. Conversation with the artist, March 5, 2020.
3. In the opening lines of his essay "Necropolitics," Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe asserts that "the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who may die." Mbembe then goes on to explore historical expressions of biopolitical violence along with its more recent mobile and technological formations. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15 (1): 11–40. For more on the application of biopolitics to African contemporary art, see Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Contemporary*.
4. Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 17.
5. Christa Clarke and Kathleen Bickford Berzock, "A Historical Introduction," in *Representing Africa in American Museums: A Century of Collecting and Display* (Seattle: University of

Washington Press, 2011): 3–19.
6. Joanna Grabski, *Art World City: The Creative Economy of Artists and Urban Life in Dakar* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017): 2–6; Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004): 6–14, 34–38; Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 13.
7. Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 21–33.
8. Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 19, 22 n 8, 341.
9. I am conscious, here, of the tokenizing tendency in globalized accounts of contemporary Africa: "So while artists may celebrate freedoms associated with globalism and transnationalism, such broader participation, detached from the markers of nationality and identity, is not without its contradictions. For it seems that, at the moment when African artists could present themselves as part of a denationalized global field of artistic production, their African-ness is reified." Enwezor and Okeke-Agulu, 25.
10. Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*, trans. Mercer Cook (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1974): xiv.
11. Simon Njami, *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (London: Hayward Gallery, in association with Hatje Cantz, 2005): 18.





MICHAEL RAY CHARLES

WITH MARA HOBERMAN

Mara Hoberman in conversation with Michael Ray Charles as the artist is preparing his first solo show in NYC in more than 20 years: 'Veni Vidi' at Templon.

MH: Let me start by asking you about the title of the show, 'Veni Vidi'. Usually there's a third word there, but you've left it out. Why?

MRC: "I came, I saw." That's it. The "I conquered" part...that's another story. My objective is not to conquer. For me, "I came, I saw" relates to the way I have been able to cultivate a visual language and use this visual language to articulate something about the world; about what I've seen and what I see.

MH: Victor Hugo wrote a poem about his daughter titled "Veni, Vidi, Vixi,"¹ which translates as: "I came, I saw, I lived." Perhaps the title of your show is somewhat in keeping with that context of family and how family fits into a larger sense of history.

MRC: Yes, I often think back about a time when my son was in middle school and really into sports. My wife was doing fundraising for the team and wanted to buy trophies to give out to the students. Well, there we were in the shop looking at all the trophies and just not seeing our son or his schoolmates reflected anywhere. The faces on the trophies were all generalized, of course, but they also clearly referenced white people. None had anything to do with the students on my son's sports team who are black, Indian and Vietnamese. It is very hard—and very telling—that, even when our kids are gifted and superior, if we want to acknowledge this, the only option is a trophy that looks nothing like them. I've come to realize that even in moments of triumph, minorities are faced with defeat in many ways because the symbols of accomplishment and excellence don't look like them.

Left: *(Forever Free) Veni Vidi*, 2022.
94 1/2 × 69 7/8 in. (240 × 177, 5 cm)

MH: There's also a painting in the show that shares the title of the exhibition, (*Forever Free*), *Veni Vidi*. In this painting we see the heads of two American presidents (Abraham Lincoln and Lyndon B. Johnson) attached to either end of a red string that is being held up by an androgynous bustier-clad black portrait bust. The historic figures are American, but the setting feels very European because of certain architectural details (like the ornate wall moldings) and furniture (the side table with gilded legs). Is the contrast between cultures and time periods intentional?

MRC: It's very intentional. I am acutely aware of how architecture and interior design create a cultural context. The architectural design elements that you're picking up on, like the crown moldings or the wainscoting, are still popular today, but they also harken back to a certain historical period that evokes pure pleasure for some and pure pain for others. So this painting, and others like it, is my way of bringing the past forward and providing an historical context. In this and other paintings in the exhibition you will find references to Versailles and also to adornments typically found in European cathedrals dating back to the 1600s. It's important also that the architectural context is always a shallow one, I mean in terms of representing space. I'm still quite interested in the idea of life as a performance and so the settings of my paintings are always very theatrical, stage-like.

MH: And as for the paper heads of the two American presidents, it appears as if they are being weighed against each other. They are

hanging there on either end of that piece of red string, but it seems ambiguous as to whether they are being measured based on their virtues or, perhaps, for their misgivings.

MRC: I think that the important decisions that these two leaders ultimately made, regardless of whether they were totally for emancipation (in the case of Lincoln) and civil rights (in the case of Johnson), are like brackets framing the black experience in America. During COVID and, what I will call "the reckoning" that took place shortly after George Floyd's death [on May 25, 2020], there was a lot of emphasis on the Civil War. Americans still can't seem to get on the same page about what that war was really about. Looking around and seeing what was happening politically in the wake of George Floyd's death, I felt like we were moving backwards in terms of laws that were being passed, the type of language that was being utilized, and a general evasion of—or just complete disregard for—the truth. So many of the things that I think that allowed American society to come together in the 60s and which paved the way for a more tolerant times in the 70s, 80s, and 90s were being removed. All of the trust that had been gained was suddenly lost. When I think about all of this, the symbol of a pendulum swinging back and forth between contemplations of Africans is an important reference.

MH: Were most of the paintings in 'Veni Vidi' made in the wake of George Floyd's death, or were you working on some of them for much longer?

It's very intentional. I am acutely aware of **HOW** architecture and interior design create a cultural **CONTEXT.**



(Forever Free) *A One 'Man' Show*, 2022.
Acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas, 94½ × 69⅞ in.
(240 × 177, 5 cm)

MRC: Interestingly enough, I got very little done in terms of making art during the pandemic. So this show includes works made mostly in the last few years. Some paintings are fresh off the boat, made just this last fall.

MH: And are some of the paintings we see in 'Veni Vidi' older works that you've recently reworked? Can you explain that part of your process?

MRC: I do rework paintings that stay in the studio. In some cases, paintings will change radically and become something totally different. Sometimes an idea comes across in one iteration but then, with more thought, it might drastically change overnight.

Many of the paintings convey the same ideas just with a different execution. I typically work on several paintings at once. Right now there are five paintings in my studio, but I've had as many as twelve in there at the same time. I'm always engaged with multiple paintings at the same time, because I'm constantly comparing and contrasting.

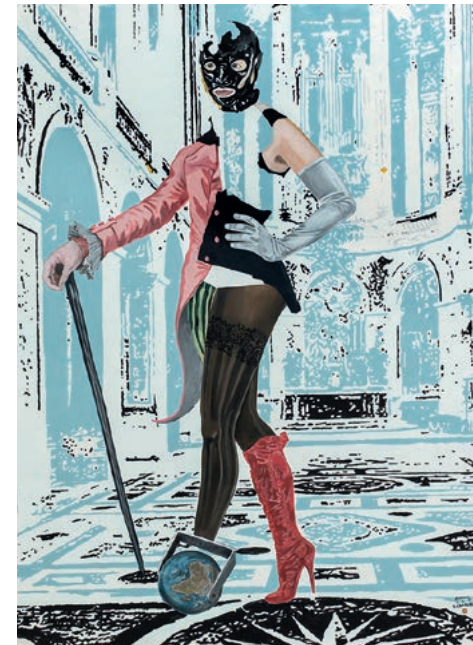
MH: It's been a while, over twenty years, since you exhibited in New York, but you just had a major show in Paris last year. Do you think that your work reads—or is received—differently in Europe and in the United States? Are you thinking about different audiences and contexts when you paint?

MRC: A long time ago, I came to understand that all an artist needs is an opportunity for his or her work to be seen. I try to create work that has the ability to communicate to anyone and everyone who is capable of standing in front of the painting and who is willing to walk down the road with it, so to speak. But I'm also conscious of the fact that all cultures have their own very specific collective consciousness and that this context necessarily shapes how people see things and interpret them. Every culture has a shared language, which includes music, visual forms, body language, hand gestures, etc. All of these things influence how someone might understand a painting. Yes, things are different in the US and in Europe, but I've also noticed an intensified globalization in the past 15–20 years. In many ways the world is getting smaller. I'm thankful to have an opportunity to exhibit my work and I don't expect that everyone will respond the same way or get

everything that I'm trying to say. But that is not my objective.

MH: I notice some new themes emerging in your recent works, specifically around sexuality and gender identity. What inspired you to start tackling these issues?

MRC: Those are important issues today; there's a lot of uncertainty surrounding the LGBTQ communities. Bringing in these themes is also as an extension of my attempt to understand the impact and the effects of minstrelsy, the 19th century minstrel shows. One component of these shows was cross-dressing. For years I was making images that only referenced black males, and this bothered me. So I came up with an



(Forever Free) *My Long Tail Butterfly*, 2022.
Acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas, 94½ × 69⅞ in.
(240 × 177, 5 cm)

image that I thought could represent both male and female. There are a lot of aspects of minstrelsy that I address with my work including, masquerade, burlesque, desire, carnival and, of course, power dynamics. My work now is different in many ways than the work I made 20 years ago; I'm going deeper.

MH: I know that your practice involves a lot of in-depth research. What have you been digging into recently?

MRC: I'm always reading. For a while I was stuck on trying to figure out the images of blacks that appear in antiquity. I was reading Frank Snowden's book: *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. It's not true that there was no racism in ancient Rome. Racism is a byproduct of ignorance coupled with power. And if you look at some of these early representations of blacks, I think you'll see that that those images can be linked to 19th century stereotypes. I can't say it enough, in my work, and in general: the past is present.

—
Michael Ray Charles, 'Veni Vidi',
Templon New York, until May 6, 2023

1. Published in 1856 as part of *Les Contemplations* (The Contemplations)

IN ODA JAUNE'S TIMES

ROSE VIDAL

Young author Rose Vidal looks at the work of Oda Jaune in the light of the “time of painting”, on the occasion of the artist’s participation in the group exhibition ‘Immortelle’ in Montpellier (France).

From her London studio, bathed in sunlight, Oda’s universe is expanding as her hands play with a range of mediums, from video to sculpture to sewing. As such she produces objects that are not paintings, and yet are related to the act of painting, without which they perhaps would not exist. First and foremost, Oda Jaune is a painter. Being a painter in 2023 implies a great deal, and above all a great deal of time, different kinds of time. The most obvious of these is the long temporality of painting, which has been the subject of stories and pictures since time immemorial: it has amassed a repertory of gestures, of themes, of pictorial explorations—as well as the representations that inform our ways of looking at the world and sometimes even orient and skew the way we look. Painting examines itself, painters look at each other through their

respective works, and meet or oppose each other. They have done so throughout a history that was traditionally written in the same way they paint on a canvas—stroke by stroke.

Then there is the intermediate temporality of societies, and their ways of producing art, as well as the economies they allow the artists to work within. This temporality does not entirely coincide with our lifetimes, but each artist’s existence is caught up in its currents. We might take as an example of such a temporality the recent decades during which painting experienced a decline, after its long-held prominence among the major arts. Being a painter, just as Oda Jaune was at that time, meant traversing a period when society had convinced itself it was sick of the very sight of paintings, all the while remaining



Untitled (Pieta), 2012. Oil on canvas, 51 1/8 × 63 4/5 in. (130 × 162 cm)

a painter. Back then, art schools had turned away from the outdated paradigm of the master and his apprentices, had broken this chain of transmission of knowledge, while in exhibitions, the spotlight was shone on other art forms, other creative gestures. At that time, the kind of painting that continued to be bought and exhibited had little to do with what occupied Oda Jaune’s time and preoccupied her mind; it was no longer a time for figurative composition.

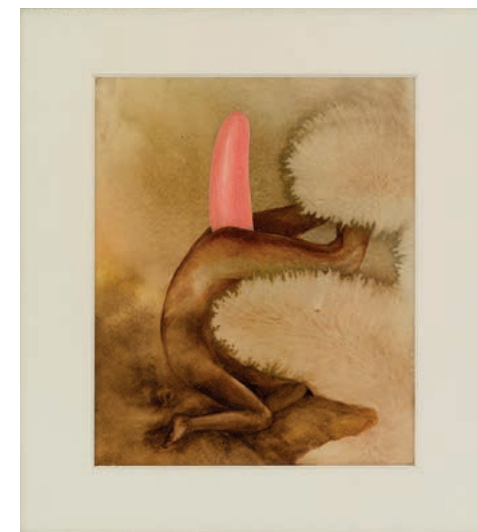
This crisis of painting as commensurate with society’s temporality may be said to be the implicit subject of the upcoming Mo.Co. exhibition ‘Immortal’ (March 11th

to May 7th), curated by Numa Hambursin, which will feature works by Oda Jaune among those of more than 110 painters. The exhibition questions the disappearance of painting from the forefront of the French art world, not only by highlighting the potential ruptures of such a withdrawal, but also by opposing the idea of disappearance with the output of artists who never stopped painting. It is an “implicit” subject because the show is explicitly about the fact that painting has always fully existed, and about restoring, at last, the visibility it has been deprived of. The issue is also to seize this opportunity to reinvent the missing links,

It is a **DESIRE**
for **LIFE** to
the point where
it overflows life,
a desire for the
BODY that exceeds
the body, and
which is a literal
chimera

the affinities, the transmission between fellow artists, that this visibility would have fostered by allowing painting to exist as an artistic scene. This belated scene has yet to bear fruit and to see its implications emerge. It is waiting to be recreated, to vibrate, and to offer the critical eye new perspectives, new things to think about and grasp. The first consideration will very likely be what failed to build a scene in its time, leaving room for less porous and more singular approaches to painting. Such a configuration of the scene, as renewed by the exhibition, paradoxically allows the unique temporality of Oda Jaune and her painting to be revealed to the critical eye: the time an artist spends in the studio creating. This time is separate from the polyphony and discussions generated by the string of concomitant and successive exhibitions that punctuate the life of a scene, and it lies in the extended dialogue between the artist and her works, as played out in her own research. This third rhythm is written out in singular, often reflexive pronouns. The word “immortal” is no doubt painting’s snub to all the voices that claimed they would dance on its grave, or even a snub to the idea of a “rebirth” of painting. Painting never died, and neither did the announcement or the idea of its disappearance affect the intimacy of the studio, in which Oda Jaune has been conducting her research without ever having been stopped from living through her paintings or from inhabiting them.

Through Oda Jaune’s paintings, the “immortal” painting is embodied in peculiar shapes and is progressively fleshed out as she creates new images, observing life—



Oda Jaune Pinky eye, 2021. Watercolor, oilcolor and wax on paper, 14 3/4 × 13 4/5 × 1 1/8 in. (37,5 × 35 × 3 cm)

its visual effects, its materials, its colors, uncertainties and shadows, always changing—from the world to the canvas. This might be the single and intimate quest of Oda Jaune, a quest that leads her from one temporality of painting to another, in the same way one steers a boat through the waves of an ocean: seeking to extend life to painting, in painting, and through painting, as it is the only place where a body can split in two in the shape of a disproportionate mouth, and the only place where limbs and faces can intertwine to the point where their embrace gives birth to a complete chimera—a fusional, aberrant caress. This desire has no fulfillment other than in painting—and does not require any other style of painting, or any other scene, or any other hand to accomplish it. It is a desire for life to the point where it overflows life, a desire for the body that exceeds the body, and which is a literal chimera—that

is to say both a monster, and a phantasy, irrational and impossible: haunting in every way. From one canvas to another, as she composes and recomposes extended possibilities for the human body, Oda Jaune gives birth to chimeras which are no longer impossible or absurd: they exist there, in the narrow space of paintings, palpable as their colors are so precisely and subtly depicted. One could touch their skin, whose every detail is revealed: the temperature, the depth that the painter delicately brushed out by mixing—a composite chimera down to the smallest detail—warm and cold colors, shades of blue, red, purple, and green. These colors that run over the skin show its thickness, and that this variable thickness makes it translucent. They show that under the thickness, the body continues to run in variable densities along to the veins, blood, hot spots, and tremors. They show that all of this is in movement, because the body *and* the world are in movement. They show that the light changes the transparency or the radiance of the skin—sometimes we see what is under, the vascularization, or the hardness of bone, and sometimes the skin obscures—opaque, secret, discretionary. Sometimes the skin is a porous interface, drowned by what it envelops, bathed in the very fluids that it shelters and which cover its surface—sometimes the exterior is what bathes it in its light, the coat of a veil that changes the way we perceive its forms.

The studio resembles an enclosed area, but that has a capacity for permanent expansion like the universe; each new canvas offers a new way of contemplating it. Yet it is in the ambivalence of this secret face to face, that painting, in conversation with

itself, offers possibilities for connections, beyond the painters and the scenes, and beyond its own time: the work of Oda Jaune thus initiates a strange dialogue with the theme of the *hortus conclusus*. In this mystical space where Renaissance painters used to depict the theme of conception, the woman's pregnant body is metaphorized by the enclosed garden. But within the architectural limits of the garden and the material limits of the canvas, an infinite something takes place, by which one plus one equals three and by which the inconceivable is conceived. Oda Jaune's studio is the garden, allowing the unimaginable to access representation. The painter experiences the same pleasure that Hieronymus Bosch found five hundred years earlier in the exponential creation of the details of the Garden of Delights—in which each body and scene was exclusively a chimera. From Paradise to Hell, from scenes of torture to representations of pleasure, there was nothing but the delight of experiencing the body as a garden made infinite by painting.

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'Immortelle', MO.CO, Montpellier (France),
until June 4, 2023.

Right: Oda Jaune *Untitled*, 2021.
Oil on canvas, 70 7/8 × 63 in. (180 × 160 cm)



IVÁN NAVARRO: THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND

ANNA MARIA GUASCH

Art historian Anna Maria Guasch looks at critical appropriation, translation as an act of resistance, and the theory of displacement at work in Iván Navarro's *This Land is your Land*, now installed in Art-OMI Sculpture and Architecture Park.

One of the constants running through the work of the New York-based Chilean artist Iván Navarro is appropriation, a critical appropriation that not only involves a radicalization of the resources of quotation or allusion (Navarro's work is full of allusions to other essential artists in modern art coming from the United States, from Frank Stella to Dan Flavin, passing through Bruce Nauman and Jenny Holzer), but which also implies a constant attitude of revision, of rereading the given, of awareness of the systems in which the art work is exhibited and received, as well as its relationship to the institutional context and to the historical discourse that determines the artist.

But in Navarro's creative processes, this "appropriation" makes sense only from

a certain theory of "displacement" or "distancing". Nothing is what it seems. The neon lights are not minimalist, they do not obey a procedural aesthetic, nor do their geometric structures follow the dictum of "all that you see is all that there is." For Navarro, displacement is that which frees him from abstract formalism and makes his works take on the value of spatial metaphors that seek to express the relationship between power and knowledge. We would venture to claim that, just as the pseudo-abstract work of Peter Halley can be understood only from Foucauldian theories of surveillance and punishment, Iván Navarro's light sculptures and installations should be understood from the perspective of the epic theatre of Brecht and,



Me/We (Water Tower) (detail), 2014–2016. Neon, wood, painted steel, galvanized steel, aluminum, mirror, one-way mirror and electric energy

specifically, from the dramatist's strategy of displacement (also adopted by other contemporary artists, such as Krzysztof Wodiczko in his public installations). Hence Navarro's works demand a radical modification of the usual perception of them. Both in Wodiczko's public works and in Navarro's, the viewer remains insecure in the face of the naturalness of the new "body" they are presented with. The normal form of reception is interrupted.

Just as in Brecht's epic theatre, where the dramatist questions a process centered on the spectator's emotivity by means of the "distancing" or "alienation" effect – distancing spectators from the drama they are watching and projecting onto them a worldview and a vision of ideological life

(Weltanschauung) – so too Navarro's work distances itself from complacent aesthetics and projects onto us a "memory effect" in which the personal is superimposed on the collective, historical, and social...

A good example of this is the work *This Land is Your Land*, a public installation initially conceived for Madison Square Park in New York in 2014 (and later shown in numerous places, including Dallas, North Carolina, Chicago, Busan, Seoul, and Arkansas). The three water towers (inspired by the water towers that are characteristic of the New York landscape) that make up the work and the neon texts inside them could be explained by the title of the Woody Guthrie folk song, inspired by the 1940 musical *Hobo* and its allusion to the nomadic

workers of the America of the Great Depression. A song conceived as a response to Irving Berlin's *God Bless America*, which Guthrie considered to be "unrealistic and self-indulgent".

According to Manuel Cirauqui, the curator of the *Una guerra silenciosa e imposible* (2015) – Navarro's first retrospective exhibition in his native Chile – the artist's work flees the "unrealistic and self-indulgent" and, specifically, "the space of art and the artistic institution, in order to refer to a conflictive context, a desire to fight against the institution, against the architectonic space, and against the alienation of the city." Good examples of this are works such as *Death Row* (2006–2009), in which the artist gives political significance to the abstract work of Ellsworth Kelly (*Spectrum V*) by projecting it onto a death row of a prison in the United States, and *Reja CorpArtes*, a site-specific installation work that diverts the bars from their minimalist origin to investigate questions of control, discipline, and punishment, thereby altering crucial elements and changing the original direction.

In this sense, *This Land is Your Land*



This Land is Your Land, 2014–2020. At Art Omi Sculpture Park, Ghent, NY, USA

again invokes "displacement theory", as it resituates the cold and geometric architecture of old models of industrial architecture (with a new formal reference to the photographic series of the German husband-and-wife team Bernd and Hilla Becher) and projects it at a social, political, and also autobiographical level: that of the citizen who was born in 1972 in the final years of the Salvador Allende government – just months before Augusto Pinochet's military coup d'état – to continue with the citizen who arrived in New York in 1997 seeking connections between Chilean protest music ("the history of music in Latin America is much more interesting than the history of the visual arts", Iván Navarro has claimed) and the American folk music of Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Woody Guthrie.

In his constant reframing of processes, it is clear that Iván Navarro approaches one of the turns that best explains the behavior of an important series of contemporary artists: the turn of "translation", a translation contemplated as an instrument to create spaces of transversal understanding between different media and between diverse cultures. And always understanding the notion of "translation" as an act of resistance to reading and to the materiality of the language considered – in the words of Emily Apter (*The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* [2013]) as a form of "listening-thinking" or of "reading-thinking". In this sense, along with artists such as Alfredo Jaar and the already mentioned Wodiczko, Navarro is an example of an artist who takes advantage of the concept of translation to nurture a discursive context around questions

inherent to our global context: diaspora, migration, exile, colonization of the other.

An other who is fixed by the use of words inside these cylindrical towers and by the resource of the neon lights and the mirrors that generate optical illusions, infinite reflections, and a sense of abysm, and which proclaim an almost utopian desire to journey towards the unknown and, at the same time, give voice and life to the inert object. Words, lights, and mirrors that burst into the public space with freedom and eloquence, endowing it with a verballity beyond the silence of sculpture and monuments.

A dialogue without sound or argumentative phrases, with only words, words of light that seem to give voice to those who have none (such as these wandering migrants in search of work in a promised land) and which trace a discursive line beyond any official and hegemonic rhetoric. Navarro likes to use short words – such as *Me/We*, *Open/Ended*, *Bed*, *Bomb* – which, thanks to the reflecting mirrors, multiply and function as wounds, reverberations, or echoes in the public space, providing a citizen's dialogue that can activate public reflection and question the discourse of power. Specifically with the water tanks of *This Land is Your Land*, Navarro uses three words: *Me* and *We* in the first, *Bed* in the second, and the image of a ladder in the third.

It is when ME – the "I" of the artist – becomes the WE of society ("There's never a 'me' without a 'we'," argues Navarro). It is when the BED, which alludes to the idea of a habitable and corporeal space, as well as to the poetics between home and origin,



Death Row, 2006–2009. Chilean Pavillion, Venice Biennale 2009

transcends the limits of the human body to open itself to the world of the infinity of emptiness. An almost metaphysical emptiness, which accounts for the ladder in the third tank, a symbol of endless growth. And all from superimposing meanings that go beyond the aesthetic and artistic and even beyond the autobiographical.

Navarro reclaims everyday objects, explores electricity with aesthetic and political aims, and makes use of words without renouncing a certain aesthetics of the spectacle or of education in speaking to the spectator but at the same time questioning the spheres of power.

In the contemporary global context, there are a number of artists – and Iván Navarro is among them – who act as historical agents of memory in contraposition to amnesia and destruction, that is to say, who seek acts of remembrance. And *This Land is Your Land* effectively functions as an "act of remembrance", both individual and collective, understanding memory from an interdisciplinary perspective.

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'*This Land is Land*', Art-OMI Sculpture & Architecture Park, Ghent, NY (USA), until 2024.



A WOMAN ARTIST, BODY AND SOUL

WITH CAMILLE FROIDEVAUX-METTERIE

On the eve of the inauguration of her monumental sculpture *Mater Earth*, artist Prune Nourry meets philosopher Camille Froidevaux-Metterie, who has recently published the novel *Pleine et douce*. The two consider the question of the body, the feminist dynamic, pro-creation, and the balance between particular and universal.

When you look at Prune Nourry's work as a whole, you are struck by the central presence of the human body, specifically the female body. It opens with the question of producing children (*Les Bébés Domestiques*, 2007, and *Procreative Dinner*, 2009), develops with the place of girls in society (*the Holy Daughters* in India in 2010–2012, and the *Terracotta Daughters* in China in 2014–2015), moves on to explore the themes of the breasts (*Catharsis*, 2019, *Prothèses de l'âme*, 2019, *L'Amazone Érogène*, 2021) and the pregnant body enveloping everything else, in the

monumental *Mater Earth* (2023). Nourry's work does not set out to represent female corporeality, still less to glorify it, but rather to show its simultaneously existential and social dimensions, by creating a sense of the solid materiality as well as the consubstantial vulnerability of a woman's body. Having long reflected on the subject of corporeality in my own essays, and having endeavoured to explore the notion in literary form in my first novel, I was immediately struck by Prune's way of making our bodies the site of an artistic exploration, where the private and the political are closely intertwined. I saw in this work another way of revealing the corporeal objectification of women;

Left: *The Amazon*, 2018. Performance, Hudson River, New York

another way, also, of asserting a freely experienced possession of our bodies. Prune, to whom I put some of the thoughts her work brings to my mind, considered these with generosity, not always agreeing with them but willing to examine her work in the light of feminist thinking today. And so together, we explored this artist's work, which centers on the singularity of each embodied existence, to reveal its human resonance, and its being part of a whole.

CFM Recently, you said this: "Cancer took me back inside my own body. It came and reminded me that an artist is never objective. It's as if I'd sculpted the tumour inside myself as a means to reconnect with my body." I can see a kind of paradox in that: the female body is at the heart of your work, yet here you are saying all of a sudden that your own body had been hidden. I was wondering how, with hindsight, you were envisaging this process of allowing your own body to join those others that have been portrayed in the light of disease, that moment when you brought your corporeal intimacy into your work as an artist.

PN For many years I worked in the manner of an anthropologist, starting from the universal as a way of connecting with myself. While other artists, like Sophie Calle for example, start from particular aspects of their story to explore a universal dimension, for me it was really the universal that I was appropriating, digesting, be it in *Holy Daughters* in India or in *Terracotta Daughters* in China. Then I got sick and I felt the need, in order to get through the disease and give it meaning, to turn the camera on



Terracotta Daughters, 2013

myself. Whereas before I would point the camera toward the outside and hide behind it to film other people's reaction to my sculptures, I made my film, *Serendipity*, by turning it on myself. My cancer was like a kind of rite of passage, a rite of passage to my femininity. As a child, I was a real tomboy, making my protests: I felt it was unfair being a girl, unfair to be a woman, because in many respects it's harder. What I was missing in my work was that letting-go in relation to one's femininity, the acceptance, the embracing of femininity rather than seeing it as something hard. I think the cancer helped me embrace my femininity.

CFM It's also as if you were entering the circle of women. It seemed to me that through the disease you were sharing your own real-life experience with that of other "Amazons". For me, that made sense, because it is the very nature of the feminist approach to share individual stories, every one unique but that together form a chorus and create a group dynamic.

PN It was a necessary rite of passage from one world to another, a bit like making my way through a tunnel or a burrow that

I had yet to explore. I think it's also a kind of maturing, a maturity. One of life's events made me go quicker over something that I'd been holding back. And at the same time I was already completely inside it, but hadn't dared admit as much. When people asked me if I was a feminist I would immediately reply that the "-ist" in "artist" was enough for me. Being an artist was enough—a woman artist! I didn't want to be confined: molds are my life; the idea of a matrix appeals to me, but, like any artist, I don't want to be confined to a mold. People would say to me, "you see, the subject you're working on is women," and I'd reply, "what I'm interested in is human selection, and in human selection, there is gender selection!" But in fact I realised that I do always go back to the question of women.

CFM I was struck by the diversity of your representations of women's breasts. There are breasts to suit every taste, literally, with the breast cakes in *Dîner procréatif*, and the *Holy Daughters'* small pubescent breast combined with udders, monumental breasts (*Prothèses de l'âme*), a spherical box with a breast-shaped lid (*Œil nourricier*), and the breast-target in *L'Amazone Érogène*. Without setting out to do so, I suspect, you created multiple ways of showing breasts, until the turning point of the disease and beyond. Then you had a mastectomy and chose reconstruction. I wondered if that in itself was another of showing and representing breasts that you wanted to explore.

PN When I made the sculpture of the Amazon for *Catharsis*, as a symbolic gesture, I sculpted her two breasts and,

during the performance, I took a sculptor's tool and broke the right breast, which is the one that was removed from me. It was like: I was a sculptor before, then a sculpture in the hands of the doctors, and now I've become a sculptor again. I think I went for the idea of reconstruction because as a sculptor, I am interested in the idea of material, volume, three dimensions. For me, it was really a form of sculpture, of construction and complete reconstruction.

CFM Was it your pregnancy that prompted you to begin working on the pregnant body?

PN No, because as a woman artist, creation and procreation have always been closely connected for me. Hence the term *Dîner*



Mater Earth, 2023. Château La Coste

procréatif, one of my first works and performances. In that respect, pro-action, procreation, and creation are closely related. Pro-action, because you can have an idea, but if you don't implement it, nothing will happen. The idea has to be realized to be real, to be strong, the process is as much a part of the work as the idea.

CFM There is an aspect of your work that I find very interesting: the continuous tension in it. There is never anything unequivocal in your works, and the ideas are often developed in couples. The way you show bodies, for example: they are either entirely in pieces, made up of body fragments, as in *La Femme Miracle*, or, on the contrary, they are whole, full-scale bodies, as in the *Terracotta Daughters*, in *Prothèses de l'âme*, or in that astonishing 2007 work,



La Femme Miracle, 2019. Silver, 91 3/8 × 66 7/8 × 4 3/4 in. (233 × 170 × 12 cm), ed of 3 + 1 AP

Autoportrait en position de fœtus. I wonder about this tension between completeness and fragmentation. Do you show complete bodies to repair those you split up previously? Or are they just different ways of showing bodies?

PN The only fragmented work I made before my illness was my friend in a bath of milk which inspired *Mater Earth*. I inflated a plastic pool and warmed milk on a gas stove, and then immersed my very sculptural friend in it. After the cancer, I began the series *Catharsis*, inspired by the ex-votos that exist in many different cultures, in Greece, Mexico, Brazil, Italy and elsewhere.

I found it interesting to look at those ritual objects, at those body parts. For me, it was a reflection of the feeling I had during my illness, a feeling like I was a fragmented body. People tell you to go see this or that specialist, so you consult a breast specialist, except in reality your body is a whole. That is something that goes without saying in oriental cultures and traditional medicines, particularly Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, where they touch a part of the foot or the ear to heal another part of the body. I am very aware of the fact that the body is a whole, but the body is also a soul, and you can have scars on your soul, and trauma can trigger an illness or express itself on the body.

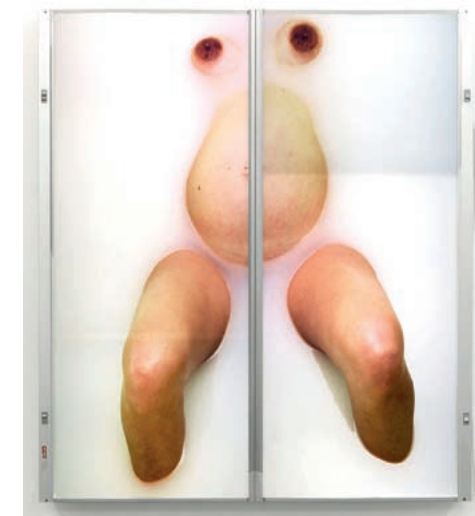
For me, these sculptures speak of that, of the fragmented body, of medicine that separates and divides, of our forgetting that the body is a whole, body and soul are one.

CFM That ties in with what I discuss in *Un corps à soi* when I say that we are our bodies. Stating that fact is a way of removing

ourselves from patriarchal objectification, of ensuring that our body-as-object becomes our body-as-subject. I believe this endeavor calls for a form of reunification: we need to put an end to the fragmentation of the female body functions, where women are envisaged first and foremost as vulvas and vaginas, because they are first and foremost sexual bodies, later becoming uteruses and breasts, because then they are maternal bodies. To me, in the themes you explore and in everything you say, there is a resonance with today's feminist dynamic that focuses on the woman's body in all its dimensions.

PN Yes, I sense that I am part of that movement, and I sense that it is an essential movement, a necessary movement. I admire the people that, through time, have left their mark and brought about change in a concrete manner, and sometimes even in the shadows. It's just that I don't feel the need to shout it out loud, because, as an artist, I'm not sure that I make a difference by saying so. For me, it's almost a private thing, it's a bit like asking me what religion I am. I would say "that's my business!" So, yes, deep down I am a feminist, but as an artist, I don't think I need to make a statement of it.

CFM With regard to this taking back of ownership of our intimate bodies, I believe it takes multiple levels of expression and reflexion. In this respect, your work seems to me to be an exploration of these female corporeal themes without making a statement or demonstration, because that is not what art is about.



Allaitée, 2009. Print mounted on vintage radiology negative viewer, diptych, 44 1/2 × 39 3/4 × 5 5/7 in. (113 × 101 × 14,5 cm)

PN The thing is, I'm afraid of dogma, I have a deep-seated fear, in my very flesh, of dogma. I am always in doubt, questioning myself, and I want to stay that way, because I think dogma confines people, dogma separates people, it makes you say that what you think is better than what the other person thinks. I think art is about searching, and artists should always be searching, whereas dogma prevents us from searching. That's why I say that the "-ist" in "artist" isn't confining, for there is no such thing as *artism*!

—
'*Amazone Erogène*', *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels (Belgium) until May 9, 2023. Mater Earth, Château La Coste, Le Puy-Sainte-Réparate (France), opening on March 25, 2023.*

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CAMILLE FROIDEVAUX-METTERIE is a philosopher specializing in feminist history and thought. Her research focuses on themes related to feminine corporeity. She defends an "embodied" feminism that envisages women's bodies in terms of alienation and emancipation. She is the author of *Le corps des femmes. La bataille de l'intime* (2018), *Seins. En quête d'une libération* (2020) and *Un corps à soi* (2021). In January 2023, she published her first novel, *Pleine et douce* (Sabine Wespieser Éditeur).

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Right: Prune Nourry, *Amazone Erogène* (detail), Le Bon Marché Paris, 2020 **Next page:** Iván Navarro, *This Land is Your Land*, 2014-2020. At Art Omi Sculpture Park, Ghent, NY, USA





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