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ABDOULAYE KONATÉ
FRIEZE, November 4, 2020

How Abdoulaye Konaté Knits Together West African Cultural Heritage

At Gallery 1957, Accra, the artist's use of both Ghanaian Kente and Malian textile traditions 'offers new possibilities for the exchange of cultural knowledge'



BY AYODEJI ROTINWA IN REVIEWS | 04 NOV 20



For 'Symphonie au Kente' (Symphony of Kente), Abdoulaye Konaté has merged two rich, long-standing textile traditions from Ghana and his native Mali. This is an unlikely pairing: although located in the same region, the two nations do not share a language or a political system, and travel between both countries often requires patience with knotty flight connections. Konaté's new works (all 2020) collage woven, cotton-based Kente cloth – an item of proud Ghanaian heritage – into large-scale canvases in tie-dye and metallic finishes that are traditional in Mali. Centuries ago, the thriving Ghanaian empire extended to parts of present-day Mali; in 'Symphonie au Kente', Konaté imagines what might have been possible materially if there had been a greater cross-pollination of textile traditions.

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To the left of the gallery entrance hangs a row of works in which green predominates. At the top of the canvas, roughly cut, dyed-black ribbons are complemented by military-green fabric strips, which are interrupted, in turn, by swathes of bright orange, red and yellow Kente. In the canvas's lower section, warm colours bleed out into light green and, ultimately, white.

This horizontal pattern recurs throughout the gallery in red, black and indigo – hues habitually found in Konaté's work. Employing repetition of colour, shape, texture and scale to great effect, the artist weaves these fabric ribbons into arresting and resonant abstract wholes, with the Kente making only a guest appearance in some and playing a starring role in others. The fabric also features prominently in the geometric shapes – pyramids, circles, squares – that appear at the top of every work. These do not follow any discernible pattern, nor is their meaning immediately clear, although one resembles a face-painting style common to many Sub-Saharan African cultures.



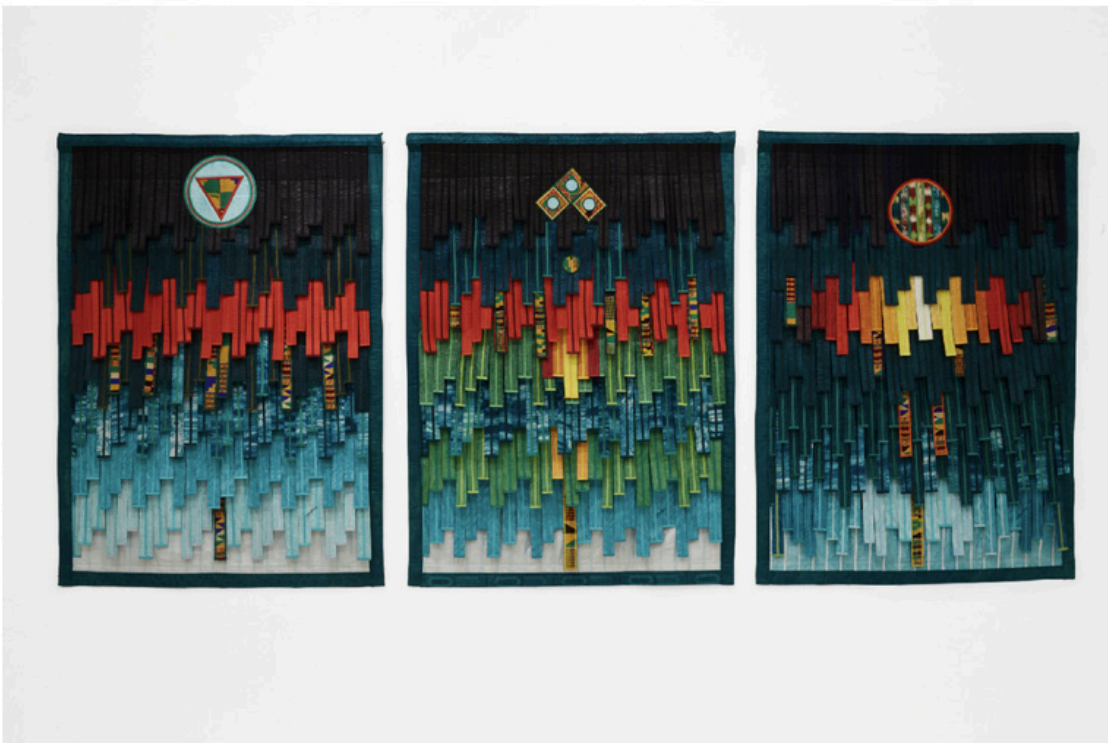
Abdoulaye Konaté, *Ghana 1 kente, poids et couronne* (Ghana 1 Kente: Weight & Crown), 2020, 3.6 × 2.9 m, textile. Courtesy: the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana

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The exhibition's only figurative work is also its strongest: *Ghana 1 Kente, poids et couronne* (Ghana 1 Kente: Weight & Crown), which depicts an Ashanti king, looms large over the gallery. Its black background bleeds ribbons of indigo, purple, blue and white. At the centre of the canvas, the figure of the ruler and the umbrella protecting him emerge from strips of woven Kente, each band of which carries a particular significance. Historically, yellow threads represent wealth and royalty; black indicates spiritual strength; green denotes growth, harvest and renewal. Woven together, these colours may tell a story or identify the wearer's clan. Using yellow, green and black threads predominantly for his marquee piece, Konaté employs fabric as communication, relaying the history of Ashanti royalty and the endurance of a centuries-old tradition.

The majesty of *Ghana 1 Kente, poids et couronne* is fitting, given that Kente was originally made for and worn exclusively by royals during the 16th century. Over time, it became accessible to all Ghanaians but has never lost its prestige. Today, Akan chiefs from the Ashanti kingdom swathe themselves in Kente layered with gold jewellery.



Abdoulaye Konaté, 'Symphonie au Kente' (Symphony of Kente), exhibition view, 2020, Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana. Courtesy: the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana; photograph: Nii Odenma

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In the past, Konaté's work has typically engaged with social and political issues – war, terrorism, religion, the AIDS epidemic – but this exhibition has no such preoccupations. Instead, the artist has married two traditions in a way that suggests not only greater possibilities for the production of art and textiles, but for the exchange of cultural knowledge. In the words of an Akan proverb: *Baanu so a emmia* – when two carry, it does not hurt. That such disparate traditions can find harmony is a most welcome surprise.

Main image: Abdoulaye Konaté, Rouge bleu au kente (Blue red with kente), 2020, 2 m × 1.5 m, textile. Courtesy: the artist and Gallery 1957, Accra, Ghana