

THIERRY OUSSOU

UNSETTLED presents two works by Thierry Oussou (b. 1988, Benin) showcasing his distinctively gestural style with drips, splatters, and calligraphic marks. Distorted figures, faces, objects and symbols float freely against a dark paper background in an unsettling universe. Oussou's unique choice for black paper as a medium was inspired by the small slates used by schoolchildren. In 2014 he started to experiment with larger sheets, which are now his standard practice. For him, paper is more than a surface, it is a conceptual medium. The material qualities of the unmounted paper are crucial for his works and Oussou favors it over canvas.

"We are all a reflection of paper. I am developing the concept of the fragility of paper in relation to human beings. We are as fragile as paper. If you do not take care of paper, it tears. Just like if you do not take care of your neighbor, of your child, of a loved one, they will not be happy. This tearing of paper is comparable to the anger we can sometimes experience. Paper is not flat. I do not mount paper, I let it live, I let it take shape. I find it beautiful. It shows that we are not perfect. We are not straight, neatly folded. You see the folds, the lines, it talks about movement, about travel."

Oussou's grand scale black drawings possess an absorbing quality, forcing the viewer to observe them up close. Another recurring visual element is the presence of white masks glued on the black surface. He explains, "Everyone can hide behind a mask. I don't know your past or present, but perhaps there is something in my pictures that you recognize in yourself. Each mask is a person, an individual composed of several layers. Maybe you can identify with some part of my drawings." The eyes, nostrils and open mouth are burnt into the face with coals, referring burn marks on one's skin – "suffering feels like coals that burn on your skin", the artist states. Oussou sculpts the faces with fire, embers recalling human struggle, in most unsettling expressions.

The large sheets of black paper contrast with the white and colored drawings revolving around a single human figure. This individual seems to float in a universe filled with signs, sketches, and doodles. Each separate element bears a meaning, and the use of vivid colors sharpens the contrasts. Through his distinctively gestural and energetic practice, the artist creates captivating works in an audacious neo-expressionistic style. A constant traveler between places and across continents, Oussou's work captures the unsettled state of being both insider and outsider, resident and visitor. As a self-thought artist, he speaks a unique artistic language with a strong visual, aural, and psychic impact.

"I use a naive language. In Benin, I took lots of photographs of wall drawings – children's wall drawings, done without thinking, but also markings to count the days on the walls, banal,



everyday drawings. I photographed them in the villages and towns. I made works from these photographs. There is a notion of time in the drawings. We do everything according to time. It is well defined, well structured, well framed, so we can use it. Young children in Benin, maybe aged around one and a half, pick up pieces of charcoal and doodle on the walls, unaware. But the elders, who also draw on the walls, are aware of what they are doing. They are communicating. They are saying something. This is what I am interested in. I take photographs of this and make something else with them. It is always about transformation. It is a transformative process, a process of authenticity, something that is always present in my work.”

Thierry Oussou was born in 1988 in Allada, Benin, and works with drawing, painting, video, installation, and performance. In 2011, he founded Atelier Yè in Benin as an informal art school where artists could assemble and exchange ideas. His practice caught the attention of artists Meschac Gaba and Barthélémy Toguo, who he subsequently assisted. He had a residency at the Rijksakademie, Amsterdam in 2015-2016 and exhibited at the Dakar Biennale in 2014, and at the 10th Berlin Biennial in 2018. Oussou had solo exhibitions at Tiwani Contemporary, London (2018), Stevenson, Johannesburg (2018) and Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam (2019, 2021). The artist was recently featured in the exhibition Benin Art: Yesterday and Today at the Palais de la Marina in Cotonou (February-May 2022).

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2019 Political Strategy, at Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam
2019 Impossible is Nothing, Art Exchange, Essex, UK
2019 Patrimoine materile, immateriel, et artérité, Musée des Civilisation Noirs, Dakar, Senegal
2018 Timelines, Tiwani Contemporary, London
2018 Before It Is Completely Gone, Stevenson, Johannesburg, South Africa
2017 Une histoire: le miel aux lèvres, Cargo in Context, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2017 Soil, Bradwolff Project Space, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2016 Don't Sit In, No Man's Art Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2016 Thierry Oussou, Ornix A. Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2019 Restless Matter, Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Amstelveen, Netherlands
2019 21st Contemporary Art Biennial | Imagined Communities, São Paulo, Brazil
2018 Works on Paper and Some Objects, Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2018 We Don't Need Another Hero, 10th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art, Berlin



2018 Gaia in the Anthropocene, Garage Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands
2018 Restless Matter, Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Amstelveen, Netherlands
2017 Field Work, Tiwani Contemporary, London, UK
2017 Impossible is Nothing, The Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam
2016 Dutch Royal Award for Modern Painting, Royal Palace, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2016 NO Future, Performance Biennale, Athens, Greece
2016 What About Africa?, Witteveen Art Space, Amsterdam, Netherlands
2015 Nine Artists, Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town, South Africa
2015 Aqui Africa, SESC, Belenzinho, São Paulo, Brazil
2014 Textiles, Brazzaville, Atelier SAHM, Republic of the Congo
2014 Dokoutin, Mòsso, Brussels, Belgium
2014 Green Art Project & Multiplicity, Dak'Art Biennale, Dakar, Senegal
2014 TGD 10, IFAN Museum, Dakar, Senegal
2013 UTOPIA, Holbaek Museum, Denmark
2013 Western Waste meets African Craft, Blaakildegaard Museum, Denmark
2012 Density New Generation, Lieu Unik, Cotonou, Benin
2012 Inventing the Image Mode, Benin Biennial, Ouidah, Benin
2011 GBAVI NOUKPIN NON, Lieu Unik, Cotonou, Benin
2010 WABA, Studio Oussou, Cotonou, Benin
2009 The Free Education in Benin, Médiathèque des diaspora, Cotonou, Benin
2008 The Artistic Vision of Prison Life in Benin, Médiathèque des diaspora, Cotonou, Benin
2007 Young Prom'Art: Waste and Environment, Place des Martyrs, Cotonou, Benin
2006 The Centenary of the Death of King Behanzin, Place Goho, Abomey, Benin
2005 National Arts School Competition, Stade de l'Amitié, Cotonou, Benin

AWARDS

2018 Tollman Award
2016 Nominated for Dutch Royal Award for Modern Painting, Royal Palace, Amsterdam
2016 Awarded first Jacqueline van Tongeren Fellowship, Rijksakademie, Amsterdam
2011 Winner of One Minute Africa Award, Cairo, Egypt
2010 Nominated for Benin Golden Awards, Cotonou, Benin

EDUCATION & RESIDENCY

2015-2016 Rijksakademie van beeldende Kunsten, Amsterdam, Netherlands

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