

# JACKY STRENZ

Kurt-Schumacher-Str. 2 60311 FRANKFURT am MAIN

## MICKAEL MARMAN

Blackberry

July 15 – August 25, 2016

**Tribal is the new Hawaiian. Go wild this summer with bold African prints. Forget Boho-chic *this* is the Ethnic trend of the season.**

The fabric that Marman uses for this series of paintings, although supplemented by scraps given to him by tailors during his recent trip to Gambia to visit family, was mostly bought in bulk in Holland and Belgium where it is considerably cheaper to purchase than in West Africa. This makes more sense when we consider that what tends to be referred to as 'African print' actually started life in the country formerly known as the Dutch East Indies.

In Indonesia the technique of Batik had long been used to produce brightly coloured fabric with repeat patterns. Dutch colonizers spent years attempting to industrialise this process, with the intention of selling the machine-made textiles back to the Indonesians, and were finally successful at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when a Belgian printer developed a method for adding resin to both sides of a cotton cloth. There are different theories as to why these new fabrics didn't take off in Indonesia, but what is known is that the Dutch, wanting to find another market for their product, switched their attention to West Africa.

As the fabric gained popularity in African countries the patterns subtly changed to match the tastes of the consumers. Traders, who bought fabric in bulk to tailor into clothing, also devised their own names for the different styles, which became an important part of the buying and selling process. Although there are now (African and Chinese) alternatives, European-made wax-relief fabric is still immensely popular in West Africa; bought as status symbol and as a way of inferring the cosmopolitanism of its wearers.

To refer to this fabric as 'tribal' is to treat Africa as a place frozen in time and ignore the cross-pollination that happens across continents. As Marman tells it, in Gambia the young men want to look either like Jamaican dance hall stars or American rappers.

*Blackberry* is not a question of Marman discovering his Gambian roots, but of a painter beginning to question the complicated business of influence. Many of the artists who are important touchstones for the Norwegian-born, European-educated Marman were heavily inspired by African art. Likewise white Abstract Expressionists, explicitly referred to in these canvases, were more often than not filmed making work in their studios to a soundtrack of African-American made jazz.

At present cultural appropriation is a widely discussed topic in the fields of fashion and art. Is a half Gambian artist exempt from this accusation? Or does the privilege of a Scandinavian passport change that? Although the paintings in this exhibition are never explicitly political, with something as simple of a scrap of fabric from the floor of a dressmaker Marman opens up his work to a discussion that goes far beyond abstraction.

Chloe Stead

*Chloe Stead is a writer and critic based in Berlin. She has been published most recently in frieze d/e, Spike Art Quarterly and on frieze.com*