

Josèfa Ntjam x Ibrahim Meïté Sikely

*It was (them) against the world*

18.01. - 02.03.2024

*It was (them) against the world* is a duo exhibition by Josèfa Ntjam (b. 1992, Metz, France) and Ibrahim Meïté Sikely (b. 1996, Marseille, France). Based on an idea by artist Ndayé Kouagou, *It was (them) against the world* (the title derives from a phrase appearing in a painting by Sikely) is conceived as a dialogue between two French artists addressing questions of social justice and historical trauma through personal narratives and speculative fiction.

In her films and photomontages, Ntjam combines references to colonial history, African mythology and science to create fictional spaces in which the artist attempts to deconstruct hegemonic discourses on notions of origin, identity and race. At Nir Altman, Ntjam presents *Dislocations* (2022), a 17 min film co-produced by Palais de Tokyo, Paris, and Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati. Telling the story of Persona - an avatar appearing in multiple films by the artist -, *Dislocations* takes viewers on an initiatory journey from the internet to a cave floating in outer space amongst a constellation of asteroid-like shells and fossils. Inside the cave, the memories of warriors, activists and the artist's family members who have fought for Cameroon's independence are projected onto the walls, progressively melting with Persona, whose humanoid body eventually dissolves into aqueous particles.

Voluntarily perplexing scales, temporalities and geographies - from outer space to the abyss, from distant past to unknown futures -, *Dislocations* establishes analogies between cosmic, geological and mental processes to rework History from personal and minoritarian narratives. Throughout the film, Persona embodies powers of transformation, hybridity and reconfiguration of both individual and collective consciousness, excavating and (re)assembling the sometimes forgotten stories of oppression and emancipation that are nevertheless embedded in matter and mind.

In *It was (them) against the world*, Ntjam explores similar ideas in a diptych of photomontages printed on aluminium panels. Made of archival photographs, AI-generated images, 3D scans of objects and microscopic views of organic materials, Ntjam's photomontages conjure an opulent universe in which, collapsing the micro and the macro, documentations of historical events and representations of African deities merge with a vast array of abstract cellular shapes and aquatic elements.

In *Ectocarpus #1* and *#2*, Ntjam focuses her attention on Nommos - ancestral spirits in Dogon religion and cosmogony, in which it takes the form of a hermaphroditic, fish-like creature who underwent a transformation and multiplied into four pairs of twins. Symbolizing hybridity, mutation and fluidity, Nommos appear in multiple forms in Ntjam's diptych, including through AI-generated images of sculptures, statues and avatars. Titled after a contraction of ectoplasm and *émeutes* (French for riots) -, these two works also contain photographs of Martin Singap - leader of the National Liberation of Cameroun (ALNK) -, and Mami Wata - a water goddess venerated in many African countries -, all combined with images of algae and anemones, as well as an AI-generated fish-snake - a recurring animal in Ntjam's work, symbolizing temporal circularity as opposed to linear history. Through the conflation of these heterogeneous references and registers, Ntjam's work conjures an oceanic imaginary wherein the artist speculates on the interconnectedness between natural and historical processes, invoking the fluidity of water and the resilience of natural organisms as models for human tactics of resistance and emancipation.

With different means and outcomes, Sikely uses comparable tactics of cross-referencing in his paintings, which combine gestures and iconographies drawn from the classical paintings he studied at the Louvre and Orsay museums, with motifs inspired by mangas, comics and video games. Informed by his personal experience and cultural heritage from the Ivory Coast, the port city of Marseille where he was born, and

the Paris' banlieues where he currently lives, Sikely's compositions evoke stories of social struggle and marginalised communities through epic, fantastical scenes that blur the lines between observations of his everyday surrounding and speculations on alternative realities.

Through a visual language as flamboyant as Ntjam's, Sikely's paintings at Nir Altman use thick brushstrokes and vivid colours to make portraits of heroes and heroines through which the artist deconstructs art historical hierarchies of genres and registers. Within this framework, we may suspect, for instance, that the painting *Saint Ambroise / 7DECEMBRE* (2020), is less interested in the 4th-century theologian Ambrose of Milan (339-97) than in the Church of Saint-Ambroise in Paris, which in 1996 was occupied by about 300 African immigrants who demanded regularization of their immigration status. In fact, notes from the artist tell us that Ambroise was the name of his uncle, and that the painting was made after the only picture left of him. Topped by a medieval banner including the inscription "You watch over us, I watch over them", Sikely's painting poignantly intertwines the personal, the historical and the spiritual, playing with the codes of icon painting to represent a family member as an archangel surrounded by flames.

Such homage and transfiguration of closed ones recur in Sikely's work, such as in *you should tell a friend to tell a friend to tell a friend...* (2023), which represents a friend of the artist wearing a Saint Seya-inspired armour on which one may recognize a hand sign referring to Jnana mudra, a practice in Yoga that enable communication between microcosm and macrocosm. Also suggested by the abstract background which, like in many other of Sikely's work, can be seen as much as an energy field than a nebula, this relationship between micro and macro serves here as the stage for a concert to an audience composed of the singer's own spirits coming out of her mouth - a direct reference to the fighting Kamikaze Ghosts in Dragon Ball Z.

Such allusions to ghosts reappear in *...you scare them shitless just by showing up alive :3* (2023), in which an elf-eared, muscular hero (who strangely resembles the artist) wears a cape on which it is written "Absent Friends and Old Ghosts". Inspired by a comic strip of Batman by Frank Miller, Sikely's character appears in a contorted, bent position, which the artist uses as a metaphor for life and its challenge to go ahead after lost friendships, betrayal and loneliness - not without humour as a speech bubble coming out of his bum reads "whole time it's just me and my poop". Characteristic of Sikely's work, this painting draws from imagination and fantasy to address worldly issues, inventing fantastical figures that fight for and/or avenge very real people and causes: the past traumas that continue to haunt the living, the memory of friends lost along the way, the ones that remain and have to fight for survival and recognition in societies that incessantly, in their turn, invent new stories to marginalize communities and maintain status quo.

Both using fiction as a mode of representation and speculation as a tactic of resistance, Ntjam and Sikely provide alternative ways of writing history and understanding society, using personal memories, fantasy and minoritarian narratives as tools to promote the emergence of new modes of being and belonging. With artistic techniques and references that expand way beyond colonial past, diasporic identities or the confine of the French banlieues in which one might be tempted to categorize them (without forgetting the wealth of knowledge and ideas these contexts provided them with), their works show the ambition of a generation of artists no longer solely interested in critiquing the world, but inventing (and possessing) a new one.

Camille Houzé