



»»» O^UATTAR^A ©

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If painting, as Peter Schjeldahl recently intimated, was 'burnt to a crisp by the phenomenological stare,' then one must equally assume that the pictorial dilettantism that overhangs the New York art world like smog, does nothing to assuage the misgivings of many gallery goers over the state of painting. And as painting's death knell ceaselessly tolls, the news that it no longer satisfies as it used to gets older and older.

How could it not, when the painting's formal precepts remain so much at odds with the fin de siècle's troubled multicultural mood. Yet, despite this multicultural mood one finds it disturbing that it remains a truism that the contemporary art world, especially in New York, is not quite as receptive to a multiple

view of the medium of painting as it should. These thoughts come to me as I stand staring in awe and wonder at the aggressive monuments that Ouattara, an artist from Ivory Coast, has installed at the Gagosian gallery at 65 Thompson.

Yes, painting can still satisfy, even for this writer who finds its quarrels with form, technique and the picture plane too boring to bear. What distinguishes Ouattara though from many of his contemporaries (Francesco Clemente, El Hadji Sy or Julian Schnabel for example) is his wildly idiosyncratic style. Whereas the work of the artists mentioned above seem fully anchored in a calm sea of recognisable aesthetic devices, Ouattara's totemic figures and accumulations of varied cultural symbols undermine these devices in a manner that places his work at the edge of true innovation.

In his current series of paintings what Ouattara has initiated is a thoroughly revised contemporary attitude towards representation. His disquieting paintings and assemblages are not so much paintings as much as they are performative sites where ritualistic intent, technique and form are seamlessly worked to create a charged discursive, aesthetic, and spiritual mood.

Cumulatively looked at, Ouattara's work at a distance evinces the attitude of eighties' neo-expressionism laden with sweeping macho gestures, size and lots of lumpy paint to convince viewers of its presence and importance. But here, something else is at work. I am inclined to see his outsized frames less as paintings, and more as painted objects; rough hewn carriers of multiple cultural signs (Nok, Dogon, Amharic, Egyptian, Senufo) relocated from their original domicile to this almost incongruous space to produce new

meanings. The awkwardness of the long, narrow gallery was not particularly advantageous to the task the artist might have wished for his works to perform. Yet their compressed energy make their aura even more palpably evident.

Constructed to be experienced panoramically, from left to right and vice versa the mural-sized paintings bear a mark of tension in the way images of violence, consumerism, pop-culture history, religion and politics have been mobilised.

Dark Star (1994), a painting consisting entirely of footprints and handprints occasionally punctuated by Nike



sneaker logo prints, is a frenzied act of *joie de vivre* that suggests more a mood of anxiety than joy. The sly marriage of consumer culture with images of death (an olive skeleton beating on a drum and skulls floating on the painting's surface) is no happy accident.

Untitled (1993-94) an unsettling work painted a vivid lemony yellow, employs as its central character an elliptical-shaped diagram of a

slave ship's interior packed with massed shadowy, dark brown figures. A coffee bean sack attached to the upper left corner of the painting vividly delineates the boundaries between capital, labour and commodity (human and otherwise).

But just as it seemed that the exhibition might veer off kilter into the kind of didacticism that have come to unsettle viewers, Ouattara balances his grave ruminations on the condition of our body politic with a celebration of it.

Narrativity belies Hip-Hop, Jazz, Makoussa's schematic emotional pull, which will duly satisfy those who share in the pop-cultural emblems that celebrate the vivacity of the cross-Atlantic exchanges between African diasporic populations and the continent; from Kingston to Brixton, Harlem to Lagos, Paris to Dakar. Placing end to end in two horizontal bands album

covers by
Fela,
Bob
Marley,
Aretha
Franklin,
Manu
Dibango,
Salif Keita,
Queen

Latifa, The Rolling Stones, John Coltrane, etc. Hip Hop, Jazz, Makoussa is a veritable precis of twentieth century popular music and youth culture, hipness as we have come to know it.

Exchange obviously, carries the normative value of some form of transaction. In the works shown here, its currency is that of an African cosmology. They come in the form of quotations taken from Amharic text, Egyptian Ankhs, colonial photography and architectural fragments: adobe walls and steles found on the facades of

Mosques and granaries throughout Africa. The insistent pressure of political content (a new direction, I imagine in Ouattara's formidable Oeuvre) rather than repel draws viewers closer to the paintings, whereupon subtle incidents and quotidian elements reveal the artist's wry humour. Though Ouattara has been absent on the New York Gallery scene for almost five years, his return shows him a really fine form. **GR**