

Arts Cabinet

1/ How did you go about starting the drawings you made in bed entitled "Bedwork"? If a bed is the place of all fantasies, Isn't it also one of recovery from mental and physical fatigue, the anti-heroic place "par excellence" for an artist?

I feel that the drawings were always there before everything else, even before my decision to be an artist. They have remained there discretely, marginal or marginalised to a great extent due to the art school system that I went through. So, "Bedwork" arises from making something outside the frame, outside the studio and the artist's workspace. All I've done is make an issue of something that I was living through, that I was undergoing. The bed is a place of rest, of love, of suffering and at times of death. It's a non-professional space where some people are ashamed to admit that they have spent too much time. But for me, it's also a place where the Orientalist painters dominated by laying down women, slaves and Arabs as a symbol of control. To be in bed is also a statement in relation to the history of art, to dominated or marginalised sexual minorities. I refer to my contemporaries like Felix Gonzalez Torres, Franz West... or Marguerite Duras and Sarah Lucas who talk of reclaiming their domestic space as being an outward expression of their interior space.

From the bed, I look for a direct promiscuity with no recoiling, which is established through the drawing. In the gesture and simplicity of a flat drawing, with neither perspective nor depth, everything is at the same level; the corners are folded and twisted.

The margin is also a place of error, of friction, with traces of clothing contact across it. I always leave a large margin around a drawing. I never throw a drawing away; it supercedes itself, it performs and surpasses what I represent. It is repetitive, always with male bodies. I don't want to prioritise, I put everything in the foreground. The only prioritisation happens when I decide to write a narrative in an exhibition, where there is a logic, as in a literary work.

2/ Can you say something about people's rights and the issue of injustice that we live or embody? I'm thinking here of your drawings which represent the relationship between the dominated and the dominator?

Yes, everything is linked, I mean, when I started to think about "Bedwork", it was a way of thinking about systems of domination and to talk about them without using the dominators' techniques. There is the idea of visibility in my work, leaving the eroticisation of politics to touch on subjects linked to the oppression of ethnic, sexual and religious minorities. All this while at the same time proffering the idea of "I", a personal biography, but one which is also that of a whole group of people who could be homosexuals, immigrants with coloured skin or a stigmatised religion, and of a post-colonial generation. How is it possible to be visible in Morocco when you're from a minority that is hunted down? How do you create a system for talking about yourself? I offer a revindication using figures that help me construct my project along with the writings of, for example, Didier Eribon, which belong to generations near and far, and also of Malcolm X or Jean Genet, who set up a literary system born from overplayed and theatricalised experience...

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3/ Tell me about the project you carried out in Douala which also talks of non-respect for people, which in the end was seen by a very few.

In Douala, the “Erotic people, exotic people!!!” project started with an observation I made while doing my courses in Paris, where there was an excessive presence of Cameroonian bananas in the shops. This project started to grow when I realised that the banana is not only a fruit we eat, but is loaded with meaning. It is erotic because of its shape, its exoticism and its racism associated with monkeys, with Josephine Baker, bon Banania, Chiquita bananas and more recently the adjectives addressed to Christiane Taubira. The banana is anything but a neutral fruit!

Once on the ground in Cameroon, the reality was more brutal than a simple history lecture. This injustice is so real in the heritage of white Africa, with Compagnie Fruitière and the exclusive export of the best quality harvests to France. The landowners made the people work under intolerable conditions for a pitiful wage. So, I decided to go beyond drawing and scenography and move towards performance, because it was necessary to have bodies tell the story. It was very urgent. I was thus able to inject bodies on this occasion. The project started at the same time as the Cergy¹ post-graduate course meetings we held, where I asked myself backwards questions about what I was going to do in Douala. It was a big blur, as even though I was born in Morocco, Sub-Saharan Africa and Cameroon have nothing in common. I set up associations without much research. I had to do something, to go and see. It was this intuition that pushed me to see the reality of and discover the incredible violence on which this fruit is transported. Yet, in Cameroon, because the banana is the main source of food, I just had to find out about how it is processed.

The artist Aurélie Djéniatold me about the village in the HautPenja where her family cultivates bananas. I was told about the increased rate of serious illnesses caused by insecticides and I started to trace the France-Africa economic chain, particularly with Compagnie Fruitière. I thus had the opportunity to learn about the heritage which persists in slavist exploitation of the people. The banana tells us of the body and of the bodies murdered in the banana plantations. So, I brought together some young dancers for a dance inspired by Bafa, a traditional dance which traces elements of rural life. I wrote this choreography on the step-by-step story of banana processing with the dancers. They wore the yellow blouses of the machine grease filled factories.



Peuples Erotiques, Peuples Exotiques, 2017 - Soufiane Ababri

The choreography evolves into a revolt by the workers, who leave their posts and lynch the yellow scenographic walls using their blouses and the grease on their hands. I wanted to demonstrate the discontentment of the workers, because in Cameroon you don't talk about all the suffering that is tolerated. For centuries, the daily violence of women being mistreated has never been made an issue. At the beginning, the dancers are smiling. Little by little, anger takes over.

This is the second time I have enforced a performance. The first time was during the visits the Macvaland Bétonsalon2 visits, into which I infiltrated a Maghreb boy wearing blue overalls. During the visit, he announced his discontent and his lack of understanding about why he not know the reading codes of the art world... This wasn't without raising the anxiety of the organisers and the public.

4/ Are you talking about the eroticisation of the day-to-day in the different worlds which meet in the colonial era – in daily life, in violence, in social classes – which are represented in your drawings?

Yes, it's often about the eroticisation of the trivial, but also what is trivialised or whitewashed. I seek to make an issue of the violence of sexual misery, of the people who live outside society – even if they are in the middle of Paris – confronted with different worlds and social classes and with all the problems that defecting carries with it. It's often about making an issue of the violence which appears to be directed and accepted by a large majority. I want to highlight sexual misery, terrible working conditions, confrontation between different worlds, the problems of deviating from these subjects which maintain an

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extreme violence and yet aren't included in the issues generally deal with in the art world. It's about eroticising politics and politicising the erotic, so that it becomes like a tool, like a guide towards understanding the mechanisms of domination, because no human being is yet used to sexuality in a casual sense, apart from it being an effective way to put humans face to face with themselves.

How does one try to lead a different way of looking at things? It's not about feeding the bourgeois discourse of Bataille or Barthes, my drawings are about solitude, about the inability to transfer eroticism between different social classes. With sexuality, one can talk about the day-to-day, abused bodies, police violence, borders. This can be approached through eroticism, like a pointer towards what we don't want to look at. In Douala, this led me to see colonial heritage close up; in London, to touch on the questions around Afro-Americans and homosexuality in the football world...

5/ There has never before been so much talk about exotic sexual relations and the abuse that occurred during the colonial and post-colonial eras, particularly as analysed in "Le Ventredes Femmes³" (Women and their Wombs) by Françoise Vergès? In your work, this violence is emblematic in the expression of the exacerbated virility in your drawings and in which you "have bathed in Morocco" and of which you "were the first victim."

I work from images that I take from porn sites and hugely banal films, which I interpret in a different way. There are strong relationships in my drawings. I automatically give rosy cheeks to the men I draw in a desire to represent the moment when the masculine body loses mastery of itself, this social game instilled since childhood in order to prepare him to be the dominator he will become. But I also play with the line between sexual fantasy and social reality, as in Isaac Julian's video "The Attendant" (1993)⁴, which talks about racialised relationships between the ancient colonised peoples and the dominant male white, and the ambiguity of sexual relations in an economy of desire.

In the Mediterranean world, how can the issue of virility be resisted and undermined? How are men instilled with the reality of becoming predators? I try to undermine masculine domination in the way that Bourdieu perfectly analyses⁵ it; "This essential investment in social games (illusio), which makes a man really a man – a sense of honour, virility, manliness, or, as the Kabyle people say, "kabylyty" (thakbaylyth) – is the undisputed mainstay of duty towards the self, the drive or the motive of all that is proper, that is to say, what it is appropriate to accomplish to be in order with oneself and to remain worthy of, in one's own eyes, a particular idea of what a man is". Women suffer physical and moral/ethical violence from a very young age. On the other hand, men aren't allowed to be weak and thus become beings with no life. So, I take my stance, which combines sexual fantasy with social reality, whilst involving the seduction that exists between the dominant and the dominated, between the guys on the estate and the police, for example, between colonial sexual relationships and the representation of the black man in gay pornography. The fear of unbridled sexuality of the black with the white which is the biggest cause of racism according to Frantz Fanon⁶, sexual lynching, and how the black body avenges itself, the worst being when a black man sleeps with a white woman.

How will they be judged?

6/ You put scenography, drawing and performance together in this form for the first time in Douala. Can you tell us about the form taken by *Here is a Strange and Bitter Crop*? Also, tell us about Justin Fashanu, the first openly gay footballer, the relevance of his story today in a world driven by the popularity of football and the code of silence that exists around the recognition of gays in the sporting world, and in football in particular?

After having worked on the image of Benzema for an exhibition in Pantin, and during my month-long residency in London this summer, I came across a story while doing some research which took place in the borough where my exposition⁷ would also take place. It was about the incredible footballer Justin Fashanu, who received £1 million for his first transfer. Justin Fashanu was the first (and the last) professional footballer to come out. Pressures and doubts led him to take his own life in his garage in Hackney in 1990. This public figure stood at the crossroads of racialized body, homosexual and class defector. Just as with all my work, I proceed using association and capilarity, particularly in the case of the Billie Holliday song "Strange Fruit"⁸. This was produced forty years after segregation, but talks of continuing injustice, just as Malcolm X's writings on the Mau Mau Rebellion remind us that "we should not be angry with the puppets, but with the puppeteers". Whether one is forced into suicide or eliminated, it's the same thing. My formal and intuitive research progressed with visual reconciliations; I rebounded from the hangings of Justin Fashanu and those in the song onto the title of "Strange Fruit" ...

What is considered strange is then carried in the *Pride* of sexual relationships and drawn in the exhibition as black men who couple in the unharvested cotton fields.

I need bodies and texts where performance is necessary to bring the drawing out of itself. As in Douala, in this political and social context, the title of the series of drawings "Beautiful Fruit" is about my feelings towards what I have produced. These six drawings on a background of two green tones contrast with a caged area where the performance takes place and to which the spectator is denied entry.

Apart from the performance, the visitor can see a ball, some pieces of text on the floor and a wall painted like a school blackboard. The performance starts with three male actor-dancers, who are roped up at the wrist and neck, and who were chosen according to precise physical criteria: black, Indian and Mediterranean. They play football and mime the gestures of football hooligans to a background soundtrack, while reading the writings of Malcolm X¹⁰ on the Mau Mau Rebellion and the poems of Léon Gontron Damas that Christiane Taubira read to the French National Assembly for the defense of gay rights. It's like a post-mortem gift to Justin Fashanu. On the right is a huge mural in pastel after a Bruce Nauman¹¹ neon; a hanging figure escapes and dances with his penis erect "à la Keith Haring". As in my exhibition at the Praz-delavallade¹² Gallery in Paris, the figures are in pink, the colour assigned to homosexuals by the Nazis... I work on the ambivalence of the banal. Finally, the London performance finishes with this phrase being written word by word by the performers, "We are revolting against the nightmare". We are revolting against the legacy of violence in history, as if we are terrified that it might start again.



Beautiful Fruit, 2018 - Soufiane Ababri

7/ What's next?

I'm going to Istanbul for a mini-residency to produce a contextual work, once again in relation to a sport. This time, it's Turkish wrestling, where masculinity is master. Before a match, Turkish wrestlers cover their bodies in oil and put on leather trousers. In order to get a hold on each other, they have to slide their hands inside the trousers. The discovery of this sport in the West uncovered this eroticism. In the scenario for my video, D. Trump appears. He has declared that Arabs should go back to Agraba, a Disney city that doesn't exist, and created the idea of the Orient from scratch. I'll be working with real wrestlers and so the drawing exists after having been submerged in what emerges from these associations. This project opens in November at The Pill13 Gallery, Istanbul.

Cécile Bourne-Farrell is an independent curator who worked for both private, public and Higher Education institutions in Africa, Asia and Europe, including Kings College London. She joins Arts Cabinet in an advisory capacity and as Curator Special Projects.