

# Numéro



**French artist Nadjib Ben Ali finds the raw material for his flamboyant paintings in football, rap videos and Hitchcock movies**

Once again, *Numéro art* teams up with Gucci to showcase the young and promising talents of the French artistic scene. With a hunger for forms and colors, young French artist Nadjib Ben Ali finds the raw material for his flamboyant paintings in football, rap videos and Hitchcock movies.

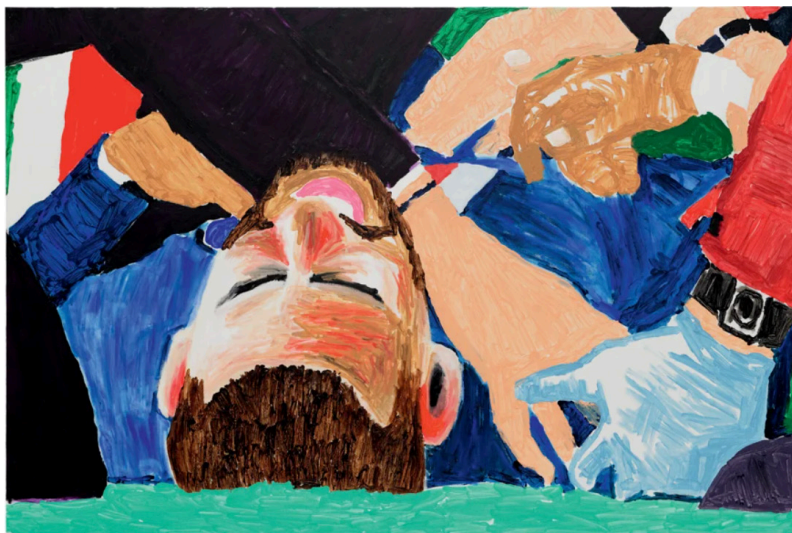


## **A “real image cannibal”**

**Nadjib Ben Ali is a football fan.** But you can't really say he watches matches; rather, he dissects them, like a critic scrutinizing an Alfred Hitchcock movie shot by shot. When he sees a frame he likes he takes a screenshot of it, which he then stores in a database to rival the Cinémathèque française. *“I’m a real image cannibal, hungry for shapes, colours and compositions.”* Some remind him of the master of suspense, others of Michelangelo. Hands touching, a close up of the back of the neck, a wide shot of a crowd. Legs intertwined. Faces marked by failure or victory. Ben Ali then compiles and reproduces these scenes as drawings – the physical manifestation of a virtual fantasy. If necessary, he reframes them, the spontaneous line of the marker pen giving them (new) life. Then comes the moment when they are transposed into paintings.

***“My goal has always been to reproduce a marker-pen line in my painting.”***

To this end he invents his own tools: paint pencils made from glue sticks into which he inserts synthetic fabric (a soccer jersey, for instance). *“For me drawing is like learning a choreography, memorizing a gesture that I’ll reproduce later on canvas.”* Plunging his DIY pencils into acrylic paint, he mixes the pigments to recreate the brilliance of the screen on which the image first appeared. If necessary, he adds a little glycerol, *“for a brighter black in the eye.”* When he paints, Ben Ali looks as much to his drawing (for the materiality of the line and the gesture) as to the original image (for the composition). *“But painting always wins,”* he concedes. *“I can change a colour, even if it is not identical to the screenshot or drawing because the balance of the painting calls for it.”* Which he sometimes does to the point of abstraction.



## **A strong taste for dramaturgy**

**Ben Ali is not the first artist to take an interest in the dramaturgy of soccer.**

In 2006, Philippe Parreno and Douglas Gordon made *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait*, for which they filmed the soccer star with several cameras from different angles for the entire duration of a match. Every move was captured, alongside nervousness, indecision, indifference, solidarity and isolation. After 90 minutes, these fragments come together to form a whole, a vertiginous over-presence of a man, a dramatic hero. This same feeling of drama and dizzying wholeness is found in Ben Ali's paintings. *"I'm not interested in a particular soccer player but in professional soccer, the big sponsor ads, the spectators in the stadiums. I want to be in their place, I want it all to belong to me. I like the dramaturgy. Soccer players aren't actors; they're focused on the game and aren't in control of their affects. Their weakness is exposed. I like this idea, them lying down, overwhelmed, wounded."*



## **An eclectic approach to painting**

**The artist has developed an obsession with necks, like the Dardenne brothers who filmed their actors from behind as way of showing a character in a weakened state.** Viewers become voyeurs, stalkers with total power over their prey. In Ben Ali's work, the nape of the neck becomes a source of eroticism, the viewer glimpsing a patch of skin peeking out between the hairline and the jersey. This fetish for body parts, and the clothing that dissimulates them, feeds an underlying homo-eroticism. Beyond Hitchcock, the movie reference here is Brian de Palma, another master of composition and patent fetishist (*Pulsions*, *Body Double*). One of Ben Ali's recent canvases once again focuses on a face, but it is wearing the white mask of John Carpenter's *Halloween* serial killer. The fluorescent red light that illuminates it against a black background radiates violence and absence; it is impossible to interpret the expression. Upon closer inspection, one sees the character is shedding tears of blood.

***"My new Mixtape series is based on images that aren't necessarily from soccer.*** *The mask was worn by a young boy in PNL's Simba video. Then I saw it again in another rapper's video. I had my image: a bleeding world. Now I'm working on finding that light so specific to computer screens, more so than in my soccer series. For this I use fluorescent, almost phosphorescent colors. The whole thing is more Pop, very 70s."* It recalls the paintings of Nina Childress, the mode by turns figurative and abstract, exploring styles with a certain extravagance. Both respond to the question of how to turn an image into painting using multiple approaches: hyper-realist, almost to the point of caricature, combining classicism, kitsch, Pop art, bad painting and Abstract Expressionism. These stylistic deviations are in themselves a powerful commentary on the hierarchies within art and society – like finding Michelangelo at a soccer match.