

## Eye for an eye, image for an image

Interview with Jean-Hubert Martin

*JH Martin:* Recently, you sent me a text that raised the perpetual question of the African artist who wants to achieve 'international' status, who is modernist and western and fears being relegated to a regionalist category. You dismissed me, saying that I situate myself in a sort of duality between modernity and obscurantism. I do take a stance in defense of identities. Artists frequently work at the heart of a cultural duality (education, society, tradition...). Philosophies and languages mix together and lead to complex perspectives. I take the schematic position in defense of those cultures that have had limited contact with modernity. The West is expanding at an unbelievable pace, forcing people to conform to this modernity. I seek to support those who want to assert their own culture, all while knowing that there is no possible return to the past, and that today, it is all about strategy, and about negotiation with the West. I am against artistic purism and unitary identities.

HM: *Identity* is such a complex subject that the intellectual quickly finds himself thrown onto a path that is far from his initial philosophical concern. In Sudan, the authoritarian middle class took hold of identity and codified it. Imprisonment is a common experience for those who challenge their authoritarian identity. When I arrived in France at the end of the 1970's, I thought that this issue was behind me. But it has resurged right here, in the fallout of globalization at the very heart of Europe. This question is constantly being asked of the artist, especially in the wake of independences in Africa. The Spanish and the Greeks, hurt by the crisis of liberal globalization, now find themselves submerged in this problem of identity that has no solution. And as for artistic creation, we are all facing these questions. Identity is not only a concern for African artists, but for all people concerned with the state of the world.

Two years ago, I took part in a presentation *L'art a la pointe* [Art on the forefront]. Artists were invited to exhibit in abandoned churches and chapels. A young man had done an installation representing checkpoints in Israel. Being from the Near East, I understood that this subject needed to be addressed. Having no political agenda, the artist found the images on the internet because he was intrigued by these check points as aesthetic objects, but his approach was naive. I immediately went the route of political reflection. The artist cannot escape the question of the *political* and of the state of the world.

JH Martin: So how do you address this problem of the state of the world?

HM: When I was young, politics didn't interest me. But through art, I found myself again confronting this question, which extends beyond the artistic sphere. Although this Earth is a common good, people hold such different positions from each other that they end up fighting and creating conflicts of interests, when we should really be finding solutions to the world's problems. I think that the artist can, in his or her way, attempt to *repair* the

world. I like the idea of *repairing*, as well as its aesthetics. There is no new world or new art history to invent. My approach is to take the history of European art, the only one that I was able to study in school, and to rework it, to *repair* it in my way.

JH Martin: The history of art, as it has been written, emerges from colonial ideas. The reparation would be rather substantial, no?

HM: As an African, I find that European art history is very limited. So I try to integrate my vision with this art, attempting to expand its perspectives.

JH Martin: We could also invoke the orientation towards chronology in art history. Today the artist's work is to show where he's coming from and what he's bringing forth (influences felt, and exercised). But things are more complex. The artist cannot limit himself by wanting only to enter into this genealogy.

HM: My relationship with European art history began when I discovered those of its images that were accessible through reproductions. These images inspired me to think about the ways in which they had been made, the "how to make." In terms of the creation of images, my motivation is not political. I have a *bricoleur's* relationship with the images. At the School of Fine Arts in Khartoum, I had a very conventional education. You had to first show that you mastered the techniques. I learned how to appreciate traditional European art through reproductions of Matisse, Rembrandt, etc.

When I arrived in France, I went to museums to see the real works with the reproductions in mind. I remember being disappointed, at a Matisse exhibition, by the quality of the red in one of his works. I found it too pastel. Still in search of the "how to make," I got the impression that European art history had come full circle with the Pop Art movement. I remember *playing* with the images and producing a result that was very personal, I thought... And then I discovered that Andy Warhol had done that well before me. In the end, with *bricolage*, pleasure also comes from reinventing.

JH Martin: You've declared that in the Sudan, there was no place for you. What status do artists have, those who remain there?

HM: There are no art galleries in Sudan. Artists exhibit in foreign cultural centers. In the 1970's, artists benefited from an ideological patronage of contemporary art. Using it in the public sector, the state became the only art patron. When Marshall Nimeiry's single-party regime collapsed, the Islamists presented another ideological patronage that favored religious propaganda. Today, artists cannot make a living from their art, not since the patronage of the Nimeiry era ended. The primary consequence has been the extreme politicization of the milieu of art.

In 2008 Mohamed Hamza, a figurative artist, was invited by the large political party, El Umma, to exhibit at the headquarters of this conservative and religious party. When he exhibited a female nude, he attracted the ire of one of the party's members who,

reacting very violently, physically attacked the piece. His attitude was denounced in the press and by the head of the Umma party. They apologized to him, and that member was finally dismissed.

Right now, there is still no art market, but the large political groups are beginning to be interested in art as a form of political action, and that gives artists a certain freedom.

JH Martin: And what was happening before the British opened the Khartoum School of Fine Arts in 1946, during colonization?

HM: Before the Khartoum School was created with the intention of training art teachers, there was no tradition of drawing in the European style (on paper, on canvas, etc.). But from that period one can still invoke the practice of calligraphy within the Quranic schools. Artistic practice existed only in bodily form: henna decorations, scarification. My parents had such decorations on their bodies. There are also other embodied practices such as dance, part of a language of the body that is inherent in everyday life.

JH Martin: But these forms of artistic expression are more social, in the sense that everyone practices them.

HM: That's definitely correct for the traditional pre-capitalist context. But since then, with the urbanization of modern society, dance has become an art in its own right. It can also be done professionally (such as the official troupes for folkloric dances from the different regions of Sudan).

JH Martin: How do you intend to repair this broken world with your painting, even while you try to be apolitical?

HM: I do not try to be apolitical, quite to the contrary! I am political, the themes of my paintings are political, but my way of creating paintings is not. I have painted on paper, on printed textile, etc. Right now, I sew, which adds to my work as a painter. I take prominent themes of European art history and I rework them. With those works in which I add my own images to already printed textiles, some people think that all of the work's motifs are mine; then they notice something else entirely. I like when people discover something unknown, full of mystery and surprises. By introducing fascination into the imaginary of people, my work does not belong to the logic of language. Curiosity allows people to reflect on something different, something not of the order of the word but of the act. They wonder how it has been done, like a sort of magic trick of creation.

JH Martin: That magic is similar to what one feels upon seeing a Rembrandt or a Holbein. The representation is so refined that you wonder about the process that could have brought about such a feat. An exhibition is successful when it engenders fascination. In the ones I undertake, I try to share my own curiosity with people, to transmit the strongest feelings. In many exhibitions, there is much to understand, but not

much to see, as in Documenta this year. The “comprehension” is being emphasized too much and the “seeing,” not enough.

HM: These exhibitions have become models on another level, a more political one. In exhibitions like “Magicians of the Earth” or “Sharing Exoticisms,” the importance of fascination is often neglected. The exhibitions end up being blocked into a political framework.

JH Martin: I created a website on the exhibition “Magicians of the Earth” in order to show the exhibition through photographs. You had to see it in order to be filled with wonder. Too much has been said about this exhibition by those who have not seen it and, worse, have criticized it for works that were not even in it!

HM: People are more interested in what surrounds an exhibition, and they don't feel compelled to go and see it before they form an opinion. Being in Sudan in 1989, I could not see the exhibition in person. Some journalists do not feel the need to see the exhibition. However, the act of “seeing” leads one to a very different stance.

*Musa shows his works to Martin with a running commentary:*

*A series of works with the theme “the moderates”: The Moderate Golfers, The Moderate Bikers, The Moderate Polo, The Moderate Rugby, etc.*

HM: Muslims have become the public enemy of civilization, thanks in part to ideological discourses producing concepts such as “rogue states” or “the axis of evil.” But since Obama's arrival, Americans have decided to reconcile themselves with the Muslim world by taking a different approach. Westerners speak of moderate Muslims to indicate allies within Muslim society, that is, reasonable people with whom dialogue is possible. Now, there are even American institutions that exist to create a network of moderate Muslims. The idea is to construct a new image of Muslims in order to continue taking a specific political approach to Muslim societies. In this context, many personalities that declare themselves to be moderate Muslims have appeared, and they claim to speak in the name of all Muslims.

*About the works being shown:*

HM: *The Supermarket Hour* represents how the paradise mythology metamorphoses into a kind of allegory of consumer society. A young Muslim gives his life as a martyr, and reaches paradise where 72 virgins (“houris”) give themselves to him.

I also have another version of this theme in a triptych. *Desiring, Fighting, Pleasure*.

JH Martin: Does it take you a long time to find your textiles?

HM: There are two stores where I look for my textiles, sometimes at the ends of the rolls. The vendors don't know what I'm doing with them, but they're used to it.

JH Martin: The "pleasure" is represented by the shopping cart? Does pleasure mean consumption for you? It is more related to material goods than to sexuality?

HM: The paradise of Muslim extremists is a paradise filled with all the goods of consumption: objectified women, alcohol, and more generally, with all that is forbidden or inaccessible to us during life.

As for *The Dogs of the Dialogs of Civilization*, people who talk about these dialogs are actually setting up an opposition between two civilizations: barbarians and the civilized; they can thus veer into a war of civilizations at any moment. As I see things, there is only one civilization—that of capital and profit—and we all live in it. This civilization is in conversation with itself, a bit like Velasquez's *Venus at her mirror*, observing her "other" in the mirror. I've reprised that work in this sense.

In *Confusion de part*, I take this term in its juridical sense, a phrase used when it is not possible to determine an illegitimate child's parentage. I have already worked with the theme of *The Raft of the Medusa*, which tells of the Governor of Senegal's shipwreck on the shores of the Canary Islands. I reprised the famous, ambiguous statement of Michel Rocard: "France cannot accommodate all the poverty of the world, but it is necessary that it play its part." I created this work at a time when French socialism was seeking to make conservatives happy. France's part is actually the confused, problematic part, because the people who cross the Mediterranean today end up shipwrecked at the same place as yesteryear's Raft of the Medusa, trying to validate their French "part" (parentage). It was thus an opportunity, a pretext for addressing this theme.

In the realm of politics, I am like a chronicler who takes account of everyday events. *Geronimo* is a painting composed of textiles printed with chickens, and of Manet's *Dead Christ*, who is glowing from the reflection of a television set and holding a remote control. In Manet's work, the Christ is illuminated in a certain way, and I wanted to work on it similarly. But this photograph does not fully show the nuances of the colors; I did not use conventional opaque paints, but golden, silvery, or bronzed reflecting paints, which added to the luminous effect.

*I love you with my iphone* is a tribute to James Rosenquist, an American Pop artist who, for one of his works, magnified a little advertisement showing the front of a Ford, and a plate of spaghetti in the detail. I reprised the title of his work "*I love you with my Ford*" and I made various versions including this one, referencing Osama Bin Laden who, even while living in a medieval mindset, makes use of the latest technology. This is one of my recent works, which are made entirely of transparent fabrics superposed, glued and then sewn.

*Application Mao* is a large work made of transparent fabrics superposed and under which I put, in places, golden, metallic, silver, and even blue fabric. This technique brings out a luminosity that is internal to the work. *Application Mao* is about countries like China today, where the population swears by Mao even while the current regime creates a politics that is in rejection of the communist vision.

In the gothic writing that I use quite a lot, the graphic logic is the same as in Arab calligraphy, especially in the orientation of the tool and in the strokes. This typography, far from innocent, has a politically charged readability, from the religious believer of the Middle Ages to nationalism in Germany in the thirties. I learned this gothic writing a long time ago in order to give a certain consistency to my texts.

JH Martin: That gives it an element that is rather nostalgic, old-world, and historical.

HM: The gothic is exhumed, a bit like manuscripts from the Middle Ages. This nostalgia for the gothic is very effective.

*The Good Game* was conceived when I was commissioned to make a poster for the World Cup in South Africa. The image refers to Delacroix's *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, but it also evokes a tango step. The two characters are footballers. Various versions of this work have been created, some as paintings and one on textile. It is this last one that was presented. Unlike the textile, my version made possible a series of allusions, to Delacroix's painting as well as to the Christian tradition of figurative painting. It also played on the "colonial" aspect of the conflict between Zinedine Zidane and the Italian footballer, Materazzi, during the 2006 World Cup. Zidane's "headbutt," headfirst, has been celebrated by some Africans as an anticolonial gesture. The figurative images are thus interesting because they propose, spontaneously, various lines of reading. I also took into consideration the problem of how FIFA handled the World Cup in South Africa. With this World Cup, FIFA amassed huge sums of money but it had no consequence for South African problems, such as AIDS, unemployment, and under-development.

*The Dialogues of Civilization* makes reference to Velasquez's *Venus at her Mirror*, which is one of the few nudes that were not destroyed during the period of the Inquisition. I showed this work at the exhibition "L'art a la pointe" [Art at the forefront] in Brittany, in an old church. The members of the selection committee had agreed on this work. But two days before it was shown, it had to be taken out of the exhibition because it shocked a great number of traditionalists, not because it was too sensual, but rather because Osama Bin Laden's head was in Venus' mirror.