

Samba: interview

Fred Roberts visits Chéri Samba, founder of the School of Popular Painting in Kinshasa, as Tate Modern stages its first ever display of contemporary African art

By Fred Roberts

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'Little Kadogo' by Chéri Samba

A sign at the entrance politely dissuades visitors without appointments. Inside, stencils, paint brushes and audio-visual gadgetry abound (I count seventeen remote controls on the table). On the wall is a sketch of Parisians walking their dogs while African immigrants clean the streets of canine excrement. Fans are blowing, and an Abba DVD is playing on one of three televisions, until a power cut plunges us into sweltering darkness.

Self-taught artist Chéri Samba (full name Samba wa Mbimba N'zingo Nuni Masi Ndo Mbasi) has been documenting and satirising the absurdities of everyday life in the Congo for more than 30 years, often portraying himself in his highly politicised, vivid figurative paintings. An enthusiastic ambassador for his fellow artists, he is a wry, engaging figure.

'I grew up in a village where we could catch and grow all our own food. I used to enjoy sketching animals and faces with my finger in the sand. My father was a blacksmith who made hunting rifles. He wanted me to help him at the forge after school, so I hid my notebooks and sketched at night. I would copy pictures from a popular comic to sell to my friends. I told them I would become a famous artist, that I'd travel everywhere and have a big house.'

In 1975, after various apprenticeships, Samba opened his own studio, a chipboard box of three square metres, which he shared with eight helpers. 'We painted billboards and shop signs, and sometimes got in trouble for cutting extra copies of official stamps. At the same time I was working on a comic strip for a newspaper, and also my paintings. At first, I was so proud of these that I had no interest in selling them.'

But, as his eye-catching clothing suggests, he was not shy of publicity. 'The day I opened my studio, I hung a big painting outside in the street. It was about a war between two tribes, and showed lots of naked people fighting. It quickly drew a crowd, and by mid-morning there was a terrible traffic jam. The police arrested me for causing a disturbance and for disrespecting Congo's history.'

Hoping to avoid his fine, he went to see a *féticheur* (a local witchdoctor). 'Those guys are real comedians. We were both completely naked, and I had to take all sorts of strange herbs.' How to explain this to a Londoner? 'Magic is anything people find extraordinary and can't explain. Look at the wrestling on television: it seems miraculous that they escape injury, so I begin to think perhaps it's magic. Of course, I still had to pay the fine. Nowadays I'd rather go to a journalist than a *féticheur*!'

Hearing a commotion outside, Samba climbs a stepladder to peer into the street from the studio's only window, a makeshift porthole. He fetches two bottles of beer, and we discuss the origins of his distinctive style.

'When I came to Kinshasa, some of my competitors' paintings were so alive, they seemed to move and breathe. I needed to stand out, so I started to add text to my paintings. This was also a strategy to keep people looking at them a little longer. I also like to use bright colours because that's what I see around me. Colour is everywhere; colour is life.' Samba later befriended and formed an association with those same admired competitors, notably Moke, Chéri Chérin and Bodo (now an evangelical preacher), as well as mentoring younger artists, including his brother Cheik Ledy, who died in 1997. Works by all four are included in the Tate's year-long display.

'When I paint, my main concerns are to represent things as they are, to communicate with humour, to ask relevant questions and to tell the truth. I consider myself a sort of painter-journalist. My source of inspiration is daily life. I always have suitcases full of ideas. As long as the world is the world, and writers have stories to tell, I will have something to say. Each time I meet someone, I think of another two or three paintings, but I don't have time to realise them all.'

Successful exhibitions in Paris' Pompidou Centre and the Bilbao Guggenheim have helped generate new levels of interest and respect for contemporary African art. Samba, whose work is increasingly in demand in Europe and the United States, is preparing an exhibition for this year's Venice Biennale. 'I can't tell you too much, as I want everything to be well-cooked before it is eaten. But there will be some real revelations. Everyone will be bowled over, especially Christians.' He chuckles, 'It will be une vraie catastrophe!'

In an avidly-Christian country, any criticism of religion is startling, but there are several copies of the Bible on his bookshelf, just along from the soft-porn videos. 'If I was in charge, I would stop everyone except children from going to church: it is such a performance. As far as I know, manna doesn't fall from heaven anymore, so why do people waste time on their knees?'

The increasingly Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) recently held its first free elections in four decades of dictatorship and strife. Corrupt politics and violence have cast long shadows, but Samba is hopeful that his country can now progress: 'We need to change our mentality. There is so much to do. Instead of criticising things, each of us should consider how we can contribute, and be ready to do some work, even to start paying taxes. I heard the President say "Playtime is over". I give him my blessing.'

Fred Robarts is a writer based in Kinshasa. 'Popular Painting' featuring work by Chéri Samba, is at Tate Modern (Level 5, 'States of Flux' suite).