

Oumar Mbengue: LOST AND FOUND



Imagine a young man, somewhere in Africa, let's say in Senegal. In an attempt to escape the monotony of his life, he spends his days on the beach, watching distant ships crossing the ocean to another world. It is his dream to discover that world too, one day. And not only has he met people from that mysterious world, but he even knows people from his own town who have visited those shores: their stories sharpen and shape his desire. He has sleepless nights, restless at the thought of crossing that ocean one day, meeting Europe and loving her, for Europe is a beautiful woman: tall and blond, of course - the forbidden fruit. She is also a difficult woman, but he is used to difficult women. He is patient, a crucial virtue in conquering a difficult woman. The young man prepares himself meticulously. He consults a local marabout of impeccable reputation. The marabout makes him a 'gris'gris', which will protect him against all evil. The 'gris-gris' comprises words from the Koran and other mystic sources of Islam, words encoded in figures. But perhaps this 'gris-gris' or amulet is not sufficient? Thus, he also consults the medicine man, who provides him with another, potent, amulet. As long as he carries these on his body, nothing can harm him.

Out of this emerges the theme of Oumar's exhibition : "Lost and Found". Discovered objects in particular. He takes us on a journey: he shows us the young man washed ashore after shipwreck. And when he is picked up by the Spanish police, losing his belongings and his 'gris-gris'. The police, fascinated by the 'gris-gris' open this "object", and decode its transcript, with the help of an Arabic-speaker. This way the identity of the young man is revealed, and his soul exposed. He is being, effectively, "de-constructed". But there is more to it: he finds himself in prison - and all that he used to be, exists no more the moment he passes the frontier.

Then the second phase of his adventure in the West emerges: the phase of reconstruction. But be aware! His lost culture is not being returned to him by the new country. He is taught how to speak its language, how he is supposed to laugh as a French or Dutch guy - how he needs to peel potatoes the Dutch way. Like the Indonesian people all those years ago when they first arrived in the Netherlands.

Only then the young man is allowed to "enter". In a profound way Oumar uses well-known Western images to continue his story: traffic signs. Here he reminds us of the Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, who uses pictures from Victorian Britain (amongst other images), to have us look at the *past* from a different *present*. Oumar makes us aware that traffic signs, once meant to create order, simultaneously enforce and impose limitations and restrictions. Within this world of order, an African sees dangers everywhere. He spots signs that warn him to be careful, to reduce speed, to avoid certain areas. Moreover Ms Europe is hard to please: she is demanding, often arrogant. In her presence the young man loses part of himself, he gets confused, his behaviour becomes unpredictable.

Picasso once said that the only things he needed from Africans were their masks to help him pave new ways into art. I guess if Oumar is asked what he needs from the West, to develop *his* art, the answer would probably be: their traffic signs. Both men, consciously or subconsciously, have used objects for their storytelling that initially served other purposes in their cultures: masks with spiritual meanings in Africa, and traffic signs in Europe that control our movement from A to B.

This is what art offers us: the possibility to look at our world with different eyes.

Vamba Sherif