

Oumar Mbengue presents a *Gesamtkunstwerk*

## LOST AND FOUND

As I walk into Oumar Mbengue's studio it is as if I am literally entering into his theme, or more accurately, as if I become a component in one of his installations. Dozens of objects are lying or standing at the back of the small room. In disorderly order. All these found objects have been sewn into the fabric of horse blankets. Some are tightly enfolded, for some the fabric has been allowed room to manoeuvre. As a result the blankets seem to take on the character of rosettes or tufts. Almost decorative. The objects vary in shape and size. The masquerade has robbed most of their identity. The origins of others are even now betrayed by their shape. A cupboard, part of a doll, a pair of shoes, etc.

At the centre of the anonymous objects lies a framed colour photo of a black man with a small child. The image is striking because it so unashamedly reveals its identity. It is the artist, with his daughter. The grey still life is surrounded by objects lying or standing, waiting for attention. Exposed, they stand out against the rest.

In the middle of the room, on the left, stands a collection of traditional wooden sculptures from Senegal. Their proud presence announces that they will not tolerate being wrapped in a horse blanket. They were not found on the street, Mbengue has collected them with tender, loving care. As a reminder of his native land? Unwillingly or unintentionally, they enter into a relationship with the rest. They give the packaged objects their own, sometimes heart-rending but always estranged dimension.

Oumar Mbengue's work is about the post-modern immigrant. What has he left behind? What has he lost? What has replaced this? What new things and customs has he been able to pick up? To what extent has he used or abused his new surroundings? What leeway has he been given? How often has he been put in his place? How much respect has he been shown and how much has his self-respect suffered? 'Lost and Found' in the broadest sense of the word.

The horse blanket symbolises the first encounter with the inhabitants of the country in which refugees have sought refuge. An apparently warm gesture, but frequently no guarantee of a warm future. Horse blankets are made from scraps for a good reason. The gesture assigns different dynamics to hot and cold. The red and white (police) tapes can protect people from danger and symbolize danger at the same time.

Just as we sit face to face in the small room, talking to one another, exploring each other's space, trying to find a connection, discovering our differences and looking for our similarities, so will Oumar Mbengue try to bring his installation to life for the visitors with a performance.

In a video that completes 'Lost and Found', he shows a parade of traffic signs. In his eyes typically Western, even artistic signs, devised to ensure regulation and safety. They also, however, symbolise rules and laws, the obstacles with which a post-modern immigrant is confronted when attempting to claim his new home.

In his presentation in Galerie 23 it is as if he appropriates the space by covering as much as possible with horse blankets. And he goes even further. He reproduces his daughter's nursery and thus brings his most personal 'possession' into the space.

Is he testing the limits? Is he provoking us? Is he pointing out our double standards? Or is he indicating how he has now succeeded, as a post-modern immigrant, in finding and seizing his own space?

Oumar Mbengue does not offer ready answers. He places the public in a suggestive environment where many interpretations are possible and where a diversity of feelings will be thrust upon them. What he definitely does is to provide an experience that will not soon be forgotten.

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