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Bouabré, Frédéric Bruly (1923-2014)

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré is one of best known contemporary African artists. His drawings first gained international exposure in 1989 when exhibited in the groundbreaking show Magiciens de la Terre (Beaubourg-La Villette, Paris). Since then he has participated in a number of major international exhibitions: Africa Now (1991), Trade Routes-2nd Johannesburg Biennale (1997), Global Conceptualism (1999), Documenta 11 (2002), Africa Remix (2004-07), Biennale de Venise (2013). His artwork succeeds to challenge the gap between the outsider art supporters and conceptual art's ones.

Born in the early 1920s into an Ivory Coast farming culture, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré served in the French Navy, worked for the police department in Dakar, Senegal, and held various clerical positions in the colonial administration. In 1948 he had a mystical vision that inspired him to start his own religion, the Order of the Persecuted. He was mainly known by ethnologists as a prophet before his prolific writing and drawing caught the attention of French curator André Magnin.

Since the 1970s, Bouabré has transferred his thoughts and researches to postcard-sized drawings, using a ballpoint pen and color crayons. His works follow precise rules both in terms of materials and format, displaying a central figure surrounded by colored frame and written text in French outside this. Among Bouabré’s most renowned works is a series of 448 drawings (*Alphabet Bété* 1990-91) depicting monosyllabic characters. Before being a series of drawings, it was a proper script created in 1956 and supported by the French scholar Théodore Monod, designed to transcribe all human sounds and provide a means to preserve the language of the Bété people, which has been on the decline since the introduction of French as the official language for schooling. Other series of works record the artist’s visions and dreams or transcribe different systems of knowledge and communication (golden weights, scarifications). Many of the other drawings, mostly from the 1990s, are devoted to the discovery of supernatural signs in natural phenomena like clouds, fruits or stains. With the help of André Magnin, the drawings were brought together under the title of *Connaissance du Monde* (*Knowledge of the World*), which is presented as an encyclopedia of universal knowledge and experience in progress.

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré represented a certain type of African artist in the west: one without a formal education, an innocent, uncontaminated by western art. Taking a critical stance towards Bouabré’s success, the art historian Olu Oguibe writes: "Bouabré's drawings are today preferred in the West to those that could be considered more familiar precisely because the artist’s works fall outside conventional Western standards, and thus inadvertently fit dubious, perverted notions and expectations.” As form they represent a slip from the normative, they signify a coveted distance between the West and the African, they satisfy the desire for the fantastic, they are open to pornographic translation, they are strange.”

However, Oguibe’s view overlooks the context of production of the work properly connected to the academic ethnographic circles. The representational image and the explanatory text – this method of presentation is to be found in archaeology and ethnology, are precisely those branches of learning with which Bouabré was trained in. In the 1960s-70s, until his retirement, he worked in the Ivoirian field of African studies as informant and translator for French ethnologists (Denise Paulme, Yves Person, Bohumil Holas...) and Ivorian ethnologists (Harris Memel Foté, Niangoran Bouah...). It is at this time he started writing and then drawing extensively. This background remains underestimated, nevertheless it is crucial to understanding where the drawings come from.

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Title :"C'est la fumée qui parcourt le plus long chemin, parce qu'elle montre en mèandre !"

Date 4-12-2003.

18 x 31 cm,  ballpoint pen and color crayons on paper

Courtesy: Abidjan Art Gallery, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire