

Roméo Mivekannin
Black skins, white masks

20th June – 31st July / Opening: Saturday 20th June, 2020
Galerie Eric Dupont, Paris.

“Roméo Mivekannin is Beninese, 34 years old, a brilliant architect, and a painter. He paints on large, free canvases. These materials are made from linen sheets or burlap sacks that he assembles by sewing them and thus creating large curtains. He paints with acrylic and works with contrasts and dilutions to obtain infinite shades ranging from black to white via a multitude of grays. His chosen subject is the body, more specifically the Black body and its representations throughout History. The artist speaks of a veil which separates individuals, those who do not share the same color of skin, everything about him evokes this confrontation, as much his preoccupations as the very materiality of his works. He stands on this frontier, and through his practice, tries to push towards those who look at him and asks himself, while soliciting us, the question of the tearing of this veil.

In the series *Barnum*, Roméo Mivekannin paints according to photographic evidence of the *Human Zoo*: a phenomenon which, for alleged scientific or anthropological reasons, developed from the time of the colonial empires and prevailed in Europe and the United States from the 19th century until about 1932. In his series *The Black Model*, the artist endeavors to represent famous works of art history showing Africans. Many of these works were presented in the exhibition *Le Modèle noir* at the Musée d'Orsay from spring to summer 2019: Van Couwenbergh's *The Abduction of the Negress*, Manet's *Olympia*, or Félix Vallotton's *La Blanche et la Noire* to name but three examples. We discover the bodies of women and men, the majority of them Black, on each of these bodies, feminine and masculine, we can recognize a similar face, a face painted systematically, a face duplicated but displaying diverse and shifting expressions, a head recognizable and almost familiar: that of the artist. What a surprise! Owing to this transplantation, an ambiguity is introduced, all the feminine figures change, they become transgender and through that, disturb our perception and upend our expectations. The results thus revisited go well beyond the “originals” from which Roméo Mivekannin draws his inspiration: such a tightrope walker, he advances without shaking on a wire to transmit to us a strange shiver: that of our history.

In the series *Barnum*, in taking back the half-bare bodies of supposed “savages,” which they were not, in exhibiting, in throwing these families to the wolves of the avid gaze of idiots and the curious, Roméo Mivekannin literally takes on this humiliation and blows us away with the realization that this humiliation has, now, become ours. Through this subrogation, through this act of sorcery, the artist manages to revive the souls of the persecuted. In displaying himself thus, he symbolically offers them a new destiny, an existence that is of course immobile but immersed in a kinder reality, by the mediation of this powerful memorial gesture, their force persists and strikes us, today their history penetrates us and moves us to become ours also.

In these canvasses, I discern a double transgression, the artist not only provokes us by looking us in the eye, he stares at us, he stuns us and at the same time, he returns us to the sinister sections of our history which are, among other horrors, slavery and colonization. In staging himself in the midst of whites, I am thinking of the work titled *Le Pendu*, after a photograph showing a handcuffed man in a lynching scene in the United States. He reminds us that the worst outrages were committed by tyrants who were familiar with their martyrs, the executioners split the same air as the victims they were tormenting. It is necessary to remember, James Baldwin tells us, “that the oppressed and the oppressor are bound together within the same society; they accept the same criteria, they share the same beliefs, they both alike depend on the same reality

The more I observe his eyes, the more I sense that they defy us, they tell us that their turn has come, that the fear has changed sides. It is left to us to feel watched, evaluated, and judged. Through the trick of a subtle reversal of values, he replicates the words of W.E.B. Du Bois: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”⁴ So let’s take this vision seriously, let’s think about this subversive and insolent eye, let’s listen to these accusing and rebellious expressions, let’s measure well, among the dramas that they depict, the assured attitudes that take hold of the artist in his works. What does he tell us in presenting himself so audaciously? He reminds us that for a long time, two worlds have coexisted, one within the veil and the other outside the veil. Between the other world and the artist stands this unspoken question that W.E.B. Du Bois was posing regarding *the problem of the colorline*. We have circled it for a long time without truly settling it, the reasons are: numerous old reflexes, quantities of grudges, without a doubt, and too much ignorance, certainly. He invites us to interrogate ourselves regarding one of the major problems of the 20th century and which remains one today, whether in the United States of America or in the countries of postcolonial Africa; he compels us to look at that which happens on the other side of this line, on the other side of this veil, before the line irreparably falls and prevents each of us from following the indispensable path to reconciliation.”

Eric Dupont, April 2020 (Extract)

³ James Baldwin, *Chroniques d’un pays natal* p. 28, Edition Gallimard, Du monde entier.

⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *W.E.B. Du Bois Les âmes du peuple noir*. Editions La Découverte.

⁵ These lines were written in April 2020. The diffusion of the death of George Floyd, who was seen pinned on the ground for eight minutes and forty-six seconds, length of time of his agony, under the knee of a Minneapolis policeman, had not yet inflamed the United States and deeply moved the planet. However, I want to add that this kind of brutality has been going on for decades and this time it happened to be filmed very closely and then widely broadcast. It is a clear and indisputable proof - as if new evidence was needed - of the cruelty and inhumanity of many, of which police violence is only the visible sign, symptom of the evil deep-seated in sick minds and in the North American society. Enough is enough! While thinking of George Floyd and his loved ones, it would be reasonable to hope that the hatred shown by this murder will change the world and open the eyes of those who have kept them closed for far too long. There will be a before and an after George Floyd.