

Francis Mampuya

Francis Mampuya was still a student when he burst onto the DR Congo art scene. In 1996, he decided to storm out of Kinshasa's *Académie des Beaux-arts* (ABA), along with two fellow students, Eddy Masumbuku and Germain Kapend, to flee an academic philosophy that was suffocating him. The trio created a movement that would subsequently be known as *librisme*, espousing a free and innovative approach to art. They were soon joined by other young artists. Célestin Badibanga, a shrewd art critic and a patron of emerging artists, welcomed them to his private cultural centre, Akhenaton, while the Centre Culturel Français enabled them to exhibit their works in the Halle de la Gombe in Kinshasa.

In 1997, Francis Mampuya was recognized for the first time when he was awarded the Missio art prize in Aachen in Germany, where he spent nine months. This award validated his approach and encouraged other artists to join the group. A few years later, the Centre Culturel Français gave the movement fresh support through an episode-based exhibition concept named *Emergence*. Francis Mampuya inaugurated the series in 2001.

The *Librisme* movement – a wind of change

The movement disbanded shortly afterwards, and each of the members took their own path. However, *Librisme* remained an important milestone in the short history of contemporary art in DR Congo. This is because in the mid-1990s, apart from popular painting, which had already gained some recognition, and two or three remarkable and uncategorisable artists, such as Bodys Kingelez, the model maker, Congolese art was developing in a conformism maintained by the conservatism of ABA. Some painters declared themselves to be avant-gardists, but their work has not stood the test of time. A generational leap and original individuals would be needed to bring about renewal. *Librisme* would crystallize this latent need for modernity. Of course, not everything new was inevitably *libriste*. For instance, Freddy Tsimba, who started his career at the same time, developed outside the movement, although he had a real affinity with it.

The works of the young *libristes* in 1996-7 were undoubtedly creative, but muddled and of uneven quality. It could not be otherwise. The *libristes* were exploring extensively, moving forward by trial and error, and were trying to find their feet. However, the fact remains that they unleashed abstraction and expressionism. They also introduced previously unknown or very little used artistic practices to DR Congo: collages, installations (Mampuya), artistic performances (Masumbuku), and usage of reclaimed items.

20 years on, *Librisme* still defines Francis Mampuya

After the original members of the movement dispersed, a new group tried to relaunch the dynamic in 2002-3, driven forward by Vitshois Mwilambwe, with *librisme synergie*. The well-known names of Steve Bandoma and Appolinaire Wantana were involved. This collective also broke up a few years later. However, it didn't matter, as the process of renewal was underway.

In fact, the *Libriste* movement was more about severing links and assertion than an artistic movement; with the artists that were part of it not having developed a shared form of artistic expression. There is no *Libriste*

school, so it is pointless searching. They shared a refusal of constraints and were attracted by modernity. But this is too little to generate artistic consistency. Their artistic identity developed separately, sometimes even outside of DR Congo. For example, Steve Bandoma trained in South Africa and Vitshois Mwilambwe at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam.

That is *Librisme*, the fine word with an unclear definition, invented by Francis Mampuya. And that is why this profile needed to start with this topic in order to present Francis; not just the *Libriste* approach which shaped him, but still defines him today. And there are at least two reasons for this.

The human condition at the heart

Firstly, because Francis burst onto the art scene, saying no to conventions. And to an extent, it could be said that he has never stopped saying no since then. In his paintings, he says no to injustice, arbitrariness, the wrecking of the environment, to Africa being forgotten or shown contempt, to the horror of migrant journeys to Europe. His work fluctuates between semi-figurative and abstract. While a certain formal beauty does emerge from his abstract works, it would be wrong to think that they are only about the use of colour. His abstract works always seek to be allusive. Each work focuses on its subject. The message is most frequently sombre and pain is never far away. Faces have no mouths because the voice of the people is gagged or inaudible, and silhouettes are blurred because everything is uncertain and confused.

Francis Mampuya is an angry man. A citizen and social brand of anger, because it stems from lived experience. Strictly speaking, he is not an activist artist. Rather, in other words, he has not chosen to be an activist artist. Simply, being an artist and sharing the people's suffering, it seems unthinkable to him to not bear witness in his work and not express what he feels.

However, hope is not absent from his artworks. There may be anger and even despondency at times, but there is no despair. Francis also knows that people are brimming with possibilities, despite depravity and injustice. And so he hopes. Improvement remains possible.

An attachment to the experimental approach

The second factor that still connects Francis Mampuya to *Librisme* is his allegiance to the experimental approach. Of course, painting is at the heart of his work. Francis first and foremost loves painting, the strong colours are immediately striking, with red being the dominant colour, colour is thrown onto the canvas in a swift, rough movement. This is his hallmark. However, he has never given up on risk-taking and searching. Over the past years, in his studio he could be seen both trying out painting on corrugated cardboard, and a new technique on paper. But what was the outcome, if any? It doesn't really matter: here he is presenting works on tarpaulins or portraits painted with his fingers. His aim is not so much to surprise, but rather to still and always explore.

Indeed, his "experimental approach" does not equate to slapdash attempts. Francis Mampuya ponders and constructs his attempts behind his often enigmatic mask. In his student days, he went to libraries to learn about art from other continents, taking notes and filling entire exercise books. In 1996, the editors of the mythical *Revue noire*, on a visit to Kinshasa, reported on this in issue 21 of the publication, describing their encounter with the student Francis Mampuya: "*In his exercise book, a real feat of intelligence and finesse, he tries his hand at the theory of art in order to try to analyse his own approach, as well as that of others.*" Nowadays, Francis no longer fills entire exercise books with copious notes, but he still follows the work of other artists. His preference is for Anselm Kieffer, Georg Baselitz and Soulages.

Francis Mampuya has his ardent supporters, Because of his work, obviously, but also because of his personal qualities - his simple and sincere consideration, his calm nature and discreet charm. At the age of 50, Mampuya the rebel is a sure value of the Congolese art world and an established name. Just like the vast majority of his peers, he still has to fight to make a living from his art. In his case, he supports a family of six children. Quite exceptional tenacity and courage are needed to do this. Francis pursues his career just like he builds his house: brick by brick, without noise, patiently, with belief and determination.

Pierre Daubert, excerpt from the *Libres pensées* catalogue, 2018