

Steve Bandoma

Pierre Daubert, excerpt from the *Possession* catalogue, 2017

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Steve Bandoma is the artist of mixed techniques, hybrid creatures and identity. He himself lives between two polarities and two influences – art and politics. Bandoma has inherited a taste for politics from his father, a former government minister and ambassador. The rest of his family live in Europe and are fully dedicated to the arts: his mother is passionate about painting, two sisters are singers, including the much-missed Malou, and a younger brother is a filmmaker. Bandoma grins broadly when asked which of his passions will gain the upper hand. He is very clear in his own mind that he is planning to multi-task.

Opening up new horizons: self-imposed exile

A man with real family heritage, nevertheless, Bandoma has not followed the preordained path of a son and heir. He graduated from Kinshasa's *Académie des beaux-arts* (ABA) in 2004 and then opted to move to South Africa. This move was fuelled by resentment, as he had not been able to accompany his ambassador father to Germany, and equally by a strong desire to discover something new. He settled in Cape Town where he started a multimedia art training programme. He tried his hand at photography and video, and did performance art, created installations, and had a go at anything and everything.

The start of his career in South Africa proved to be hard and anonymous. However, Bandoma gradually constructed his own style, raised his profile, began to exhibit regularly and finally managed to make a name for himself on the South African arts scene, which is a great achievement. In 2009, Bandoma hit the road again, firstly going to Zurich and then travelling to Paris to take up a residency at the Cité Nationale des Arts.

A noteworthy comeback onto the Kinshasa arts scene

Bandoma moved back to Kinshasa in 2012, and exhibited his work at the Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles (*L'heure des chocs*), then the Institut français (*Mutatis Mutandis*, 2013). His return meant that the Kinshasa arts scene got to discover Steve Bandoma. And what a discovery it was! To quote the name of one of his exhibitions in Cape Town, it was the *contempocalypse*! Bandoma employs a mix of drawings, splashes of ink and collages, making for an incredible aesthetic of explosion or rather implosion, and chaos, often against a backdrop of a clash of civilisations. Faces, limbs, body fragments, statuettes and fetish all fuse together to bring alive superficially wild and incoherent creations, but that are in fact very well thought-out and carefully arranged.

Identity and culture at the heart of Bandoma's work

Bandoma's work does not seek to be specifically African, at least not in its style. It endeavours to be contemporary and universal. However, the themes explored by the artist and the vision developed are a clear reflection of his African identity. Bandoma produces themed series whose titles set the tone: *Lost tribes*, *Enculturation*, *Abolition*, etc. In other words, the relationship with identity, the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the clash of cultures.

Bandoma's aim is serious, but the profound nature of the message does not rule out levity. Humour and mockery are writ large. For instance, when he tackles Africanness, he unequivocally criticizes Western domination and the materialism which accompanies it, albeit with more irony than acrimony. The theme

itself is not original and is often explored by African artists. However, Bandoma's off-beat take on the subject is something unique. The same ironic tone emerges in his interpretation of colonialism. It is impossible not to see in it the trace of derision that the people of DR Congo have cultivated through enduring the crisis. In DR Congo, people know how to address the most serious issues with humour.

Another distinctive feature of Bandoma's work is that the chaos and peculiarity do not rule out a certain amount of harmony. In *Crépuscule* (2013), Bandoma has inserted solely white faces into this stunning Afro, the symbol of black identity during the years of struggle for civil rights. A surprisingly harmonious chaos results from this racial and cultural big bang; in which beauty wins out over deformity. The same originality can be seen in his portrait of Abraham Lincoln (Lincoln's vision, 2014). Despite the excessive number of abnormally large eyes – demonstrating that the white hero of the black population was most certainly a visionary – the choice of colours, the successful inclusion of collages, the position of Lincoln's hat, and finally the tenderness for this great man, give the work as a whole a certain harmony.

Paper – his favourite format

Having tried out all the media during his formative period in South Africa, Bandoma plumped for paper from 2008 onwards. Drawing paper has a clear advantage; namely that it allows the artist to combine drawing, ink splashes, collage and gouache. Bandoma's creativity best expresses itself in this mix and diversity of techniques.

From 2014-15, collage tended to disappear from his work. Why did this happen? "Everyone is starting to do collage", he complained. Bandoma therefore decided to limit his technique and focus on his subject. He kept increasing the size of his works during this period. Large formats enabled him to express all of his energy. Collage did make a return, as we will see in this exhibition, but with parsimony and in a very targeted fashion.

International recognition

Since 2014, the Magnin-A gallery has regularly shown Bandoma's work at art fairs in Europe and the US. In 2015, his paintings were included in the famous *Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko* exhibition at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris. The same year saw Angalia present his works in a solo show at Swab Art Fair in Barcelona. 2016 saw him back in Paris at AKAA on Angalia's stand. In 2017, his works were once again shown by Angalia in Paris (March-April) as part of the Zürcher Africa art fair. At the age of 35, Steve Bandoma is establishing himself as one of the prominent young artists on the African arts scene. It was high time to see him back in DRC, where he had not had a solo show since 2014.

Culture for development

And how do politics fit into all that? As Bandoma said, in an interview with *Le Monde* in 2015 (R. Azimi, 27/08/2015), "an artist is a politician in one way or another. Artists have a message to convey, an ideology to defend." Indeed, what is the purpose of a work on national history, the disappearance of ancestral cultures, if it is not an invitation to reflect on the future of the people of DR Congo? It is no coincidence that Bandoma has resumed his *Lost Tribe* series on several occasions, even though he thought that he had finished with the topic. Bandoma is fascinated by this sea change in the history of Africa, and DR Congo in particular, which has seen the coloniser ride roughshod over the tribal cultures, while taking ownership of their most beautiful symbols: indigenous art. Not only does Bandoma believe in an African pathway to African development, but he also thinks that culture needs to play a pivotal role in it. He has ideas on how to showcase Congolese culture in DR Congo. He wants to play an active role in his country's future, both artistically and politically.