

# JP Mika

Jean-Paul Nsimba Mika was born in Kinshasa in 1980. Mika has a great gift for drawing and started out at the very young age of 13, painting advertising boards to earn a little money, as so many artists have done before him. JP Mika is from a poor family and started his studies while trying to generate income and put money to one side. He finally enrolled at the Kinshasa Academy of Fine Arts in 2005 and graduated in 2007.

## His mentor Chéri Chérin

Chéri Chérin then took him under his wing and gave him the opportunity to travel abroad for the first time to exhibit his work in Bilbao in 2008. He travelled abroad again in 2009. His first works were in keeping with Chéri Chérin's artistic world: narrative depictions of subjects from national and international life and the portrayal of humanized animals. The world's great and good appeared in abundance on his canvases and artworks celebrating Barack Obama burgeoned, halfway between paintings and posters. Animals parade 'dressed up' in true Congolese sapeur style and 'ape' humans in their attitudes and quirks. His strange and even playful depictions of animals amuse and appeal. However, interest fades once the initial surprise has passed. JP Mika realized that an artistic career cannot be based on a borrowed style. He needed to blaze his own trail.

## Simplifying compositions to forcefully communicate the key message

While remaining in keeping with popular art, JP Mika then started to refine his depictions in order to more effectively highlight the subject. He simplified his depictions of world leaders. This switch led to the understated and tender *Nelson Mandela* portrait, showing the South African politician saying goodbye (2011). Previously, his abundant wide-ranging scenes portrayed many subjects, but these new canvases depicted fewer people who seem to be directly speaking to us.

## The vintage feel - Two eras, two fashions

In 2011, he started his Two eras, two fashions series, in which he compared past and present fashions, both with animals and humans. Figures in black and white from the 1960s rub shoulders with contemporary figures in colour. One of these works from 2012 (*Deux temps, deux modes*) led to a t-shirt being designed as part of the 2013 Hannover Festival Theaterformen. The JP MIKA! exhibition organised in Kinshasa by Espace Texaf-Bilembo and Angalia in 2014 includes several works on this theme. The 'head-to-head' between two eras sometimes turns into duality between two cultures. In some cases, it takes a surrealist turn, with paintings in which the same figure is half depicted in their youth and half at their current age

## The portrait in all of its glory

The move towards simplifying compositions led JP Mika to further hone his brushstrokes. He started to apply a more meticulous approach to his work, in the process making his famous brushstrokes more eye-catching. Finally, this process of evolution resulted in JP Mika developing a liking for portraits in 2013 and especially in 2014. A lucky find added the decisive touch. Mika opts for highly colourful backgrounds, using floral print fabrics, which call to mind the wallpapers of yesterday.

These portrayals sometimes have a deliberately old-fashioned feel. They evoke the portrait photographs taken in the 1960s in studios in Kinshasa and Bamako. These portrait photographs are now much sought-after by collectors. JP Mika adds some colour, albeit not without a dash of derision or nostalgia, and even gentleness, as in *Femme extatique* (2014) and *Les amoureux* (2014). Sometimes the pose explicitly calls to mind

the famous Congolese sapeurs. The blend of ancient and modern, the vintage touch in contemporary creation and finally the tender and ever so slightly off-beat feel appeal to collectors.

### **Autoportraits**

Just like Chéri Samba, JP Mika does not hesitate to depict himself or family members in his paintings. He sketches himself uncompromisingly but without any false restraint. After all, he too is an interesting subject, the child of N'Djili who gets the public to bear witness to his dream. The assertive nature of these works contrasts with his calm and reserved personality. Mika's energy is kept inside and is not apparent on the surface. But he is excellent at conveying this inner energy in his works.

Pierre Daubert

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