

Kura Shomali

Kura Shomali was born in Kananga (Kasai, DRC) on 25 May 1979. His family moved to the Limete district of Kinshasa a few years after his birth. The young Kura had a flair for learning. He studied at Massamba school, where he landed a bursary enabling him to go to Kinshasa University to study biochemistry. He then followed his father's advice and started to study medicine (1999).

However, Kura could not see himself becoming Dr. Shomali. He dreamed of becoming an artist. He had always loved drawing, and at every age showed signs of his attraction to art, just like small pebbles scattered along a path: he won a drawing competition at nursery school, and won another drawing competition at primary school (with first prize being a watch!), and shared a passion for making puppets with his brothers during his teenage years. In 2001, art finally won the day: he quit medical school and enrolled at ABA in Kinshasa.

AFTER ABA, THE EZA POSSIBLES AND EUROPE

He graduated in 2003. The same year, along with a handful of friends from the school - Eddy Ekeke, Mega Mingiedi Tunga and Pathy Tshindele - he founded the Eza Possibles Collective. The *Libriste* movement headed by Francis Mampuya was on the decline at that juncture, and in a way the Eza possibles picked up the torch of artistic non-conformism in DR Congo. The collective sought to move art out onto the streets. They focused on installations and performance art. The collective received support from the *Centre culturel français*, directed by Jean-Michel Champault at that time. The group grew, rebuilt itself, and made its way.

In 2004, Kura sold his first works to André Magnin, who was travelling around Africa on behalf of the Jean Pigozzi Foundation for Contemporary African Art. A quick glance at the foundation's website shows that even in those early days, Kura's artistic world had already taken shape: humorousness, affectionate irony, deliberately chaotic treatment, collages, virtually all the aspects which make his artworks stand out were already in place.

In the same year, along with three other young ABA graduates, including Vitshois Mwilambwe and Iviart Izamba, Kura was chosen by the French embassy to study at Strasbourg School of Art and Design (ESAD). This was a fantastic opportunity for a student who had never travelled abroad. Kura tried his hand at everything during the four-year course: videos, silkscreen printing, painting on canvas, wood, metal, etc. However, on his return to Kinshasa in 2008, with his degree in the bag, he returned to his first love: working on drawing paper.

UNBRIDLED CREATION DRIVEN BY MULTIPLE SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Anyone seeking to understand Kura Shomali's work needs to grasp his creative approach, in which spontaneous inspiration dominates his creative choices. It is pointless searching for a central theme or a profound message in his work. The only guiding principle is that there are no principles, as it were. He seizes on anything that comes to mind, without seeking to put things into some kind of order, or charm us with a long persuasive discourse. The subjects go by, without any apparent links between them: a British telephone box, an awards ceremony, a Chinese man wearing the garb of a French Academy member, a street scene in Kinshasa, a matador. But why a matador? A question is the only meaningful response: why not? Kura has the ability or luck to be able to capitalize on each visual, artistic or social experience, and use

it to nourish his creative ability. This is the explanation for the “polyphonic artistic union” that makes up his work, in the words of Jean Kamba.¹

Where does his unbridled inspiration come from? The artist explains in his own words in a Virginie Dupray article published in 2007 in an *Editions de l'œil* paperback devoted to him: “I go along, I take, I pick up, haphazardly, by the shovel load, everything interests me.” “I strike when the iron is hot, and here it is always hot. I glean things from newspapers, local and international stories, I nab, I add, it always works, the climate is always conducive, everything always grows, despite it all.” “I channel hop. I sketch, I draw, I cut, I style, a daily log of this massive outdoor performance, with 10 million extras, who are not even paid for their troubles.”²

Kura’s works tend to be humorous. People find them entertaining at a first glance, and even more so when they concentrate on the details. Depending on the work, the humour is found in the subject, treatment, facial expressions, or depiction. Let’s take a work from 2018, “*Miss Panda*”, as an example. Totally naïve, the girl depicted is so head-over-heels in love with her darling little pandas that she is literally suffocating them with her love. The poor pandas are sticking out their tongues and are suffocating, and maybe they are also dazed by the charms of their mistress. It is amusing, we can surmise that the artist enjoyed going about his work, and it is refreshing; with apologies to those for whom art is too serious a business for humorousness to dominate an artwork. At a time when so many artists are obsessed by the story they feel they have to tell the public in order to be regarded as fully-fledged artists, to the extent of forgetting the sheer pleasure of instinctive creation, Kura Shomali believes in the power of spontaneity. He lets inspiration guide his work. Indeed, this is what is consistent in his artistic approach.

Mockery also plays a part in his drawings, which is hardly surprising in a Kinshasa artist, but there is also a certain amount of tenderness for the depicted characters, which is more original. –Although *Miss Panda* is a real pain and apparently silly; she is, nevertheless, moving. Even his most unpleasant subjects generally fare rather well. Kura manages to make his drawings both cutting, humorous, and tender.

Kura sometimes depicts serious issues, and does so without any affectation, without needlessly overdoing it, and even without excessive harshness. It is clear that this artist is not an activist at heart. He should not be relied upon to lead a crusade. And if he denounces the abuses of those in authority, it will be in passing, among so many other subjects picked up hither and thither, but he will not act as a righter of wrongs, he will not dwell on the subject, he will continue his inoffensive pilfering, and immediately afterwards we will find him drawing a woman languorously draped over a faded sofa.

Just like JP Mika, Kura readily draws inspiration from the work of the major African photographers of the 1950s-60s, the Zairian Jean Depara, and the Malians Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, in order to create highly personal artworks. He does not seek to reinterpret them. They are simply sources of inspiration. Hence his irresistible cowboys of 2011, inspired by the photographs of young people posing dressed as cowboys imitating Buffalo Bill for Jean Depara (1950-60s), or more recently *Basi na Biso* (2017), also inspired by Depara (untitled, undated, featured in the *Beauté Congo* exhibition catalogue).

Even if they naturally digress due to their craftsmanship, Kura’s drawings of Kinshasa are most definitely a part of Congolese popular painting. With *La deuxième vie d'une Peugeot en Afrique* (2016) and *La marche de santé* (2018), Kura depicts what he sees on the streets, and everyone can grasp what he is drawing. Indeed, this is the definition of popular painting coined by Chéri Samba. Once again, it would be pointless to seek out any specific intention. Kura does not really set himself the goal of depicting the different facets of Kinshasa. It is simply that the streets are a first-rate source of inspiration, and the need to draw takes care

¹ *La juxtaposition des sens chez Kura Shomali*, Jean Kamba, The Art Momentum 11/2018, nov. 2018.

² *Kura Shomali – plasticien*, Les Carnets de la création, Ed. de l'œil, 2007

of the rest. Kura is second to none when it comes to capturing and reproducing the ludicrousness of our lives. Hence these snapshots of life in DR Congo, which do not look like much, and could be considered as anecdotal, but, when all is said and done, cover whole lifetimes.

A COLOURFUL PALETTE ON PAPER

Working exclusively on paper, Kura has a predilection for ink, to which he adds gouache, felt tips, and even charcoal. Collage can play a big part in some works, but be totally absent from others. While his works are all recognizable, it is firstly because of his lines, but also the splashes of ink, which are the hallmark of his colourful and turbulent universe. There is a connection between these stunning splashes of ink and the teeming disorder of Kinshasa, which is not a coincidence in this case. Besides, the buzz and disorder of Kinshasa also appear in his work. His drawing paper is never clean and neat. It is very hard to imagine a Kura Shomali drawing on an immaculate piece of paper.

A EUROPEAN CAREER FROM A VERY EARLY STAGE

Having added his works to the Pigozzi collection, which is the gold standard for African contemporary art, André Magnin kept tabs on Kura during his time in Strasbourg. Magnin then became a gallery owner and continued the partnership, becoming the main promoter of his work in the European art market. This is how the London gallery Jack Bell ended up showing Kura's work, notably with a stunning exhibition in 2012, followed by the Saatchi Gallery, another leading showcase, which in turn acquired a series of his artworks.

In 2015, Kura Shomali's art was displayed in the already mythical *Beauté Congo – Congo Kitoko* exhibition at the Fondation Cartier in Paris (July 2015 – January 2016). Angalia regularly shows his work at AKA (Also Known As Africa) in Paris.

As for the Eza possibles collective, it remains active to this day. Such longevity is unparalleled among DR Congo artist collectives.

Pierre Daubert, excerpt from the *Songi songi na Kinshasa* catalogue, 2019