



Opening
8 April 2023

Group exhibition
JOYFUL ART– Toseka !
11 April to 15 June 2023

JOYful ART – Toseka!

Group exhibition

11 April to 15 June 2023

Opening on Saturday 8 April from 5 to 8 pm

In DR Congo, art manages to be funny when the surrounding world inspires disillusionment, bitterness, or anger. This is actually one of the acknowledged characteristics of Congolese art. What are the reasons for it? It is tempting to cite the sociological and psychological aspects linked to the permanent state of crisis experienced by the Congolese people, their precarious yet vibrant lives; vibrant because humour, mockery, and also dance and music, are survival mechanisms. However, DR Congo is not the only crisis-ridden country, and not all countries in difficulty stand out in the same way.

The main source can be found in “popular painting”, defined by Chéri Samba, its leading light, as coming from the people and being understandable for the people. In the 1970s and 1980s, the popular painters of Kinshasa did not travel, had no internet access, and knew next to nothing about global art trends. Self-taught in the true sense of the word, they had no intention other than to reproduce on canvas what they could see around them. This is how they came to portray everyday life in their works, painting street scenes, bar scenes, and so on. And just as in real life, people find humour in the slightest thing, so humour could not be absent from their works. The success of popular painting made it one of the country’s main forms of cultural expression.

The epitome of Kinshasa popular painters of this generation, **Chéri Benga**, has made joyful art his life’s work; in this case, “joyful art” means a comical, funny, ironic, mischievous, cheerful and impish art. Chéri Benga depicts scenes from everyday life with great simplicity: people fighting, swaggering, dancing, people suffering when the power cuts out, people

lacking everything, but keeping their sense of humour intact.

This is how serious topics, and other less serious ones, are depicted with creativity. The COVID pandemic becomes *Pochvid 19* when depicted by Chéri Benga’s paintbrush. He uses mockery to illustrate the economic impact of lockdown. There is also an art to the titles of paintings. An example is *KO debout (Standing knockout)*, looking at the inexhaustible theme of seduction, or *Transport ou malédiction (Transport or affliction)*, giving a charming view of the daily lives of passengers of the packed minibuses, as depicted by **Moke fils**. A leading figure of popular painting, who excels in chronicling national life, **Chéri Chérin** has in turn depicted *sapeurs* (Congolese dandies), politicians, revellers, sex workers, prophets...and in *A la terrasse* reproduces the unique atmosphere of the bars which turn into nightclubs in the evenings and in which dancing makes the vibe red hot.

Congolese popular painting has produced many works in which anthropomorphic animals are depicted. Classics in the genre include *Grand Prix Chéri Benga* and the animal orchestras, in which a merry and unbridled ambience holds sway. In Congolese art, animals often appear when it would be unwise or inopportune to depict humans. Parables are often more powerful than direct portrayal when denouncing abuses of power. These works have more in common with La Fontaine and satire; for instance, see **JP Mika’s** *Le crime du chat*.

While not fitting into the category of popular art, **Amani Bodo** provides his version of a major classic with *Le Grand orchestre des animaux*. A virtuoso version in which it is a delight to immerse oneself in the details. A figurative and symbolic artist, Amani Bodo has carved out a unique niche in Congolese painting, exploring two fields of artistic expression. In the first, he questions the state of Africa and its place in the world, a serious and weighty subject, while in the latter, undoubtedly a breather from the former, his compositions are brimming with humour. Joyful *sapeurs* and comical scenes emerge from

his brushstrokes with apparent ease. But make no mistake: joyful art is not as easy as it looks. It involves know-how, expertise, application, in a word - professionalism! In André Magnin's visionary words, "in Congo, artists do funny things seriously". Indeed, and in this respect, Amani Bodo is an authority. An example is *Artistes en perdition* in which he lampoons the sensitive subject of artists leaving Africa.

Exile is also the theme of the caustic *Nazongi mboka libela*, where we can see the astonishment on the faces of a family whose son has returned, when they thought that he had settled in Europe. A cartoonist who belatedly moved onto painting on canvas, **Papa Mfumu'Eto 1^{er}** has a penchant for tales imbued with witchcraft and mysticism, but has also become renowned for his depictions of scenes from everyday life combined with delightful dialogues.

Joyful art is not the sole preserve of painting. The work of **Kura Shomali**, who uses ink on drawing paper, is often tinged with humour, irony and self-deprecation. The unmatched tone of his works makes us think that this art could only be "made in Kinshasa". Wrongly, obviously, but it does seem to bear a hallmark, and Kura, who studied at Strasbourg Art School but is a profoundly Kinshasa artist, is part of those who make it. We feel that he has fun working with his own figures. In *Miss Panda*, taking note of the widespread craze for pandas, he depicts a thrilled yet naïve girl on a bed of pandas, whose tongues are hanging out under the weight (or maybe the charms) of the young woman.

While popular art has an important place in joyful art, it has fallen out of favour among the young generation of Congolese artists. They respect the success of their elders, just like they respect those who have found the road to success. However, the young artists do not intend to follow in the footsteps of their grandparents' generation. And it must be acknowledged that it is risky to board a train whose journey started such a long time ago. Therefore, there should be no regrets, cycles must come to their natural end, and let's simply hope that the legitimate quest for

modernity and inclusion in world art does not lead Congolese art towards a normalisation in which, as we well know, there is little room for humour. Fabrice Bousteau emphasized recently in *Beaux-Arts Magazine* that the only humour allowed in western art is "cynical, black, and even morbid". "Funny art is undeniably a problem. It is accused of being vulgar and is held in contempt, insomuch as it demystifies the very concept of art."

If art is therefore too serious a matter to be funny, the *Joyful Art* exhibition can proclaim itself to be a real event, without risk and in all seriousness!

**Beaux-Arts Magazine* issue 456, June 2022, editorial.

Toseka!: "Let's have a laugh!" in Lingala.

Artists featured in the exhibition

Chéri BENGA (1957, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Amani BODO (1988, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Chéri CHÉRIN (1955, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

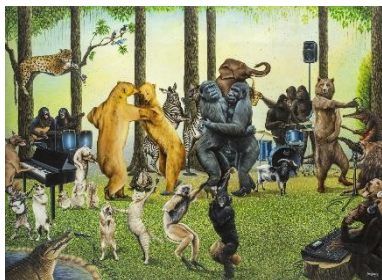
JP MIKA (1980, RD Congo), lives and works between Kinshasa and France.

MOKE FILS (1968, RD Congo), lives and works in France.

PAPA MFUMU'ETO 1^{er} (1963, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

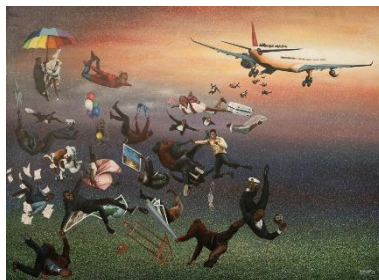
Kura SHOMALI (1979, RD Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Images available



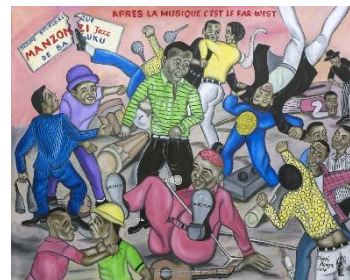
1. Amani Bodo, *Le grand orchestre des animaux* (2017)

Acrylic on canvas, 134 x 185 cm
© PCP - Courtesy A. Bodo & Angalia



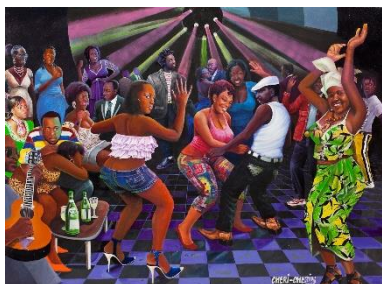
2. Amani Bodo, *Artistes en perdition* (2021)

Acrylic on canvas, 150 x 200 cm
© PCP - Courtesy A. Bodo & Angalia



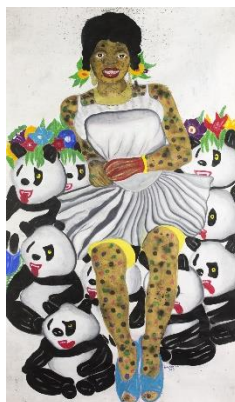
3. Chéri Benga, *Après la musique c'est le Far West* (2017)

Acrylic on canvas, 79 x 98 cm
© PCP - Courtesy C. Benga & Angalia



4. Chéri Chérin, *À la terrasse* (2012)

Acrylic on canvas, 139 x 189 cm
© PCP - Courtesy C. Chérin & Angalia



5. Kura Shomali, *Miss Panda* (2018)

Mixed media on paper, 130 x 130 cm
© PCP - Courtesy K. Shomali & Angalia

Information

Galerie Angalia
10-12 rue des Coutures Saint Gervais
75003 Paris
Ouvret du mardi au samedi
Mar. 12h – 19h
Mer. à sam. 11h – 19h
07 81 72 30 62
galerie-angalia.com

Contacts :

Pierre Daubert (directeur)
daubert@galerie-angalia.com
06 32 10 55 80
Karin Barlet
barlet@galerie-angalia.com
06 13 92 18 72