



EXPOSITION

'CONGO *Passé composé*'

5 FEV - 1 AVRIL 2023

Galerie Angalia 10-12 rue des Coutures Saint Gervais Paris 3e

Angalia Gallery
Opening
4 February 2023

Group show
CONGO / Passé composé
5 February to 1 April 2023

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Private view on Saturday 4 February 17:00 – 20:00

For its first exhibition in Paris, Angalia Gallery has chosen to present a series of works linked to the history of DR Congo. It is not an exhibition about the country's history, but instead focuses on how Congolese artists address their country's history in their work.

The exhibition comprises around 20 works by 10 artists. They were all recently created (2008-2022), apart from a set of photographs from the 1970s.

Congolese artists' relationship with history

On the face of it, and in all likelihood because of popular art's high profile (Moke, Chéri Samba, Chéri Chérin, etc.), Congolese art seems more focused on depicting current events rather than exploring the past. However, this impression is unfounded. Contemporary artists – particularly the most prominent ones – frequently draw on their country's history, even if they rarely make it the main subject of their work. Some tackle the country's history on an ad-hoc basis, for instance in a series, while others use it as the background for art that draws on the past, without directly representing it.

NB: Names in italics refer to artists not included in the exhibition.

The **pre-colonial era** has been depicted recently by *Sammy Baloji* and *Eddy Kamuanga*. The former explores relationships between the Kongo communities, the Portuguese traders and the Vatican, and showcases pre-colonial textiles. The latter, in his characteristic style initially developed in

tribute to the Mangbetu people, explores the heritage of the Kingdom of Kongo.

Among the artists who draw inspiration from the pre-colonial past, without their works explicitly dealing with this topic, there is also *Hilary Balu*, who regularly researches the spiritual dimension of pre-colonial society, particularly religious objects.

Addressing the **colonial period** inevitably means that we are confronted with violence – in the broadest sense of the term – including the domination, humiliation and denial of a culture. In the grand rotunda of the Tervuren Africa Museum, a large sculpture by *Aimé Mpane* evokes the decapitation of Chief Lusinga, whose skull was brought back to Brussels as a trophy, in what will remain as the prelude to the reign of brutality during the period of the Congo Free State.

Among the young generation, two artists explore the dark times under the rule of King Leopold II (at the turn of the 19th-20th century), symbolised by the widespread violence inflicted on the country's population, particularly in the context of rubber collection. Catheris Mondombo, who works on tarpaulins, depicts the crimes openly in a large format. He symbolically repairs the victims using stitching. The young painter, Théo Mwamba, aged 25, displays the same compassionate and humanist approach. In both cases, an exploration of the past is part of an introspective approach. And in fact, their treatment of history at times focuses more on freeing the victim – or to be precise, their descendants – than denouncing the perpetrator.

In contrast, Steve Bandoma does not seek to document the colonial period. A supporter of restitution, he underlines the modern-day impact of the obliteration of the cultures and faiths of his country during the colonial era. Colonialism is the basis for his Africanist advocacy expressed in his work by symbolic representations.

Sammy Baloji, an expert in exploring historical archives, shows colonial domination in

concrete terms, where necessary using details, in order to more effectively convey the inhumanity of the colonial ethos. In his work, which, in his words, involves “reversing the erasure of history”, he uses a process of collecting data and visual resources. For example, images relating to the fly collection quotas imposed on the population of Lubumbashi (Elisabethville) in the 1950s (*Essay on Urban Planning*, 2013).

Apart from Baloji’s historical-artistic works, there are few works that depict life in the Belgian Congo in the post-World War II period. For instance, there are no works on the “*Force Publique*” military and police force or the “*évolués*” (Africans educated according to European principles) in the 1950s. Incidentally, people are practically absent from the works of the painters from the modern era, notably the artists from Le Hangar studio, whose works were dominated by nature.

The **post-colonial era** is evoked in three main forms.

The photographer Gosette Lubondo tackles the era from the viewpoint of memory. Born in 1993, i.e., in the years when the shift took place between Zaire and modern-day DR Congo, she tackles history from the angle of Congolese built heritage. She strolls through the ruins of abandoned national infrastructure, which leads to her revisiting her country’s history. However, in actual fact, her work focuses more on the passage of time and on memory than on history in the strictest sense of the term.

Nostalgia is the other driving force behind post-colonial historical exploration, and was one of *JP Mika’s* favourite themes, for example, during his narrative figure painting period. A nostalgia for the years of independence, an era of relative prosperity, a time when Zaire astounded the world with the 1974 Rumble in the Jungle, and finally nostalgia for the years of peace.

There has been no peace for over 25 years, namely since the major regional turmoil of the 1990s, and this lost peace is one of the

themes explored by the sculptor Freddy Tsimba, whose sculptures are made from cartridge cases and are incredibly powerful. Although his works are first and foremost dedicated to the victims of the ongoing dirty war in the East of the country; they are universal in scope.

The exhibition

The exhibition shows how these Congolese artists depict the country’s history in their work. It does not seek to portray all the periods in the country’s history, and they are not covered. While most of the works evoke specific events, some instead portray the climate of a period.

The exhibition opens with an evocation of colonisation. Firstly, with incisive works by Steve Bandoma, striking interpretations of the clash of civilisations that occurred when Europe took possession of Africa in the 19th century, and then with works by Théo Mwamba. Théo pays tribute to the victims of the Congo Free State, making use of historical photos that form the background of his works. The series is dominated by the chilling figurehead of King Leopold II. Catheris Mondombo looks at the same topic but from a different angle, with a large format work, *Barbarie* (2021), a harrowing evocation of the mutilation of the Congolese people by colonial representatives. A second work by Catheris alludes to the construction of the railway (*Congo-Océan*, 2021).

Chéri Benga portrays Patrice Lumumba, the iconic key figure of Congolese independence (*Lumumba*, 2011).

The post-independence years are those of the “good old days” for Chéri Chérin, whose black and white work stands alongside photos by Gaston Diakota dating back to the 1970s. The influence of Western fashion can be seen; this would subsequently be attacked by President Mobutu in his quest for “authenticity”.

The 1970s were a time of relative national prosperity. It was a decade of Zairean self-

assertion, and the media high-water mark of the Mobutu years with the legendary Ali-Foreman boxing match in 1974 in Kinshasa, to which Francis Mampuya devotes an off-beat work in his usual semi-abstract fashion (*Je reviens au pays de Lumumba*, 2023). However, the future was to prove much less rosy. *Le dictateur*, a Francis Mampuya work, symbolises the Commander in Chief-President's missed opportunity with the democratic spring in the early 1990s. The country sunk into crisis.

Gosette Lubondo explores the remains of this past: abandoned rail infrastructure, a deserted prestigious school, and in Gbadolite, President Mobutu's former palace in ruins, including the marble mausoleum erected in memory of his first wife, Marie-Antoinette (*Requiem pour la terre de lait*, 2022).

Freddy Tsimba's smashed faces (*Les rescapés* series), made from melted cartridge cases, lead us into the territory of regional geopolitics, which have extended and worsened the national crisis of the 1990s by transforming the East of the country into a no-go area. A female bust in chains (*Silhouette effacée n°2099*, 2015) notably symbolises the violence perpetrated against women. A Kura Shomali work (*Lembele*, 2019) depicts a defeated soldier, and with *Un ange déchu* Francis Mampuya expresses the Congolese people's disillusion with the international community's underwhelming action.

Artists featured in the exhibition

Steve BANDOMA (1981, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

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

Chéri CHERIN (1955, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Gaston DIAKOTA (1950, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Gosette LUBONDO (1993, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Francis MAMPUYA (1967, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Catheris MONDOMBO (1992, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Théo MWAMBA (1997, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

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

Freddy TSIMBA (1967, DR Congo), lives and works in Kinshasa.

Illustration page 1

Théo Mwamba, *Elati biso*, 2021

Théo Mwamba, 25, has recently graduated from ABA (School of Fine Arts). He is one of the young Congolese artists supported by the [Ébalé](#) impact investment fund. This painting, which evokes the dark times in the history of the Belgian Congo, is part of one of his first two series.

Photos available



1. Steve Bandoma, *Sans titre*, 2015, mixed technique on paper, 150 x 100 cm
© PCP - Courtesy Angalia & the artist



4. Francis Mampuya, *Le dictateur*, 2007, oil on canvas, 157 x 157 cm
© PCP - Courtesy Angalia & the artist



2. Chéri Chérin, *Le bon vieux temps*, 2022, acrylic on canvas, 117 x 187 cm
© PCP - Courtesy Angalia & the artist



3. Gosette Lubondo, *Imaginary Trip II #1*, 2018, inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag 308 g paper, 50 x 75 cm
© Gosette Lubondo - Courtesy Angalia & the artist



5. Théo Mwamba, *Elati biso*, 2021, print and acrylic on canvas, 130 x 130 cm - © PCP - Courtesy Angalia & the artist

Contact information

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Tuesday. 12:00 am – 7:00 pm
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