

Press release

Barthélémy Togu

The missing part

On show from 12th January to 4th March 2023

Nosbaum Reding | Bruxelles



Barthélémy Togu, *Porte du bonheur*, 2022, ink on canvas, 200 x 200 cm. Photo : © Villa Merkel

Press release

Entitled «The missing part», the exhibition presented by Nosbaum Reding follows on from the retrospective devoted to Barthélémy Toguo by the Villa Merkel in Esslingen (Germany) from August to October 2022. It brings together a group of works that illustrates the polymorphic approach of the artist and acknowledges the primordial place he occupies both within African art and on the international scene.

For nearly thirty years, Toguo has demonstrated an exemplary humanist commitment, establishing himself as the spokesperson for an African identity that claims its independence from the Western world. A fighter from the outset to ensure that African art is not taken hostage, he has never wavered in his quasi-militant activity to promote it throughout the world, while at the same time ensuring that Africans in the diaspora who have skills in all creative pursuits pass them on to their fellow Africans.

To this end and with his own funds, Barthélémy Toguo has created an astonishing complex in Bandjoun Station, Cameroon, consisting of a museum, a collection and residences for artists and intellectuals, coupled with a significant agricultural activity. Exhibitions, meetings, debates and educational projects are all part of the programme to raise awareness and help Africans take charge of their own future. Buoyed by the inertia of the Cameroonian state to engage in all forms of cultural action, the artist decided to launch a new project to build a contemporary art museum in Yaounde that was also a place for symposiums and theoretical reflection on creativity, thereby combining all disciplines.

The title of his exhibition - «The missing part» - refers to the idea of that something which has been forgotten or which has been marginalized by the passage of time but is nevertheless necessary for any creative intention. A missing part that must be recalled, reactivated, brought back to oneself in order to nourish the spirit and better be able to share with the other.

Philippe Piguet,
Art Critic.

Biography

Barthélémy Toguo was born in Mbalmayo in Cameroon in 1967. Between 1989 and 1993 he studied art, first at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan then in Grenoble, and finally at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf where notable encounters included Tony Cragg, Jannis Kounellis and Konrad Klapheck. Although he stayed in Europe and became a French citizen, Barthélémy Toguo remained profoundly attached to Cameroon, and he regularly returns to the country. That is where he created Bandjoun Station, a foundation inaugurated in 2013 with the aim of hosting artists and academics from around the world in residential workshops, to develop propositions in harmony with the local population. This is how he talks about it: “My idea with Bandjoun Station was to combine classic African art and global contemporary art, to exhibit these works in the same space, without ghettoization or a hierarchy of values. [...] That way Bandjoun Station will become a crossroads, a point of contact between classic and contemporary art.” This “laboratory without borders” exhibits a permanent collection of contemporary works gathered by the artist thanks to exchanges with his peers and collectors. He also develops agricultural projects there, in a spirit of healthy and sustainable development. Since the end of the 1990s, his works have been noticed by many critics and curators who have invited him to participate in major events: Hans Ulrich Obrist in 1999 for Migrateurs (ARC, Paris), Jean-Hubert Martin in 2000 for Partage d'exotismes (Biennale de Lyon), Pierre Restany in 2001 for Political Ecology (White Box, New York), and Okwui Enwezor in 2015 for the Venice Biennial, All the World's Future. In 2016, Barthélémy Toguo was one of four artists nominated for the Prix Marcel Duchamp and for this occasion he presented the installation Vaincre le virus! at the Centre Pompidou. The works of Barthélémy Toguo are exhibited in many collections including those of the Musée National d'Art Moderne (Paris), the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (Paris), the Museum of Modern Art (New-York), the Museum of Contemporary Art (Miami), the Perez Art Museum (Miami), the Fondation Louis Vuitton pour la création (Paris), the Collection Agnès b (Paris), and Bandjoun Station (Bandjoun). A recent commission was placed with the artist for four over-doors at the Rodin Museum (Paris).

Interview with the artist

Whatever medium you work in - drawing, painting, ceramics, sculpture, etc. - the human figure is omnipresent in your art. What meaning should we attribute to this recurrence?

It is a universal figure that does not belong to any race - neither yellow, nor red, nor black, nor white. It has no nationality or gender. It is a figure, the archetype of the human body. It is symbolic of an affected state of the human being – at times suffering, at times fulfilled, at others worried, or rebellious.

They are often fragments of the body: hands, heads, arms... What does this relate to?

It all depends on what I want to express, or what is going through my mind at the very moment I am working. There is no preamble, I am an artist who operates empirically. Sometimes the figure even takes on a hybrid form, half human, half animal.

Where do these figures come from? From what cultural background?

They are not linked to any particular culture. These figures belong to me, fully. They are my creations. They come from my imagination, from a mythology that is very personal to me. They are phantasmatic figures to whom I give all sorts of attributes. One of them makes a flower grow out of its mouth while another, lying on the ground, sees the ends of its hands and feet transformed into branches: they do not refer to any pre-existing model.

What motivates you in such creations?

The celebration of the living. For me, to celebrate is to honour. These drawings are about honouring life. The hands are about solidarity. It is the symbol of what can give and receive at the same time.

What nourishes your universe?

It is the human being in its most general sense. The one I see during all my travels in the many trips I make for my work. I am a very observant person. I read newspapers, I watch TV, I am constantly informed about the world. My imagination is constantly fed by what I experience and what I see on a daily basis. As I am always on the move - one day in Sao Paulo, the next in Lisbon, the day after that in Asia - I glean from here and there everything that surrounds me. I am a bulimic of the world. At the very beginning of my life as an artist, I lived for four years in Abidjan, four years in Grenoble, two years in Düsseldorf, then two years in Paris. Today, I come and go between the capital and Cameroon.

And all this comes out in your work in one way or another...

Absolutely, but never on an anecdotal level; my images never seek to illustrate a particular situation that I have experienced, but what I feel. I'm not an artist who fills sketchbooks with the different situations he goes through, instead I gather all sorts of perceptions and sensations deep inside me. At work, I am governed by a kind of commemorative sensibility.

The fact remains that there is always an origin to everything. How did the idea of the wooden stamps you use to print words and sayings that are like manifestos come about, for example?

Originally, it was the memory of a bus I had seen that displayed slogans written by young Africans as a way of protesting. I write words that refer to stories of suffering and constraint as well as social facts. They are indeed manifest works, political in nature.

In the way you have conceived certain works, it is possible to see various and varied installations where the printed words appear as cries. What is the function of the artist for you? If not, what role do you consider yourself to have as an artist?

The role I want to play through my work is to accompany people who are going through difficult times - if need be, to cry with them about their difficulties, like the mourners of old. Exile, migration, the fraudulent circulation of trade, North-South inequalities, epidemics and pandemics, these are all issues that I have tackled because I keep coming across them, living them, experiencing them as I travel. It is impossible for me not to react. I have always subscribed to the thinking of Albert Camus who proclaimed the need to go towards those who are in difficulties, to help them do something that will help them get out of their situation. It is a simple question of humanity.

Information about Nosbaum Reding

Véronique Nosbaum and Alex Reding founded their contemporary art gallery in Luxembourg in 2001. Initially named Alimentation générale, to evoke its antecedence as a grocery shop in the station district, it was one of the most popular places for the young Luxembourg scene. Its concept oscillating between project room and art gallery quickly brought together the strongest artists of the current contemporary market. Their very first exhibition was no less than a solo show by Tina Gillen.

In 2006, the gallery moved to the place du marché aux poissons and took its definitive name and form: the Nosbaum Reding Gallery. At this point the gallery develops and establishes itself on the international market: Liste Basel, FIAC, Art Brussels, Art Cologne, Art Geneva, Arco ... Alex Reding and Véronique Nosbaum continue to support the artists tirelessly in their international programme and in the process forge the image of a dynamic Luxembourg art scene.

In 2014, a second space called Projects was opened. Its aim is to support young Luxembourg and border artists by offering them a space alongside established artists from the programme such as Barthélémy Toguo, Peter Zimmermann, Su-Mei Tse, Stephan Balkenhol, Aline Bouvy, Damien Deroubaix, Tina Gillen and Manuel Ocampo.

Buoyed by its international success and the confidence of its artists and collectors in September 2021 Nosbaum Reding opened a second branch in Brussels at 60, rue de la Concorde in the trendy Ixelles area. Only a few steps away the Baronian, LMNO, Stems galleries and the Charles Riva collection the programme is designed to reflect the values of its parent gallery. Nosbaum Reding's priorities have always been and remain the simultaneous support of young talent alongside the stars it has made and the stars it has attracted in its twenty year long journey through the contemporary art world.

Practical information about the exhibition

Opening: Thursday 12th of January 2023 at 6 pm, in the presence of the artist.

Exhibition date: From 12th of January to 4th of March 2023.

Location: Nosbaum Reding gallery (Brussels), rue de la Concorde n°60A, 1050 Ixelles (Brussels).

Opening hours : Wednesday to Saturday, from 11 am to 6 pm.

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