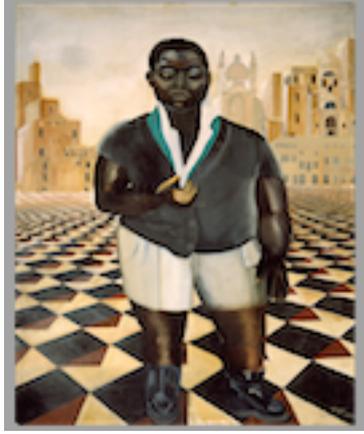


Fatal Mirrors **Miroirs Mortels**



Fatal Mirrors begins with “The Venetian Boy” of 1976. This was my first canvass on which suddenly a black man appeared. An imaginary portrait of a young Congolese who studied with me at the Ecole des Arts Décoratifs, rue d’Ulm, in Paris. This picture immediately raised many questions and much perplexity. During the 1970s, I was made to understand that it would be simply impossible to exhibit and to sell paintings of Blacks.

Representing the Black body has always been a problem. I linked this fact to their often violent history. **The Boxer’s Night**, a portrait of Battling Siki, the first African heavy weight world boxing champion against Georges Carpentier in Paris in 1922, assassinated in New York in 1925, opened a long period of 27 years of committed work. This series of 15 paintings, begun in 1985, traces the lives of Black boxers, often involving difficult political struggles in England, in the United States and even in France where Battling Siki, alias Louis Mbarick Fall, was a veteran of World War I.

He said: “**Many journalists wrote that my style came from the jungle, that I was a chimpanzee who had been taught to wear gloves. Such comments hurt me. I have always lived in large cities. I never saw the jungle**”. He was born in the capital of French West Africa, Saint-Louis, Senegal, in 1897.

I worked on representing these Black bodies, their strength forced into heroism; on stereotypes manufactured for domination, on the fluid movement and the enclosed space of the ring (a microcosm of the

circus), the sham face to face and confrontation. And “*Panama Al Brown*”, wrote his friend, Jean Cocteau, “*is like lightening, like luck, like anger, like hail, like the snake, like epidemics*”; another boxer said of himself: “*my right hits like armoured bullets, I keep it for wild beasts!*”.

My painting is usually built around a character, registered in an “Italian Renaissance” apparatus and often situated on flagstones – three elements constituting a simultaneous cut-out of time and space. I am particularly interested in boxers in the limited space of the ring, like a stage theatre, and in their evolution circumscribed in the heart of this space, to unite the three dimensions of tragedy. Unity of time, place and action, that enable me, in my parallel universe, to discover the eternity of the moment, essential quest of my research.

This series, and those that will follow, disclose or register histories and some tragedies:

. The series “***Cruel Babies***” & ***Poung Zulus***” link childhood violence in *Apartheid* South Africa.

“***The end of a primitive***”, of the “other” sacrificed in a murderous fury, of once again a mirror game, and of the drama of an eternal double constraint...

. “***A Season in Southern Sudan***” recalls the genocide of the Sudanese Black peoples, where bodies are emasculated, tortured and mutilated ever since the millenary *Trans-Saharan slave trade up to the ethnic cleansings* of the 20th century.

. “***No Springtime for Geronimo***” links the Amerindian genocide to the Sudanese war of extermination.

. “***Strange Fruit for John Garang***” recalls the lynchings and anti-slavery struggles, still current today in Mauritania (where slavery was abolished three times since the 1980s) and in the Sudan. It is also a reminder of Billie Holiday’s song. John Garang fought for 20 years against the Khartoum dictatorship. He died three weeks after his Vice-Presidential election (Southern Sudan) providing this series with a tragic warning.

. “***Why Die under a Star-filled Sky?***” evokes the civilian bombings in the Darfur, but also in the Blue Nile and in Southern Kordofan, still today.

. “***Fatal Mirrors***” denounces the lapidation of women against a background of archaism.

Finally, the exhibition “***Sanctuaries, Cemeteries***”, is a homage to the hundreds of thousands of young African men who, deported by the trans-

saharan slave trade, died during that inhuman crossing of the Libyan desert, on the *Teggery Road*. There, where the Black body disappeared. Those who were still alive at the end of the journey, became eunuchs for Middle East harems. And Samuel Cotton wrote in 1998, in *The Silent Terror. A Voyage through Contemporary African Slavery*: “*This road was strewn, marked out with so many human bones that a traveler, even unfamiliar with this desert region, could nearly have found his way thanks to them...*”.

Ultimately, this research aims at setting up a sanctuary, in this Teggery desert, so as to give one day a grave to those dead, never buried, totally erased and forgotten by History.

These *Fatal Mirrors* close with *People of Mixed Blood in Cities*, a walk begun in 2005 that, through photography, family stories, canvasses, videos and exhibitions, concerns the round trips, the presence and the *invisibility* of those of Mixed blood in the megalopolises of the West or of Africa.

Cruel Babies, Fighters, The Venetian Dream, put on stage, so to speak, at different periods, people with serene or structured, confused or fragmented destinies, who always question their bodies. It confronts colour by playing with esthetic canons, by sounding inner lives and those “*Black, Brown or Beige*” souls composed by Duke Ellington in 1958 for Mahalia Jackson.

Thank you for your attention and my thanks to the organizers who invited me to share this summary of my research with you.

Diagne Chanel

Paris, janvier 2013, Conférence *Black Portraiture[s]*

