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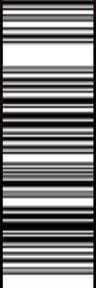
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RAPHAËL BARONTINI: COLOURING OUTSIDE THE LINES

Race, place, power, and prejudice. The work of French artist Raphaël Barontini deals with some fundamental questions. And he is doing it on his terms, uninhibited by any of the constraints restricting contemporary political discourse. More gentle than insolent, the graceful handling of his subject matter makes him one of the few artists of colour confounding France's defiantly peculiar embrace of race.

Portrait of Raphael Barontini, photo by Nolis Anderson. Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim





Raphaël Barontini, Cape saint Maurice et le dragon

“When it comes to race, the French don’t like to engage with the topic, and the art world in particular, exists in a sort of bubble. It can survive with little connection to other global trends and movements. There is certainly the start of something which is exciting – particularly amongst younger artists of immigrant parents. But when I was a student, there wasn’t a lot happening, most likely because the schools were run by people who had never been part of a mixed or coloured reality.”

Indeed, the very doctrine of what it even means to be French asserts that its citizens are ‘French’ over any other cultural or ethnic identity. It is illegal to collect data on race in the census or for other official purposes. You aren’t Black, you are French; you aren’t of Caribbean descent, you are French. In France, universalism is a core value of the republic and asserts that all citizens share the same universal rights regardless of racial or religious groupings.

It is a noble idea, but as rage mounts around the world over systemic racism, and the rampant racial discrimination in more diverse societies is thrust into the spotlight, universalism is proving to be untenable, and in some cases actually dangerous. Possibly fuelling France’s stance on this issue is a deep-rooted desire to distance itself from certain American values. There is also the worry that to focus on diversity and what that means for non-White people living in France, might well result in the further fragmentation of an already fragile society.

Yet still, buoyed by the global spread of so many grass-roots initiatives, France is making important strides, which partially stems from it simply being aware of the injustice. President Macron recently stated that if you are a person of colour, you are 20 times more likely to be subject-

ed to a stop-and-search by the police. These sorts of announcements spark a crucial conversation that stretches beyond any colour-blind ideologies. It should also be noted that Paris always ranks in the top 10 of the most culturally diverse cities in the world. What makes this even more poignant is that it maintains that ranking when the main language of communication between people of different nationalities is not English.

The journey via public transport from central Paris to the northern commune of Saint-Denis is telling. Cafés give way to prefab architecture housing low-rent commercial tenants. The little green parks curving around pretty boulevards in the Paris *intramurs* have disappeared. Saint-Denis is racially diverse and clearly poor, with headscarves dominating the streetscape. This area was ravaged by Covid-19. The day I arrived happened to be the first day that tight restrictions were lifted, so people were edging back to a public life. The queue for the bus in the sweltering heat was fifteen people deep.

A lot of artists and designers have moved into studio spaces in Saint-Denis – its proximity to Paris and the comparatively cheap cost of rent make it a favoured option for creatives. But Barontini hasn’t chosen it in order to benefit from those things. Nor for the football games or concerts at the huge Stade de France. He was born here in 1984 into a mixed-race, lower middle-class family. Together with his older sister, he grew up in a public housing block surrounded by other immigrant neighbours. And here he has stayed.

Although his tight-knit family struggled financially, Barontini’s parents were open-minded. His father, a teacher, loved music; his mother was an avid literary buff. “So it was definitely a different

childhood than that of my school friends,” he says. “At home we listened to jazz and hip-hop, and read books by French-Caribbean thinkers. They took me to museums in the city, and also took my poorer friends to museums. I was encouraged to be politically engaged – we went to rallies, read pamphlets and spent time with my mother’s family in the Caribbean, which is where I learned about slavery. It was there that my cultural identity was born.”

“It’s a bit tricky for me to label my identity,” says Barontini – who has roots in Réunion Island, the Caribbean, Italy, and Paris. “My skin is lighter because my dad is fair, but I have Black blood. Culturally-speaking, my blackness dominates. It’s complicated and probably explains why my artistic references are so mixed.”

And certainly no other kids from Saint-Denis earned a place at the coveted Beaux-Arts de Paris. For a kid like Raphaël, to attend art school in France was a rarity. “Schools might be free, but it’s hard and the associated costs make it very expensive.”

Once there, what Barontini confronted was tough. “Nobody understood my references,” he says. “I found people very closed-minded, and they were 98% White. I think I expected to encounter a more progressive political conversation, but it was all very conservative.”

It wasn’t until the Erasmus University exchange programme landed him at Hunter College in New York that things started to make more sense for Barontini. “There I discovered a lot of African-American artists – big, vocal, and celebrated in the States,” he says. “I felt like I finally found a way of thinking similar to my own. Artists like Kerry James Marshall, Romare Bearden, and Sam Gilliam were inspirational and became major influences, but

Raphaël Barontini

in France, nobody had ever heard of any of them.”

After graduating in 2009, it took Barontini a further decade to devote all his time to art. He also started to read more. Through a new friend, Julia Wright, he became better acquainted with the writings of her father, Richard Wright, and of social activists like Frederick Douglass, Angela Davis, Kathleen Cleaver, the Black Panthers, James Baldwin, and Maya Angelou. He became serious about how to reposition the representation of Black bodies in art.

He also upped his political proclivities, becoming president of a French group committed to abolishing the death penalty globally, and a solidarity movement to fight for the release of renowned Pennsylvanian death-row inmate Mumia Abu-Jamal. Claims that the case was tainted by racial bias and prosecutorial misconduct were eventually successful. Abu-Jamal was removed from death-row and entered the general prison population.

It was at a protest march contesting Abu-Jamal’s retrial that Barontini spotted an African-American woman who had randomly joined the procession. “My friend is obsessed with American actors and he thought he recognized her. I said no way, it is not possible, but it turned out he was right – it was Marpessa Dawn, the actress from *Orpheus Black*, a film that really affected me and my thinking.”

Barontini’s first big break came in 2020, with a commission from the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia. “The museum was opening up their archives of the abolitionist, writer, and statesman Frederick Douglass, to coincide with a new film about his life, by Isaac Julien,” Barontini informs. “They asked me to create some work for this.”

At the exhibition, a student took issue with one of Barontini’s pieces that depicted a Black man with typically racist and exaggerated attributes. “She asked me why I would do that,” he says, “why I had used an image of a man looking like a monkey. And I told her it was because this is how Blacks were represented, and I will not let that representation be forgotten. I’m about rewriting the conclusion, but that it existed is still part of reality. Even the actual wall of the museum had etchings of slaves working on cotton plantations. To deny this truth is ridiculous. It happened.”

“It is also about wanting to be part of a historical continuum,” he continues. “It’s only by including what has already been said that I feel I can question certain parts of our contemporary history. Plus, I don’t ever want to be constrained or to work with any constraints. I take my freedom as an artist very seriously. So I will use images of Louis XIV, who was also involved in the slave-trade, but I will always make that decision for a reason.”

On the day of my studio visit to Saint-Denis, Barontini had just returned from a seven-month stint at the LVMH Métiers d’Art ateliers in Singapore, working with leather. There and throughout much of the 2020 lockdown, he mastered a complicated system of tanning crocodile skins to produce 30 unique pieces. He worked under the guidance of LVMH masters and members of the Koh family, the original owners of the tannery who for decades provided skins to luxury brands.

One of the stand-out pieces – a saddle – is included in the inaugural exhibition that will open the new Paris chapter of the Mariane Ibrahim gallery in Paris this September. For this work, he looked at how crocodiles have been incorporated in mystical paintings from the Middle-

Ages to the Renaissance, focusing on how they have always been of symbolic and ceremonial importance. “Saint George, Saint Morris, Saint Michel have all been depicted together with these creatures, by artists like Raphaël and Carpaccio,” he says. “I incorporated a lot of Egyptian antique references, mixed with afro-futurist imagery. It’s also a kind of subversive celebration, taking a skin that has been in storage for ten years and turning it into art.”

This crocodile art is a direct extension of Barontini’s earlier work and his ongoing commitment to historical inversions. So while his core training is in classical painting, he chooses to layer a literal and figurative texture that sabotages the certainty of the Western canon to delicious effect.

His characters usually assume the familiar power poses of successful Occidental figures, but he then beheads them to insert the faces of heroic black revolutionaries and resistance fighters from the Caribbean. Classical codes are twisted, fantasy is doled-out, and interest is piqued as the under-represented are launched into focus – and rather than appearing downbeat or aggressive, they assume – thanks to the technique of collage – the poise and stance of the formerly celebrated.

In this way, Barontini is inventing a new narrative and using unexpected mediums – from canvas, curtains, capes, and prints, to textiles, found imagery, silk screens, digital prints, photography, banners, and flags. The reinventions celebrate new heroes while daring to acknowledge that the hero is anyway only an assemblage of forces. There is no such thing as singular male brilliance. He is constantly reminding his audience that assumed histories are little more than edited versions of reality, and in art, these



Raphael Barontini
Pégase I

are often manipulated to achieve a smooth aesthetic. This editing, he is saying, is the ultimate Svengali.

“I am interested in how power is represented in Europe,” Barontini asserts. “I do this by using references from the Caribbean and Africa to show that, at minimum, the dominant narrative found in art history can be challenged. That it *should* be challenged. And that, at least in France, this is not yet happening enough.”

In his mashup, one can get bogged down trying to understand and pinpoint the message. But it doesn't really matter. Ceremonial horses, Napoleon Bonaparte, Haitian revolutionary Dutty Boukman, François-Dominique Toussaint Louverture, magical deities, Sun Ra, and a Voodoo priest are all recurring characters. The range spans from real to fantasy – mix 'n match. Fragments from ancient Roman statuary, ritualistic masks, Nigerian statues, ethnographic photographs, street pageants, military parades, and carnivals are overlaid. Barontini calls his process and his belief ‘hybridity’ – a borrowing of ways and means from everywhere to collate a reinterpretation that forces viewers out of their conventional perceptions.

In some ways it's the same sort of appropriation that is mostly frowned upon these days. But Barontini stays bold. “I don't like closed doors,” he says, “closed doors lead to closed results.”

“It's really different to cultural appropriation, which I think is solely about selling things and making more money in disciplines like music videos and fashion. That is not the same, it is not genuine thinking.” He also points out that he grew up in a mixed-race environment with roots in the West Indies, itself having a hugely diverse population with ties to many dif-

ferent regions. “In Guadalupe, you have native people who are Indian-American, and descendants of Black slaves who are from different tribes across Africa. Then there are the Europeans – British, French, and Spanish. This particular blend gave rise to a hybrid culture of food, language, music, and religion. My cultural identity came from this mixed approach, so I have continued to give space and visibility to different cultures with an intention to correct a wrong.”

And significantly, Barontini's visual language is coherent – none of his combinations feel random or meaningless; with all their gravity, they still manage to appear slick, stylish and fashionable, with an exciting physicality. It appeals to the generation he is confronting, seduces the generation he is a part of, all the while elevating formerly enslaved humans to hold fast to their African identity without compromise and despite the violence of Western colonialism. Everyone is included – his portraits look back at their audience with fiercely penetrating eyes – not with anger, but with a deep and thoughtful knowing that nobody dares deny.

Barontini already has a solid American following, thanks to the sold-out show *The Night of the Purple Moon*, held earlier this year at the Mariane Ibrahim gallery in Chicago. The exhibition opened with a soundscape by his long-term collaborator Mike Ladd, who also composed a piece for the more recent LVMH exhibition *Soukhos*, held in Paris at the Studio des Acacias.

Barontini is thrilled to now be paired with Mariane Ibrahim, his sole gallerist – who this September opens her second space in Paris, following on from a successful Chicago venture. “She had been based in the US, where I felt my potential collectors were,” he says. “She is Black, and we share exactly the

same references in books and culture. She has lived the reality I am working with and connects with the topics I incorporate. And she shares the same sense of urgency.”

“I believe Mariane is going to change something in Paris,” Barontini concludes. “Nobody else is doing this, and I think it is going to be huge.”

Indeed, the coupling does seem set to push the Paris art scene to a place it has been reluctant to enter; a place where art boasts freedom, creativity and pride for the hitherto underrepresented.

It's all part of the broader and forthcoming revolution. <

Barontini has exhibited work in galleries and institutions globally, including MAC VAL Museum, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, The Pill, New Art Exchange Museum, and the SCAD Museum of Art. He has also participated in international biennales in Bamako, Casablanca, Lima, and Thessaloniki. His next solo show will open in the new Mariane Ibrahim gallery in Paris this September.

Raphaël Barontini, *Black Orpheus*, 2020, courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim

