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The Ivorian Joachim Kagnedjatou Silue, Western artist.

I met Joachim Kagnedjatou Silue for an edition of “Arte Fiera” in Bologna that took place some years ago. The briefness of our first meeting, arranged or rather strongly recommended by a mutual friend, the artist Monalisa Tina, didn't prevent me to catch the extroverted and somehow electrifying personality of the Ivorian artist, today forty-two. A generous and engaging man already at that time, I felt his work was inspired by enthusiasm and expectations likewise all young people who choose to follow the path of contemporary Visual Art, especially as he was channeled towards the full maturity of his production.

I had a second opportunity for deepening the critic-artistic *liaison* in 2012 with Silue's participation to the permanent exhibition project "Sculpture Symposium" for MAP (Mediterranean Museum of Present Art), curated by who is writing. His work of kept down size arranged in the museum, *Untitled*, modeled in 2009 with raw clay, wire and white sheets of paper bound, is inspired by the shape of a tropical calabash, the "Lagenari" variety, which in addition to being food it has a woody skin used as a case or as a musical instrument. To this last one refers the shape of a long neck of the work, as a means of spreading the oral tradition of myths, legends and rituals from Africa, then similarly replicated in the next installation *Kora* (2012), which reaffirms the link between material, shape and traditional themes . In the strict comparison between oral tradition and written culture symbolically portrayed by books with white pages, the calabash-shape-instrument encourages to assimilation, it holds the sheets in the tummy, in order to metabolize and then build itself in, resting on the solid base made of more books. Silue suggests his poetics: not the resistance to the cultural hegemony of the West, but the creation of a bridge between identity and otherness, which makes of contamination the signature of his own artistic research . The formal transposition of *Untitled* summarizes the constant dialogue between motifs taken from the native country and the fully Italian artistic education; he had his training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, where in particular he took courses with Giovanni Mundola , Daniele Degli Angeli, Severino Storti Gajani, Franco Marrocco . His intention is to affirm an aesthetic that while specifically referring to Western models is able to give life to creative and original works which are not separated from fantasies and instincts coming from primigenial and far away backgrounds.

The contacts with the artist of Ivorian origins allowed me to learn, in many circumstances during the passing of years, the recent evolution of his remarkable industriousness decreed by a couple of relevant *solo* exhibitions that were accompanied by two beautiful and interesting catalogues published by Nuovagrafica from Carpi: in 2010 "Sans titre", the exhibition curated by Paolo Donini and Nadia Raimondi at the Civic Gallery of Palazzo Ducale in Pavullo, with a critical essay by

Julia Draganovic¹; in November 2012, the exhibition curated by Vittoria Coen at the time of the realization of *I = 2*, painting that measures 15 square meters, located permanently at the Council Chamber of the Municipality in Rio Saliceto².

In those two exhibitions emerged the contemporary interpretation of Silue's narrative dimension. Since his debut in Naples in 1996 (Cloister of the Church "S. Francesco al Vomero") followed by a sequence of exhibitions in Modena from 2000 to 2003 – having chosen Modena as his city of action - he did not fail to express figurative visions within Ivory Coast folkloric context and centuries-old roots of his homeland. As to give an example, the realistic pastels *Il duro lavoro* (2001), *l'Exprit* (2001), *Au Coucher du soleil* and *Philippe*, both of 2002, passing through the painting experience referable to the Expressionists language belonging to *Les dabats* and *Le mauvais chasseur*, paintings on canvas of 2003, with hints of metaphorical images.

The range of Silue's activities in the first decade of the new century are accurately retraced by Nadia Raimondi that distinguishes the use of the first blacks, clays and sandy mixtures made in 2004, transitional phase of his painting, which by the middle of the decade aspires to a plastic condition open to welcome materic textures on its surface towards an "artistic practice" which "Joachim always gives the value of indispensable existential tool, painting and/or sculpting are ways for him to look at, understand, accept, live life, as well as telling everybody parts of his own intimate world, made by different but coexisting places of the soul".³ It is then that the *objects trouvée* peep out in his works and next to them we find his dearest clays which bring nature tangibly back in the founding core of the composition; everything is organized by the support of brushstrokes as it's shown for example in *Equation du premier degre* (2006), *La balance* (2007), *Une goutte* (2008), *Maternitee*, *Coppia e Circoncisione* both made in 2009, and *50KG nett* and *la poubelle* from 2010, just to mention some of the works where Silue manifests, as noted by Paolo Donini, the "noticeable awareness of our (European) past, but thanks to the active reality of his (African), he introduces in the work living cells and unexpected reactions, and again tells brand new stories, he composes fables that contain ideas and opinions, he explains ways, styles, and life problems" and that for the critic "it is the entering into western historicized forms of a non-European ancestral

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Sanse titre. Opere di Joachim Silue, catalogue of the exhibition (Pavullo nel Frignano, Art Gallery Palazzo Ducale, May 15th – June 27th 2010), curated by P. Donini, N. Raimondi, Nuovagrafica, Carpi 2010.

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I=2. Opere di K. Joachim Silue, catalogue of the exhibition (Rio Saliceto, Council Chamber of the Municipality, November 10th – January 25th 2012), curated by V. Coen, Nuovagrafica, Carpi 2012.

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N. Raimondi, *Le storie di Joachim K. Silue. Moderno e romantico peintre / sculpteur: Modena 7 Abidjan, andata e ritorno* in *Sanse titre...cit.*, pg.11.

feeling ⁴. His plastic-pictorial hybridations are developed and in 2012 they reach their peak in the already mentioned triptych titled *I=2*, the result of a prominent contamination expressed by the focusing on different elements that compose the artifact depicting a modern still life. It is a genre in line with the western pictorial tradition that fascinates Joachim and that he resumes again. Nadia Raimondi in 2010 defined the genre adopted by the artist "a form of concrete contemporary poetry" ⁵.

These are the features that guide much of the work performed by Silue in his most recent period, owing primarily his semantic processing of collage made of objects and signs to Alberto Burri and not less to the lectures about materic painting by Tapies, as an urgency to concentrate on the surface of the painting a living and conflictual space, primitivist suggestions, achievements of visionary surrealism, extensible *art brut* semiotic universe, the manipulation of anomalous materials from *Arte Povera* and *Nouveau realisme*, Basquiat's hybrid distempers which was the climate of languages and cultures crossroad. The mingling of languages, which are recorded over the time in his art, is the outcome of mixed instincts, of indissoluble conflicts between the different -and non-cultural needs, which he has absorbed among the ethno-anthropological tradition of his native geographical area and the schematic Western formulas of his life story; and no matter how obvious it may seem it's a matter of fact. A production marked by the combination of art and life – I would add “survival” for the modern days - of his " always being in the world , not in imitation , but with the awareness of his existence in the multitude of forms that we can discover and invent ," as suggested by Victory Coen⁶. Typical of contemporary *métissage* we can capture on his canvas and MDF the connections between diversities coming out from his unforgettable experienced background⁷, mixed with some creative spurs that derive both from the Western cultural debate as well as from the experiences of his daily life activities closely linked with the history of Art in Italy;

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P. Donini, *Silue: l'oggi delle forme viventi in Sanse titre ...* quote., pg.51-52.

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N. Raimondi, *Le storie di ...* quote, pg.39.

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V. Coen, K. Joachim Silue. *Molti mondi in uno*, in *I=2. Opere ...* quote., pg.19.

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As observed by Martina Corgnati about the relations between our country and the Arab-Mediterranean artistic cultures, recalling Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor, which can be extended to several migration flows in particular cultural flows, artists feel "the need to preserve the memory of something , of themselves but but if stretched to an even more sensitive side to stories, experiences, landscapes, individuals, communities and meanings that are reflected in their work. And it is important that these exchanges continue: because visual art today is trying to deal with many new aspects and conflicting layers of existence and meanings;it's trying, or maybe it's forced, to process the fragile balance, instability of peace, of the very conditions of life and survival. " see M. Corgnati, *Dall'Italian Manner alla modernità liquida. Relazioni artistiche fra alcuni paesi arabo-mediterranei e l'Italia*, California Italian Studies, eScholarship University of California 2010, pg. 9-10, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hs4w9t8> [04.22.2013]

it is necessary to mention that Silue is employed at the Civic Museum of Art in Modena, that counts an artistic heritage that goes from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth century .

Enthusiasm for life and inner force, mixed with humanity and memory, creative thinking and gestures: it's with these skills that Silue fulfilled his research with a critical meaning. His research strives for claiming a process that restates the common space of painting and sculpture together. There he expresses the profound awareness of reappropriation of Ivorian tradition and of manipulation of conceptualism inherited from the new avant-garde.

How many and what kind of stories Joachim Kagnedjatou Silue tells through his images made of drawing and hybrid materials is delineated by an unpredictable and existential artistic path. Each trace, form, color or space proposed in his work is an act of his reality, interweaved with relational and thematic statements, which are twisted and interchanged with the world. He considers himself free from the laws of globalized market and of the power of Art system, that he believes it's not much in touch with the present, with the everyday life. He says: "I do not have the problem of wanting to conquer a market. I do a research that relates to my own way of seeing things.

Contemporary Art - for Silue - also needs freedom. "

Not too many the opportunities for personal exhibition, but all well selected. As shown by the present circumstance of the exhibition designed for the Sala dei Putti inside the museum "Il Correggio", where he presents two parallel researches "Il Collante", which features still lifes and figures belonging to his latest researches of nearly two years that we could record between April 2013 and February 2014, and "I Pettini", investigation that has been going on for four years and it's still in progress. Symbiosis between mirror and tool that makes hairstyle, the comb becomes an autobiographical matter, for those who like Joachim gave up using it. The hairstyle expresses identity but society is not always able to judge it in its appearance as referred in *A more sophisticated combs* and *Objets* made in 2012.

Both in the series of "Il Collante" as in that of "Pettini" the works exhibited involve the great manual skills belonging to the Afro-Italian artist who only follows a little of the technological medium now widely used in the contemporary aesthetics. He assembles clays, pigments, textiles, rusted metals, locks, wire, nails, mirrors, strips of wood, recycled cardboard, marbles, sandals and footwear, glass case, bags, bra, synthetic flower, everyday objects, chosen and humbled as realistic insertion, documents of the living. The manual intervention, marked on material deprived of its relevance as an object, is used to create color, it gives chroma to his paintings. Because Silue is always painting: wall format as well as in the front-back sided versions (*L, F Villanova 048, L, F Villanova 049, Hard bread 051*) which in a versatile set up can be considered installations. The three-dimensional creations are closer to the painting to be conceived as wall-pictures as the ones of the great Western tradition.

It is paint structured on the framework, that goes beyond the perspective conceptions and explores the contemporary vicissitudes, scrolls the routine of everyday life, displaces figures and objects, reformulates updated still lifes. Thus, it is to the theme of still life, stating it to be "a genre that does not exist in the West African tradition"⁸ but congenial to him, that is primarily addressed the exhibition in Correggio. If in the German and English translations they are called "silent life" in the practice of European painting still life has been interpreted as *vanitas vanitatum* as a matter of fact perceived as a ready-made⁹. In a slightly Duchamp style something comes up in the options of the objects used by Joachim, ready-mades with charcoal feature, oil markers, either black or white, Punta Secca or sketches that he completes, he recomposes, in the definition of images often transcribed in monochrome. The fast drawing, led with great confidence, gives softness to the line drawn and it relates to the plastic thickening which underlines an educated use of the material. Most of the themes composed in these past years are related to food, nutrition in general, to the starve suffered not only in the Third World but also in the civilized Europe, in Italy. Works that recall the still life such as the triptych *2 G Apper*, metaphor of a set table, and *A beautiful plate* and the ones that portrait familiar figures, *Modernitee*, *Remains alone*, the two editions of *Une autre tradition*, or the multitude displayed in the triptych *Linea di confine*, should be considered as the cornerstone to interpret his themes. Silue demolishes the typical image of wealthy globalization, conceived as Westernization, that reveals today, in times of crisis, the uneasiness of communities and families, not rarely led to great poverty, and he recognizes the situation experienced in his own homeland which he considered unthinkable to be found in Italy in the new millennium. The citizen of the civilized West loses his job together with his human dignity and gets in line at soup kitchens likewise the "notorious" immigrants who arrived in Italy because they had nothing to eat or drink in their countries of origin; the retiree is even forced to dig in the garbage bin of markets searching for means of support, something to put on the table; young people are forced to migrate looking for a job, scattering dreams and hopes. Based on these urgent current issues so close to us that affect the work of art, Silue does not desist from pursuing the comparison with the African continent, whose conditions of life seemed so remote. The two worlds are now lapping on the discomfort of entire communities and the values suggested by the subjects are translated into many metaphorical variations delivered to the eye of the public. The contradictions that now join the two civilizations who appeared to be distant, are unveiled by the displacement of the multiple objects present or represented.

⁸ Quote in J. Draganovic, *Natura morta*, in *Sanse titre...cit.*, pg.33-34

⁹ Eugenio Battisti writes in a witty essay: "In other words, still life doesn't aim to reproduce the process of formation of reality, but it extrapolates the elements already finished, and it renames them, as Duchamp would have done later, assigning them another value, that we could call superstructural (...)", E. Battisti, *Meditando sull'inutile*, in F. Porzio, curated by, *La natura morta in Italia*, Electa Milano, 1989, pg.33.

From Silue's plastic paintings breaks out an imaginative potential of subtle allusive transfer without ever resorting to banal decorative emphasis. The artist does not renounce to set aside the distinction between the artist and the audience, to bring the viewer to the creative experience of multiple messages, clear and direct as they are, not mystified even though regrettable, disturbing.