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Homage to Michel Fabre

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# African American Visual Artists in France

A Panorama, 1980-2008

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# African American Visual Artists in France

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- 1 This paper presents a panorama of the presence of African-American artists in France over the last 30 years or so: from 1979, when I met Michel Fabre, under whose direction I wrote my doctoral dissertation – completed in 1984 – up to and including my participation in Michel and Geneviève Fabre’s activities with the Cercle d’études afro-américaines. I have divided this time into three periods, all predicated on the extraordinary advent of Basquiat’s art in France in the late 1980s. These periods also mark the evolution of the positioning of African American artists on the French art scene in a movement towards acknowledging the political aspect of their history. First viewed as American artists whose “blackness” was only incidental, their African American identity gradually appeared as a strong political component of their art as well as a cultural focus that could no longer be ignored.
- 2 I have tried to record all the major facts and publications that give a preliminary, overarching and general approach to the history of African-American artists in France.<sup>1</sup>

## 1975-1984: Discovering African American Artists

- 3 I began my research on African American artists in 1975 as a student at Toulouse University where I was puzzled that none of these ethnic artists ever appeared in my textbooks. In that pre-Internet age, I found a copy of John Edward Atkinson’s *Black Dimensions in Contemporary American Art* (1971) in the American Library in Toulouse (published in 1971, it introduced 50 artists on 127 pages, with illustrations), which led to a decision to write my master’s thesis on the topic. I spent two months in New York, where the Brooklyn Museum was about to present the exhibition “Two Centuries of Black American Art” (1076); I also became a member of the Studio Museum in Harlem, then housed in a rented loft at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 125<sup>th</sup> Street.

- 4 At the time, I had no idea of the presence of many African-American artists in France, such as the sculptor Richmond Barthé in Lyon, celebrated by Melvin Dixon in one of his poems:

(...) Two rivers swell in Lyon and clean the old dust.  
 History is stone polished black,  
 is blood and burnt bronze.  
 Your blood hardens into stone poems. "What color is art?"  
 and "What color is love?" The questions and your crisp  
 eyes clean me, let me know the years you read the muscles  
 torn from proud black chests, from open stilled mouths,  
 from wide nostrils and ebony bones and now reading me (...).  
 (Dixon, pp. 24-25)

- 5 Neither did I know that painter Beauford Delaney lived in Paris. A close friend of James Baldwin, Delaney arrived there in 1953 and participated in various group shows<sup>2</sup>. He had just painted *L'église de Saint-Germain-des-Prés* (1971), *La statue de Balzac par Rodin* (1972) and *Yellow Cypress* (1972) at St-Paul-de-Vence, where he visited Baldwin.
- 6 Barbara Chase-Riboud, who is known internationally today as a writer, was then an accomplished sculptor and had a show at the Musée national d'art moderne in Paris in 1974. Also in Paris, Sam Gilliam had held regular shows at Darthea Speyer's gallery since 1970, while group shows such as the Biennale de Paris included painters Raymond Saunders and Howardina Pindell.
- 7 I wrote my Master's Thesis on "Black Painters in Contemporary America" in 1977<sup>3</sup>. The history of African-American artists in the United States appeared to me to be rooted in politics and I wanted to explore its past as well as its development. I decided to focus my Ph.D. research on this topic, but I could not find a thesis director. I met Michel Fabre in 1979 and he agreed to supervise my dissertation<sup>4</sup> with Roland Tissot, from Lyon University, who had just published *L'Amérique et ses peintres, 1908-1978 : essai de typologie artistique* (1980).
- 8 By the 1980s, most of the American artists who had arrived in Europe after World War II were gone, and only a few African American painters spent time in Paris, such as Herbert Gentry, who lived between New York and Malmö (Sweden), Ed Clark, who rented a studio in the Cité Internationale des Arts every summer, and Lynn Chuck Bowers, who had settled in Berlin and had a show at the Galerie BMIC in Paris in 1980. Howardina Pindell participated in the group show "American Painting of the 1970s" presented in Paris by the United States Information Agency (USIA). Arthur Beatty showed portraits of jazz musicians at the Galerie de l'Ile du Démon, on the rue Bonaparte. Cynthia Simon passed through the city on her way to Toulouse, and Bill Hutson worked regularly in a studio on the rue des Plantes.
- 9 In its tradition of universalism, the French art world at that time considered African American artists simply to be American artists who did not display any cultural differences or references in their works that could justify a different way of looking at their work. In its own way, this perspective reflected a process of integration that kept racism and political references at bay. Paradoxically, this was to change with the arrival of Jean-Michel Basquiat in the international art world and art market.

## The 1980s: the Myth of a “Black Picasso”

- 10 In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, while galleries and museums dedicated to African American artists opened in various parts of the United States, the French art world showed little interest in them. Neither ARC (Animation, Recherche, Confrontation), the avant-garde venue at the musée d'Art moderne de Paris nor the contemporary world of art gave consideration to this phenomenon beyond the prism of French Republican universalism. This was partly due to a general disinterest in France for American art, part of a post-war tradition and rivalry that opposed the European and American art worlds (see Bellet, 1994). However, the street art movement was soon to introduce an unexpected disorder in the conventional approach of American art in France. The collective exhibition “5/5, Figuration libre, France-USA” was held at ARC / musée d'Art moderne, where Jean-Michel Basquiat's art was shown for the first time in France, in Paris in 1984. According to the curator of the show, Suzanne Pagé, this show, featuring French and American artists presented:

An art free of obligations, of refusals, of allegiances; and even free from references; free precisely in its excessive borrowing and in the laminating of what it borrows; free in the impertinence with which it flattens out through a mixing by collage, outside of hierarchies related to any known category of art, outside of all traditional, popular or trivial history. The energy, the effects of liberty, the speed, the spontaneity, and the highly emotive lavishness of this art, in which the body is loosened up by the music closely associated with it, imposes its own rhythm, directly plugged into a sensitive and nervous high voltage network. Intermingling humor and a frenzy that does not exclude anxiety and violence, free at last, this art of the cultural, historical, and geographical melting pot, has made out of from all this crossbreeding of knowledge and living experience situated at the heart of the most vital and intense experience, irreducible to anything we know (Popism, Surrealism, Graffiti...) and explosive in its quasi primitive need. (Pagé, p. 3)

- 11 The word “primitive” is a key element of the fascination for Basquiat's art in Europe: because of his ethnic origin and aesthetic choices, his art was supposed to be free of conventions. Some French art dealers became interested in the emergence on the art scene of this young African American artist from New York who drew critical attention for the first time because of his involvement in the graffiti movement of the late seventies, when he went by the graffiti tag SAMO. Jean-Michel Basquiat had been exhibited in the U.S. and Europe, and in 1985 had participated in the XIIIth Biennale in the Grande Halle du parc de la Villette, in Paris. He had his first one man show in France in 1987 at Daniel Templon's Gallery, followed by many other shows, until the Musée Cantini, in Marseilles, gave him institutional recognition in 1992. In France, Basquiat was first considered as a street artist who had evolved into a painter, and as such was mostly isolated from African American cultural references. This vision was reinforced by the title of a June 1986 interview he gave to Démosthène Davvetas in the daily paper *Libération* entitled “Acide: Jean-Michel Basquiat, graffitiste” (Davvetas, 1986). His frequent use of recreational drugs and his Caribbean origins marginalized him in relation to the mainstream American art world. The French art world originally wanted to associate Basquiat with a multi-ethnicity far removed from the history of African American painters. Gradually, critics became interested in his Haitian background. In 1988, the anthropologist Remo Guidieri described Basquiat's art as an expression of rituals, in an article in *Art Press* entitled “Autels du loa ; à propos de Jean-Michel Basquiat”. In 1989, in his book about Basquiat, Michel Enrici described the artist

as a “child of the Sixties” who belonged to a new “American graffiti” but also built his art on the foundation of American painting and Rauschenberg’s architectural strength. After Twombly, Basquiat discovered the power of his journey, across the Atlantic but also back in time to the memory of Africa. These recollections were legitimized by the validity of the notions of black identity and history (Enrici, 1989).

- 12 In the French imagination, Basquiat was somehow a link between a mythical Africa and the aesthetic revolution originated by Picasso and Cubism. Basquiat came to embody the myth of primitivism, “free” from any rules and legacy, in an urban jungle (Huser, 1986). Nicolas Bourriaud summed up this general idea in his 1988 article “Black Picasso”, in *Decoration International* (Bourriaud, 1988). The epithet was to remain his. In the summer of 1992, Emmanuel Daydé used it again in *Museart*:

Five years after his death, Jean-Michel Basquiat is still an impossibly tragic and wild Black Picasso, a long-awaited figure who appeared at the end of century that lacked Jimi Hendrix’s esthetics. The 72 pieces displayed by the musée Cantini in Marseilles prove that Basquiat was not only a star of the art world but also a stunning genius, on a par with Masaccio or Caravaggio. (Daydé, p. 20)

- 13 The notion of “genius” also contributed to extricate Basquiat from his historical context. Such an extraordinary artist’s works could be marketed without regard for any ethnic connection. They were also represented by some of the most influential art dealers of the day and sought after by institutional collectors. Daydé shows how Basquiat reflected the image of the “primitive” in the French imagination: he describes him as an offshoot of mythical “violent meteors, wildly black”; “a cruel Van Gogh” who fashioned “the ancient treasures of naked black kings,” creating works that were “fundamentally primitive;” and finally as “an artist whose mindset was African” (*Id.*).
- 14 Far from the exoticism and primitivism evoked by Basquiat’s work and personality, the Parisian scene in the 1980s slowly opened its doors to African American artists. Darthea Speyer went on presenting the works of Sam Gilliam; Lynn Chuck Bowers had a one man show at the Galerie BMIC (1983), Howardina Pindell participated in “USIA: American Painting of the 1970’s” and I presented the Hatch-Billops Collection (an archive of African American cultural history) at the Centre Franco-Américain Odéon in 1984. In 1986, Galerie Tension held a one man show by Richard Yarde, featuring his installations entitled “Savoy”, a re-creation of the Savoy Ballroom bandstand and dance floor in Harlem which was made famous in the 1930s. In 1989, Adrian Piper was included in “L’art conceptuel, une perspective” at the musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris. Far from the stirring of passion created around Basquiat’s art, Daniel Soutif recalled the socio-political origins of these American artists, asserting that “by tapping into America’s racial neurosis,” Piper, “a black woman who appears to be white but is of black origin, replenishes a forgotten ingredient in American art: politics” (Soutif, 1990). Such acknowledgement of the political aspect of the African-Americans’ art was to lead to broadened recognition and circulation of their work in France.

## The 1990s: A Growing Presence

- 15 While major art dealers and institutions in France and Europe were focusing on Basquiat’s work, small galleries continued to promote the work of other African American artists. Not far from Darthea Speyer’s gallery, Nicole and Jean-Claude Resche presented Raymond Saunder’s works as early as 1990 in their gallery on the rue de

Seine. They also showed Ed Clark's paintings in 1991 (whose work was also exhibited at the Foire internationale d'art contemporain (FIAC) by the Galerie Keeser Bohbott, that same year).

- 16 In October 1992, in an article in *Beaux-Arts Magazine* entitled "Noire Amérique" (Sanconie, 1992)<sup>5</sup>, I gave a historical presentation of black American painters from the Harlem Renaissance to the present day. That same year, Professor Michel Fabre organized an international conference on African-American writers<sup>6</sup> and an art exhibition related to the event was organized by the Galerie Resche and the Galerie Black New Arts in Paris. Michel Fabre asked me to organize the "Visual Arts Conference: African-American Artists and Europe"<sup>7</sup> that also took place in Paris in 1994, in the grand Palais de Luxembourg, the seat of the French Senate<sup>8</sup>. I wanted to provide a framework for a dialogue on essential aesthetic issues with artists and professionals from Europe and the USA in order to open a historical perspective on displacements—past and present—between these countries and to trace the semiological developments of visual arts rooted in the African diaspora. Thirteen artists were officially invited. The conference lasted three days, and a few artists each showed one of their works at the Galerie Resche during the week of the conference.
- 17 The French art world continued favoring Basquiat's work with an exhibition at the Musée-Galerie de la Seita in 1993 (with a catalogue, Adès & Le Guen, 1993) and works on paper at the Fondation Dina Vierny-Musée Maillol (Prat, 1997) in 1997, and important Parisian galleries followed suit (Part et al., 1996) in 1996 and 1997 (Bischofberger, 1998). But other artists also received wide recognition, such as David Hammons, who was mentioned in two articles in *Art Press* in April 1992, together with a translation of Calvin Reid's text, "David Hammons, guide du hipster dans l'Amérique noire" (Reid, 1992). The following year, *Art press* also published a translation of an interview with Robert Storr, calling him a "great artist whose own work acknowledges the entire art community" (Hammons, 1993). Interestingly, Storr's art was reviewed under the heading "identité culturelle/minorité culturelle", and the concept of "cultural identity" was to allow younger artists such as Lorna Simpson or Kara Walker a new entrée into the French art scene.
- 18 As for artists who had acquired major recognition in the US, their presence in France remained discreet. Martin Puryear had been invited by the French State as an artist in residence in Alexander Calder's studio in Saché (near Tours) for nine months in 1992-1993 and had had regular shows in Europe before his work was ever exhibited in France in 1999. "This Mortal Coil," exhibited at the Chapelle Saint-Louis de la Salpêtrière, was a monumental 30-meter hollow structure in red cedar (Rossignol, 1999). Built near Marseilles, this staircase coiling around a conical shape is an homage to Shakespeare that also suggested to Geneviève Breerette, in *Le Monde*, "a traditional mastery of architecture, comparable to Brunelleschi's style. The conical form of the spiral staircase recalls that architect's drawings for the dome of the cathedral in Florence" (Breerette, 1999).
- 19 As the art world pursued its dialectic vision of African American artists caught between integration and classification as minority, the notion of a specific history of African American artists was still denied. This is partly why the association "Arts Visuels Américains" which I helped establish organized a presentation entitled "Conversations: African American Artists and Art History" on May 22, 1998, with painters Raymond

Saunders and Bill Hutson in Reid Hall (Columbia University Programs) in Paris to display archives and books on African American artists.

- 20 During the 1990s the breadth of American art visible on the French art scene had increased. During the 2000s, the political (and racial) perspective was to prevail over aesthetics.

## The 2000s: Towards integration

- 21 Each year since the dawn of the new millennium an African-American artist has been included in a group show in France, either in galleries such as Darthea Speyer's in Paris (from September 6, 2001 to September 14, 2001) or in venues dedicated to contemporary art—such as La Criée in Rennes, Le Plateau in Paris, and the Nomadic Nights Series presented by the Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, in Paris. In 2006, the centre Georges Pompidou presented a large exhibition entitled “Los Angeles 1955-1985. Naissance d'une capitale artistique”, including the works of Betye Saar, John Outterbridge and David Hammons—in the space dedicated to assemblage (Roussel, 2006; Grenier, 2006). That same year, Adrian Piper's soundinstallation *Bach Whistled* was exhibited with the collection of the FRAC Bourgogne in Dijon.
- 22 Along with solo shows by Raymond Saunders in Paris or Adrian Piper near Lyon, Beauford Delaney's work was presented in 2003 in the musée d'Art américain in Giverny (Robinson, 2001). In December 2004, Lorna Simpson had her first Parisian show although the event that was most heavily covered by the media took place in 2007, with Kara Walker's show at the musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, entitled “Kara Walker, Mon Ennemi, Mon Frère, Mon Bourreau, Mon Amour” (Hergott, 2007; James Rose, 2007; Da Costa, 2006). In an interview in *Les Inrockuptibles*, E. Renard and C. Moulène tried to explain “how these black women artists, a minority within a minority, determine and define their own identity by delving into the history of the struggles of the African-American community”, and Elvan Zabunyan commented on the artist's “fantasmagorical mental images” (Renard, 2007).
- 23 The political aspect of the work by African American artists has now been accepted within the category of “identity” or “minority” art. Paradoxically, it is the political dimension, rather than the aesthetic contribution, which is favoured by the art world. The reference to Black America is still rather timid in the press and among critics. Conceptual art as well the figurative representation of the black body seem to be visual approaches used by artists to introduce the reality of African American culture.
- 24 In conclusion, I would like to call attention to two striking aspects of the French approach to African American art: its focus on the female form almost as the exacerbation of its identity as a minority; and the absence of any clear interest in the collective history of these artists, who are usually considered on an individual basis. It is important to note that cultural references are still mostly limited to slavery and the civil rights movement. This no doubt reflects the Old World's incomplete understanding of Black America. But the gradual and growing interest in the work and lives of African American artists in France and their integration into the art market, shows a progression towards a thorough treatment of this historical situation within the French art world.

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## NOTES

1. For the earlier periods of this history, see Theresa Leininger & Maïca Sanconie (1992); Jocelyne Rotily (1998).
2. Salon des Réalités Nouvelles, Paris (1954-1960-1963); "Abstract American Artists", Galerie Arnaud (1956); « L'Insurrection contre la forme », Galerie Prisme, Paris (1957); « Antagonismes », musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris (1957); Centre culturel américain, Paris (1961, 1965, 1966); « L'Age du Jazz », musée Galliera Paris, 1966. First solo show at Galerie Prisme (1956) then Galerie Paul Facchetti (1960), l'American Center du boulevard Raspail (1962); Centre culturel américain, Paris (rétrospective, 1969) ; Galerie Darthea Speyer (1972).
3. "Black Painters in Contemporary America", Master's Thesis. Director: Maurice Levy, Université de Toulouse le Mirail, 1977.
4. « Peintres noirs américains, 1945-1980 », Ph.D. dissertation, Université de Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle, June 1984.
5. With a commentary on the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Romare Bearden, Beauford Delaney, Sam Gilliam, David Hammons, Jacob Lawrence, Adrian Piper, Martin Puryear, Faith Ringgold, Bettye Saar, Raymond Saunders, and Lorna Simpson.

6. “African Americans and Europe”, organized by the Centre d’études afro-américaines (Université Paris III - Sorbonne Nouvelle), the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research (Harvard University), the Center for American Culture Studies (Columbia University), and the Center for the Study of Southern Culture (University of Mississippi).

7. Artists invited: Dewey Crumpler, Sam Gilliam, Russel T. Gordon, Mildred Howard, Clarence Morgan, Howardina Pindell, Adrian Piper, Martin Puryear, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Raymond Saunders, John Scott, and Lorna Simpson.

8. “Visual Arts Conference: African-American Artists and Europe” convened by the Centre d’études afro-américaines (Sorbonne Nouvelle), the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research (Harvard University), the Contemporary Transatlantic Arts Program, the Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches Nord-Américaines, Paris VII University, the Collegium for African American Research. There were three main topics : “Europe and Africa: Conflicting Attractions”; “Europe: A Converging Point; Some Historical Moments” ; “The role of Artistic Decision-Makers within the America-Europe Art Network”.

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