

The Art of Wandering

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(...) Diaspora ? Me ? What in heaven's name did I do to deserve such a Biblical destiny ?

If there is an experience of diaspora in my life, it would be the experience I lived through before leaving Sudan, the country of my birth, and after landing in France, the promised land where my « African exile » came to be accomplished. Legend says that the people of the diaspora must see a « sign » that heralds the end of wandering. That sign, for me, was paper.

I understood it one day when I found myself in a large stationery shop in Lille in front of stacks and stacks of paper. I discovered there a dozen variants of watercolor paper. I took out these beautiful sheets, examined them, touched them, smelled them, and I even felt the desire to chew them, so enchanted I was. I, who had learned how to take sheets of already painted paper and wash them with soap and iron them in order to whiten them before re-painting them. In fact, a sheet of virgin watercolor paper was still a rare object in the College of Fine Art in Khartoum, the inspired place where I spent the 1970s. The place where I learned how to appreciate the most diverse watercolorists, from Dürer to Sam Francis by way of Turner, Schiele and others. (...)

The Africa that I fled is neither the Africa of ethnologists and of other Africanists, nor is it that referred to by African-Americans and diasporized British rasta-men. It is and African that each day resembles more and more to the blurry image that western media sends us in between wars, famines and tom-tom drums. It is the only image available in this day and age. What are we to do with this image ? As for myself, I save it and take care of it according to the terms of this sudanese proverb : « The madness that you know is certainly less dangerous than the one you don't know ! »