

B. Thomson : - Can you tell me about your interest in black womanhood and about your specific choice of using these two women in your paintings?

Hassan Musa : - I think the first time I saw an image of Josephine Baker was towards the end of the fifties. It was a fascinating sequence in a black and white film about a black woman singing in a cage. At that time, I think I was eight years old, but I was already a serious movie goer. I had no idea who that woman was but I was intrigued by the fact that the cage was not really a cage that could keep anybody in, and that the woman could leave if she wanted to, in fact I wished secretly if she could walk out of the cage and be free, but the woman seemed to enjoy being in that cage. Later I started to know more about Joséphine Baker but I never managed to make the connection between the singer in the cage and the dancer with the banana skirt, until few years ago where I reviewed that sequence of the cage singer while watching a French TV documentary on Joséphine Baker. The fact that the singer was happy with her cage seemed to me referable to these biblical figures like Jesus or St. Sébastien who seem to enjoy their pain so much that they metamorphose into extra-human. There is something biblical about the experience of Joséphine Baker. It has to do with the way that she accepted (and enjoyed) the role of the typical African female for the benefit of the European colonial male society. This biblical dimension is absent in the experience of Saartje Baartman. Baartman was captured, deported to Europe and forced to play the savage African female in a real cage where no escape is possible. If the career of Baartman was so short, compared to the long career of Baker, it is because of miserable material conditions of life that her « owners » offered her. What is common in the Baker and the Baartman experience is that both of them were put on a scene in front of an European male audience. But the difference between Baartman and Baker might be in the attitude that of each woman showed towards the fact of being considered as black female. It seemed to me that Joséphine Baker was raised as a black person. Her education as black American made her internalize the identity of a black being, while Baartman who was uprooted from the traditional African context might find it difficult to assimilate the version of identity that Europeans reserve for black beings. I think Africans living in the traditional pre-capitalist societies never identified themselves according to the colour of skin. I think Africans started to identify themselves as Black when Europeans, who define themselves as White, came and called them Blacks. The appellation of « Africans » itself is an European idea. During my childhood in the western part of Sudan, I remember, we used to meet with alien persons from the neighbouring countries. There were some Egyptians, few Ethiopians, and a lot of people from West African countries. West Africans were generally Muslim pilgrims walking their way to Mecca. Like everybody else, I used to identify these persons by reference to their countries. The idea of including all these persons in the category of « Africans » seemed rather incongruous at the middle of the fifties. To internalize the concept of « Africans » we had to assimilate all the « Pan-Africanist » propaganda of the Cold War period in order to give existence to this strange idea of belonging to a continent called « Africa ». The Pan-Africanism, which was a political « tool » that the African

nationalists used to fight colonialism, is not easy to understand out of the geopolitical context of the Cold War.

You may ask about the connection between the situation of black womanhood in the Baker/Baartman perspective and what I am saying about the invention of « Africa » as a false category. I think the connection is in the false-hood of these two categories :Black-hood and African-hood. Africans never had the opportunity to choose being black or being african. Both identities were imposed to Africans from the outside by dominating colonial forces. Never the less the false-hood of black and african categories is imposed as an accomplished fact.

Once you say that you have to face the second question : What can the African and the Black persons do with this real-fals status ? The reality of an african false-hood as an attractive practical option, (or may be the only real option allowed) is in the heart of all the conceptual effort related to the images related to african cultures.

This is where I try to work as an image maker manipulating the levers of art and exclusion in this specific zone of contemporary art called « contemporary African Art ». This is where I differentiate between the destiny of Saartje Baartman and the destiny of Joséphine Baker. I feel a great compassion, (and a great anger), for the terrible moral and physical sufferings of Saartje Baartman, but it is not the same kind of compassion that I have for Joséphine Baker. Joséphine Baker is different. She positioned herself as an Artist. Art offered her, not only the means to escape the condition of excluded persons, but also a shortcut to recognition and glory. But the artiste she was allowed to be, in the Paris of the twenties, was conditioned by the colonial and racial considerations of the French society at that time. The complexity of her attitude as a black person, a woman and an artist deserves much more attention than the usual commemoration of « la Revue Nègre », Joséphine Baker stands as a central figure in the problematique question of africanist aesthetics when instrumentalized as a lever for exclusion.

- Also many of your paintings have made visual references to western art history, appropriating iconography from famous representations of religious figures (St. Sebastian), artists (Van Gogh), political figures (Bin Laden). What--if any--art historical references have either directly or indirectly played a role in influencing your choices of representing black womanhood both in these two works as also in your larger oeuvre?

What do these two women (Baker and Baartman) mean to you, what do they represent, and what do you hope to communicate to the viewer about them or about their histories?

Also, what do you hope to communicate about your inclusion of Michel Leuris in the Baker painting and what is your role role in the Baartman painting?

- When I was living in Sudan I used to consider my self as an artist, I mean I considered my self as part of the art world affected by the european cultural tradition. If, at the Khartoum school of art, we studied the same programme as in the european art schools, that was not because we wanted to avoid the African art tradition ; It was just because there was no African art programme available for the Sudanese art students.

So, when I came to France, in 1978, I discovered that I am only allowed to be an « African artist ». Out of this category, situated in the dark side of the European mainstream art, my work can not have any visibility.

I remember, with some of my African friends in France, we used to laugh about this situation as an other European « ism ». This is how the term « Artafricanisme » was forged to describe the type of an European art practice designed for African or Black persons.

When I say I am part of the art world, I mean that I am fully aware of the moral and material advantages and risks that I take (like everybody else) while I work within the European tradition of art. It is just like inheriting a big house from a distant unknown rich uncle. You accept the unexpected present, you enjoy living in this comfortable house but you never know when and where you may find a skeleton in the cupboard.

In my experience I think I managed – so far so good - to ignore the skeletons in the European cultural tradition (racism, violence, dogmatism, Fascism, scientism etc.), and to concentrate on the extraordinary human intelligence that expresses itself in arts, sciences and literature. In this perspective, my project is to enlarge the European tradition, (my European tradition) to make it apt to include all the extra-European traditions. The ultimate goal is to create – on the basis of the actual European tradition - new humanitarian culture where the European tradition is one part of an ensemble. I know it is utopian but it is the only moral way out from the actual situation.

When I am using « the visual references to Western art history » in my work I am not in the position of the « other », the cultural alien, borrowing material from the Western culture. I am the partner and I am using my own Western cultural material to construct my part of the collective answer to the main questions of our world.

So when you approach the use of icons like Baartman, Baker, I think it is important to confirm their European origin. The list of Black icons invented by Europeans for European use is too long to be enumerated here. For me the Joséphine Baker is not more African than that of St. Sebastian, Picasso, Leiris or even Van Gogh. All this is about « my » European iconic material.

In some of her music-hall performances, Joséphine Baker used to cover her « white » skin with black paint so as to look more conform to the « African » image in the expectation of her white audience. In such an attitude, Joséphine Baker, the artist, is taking a « security distance » from the risk of being African. She knows she is not African, she is just playing the role. African-hood is just an icon, among others, that she was able to use. Other persons – like Michel Leiris (an other African icon) – helped her to assume the role of the African female. I think research workers on contemporary art of the Africans should pay more attention to the role of Michel Leiris in the invention of an art defined today as « African ». In a book about the artist Wifredo Lam, (Lam Métis, Edition Dapper, 2001), the French art historian, Jean-Luis Paudrat reported how Picasso once asked Leiris to « teach Lam l'art nègre » (p.75). I think that most of the Parisian intelligentsia around Joséphine Baker was trying to « teach » her « l'art Nègre ». I also think that Baker was happy to learn and to perform « l' Art nègre » of her Parisian audience. The film sequences of the Black singer enjoying the cage condition is a fine illustration of the state of complaisance affecting the Baker artistic career.

- Many of your paintings from the Baker series (and others!) also incorporate old maps such as parts of Africa, Europe, or Japan. In some instances the maps are seemingly incongruent to the figures being portrayed in your paintings (eg.), however in others the connection seems more clear (such as in *Allegorie a la Banane*). Can you tell me about your use of maps, why specifically old maps, and how do you connect the maps to the figures and stories in your paintings. For example, in *Allegorie a la Banane*, you depict Josephine Baker in her famous banana skirt, who is superimposed on an economic map of colonial Africa. Why this map and this icon of black womanhood ?

- Maps are images, (hand made) interpretative images. Living images reflecting life changes. As images, maps are naturally false representation of reality. As cultural objects, I think no map is innocent because people usually draw maps to mark the limits of the land under their control (or the lands they want to control). All the great wars were conducted around maps and millions of people died because someone sends them defending or attacking a line on a map. All this history makes maps look more obscene than the conventional folkloric images of obscenity.

I think there is something pornographic about maps. It has to do with the map pretension to show the reality. All pornographic images tend to expose what is supposed to be « the real thing » about sexual behaviour, while they are only showing their conformity with the one dimensional commercially codified norms for a complex human behaviour.

Saartje Baartman was exposed in a cage for the Londoners or the Parisians who paid to see her sex organs. She never had a choice about exposing herself as an African sex symbol. A state of deep misunderstanding should have isolated her from her European audience. She was unable to understand the spell of the « Art Nègre » that might have enchanted her European audience.

But when you consider things from the Josephine Baker point of view, you may find that Baker, the artist, positioned herself deliberately in the « Art Nègre » attitude.

I use maps in my paintings the way I use printed fabrics. When I take a piece of cloth with sunflower patterns to paint on it, the order of the sunflower patterns works as a map that enable me to reach the image of a Van Gogh lost somewhere in the fabric visual story. The difference between a map and a fabric with sunflower patterns is that the map patterns are loaded with precious political references. I picked the first maps from my school garbage. Maps of the twentieth century world, (Soviet Union, French colonies etc.), were thrown away because they were considered out-dated.

I always appreciated maps. I remember when I was a child I used to draw geographical maps for my classmates who were not very good in drawing. I enjoyed drawing and colouring maps. This practice represented – for the child I was – an opportunity to project my dreams far away from my small home town. In this perspective maps were magical objects.