

LOUIS BARTHÉLEMY

“I firmly believe that art is a vital and powerful tool for intercultural communication and dialogue, especially in light of the critical events shaking our world.

This exhibition, which is being held at the Théodore Monod Museum of African Art in Dakar, underlines the importance of opening up to others and of celebrating this dialogue.

The series “Mbër Yi / The Wrestlers” reflects different cultural influences: the rites and symbols of Senegalese wrestling, the dexterity of Egyptian know-how in the realization of the “Khayamiya” hangings responding to the tapestries also appliquéd from the kingdom of Danhomè, together linked by the particular interest I have in the exercise of color, drawing and for humankind.

Louis Barthélemy

At his first solo exhibition in Athens Greece, the French designer and multidisciplinary artist Louis Barthélemy found himself in Dakar in 2020, just before the closing of the borders due to the pandemic restrictions. There, he witnessed the ancient ritual of fighting which has evolved to a sort of national sport. Seated on the sand and watching the games, Louis was enchanted by the wrestlers and their body movements, accompanied by a colorful choir of local women. He followed the training of one of the teams which he met personally. During his stay in Dakar, he browsed the local markets and acquired colorful bazins, waxed cotton brocades with the desire to rework them in Cairo together with the tent makers who work with the traditional Khayamiya tapestries. He wanted to create scenes of fighting on the fabric narrating thus the Dakar story. The fabrics and the threads became the unique means to portray the bodies in motion during the fight.

Having a profound knowledge of the fabrics used by the traditional handicrafts tent makers in Egypt, and inspired by different fabrics of various historical eras that were exhibited in African and Egyptian art Museums. Barthélemy was motivated by the experience of this old Senegalese sport, to create a fictional illustrated choreography which renders not solely the magic of the bodies but also the magic of the fabric. Abstract and full of colour, the bodies intertwined creating tapestries of exceptional beauty. These works become the means for the artist to point out the coexistence of diverse civilizations, but also give way to highlight the important work of specialised artisans who use and revitalize traditional techniques.

« Mbër Yi / The Wrestlers »

A few weeks before the borders closed in February 2020, on the cusp of the pandemic, I traveled to Dakar in Senegal.

I have long associated this country with wrestling and its mystical rituals. Interested in this national sport, Malick, member of staff of the hotel where I resided offered to join him at the end of his service to attend an important fight in the arena of the Grand Yoff the same day.

I found myself sitting on the sand track, in the front row, contemplating with wonder this performance which lasted several hours, accompanied by a choir of women dressed in brightly colored boubous and percussionists. The arena goes into a trance that takes me over. From then on, I would attend training sessions for a week of the Sakou Xam Xam team which I was introduced to the day after the fight.

These moments spent with the wrestlers allowed me to better understand their condition, their aspiration and the universe in which they evolve. A universe steeped in sacredness, the sublime, respect for ancestors and the forces of Nature. I experienced unexpected sensations, alternately pleasant, moving, violent, seeing the fights fiercely happening in front of my eyes.

The heartbreak of the vanquished, the glory of the victors erected as gods on Earth and acclaimed by a bewitched audience made me wonder about the echo that this performance provokes in us.

During this stay, I browsed the markets and I got an expandable range of colorful bazins, waxed cotton brocades, with the desire to rework them in Cairo in my Khayamiya tapestries, appliquéd and hand embroidered by the tent makers I work with.

I also visited the institutional Théodore Monod Museum of African Art, where I was immediately won over by the Africanist architecture of the 1930s, the charm of the gardens, the lines of which echo those of sacred masks. I retained from this visit the vitality of the appliquéd hangings of the kingdom of Danhomè in the current Republic of Benin dating from the 18th and 19th centuries, forming large fabric collages where human figurines and formidable animals are engaged in fierce duels.

These hangings composed of pictograms remind me in their graphics of Egyptian hieroglyphics and for the embroidery technique, the sublime tents of the Ottoman Empire decorated with appliquéd calligraphy, vehicles of spiritual and political messages through the great military campaigns.

Born from this stay in Dakar followed by a trip to Cairo, a mixture of influences and colors celebrated through an exploratory series of tapestries in bazin where the figurative merges with the abstraction.

The hospitality and gentleness of the wrestlers who received me like a brother moved me deeply. The admiration of the other gives way to a creative complicity, the dialectization and the discovery of a powerful and vulnerable, sensual and painful otherness. This omnipresent duality between light and dark, life and death, mastery and abandonment in the game that these men embody, invited me to chromatically express this fiery mêlée through chromatic rivalries.

The lines of the bodies fighting are intertwined, forming colorful maps. Borders mingle with silhouettes, waves drawn in the sand are superimposed on the defined muscles of the wrestlers, the confrontation gave way to a union of bodies with Nature.

Louis Barthélemy



AT NIGHTFALL, 2021, Hand crafted tapestry on cotton canvas,
Made in Cairo, Egypt, , Unique edition, 122 x 90 cm



OVERTURN, 2021, Hand crafted tapestry on cotton canvas, Made in
Cairo, Egypt, Unique edition, 126 x 90 cm



PUSH OFF, 2020, Hand crafted tapestry on cotton canvas,
Made in Cairo, Egypt, Unique edition, 125 x 90 cm



ADMONITION, 2021, Hand crafted tapestry on cotton canvas, Made
in Cairo, Egypt, Unique edition, 97 x 100 cm

Photographs



THE WRESTLERS 2022, Digital Print on aluminum, Edition of 5, 50 x 40 cm



THE WRESTLERS 2022, Digital Print on aluminum, Edition of 5, 50 x 40 cm



THE WRESTLERS 2022, Digital Print on aluminum, Edition of 5, 50 x 40 cm



THE WRESTLERS 2022, Digital Print on aluminum, Edition of 5, 50 x 40 cm

Short Bio:

Louis Barthélemy is a multidisciplinary artist and designer who lives and works between Marrakesh, Cairo and Paris. A crucial part of his practice is the preservation and the revival of traditional crafts threatened by globalization. He started his studies with a Bachelor in Central Saint Martins while at the same time he worked for Dior as scarf designer. He graduated in 2012. He continued working for Salvatore Ferragamo and Gucci, however he gradually re-orientated his interest towards different directions which led him to Marrakesh and then to Cairo and to his collaboration with native artisans.

BIOGRAPHY

Louis Barthélemy is a multidisciplinary artist and designer based between Marrakech, Cairo and Paris.

At the heart of his practice is a deep commitment to the preservation and revival of traditional crafts threatened by globalization. Barthélemy not only collaborates with artisans from all over the world but contributes to publicize their work, to safeguard their means of subsistence and to transmit their precious know-how.

It was as a teenager growing up in London that he began to travel across worlds and cultures. Fascinated by the intricate construction of the articulated armor belonging to the samurai soldiers and exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Barthélemy then discovers the Egyptian collection of the British Museum which fascinates him, dragging his parents weekend after weekend to contemplate with wonder the Rosetta Stone.

While enrolled in a fashion design Bachelor course at Central Saint Martins, Barthélemy began working for Dior as a scarf designer. For four years, he juggled between Paris and London, working for the Couture house and at University, to finally graduate in 2012 with a collection in which he imagines the 19th century femme fatale, the Countess of Castiglione waking up in the 1970s to become the darling of the Palace, a decadent Parisian nightclub of the time.

Although he continued to design prints and scarves for Salvatore Ferragamo and Gucci after John Galiano's departure from Dior, Barthélemy is increasingly disillusioned with the fashion industry. After a health crisis that put his priorities back in place and sparked a thirst for authentic and human experiences, he moved to Marrakech in Morocco, a city whose gentle energy he admired, and began to travel the world for good.

A love story that takes the young artist and designer to Cairo in 2017 ends quickly, relayed by a fascination for Egyptian culture and craftsmanship, which will lead to collaborations with traditional artisans from Cairo, the Nile Delta and the secluded Berber oasis of Siwa. Other creative partnerships followed with artisans working a variety of mediums in Morocco, Lebanon and Syria.

"I am drawn to parts of the world where humans know their lives are hanging by a thread," says Barthélemy. "Everything worthwhile follows: confidence in fate, belief in friendship, an instinct for kindness and appreciation for beauty. I try to incorporate this lesson learnt in Egypt into everything I do".

With this exhibition, Barthélemy inscribes his works for the first time of his artistic career in a museum in dialogue with the permanent collection of the establishment, which made a deep impression on him during his first visit to Dakar.

Text by Lee Marshall