



Ouattara Watts, *OTÉ-FÊ*, 2018, mixed media, 9' 1" × 10' 5 1/4".

Ouattara Watts

GALERIE CÉCILE FAKHOURY

Ouattara Watts left the Ivory Coast in 1977 to study painting at Paris's École des Beaux-Arts before settling in New York in 1988. He has since shown regularly in Europe and the US, but until two recent concurrent exhibitions in Abidjan—"Before Looking at this Work, Listen to It," at Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, and "Get Ready," a survey of works dating from 2009 to 2018 at the Rotonde des Arts Contemporains—Watts had never had a solo show in his native country. Galerie Fakhoury showcased the artist's latest work, presenting fourteen paintings from 2018—expressionistic compositions rife with references to African gods, modern art, computer coding, and cosmology—along with three older works. In the context of this show, another prominent feature of Watts's paintings, his alternately inscrutable and universal codes, took on a new didactic function. Painted in New York and shown in Abidjan, Watts's numerical sequences, calligraphic writing, and scientific symbols describe a political and spiritual experience of homecoming.

Hung on the gallery's entry wall, *Dogon Culture* (all works cited, 2018) was an inspiring creation scene. In the upper-left quadrant of this squarish and mostly black composition, Watts painted a cluster of bright symbols, including a stick figure, the numeral 5, a heart, the mathematical sign for summation, and an arrow. Splatters and drips of silver paint that emanate from this constellation evoke the explosive energy of a big-bang moment. Toward the bottom of the painting, Watts depicts a calmer earthly setting with three empty benches under a peaked roof. With this shrine-like image, Watts invites us to sit, stay awhile, and meditate on his cosmogenic myth and, by extension, our own origins.

In stark comparison, *OTÉ-FÊ*, described human-wrought destruction. This painting's large support is stitched together from two contrasting fabrics: a rugged tarp and a similarly sized swath of Italian brocade. In the upper half of the composition, over the tarp, Watts has painted a symbolist nightscape. The black background is punctuated by a number of motifs: a gold-and-silver finger-painted starburst, the numerals 5 and 7, a white molecular structure that suggests a constellation, and rows of white triangles that hang from strings like kites or flags. Below this complex cosmos, on top of the brocade, he has painted a stark black outline of the African continent. Like many of Watts's paintings, this work was inspired by music, and in fact its title comes from a 2018 reggae song by Alpha Blondy, an Abidjan-based Ivorian. The song "Oté-fê" describes, in a mix of English, French, and Dyula (a Mande language spoken in parts of West Africa), the exploitation of Africa's natural resources by foreigners. Watts visualizes this message in the lower part of the painting, where five menacing black forms suggesting boats or heavy boot prints invade the continent. Alluding to the slave trade and colonialism, *OTÉ-FÊ* was the most overtly political work on view.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Watts evoked Africa in a more positive light. *Farafina #2*, an uncharacteristically sparse composition, is a violet-washed tarp on top of which the artist has painted various numerical sequences. *Farafina* is the word for "Africa" in Bambara, (one of Mali's most widely spoken languages), and Watts conceived this painting as an homage to great black leaders, including Marcus Garvey, Nelson Mandela, and Malcolm X. Representing each historical figure with a different string of numbers, Watts offered up these men as the shining stars of his personal cosmology.