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African Diaspora class

Final paper
Cheri Samba

One of the most famous African painters in Contemporary art, and the Fund’s first laureate in Congo, Cheri Samba, was born in 1956, in Kinto M’Vuila. The main inspiration in his paintings is a social and political situation in Africa

“I grew up in a village where we could catch and grow all our own food. I used to enjoy sketching animals and faces with my finger in the sand. My father was a blacksmith who made hunting rifles. He wanted me to help him at the forge after school, so I hid my notebooks and sketched at night. I would copy pictures from a popular comic to sell to my friends. I told them I would become a famous artist, that I’d travel everywhere and have a big house.”

Cheri Samba started his artistic career from early childhood. He was always interested in doing humorous sketches, while in school. However at the age of 16 Samba left school in order to go work as a sign painter in Kasa Vubu Avenue in Kinhasa. At this period of time Samba was working as billboard painter, and comic strip artist. Later on in life, this experience played a major role in his inspirations. His paintings always reflect conventions of these genres. For example in his paintings he uses “word bubbles”, which allows him to comment and interject in his own compositions. He was not shy of publicity. That technique makes the message of the painting more dramatic, unavoidable and unexpected. Later on, word bubbles transferred into just a plain box of text in his paintings. Samba has explained why he started to use text in his paintings: “I had noticed that people in the street would walk by paintings, glance at them and keep going. I
thought that if I added a bit of text, people would have to stop and take time to read it, to get more into the painting and admire it. That’s what I called the ‘Samba signature. From then on I put text in all my paintings.’

In 1975, Samba opened his own studio where he painted billboards and shop signs. It was an important moment of his life, because he started to work independently and develop his own style. As he once mentioned at the interview: “The day I opened my studio, I hung a big painting outside in the street. It was about a war between two tribes, and showed lots of naked people fighting. It quickly drew a crowd, and by mid-morning there was a terrible traffic jam. The police arrested me for causing a disturbance and for disrespecting Congo’s history.” Cheri Samba was never a shy person, and was never afraid to reveal his imagery in the most unexpected way. He began painting on sacking cloth, because canvas was too expensive. Soon he gained the respect of local art circles.

His early most successful paintings were “mbanda scenes”. In this painting he comments on the household issues and kind of makes fun of it in a sophisticated way. This painting shows rival wives of the same man arguing. However he done it in such a way that intrigues people and you really want to dig in and know the whole story. Colors and contrast is another reason why his paintings are so animated and attention grabbing.

At that time in his career Samba started to really dig into African lifestyle and describe daily life in Zaire in his paintings. Social, political and cultural realities became the main theme in Samba’s work. The way he started to show it is by drawing all common aspects of everyday life in Kinshasa in uncommon way. He addressed issues such as: sexuality, Aids, illnesses, corruptions and paradoxes. However for a long time sexuality remained on of his favorite subjects. As he one said: “My painting is concerned
with people’s lives. I’m not interested in myths or beliefs. That’s not my goal. I want to change our mentality that keeps us isolated from the world. I appeal to people’s consciences. Artists must make people think.”

The interesting talent of Chéri Samba is how he uses a real subject matter; but puts its in unreal circumstances. He does it in purpose; he exaggerates the topic in order to shock people, to open their eyes in a way. He shows society what we already know, and got used to, but after seeing it through Samba’s eyes we start think in a different direction. For example his “medicine de Brousee” prints: “Mpiki”, “Traitements Apollo”, and “Le Lavement”. In these painting he uses an unusual angle, twisted bodies, and most importantly, strange process happening between people. But when you take a closer look, you realize what is happening, and how corrupted the methods of treatments are, and what level of knowledge about medicine people have in Africa. These paintings also show Samba’s skill to use a keen irony while working with such a serious subject matter. The combination of his comic style and strong idea, gave such a strong visual result.

‘When I paint, my main concerns are to represent things as they are, to communicate with humor, to ask relevant questions and to tell the truth. I consider myself a sort of painter-journalist. My source of inspiration is daily life. I always have suitcases full of ideas. As long as the world is the world, and writers have stories to tell, I will have something to say. Each time I meet someone, I think of another two or three paintings, but I don’t have time to realize them all.’

In 1980 his work gained an international audience, and became world known. That is when Samba changed his signature style and started to sign his paintings “Chéri Samba: Artiste Populaire.”
Interestingly, with all the corruptions going on in Africa, on which he comments so much in his work, he is very proud of his African identity and never forgot it. From the late 1980s, he started to use himself as the main subject in his paintings. By doing that, he really tried to show what it means to be a successful African artist. His painting “Une peinture” (A painting to be defended) is a great example of that. Cheri Samba put the emphasis on the relations between art and politics. In this painting, he demonstrates his skills of space and movement. He put himself with brush in one hand and a can of paint in the other, in the middle of the painting. The red rope around his waist is being pulled on left by two hands, and the green rope around his leg is also pulled by two more hands. Two men are grabbing him in the foreground, one by the waist, another one by the leg, and the all say: “I must defend that painting.” In the background, there is a Cheri Samba’s popular painting; a woman with a baby on her back is braiding another woman’s hair, which the artist is trying to protect. It shows a moment from everyday life in Africa, houses, wagon, and a child in a bathing tub. In this painting, Cheri Samba evidently is trying to say that his work is in demand. In a way he comments on it, before it was just another item for sale, and now white reviewers and traders claim ownership of it. This painting became a symbol of Africa, which needs to be defended. His paintings belong to him, as well as Africa belongs to its people, and this right needs to be defended. He is talking about Africa that has a stereotype, has a specific lifestyle, no limits and no history.

In conclusion, Cheri Samba comments on serious issues going on in Africa with irony and humoristic angle, while expressing his own identity and ownership of his country.
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