

PORTRAY

“About Town” with Ajarb Bernard Ategwa

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Ajarb Bernard Ategwa Photo: Courtesy Peres Projects, Berlin Photographer: Matthias Kolb

Coffee, produce, carts, and arms reaching to and fro in a world of transparent vivaciousness on a canvas by Cameroonian artist Ajarb Bernard Ategwa creates an urge of two sorts. One would be to step in the scene, (they are beautifully made to scale) and enjoy one moment in the bustle and the other, the antithesis, where one could cast a lingering gaze upon it all, and in that moment notice and appreciate the details, all of the layers not only coming off the canvas directly but from top to bottom, side to side. Your eyes dart as you are transported to Cameroon. The silhouettes of dramatis personae sauntering, or leaning up on a counter, unloading fruit baskets to reaching hands. In lieu of facial features these patrons are appointed patches of rainbow swirls or masks and then when there for a moment you may begin to notice carefully how the color will fade towards the bottom, to give the eye a “resting place” according to the Ajarb. You settle into it and feel it. Let’s sit down and watch this technicolor world go by for a while. It is beautifully distracting.

There are moments when you may become aware you are adjusting temperments, and empathy for the crowd filling your imagination of what they may be saying and most importantly, you linger as the work fills a voyer in you that should maybe have a cup of coffee. The paintings have the intellectual capability to create a dialogue in a place you have never been and become a playwright in your own head.

Cameroon and Creativity

How does living in Cameroon affect your creative process? Have you ever lived anywhere else?

ABA- Living in Cameroon is a great source of my creativity. Every African country has their own style of living, what makes sense for a Cameroonian artist to portray of a scene of the day to day is different to a Nigerian artist portraying a Nigerian lifestyle. So in that sense, staying in Cameroon has helped me to develop a lot.

About the color of the work.

ABA- I’ve always painted with very vibrant colours, I’m not sure why but I just love colour. My paintings became even more vibrant when I started working with Peres Projects in Berlin, when I saw the gallery on Google I thought wow, I need even more vibrant colours. I spoke with Javier and he helped me to get new acrylic paint that we can’t find in Cameroon. From that point on my paintings became more vibrant and also stronger.

Tell us about defying advice growing up and creating your dream to be an artist?

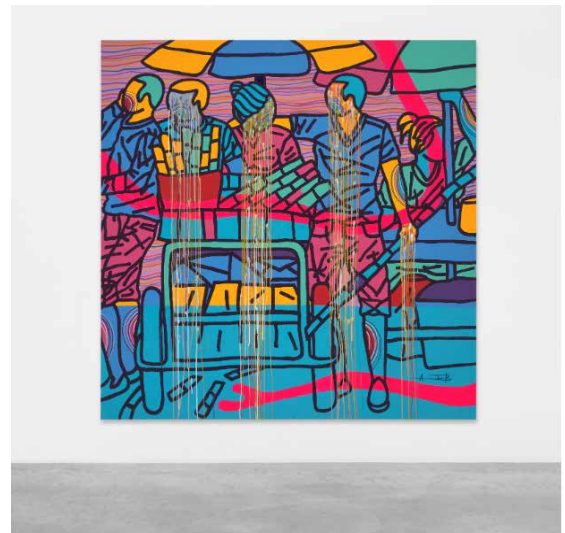
ABA- At first, my parents didn’t love the idea of me being an artist. In fact they opposed it but I think with time they have come to appreciate what I am doing more and more.

PERES PROJECTS

“My passion and creativity comes from my walks to the studio and around town. I often refer to my studio as the MENTAL STUDIO because everything I do takes shape in my mind and then I create. On my way to the studio, my head is always turning left and right, looking to capture the best scenes and when I arrive I try to bring out what I saw onto the canvas.

Do these characters in your paintings have stories of their own in your mind as you paint them? Do you imagine their conversations, or thoughts, give them names while you are painting the story?

ABA- The characters from my paintings are about 90% from the markets. I don't need to imagine their conversations, I know what they are saying from that particular moment when I see them. That is also helpful for the process for naming the painting when I have finished with a canvas.



*“Sugar Cane” 2019
Photo courtesy of Peres Projects, Berlin*

“Working in silence makes me concentrate too much, and it’s not good for me to over-think my work, and then over-work my paintings. Music helps me to concentrate less, I’ll sing and dance, and to me that’s happiness. When I am happy my paintings are more beautiful. 100% concentration is not good for me, maybe 60% concentration and 40% music.”

Getting Noticed

What did you do to become noticed? Many artists today have this conundrum and are interested in how other artists have broken into the business professionally.

ABA- I don't think that I did anything extraordinary in breaking through to the market. I think many artists have the potential to do so. I think that galleries are searching for something unique. I am the first African artist working with Peres Projects. When I was in Berlin for my first solo show at the gallery I asked Javier 'why me?' and he told me that the truth is in my paintings. During the opening of my show, a Berlin-based artist asked me if my paintings were digital paintings, I said no, it is all handmade – I think details count a lot.

What are you thankful for?

ABA- I am thankful to nature, and the Cameroonian markets that inspire my paintings every day. I am thankful to my wife and son, and also to Jack Bell Gallery, which was the first gallery to have the confidence to show my works internationally and also to Peres Projects.

Are you a big soccer fan? What else do you like to do besides paint?

ABA- Yes, I love soccer. Every Tuesday and Wednesday evening I close the MENTAL STUDIO early so that I can go home and watch the Champions League.

Where has been your favorite place you have visited with your work?

ABA- My works have been seen in many more places than I have actually visited thanks to the galleries that represent me.

How many languages do you speak? I was reading that in Cameroon there are over 200 languages spoken?

ABA- Yes, it's true that there are over 200 languages in Cameroon, but I only speak two – English and French, which are the two national languages

What are you excited about now? What do you have planned for 2020?

ABA- I am looking forward to continue my artistic growth, I'm still very much at the start of my career. In fact, in 2020, I will have my first solo show in Cameroon at Doual'art. I'm very much looking forward to showing in my home town and sharing my works with a local audience of friends, family and fellow artists.

The subjects in your paintings seem to be depicted as if the viewer is sitting in the environment watching them. How do you think you achieve this so well?

ABA- The subjects of my canvas are drawn from my daily walk to the MENTAL STUDIO. On my route, I come through three markets. I know all the subjects very well, I see them every day, which is why I can successfully put them on the canvas.

Ajarb will be having two upcoming single shows in 2020 in London and Doual'art in Cameroon. A special thank you to the Peres Project for the pictures. Peres Projects will have a booth at Art Basel Miami A14