

THE
Sybarite



Interview | Paloma Tracey Diaz

The Sybarite Speaks to Cameroonian Artist Ajarb Bernard Ategwa

“The desire to depict ephemeral hair salon scenes came from my desire to represent African women in aesthetic and contemporary moments.” The Sybarite interviewed Ajarb Bernard Ategwa on his new show Kwata Saloon at AFIKARIS Gallery. Exhibition will run until September 28th in Paris.

Tell our readers a bit about yourself

I am Ajarb Bernard Ategwa, a self-taught artist. I am inspired by daily life scenes and I seek to transcribe the bustle of Douala and the richness of the Cameroonian culture. My work is inspired by scenes from everyday life. As an artist, I feel that I have a duty to mark my time. It is therefore important to me that my paintings project what I experience in my time. Also, if my painting lasts for 200 years, people who see it at that time will be able to project themselves back 200 years ago and understand a past era. I find this interesting, because I am not sure that the scenes we see today will be the same in two centuries. Painting scenes from everyday life is therefore a way for me to mark my time and, I hope, future eras.

What got you in the art world?

I have always to be an artist. Since my childhood, I was attracted by art. As a teenager, I was marked by my

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parents' firm refusal to welcome my interest in drawing and painting as it is the case for everyone in the Mboa who would have the ambition to dive into art, unsurprisingly when, daily and in the current media, models are invisible.

How has your work progressed over the years?

Before, I was inspired by the daily activities of the city of Douala. My work was essentially about the markets. I depicted women selling fruit and vegetables. These scenes show them in simple clothes. My new series aims to highlight their chic and their proud attitude. Above all, I want to shed light on these same women. Also, if the skin of my characters used to be monochrome, I now depict them using swathes of colored dots. It is a way to pay tribute to the richness and diversity of Cameroonian culture.



You have shared that you didn't attend school, yet you have been very successful. What does success mean to you?

I don't see myself as an artist who has an international success. If I tell myself that I'm a successful artist, I will be stopped in my creation. I don't picture myself as an artist who succeeded in his career yet so it always pushes me further and to do better.

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What advice would you give to the young generations that want to pursue their dreams in the art industry?

We don't become an artist, we are born an artist. It is a gift. If you see that you have a gift for writing or drawing or painting, so too you can be an artist.

Who are other artists you are influenced/inspired by?

The artists who inspire me are Jackson Pollock, Jean Emati, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Damien Hirst.

People use art to understand aspects of the past, present, and future as well as to make a great impact. Do you think art can change the world?

I think art can change the world because everything surrounding us is made by artists. Everything that exists has been drawn before existing. Art is one of the first steps of any creation. So, art can change the world as it models it.

Public spaces in Douala are most of your source of inspiration. In your new exhibition, you pay tribute to the ephemeral hair salons popping up each year in Cameroon between November and December. Why did you decide to head in that direction for your new series?

The desire to depict ephemeral hair salon scenes came from my desire to represent African women in aesthetic and contemporary moments. When they go to these hair salons, it is to make themselves beautiful, to be appreciated by their entourage. Previously, I had drawn several women who were not well dressed, who did not take care of themselves. So the idea of representing these African women in ephemeral hair salons was a way for me to show another aspect of them, their chic side.

