OMAR BA: SAME DREAM
The artist’s first solo in Canada
The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Contemporary Art Square, Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion – Level S2
May 30 – November 10, 2019

Montreal, May 30, 2019 – In collaboration with Toronto’s Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA) is presenting the first Canadian monographic exhibition dedicated to Omar Ba, one of the most influential artists of his generation. OMAR BA: SAME DREAM showcases a selection of Ba’s major works from different periods in his career. In addition, the artist is creating a large-scale mural for the Montreal public, directly on one of the gallery walls. Ba’s work is at once a bold critique of tyranny, a celebration of the strength of the human spirit and an ode to the resilience of the world’s youth.

As for what he would like the public to take away from his work and this exhibition, Omar Ba says: “I’d like people to see that we need to give African artists their rightful place, and I also hope they come away with a more positive image of humankind. That we realize that beyond conflict, religion and culture, we are all one. That there are no blacks, yellows or whites – only humans. I also want to convey the idea of an Africa that’s reasserting its place: of countries free of conflict and dictators that people are no longer forced to leave in order to have a good life. In fact, it’s my dream that the continent share its riches with every other country in the world in a mutual respect between African and Western leaders.”

Nathalie Bondil, Director General and Chief Curator, MMFA, and Gaëtane Verna, Director of the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, delightfully add: “This is the first time our two institutions have collaborated together! We are convinced that this particular vision of contemporary Africa will surprise and enchant our Canadian audiences. By marrying current realities with disparate mythological elements, a fantastical bestiary and African traditions, Ba creates powerful economic and political metaphors for his continent.”
Omar Ba’s work engages with some of the most urgent issues of our time: the global inequality of wealth and power, immigration crises and our changing relationship to the natural world. His penchant for depicting personal narratives alongside collective ones speaks to the multivalent character of his work.

In his practice, Ba synthesizes the visual texture of his two homes – Dakar, Senegal, and Geneva, Switzerland – combining the historical and the contemporary, elements African and European, as well as a range of techniques and tools including corrugated cardboard and his bare hands. Ba prepares his surfaces – be they cardboard, canvas or wall – with a black ground, upon which he layers vivid colours and complex compositions teeming with detail. His figures emerge from lush flora and fauna and biomorphic forms inspired by the dazzling coast of Senegal, where he grew up. Micro-worlds exist within larger constellations that evoke a shared cosmogony between humans, plants and animals.

Mary-Dailey Desmarais, who curated the Montreal presentation and is Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, MMFA, explains: “Same Dream reveals at once the artist’s profound critique of authoritarianism and his deep embrace of the resilience and perseverance of the human spirit. Representations of dictators and despots depicted as hybrid half-beasts are set in dialogue with paintings of youth and strong women that convey hope for the future. This duality in Ba’s choice of subject matter underscores today’s divided reality, precariously straddled between development and destruction... Across different cultures of today, he explores a recurrent motif of birth, death and reincarnation.”

About the Artist
Omar Ba (born 1977, Dakar, Senegal) lives and works between Dakar and Geneva. His work has been shown at BOZAR, Brussels, Belgium (2017); Ferme-Asile, Sion, Switzerland (2015); Hales Gallery, London, UK (2017, 2014); Biennale de Dakar, Senegal (2014); Aargauer Kunsthaus, Aarau, Switzerland (2012) among others. Ba’s works can be found in private and public collections, including Credit Suisse, Switzerland; Fonds municipal d’art contemporain de la Ville de Genève, Switzerland; Fonds municipal d’art contemporain de la Ville de Paris; Centre national des arts plastiques, France; and the Barbier-Mueller Collection, Geneva, as well as the Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France, and the Louvre Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. In 2011, Ba received the Swiss Art Award.

Catalogue
Published in English and French by The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, under the editorship of Gaëtane Verna, the 150-page catalogue is a wonderful complement to the exhibition. On sale at the Museum Boutique and Bookstore.

Credits and curatorial team
An exhibition initiated, organized and circulated by The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, in collaboration with the MMFA. It is curated by Nabila Abdel Nabi, Associate Curator, The Power Plant, and Mary-Dailey Desmarais, Curator of International Modern and Contemporary Art, MMFA, for the Montreal presentation.

Acknowledgements
The exhibition received support from TD The Ready Commitment, the Pro-Helvetia Swiss Council and Lead Donors Steven and Lynda Latner. It is presented in Montreal by Air Canada and the MMFA’s Young Philanthropists’ Circle as part of the upcoming inauguration of the Stéphan Crétier and Stéphany Maillery Wing for World Cultures and Togetherness.
The Museum extends its thanks to Quebec’s Ministère de la Culture et des Communications for its vital support, as well as to the Conseil des arts de Montréal and the Canada Council for the Arts for their ongoing support.


Download high-resolution images here.

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About the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts
Drawing over 1 million visitors annually, the MMFA is one of the most visited museum in Canada and North America. Its highly original temporary exhibitions combine various artistic disciplines – fine arts, music, film, fashion and design – and are exported to the four corners of the world. Its rich encyclopedic collection, displayed in its five pavilions, includes international art, world cultures, decorative arts and design, and Quebec and Canadian art. The Museum has seen exceptional growth in recent years with the addition of two new pavilions: the Claire and Marc Bourgie Pavilion, in 2011, and the Michal and Renata Hornstein Pavilion for Peace, in 2016. The MMFA complex also includes Bourgie Hall, a 460-seat concert hall, as well as an auditorium and a movie theatre. The MMFA is one of Canada’s leading publishers of art books in French and English, which are distributed internationally. The Museum also houses the Michel de la Chenelière International Atelier for Education and Art Therapy, the largest educational complex in a North American art museum, enabling the MMFA to offer innovative educational, wellness and art therapy programmes.

mbam.qc.ca
The MMFA, in collaboration with the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery, Toronto, is presenting the first monographic exhibition in Canada devoted to the work of Omar Ba, one of the most influential African artists of his generation. Bringing together many of his most important works to date and a large-scale in situ painting, *Same Dream* reveals at once the artist’s profound critique of authoritarianism and his deep embrace of the resilience and perseverance of the human spirit. Representations of dictators and despots depicted as hybrid half-beasts are set in dialogue with paintings of youth and strong women that convey hope for the future. This duality in Ba’s choice of subject matter underscores today’s divided reality, precariously straddled between development and destruction.

Omar Ba’s work engages with some of the most urgent issues of our time: global inequality of wealth and power, immigration crises and our changing relationship to the natural world. His penchant for depicting personal narratives alongside collective ones speaks to the multivalent character of his work. In his practice, Ba synthesizes the visual texture of his two homes – Dakar, Senegal, and Geneva, Switzerland – combining the historical and the contemporary, elements African and European, as well as a range of techniques and tools including corrugated cardboard and his own bare hands. Ba prepares his surfaces – be they cardboard, canvas or wall – with a black ground, upon which he layers vivid colours and complex compositions teeming with detail. His figures emerge from lush flora and fauna and biomorphic forms inspired by the dazzling coast of Senegal, where he grew up. Micro-worlds exist within larger constellations that evoke a shared cosmogony between humans, plants and animals. Across different cultures of today, he explores a recurrent motif of birth, death and reincarnation.

Born in Senegal in 1977, Omar Ba now splits his time between Dakar and Geneva. His works have been exhibited and collected by major public and private institutions, including the Fondation Louis Vuitton (Paris) and the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

*Same Dream* brings together work from many different periods of your career. In reflecting on the whole, I am struck by what appears to me to be a certain duality in your practice. There are certain series, such as the dictators, that constitute an engaged political critique, while other series, such as your paintings of African youth, carry a message of hope. Can you speak a bit about this double aspect of your practice? My work is foremost about human beings and the human condition, be it in Africa or elsewhere in the world. But in this specific case, creating a discussion on dictators in juxtaposition with one on youth and identity problems allows me to bring attention to the next generation; to express that youth without an identity is a bit like art without roots. And that, ultimately, it’s the next generation that will help change the mentalities of dictators and bring about the decent leadership of nations.

Women also play an important role in your work...

Yes, that’s true. Earlier, you asked me which work I liked best, and I mentioned the portrait of my mother. It’s through her that I talk about the status of women and their contribution in different countries. We know that before the arrival of religions (e.g. Islam and Christianity), much of Africa, including Senegal, was matriarchal. It’s the mother who assumed the “paternal” role, if you will. In fact, in mentioning someone by name, you would reference their mother’s line rather than their father’s. Contrary to what most people think, women held a much more prominent position than men in these societies – there were queens and women who were the guardians of various rituals. In addition, it was women who were responsible for education and were the bedrock of the community. All these things somewhat disappeared with the arrival of certain religions and cultures. That’s why I want to pay tribute to the woman: she is the mother of life itself.

You have made several references to religion. Tell us about the role it plays in your practice.

As Senegalese, as Africans, we tend to say we live a sort of schizophrenia, in that we’re men – be they cardboard, canvas or wall – with a black ground, upon which he layers vivid colours and complex compositions teeming with detail. His figures emerge from lush flora and fauna and biomorphic forms inspired by the dazzling coast of Senegal, where he grew up. Micro-worlds exist within larger constellations that evoke a shared cosmogony between humans, plants and animals. Across different cultures of today, he explores a recurrent motif of birth, death and reincarnation.

**Is there a link between animism and the animal forms you give your dictators?**

Fundamentally, I am not making any allusions to animism in representing humans with animal heads, even though the composition might suggest otherwise. What compels me to mix man and animal in my art is our animalistic nature: the beast in us that surfaces in certain situations, conflict zones or disasters. What drives man to go to war? How can he dominate another? Our behaviour can at times be savage. My hybrid creatures are a metaphor for our humanity.

**Your dictators, with their animal heads, appear calm, docile, poised... Why is that?**

It’s a choice that stems from two things. First, I’ve observed that as humans we’re always trying to conceal our negativity. We rise in the morning, get dressed and attempt to cover ourselves in clothing that creates an impression. But underneath is a human side that we want to hide. Secondly, it reflects something I always aspire to do in my work, which is to talk about difficult and violent subjects with the utmost beauty. It’s a way to get the viewer to absorb the message in an unhurried way. I want the observer to take their time and contemplate, even if the subject is complex.

In looking closely at your paintings – both in the background nature and within the characters themselves – you can see all sorts of hidden figures. What is their significance? They’re symbolic. The point I’m trying to make is that in everyday life, there are things we see and others we miss. It’s about enticing the spectator to enter into these worlds. I don’t want people to look at my works from a single point of view. You have to get close to them to examine the smallest details, then step back to see the big picture and take in the main figures. This shift in perspective interests me. It reminds me of my journey when I left Senegal for Switzerland.

**Tell us about this migration.**

In fact, it happened by pure chance. I was invited to Germany while studying at the Dakar...
 Universidad de las Artes. Durante este mes y medio, una típica semana en Bonn (mi primera visita a Europa y a Alemania en general), me di cuenta de que el arte de la escuela era algo completamente diferente a lo que habíamos visto en Dakar. Entonces, en un seminario en la universidad, hice un mural para el primer año de la escuela. Me di cuenta de que me gustaba el mural, pero no conocía la técnica adecuada. Eso me llevó a hacer más investigaciones y a tomar clases de arte. Desde entonces, el arte ha sido mi pasión.

**Interview by Mary-Dailey Desmarais**

**Exhibition**

*Omar Ba: Same Dream*

May 30 – November 10, 2019

Jean-Noël Desmarais Pavilion – Level S2

**Credits and Curatorial Team**

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**Interview by Mary-Dailey Desmarais**

**What made you decide to pursue art and at what moment?**

The idea came from one of my teachers when I was studying general mechanics at the technical school. One day, he gave us an assignment based on a course we hadn’t taken yet. On my paper, I drew a person with a knife in their back based on Claude Sambo’s. This Swiss artist and professor in Geneva then asked me if I wanted to do a master’s in fine arts in his country, and that’s how it all started.

**What would you like the public to take away from your work and this exhibition?**

I’d like people to see that we need to give African artists the right place, and I also hope they come away with a more positive image of humankind. I want to convey the idea of an Africa that’s reasserting its place; of countries free of conflict and dictators that people are no longer forced to leave in order to have a good life. In fact, it’s my dream that the continent share its riches with every other country in the world in a mutual respect between African and Western leaders.

**Interview by Mary-Dailey Desmarais**

**You begin almost all of your compositions on a black background. Why is that?**

In school, they taught us to paint on white to make the colors stand out better, to make them cleaner, perfect. But this struck me as a form of ideology: to always say that what is clean is white and what is dirty is black. This idea kept being repeated: to effect something sharp and true requires white; for murky, it’s black. I wanted to do the opposite, not only to show the purity of black but to right the wrongs of history. It’s a central theme in my quest, my creative process – how to adjust things, put them back in order. Everything in my painting revolves around this. I realized that I could actually see things more clearly by starting a painting this way, and that it made me feel good, serene. I say this a lot, I know.

**What would you most like the public to take away from your work and this exhibition?**

I’d like people to see that we need to give African artists their rightful place, and I also hope they come away with a more positive image of humankind. That we realize that beyond conflict, religion and culture, we are all one. There are no blacks, yellows or whites – only humans. I also want to convey the idea of an Africa that’s reasserting its place; of countries free of conflict and dictators that people are no longer forced to leave in order to have a good life. In fact, it’s my dream that the continent share its riches with every other country in the world in a mutual respect between African and Western leaders.

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