

Gaia, 1994



Ouattara has lived half his life in Africa and half in Europe and the United States. As a young man, he was initiated into the religion of the Senufo people who inhabit an area including northern Ivory Coast, southern Burkina Faso, and southern Mali. Ouattara traces the origins of his artistry to this initiation period when the elders, "saw that my mind was shamanic...in the direction of creation."¹ Inspired by reproductions of works by Goya and Picasso that he saw in books at the embassy and consular libraries in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Ouattara traveled to Paris in 1977 to study art. Since that time he has absorbed further Western influences—perhaps most especially the works of Joseph Beuys, Julian Schnabel, Jackson Pollock, and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Ouattara's paintings reflect not only the cosmopolitanism of his own life but, equally, a conception of the spirit that embraces the world and cosmos. Steeped in magic, his art expresses tenets of West African *voudon*, a relative of the more familiar West Indian *voodoo*. As Ouattara describes it, *voudon* derives from the mingling of traditional African spiritual practices with other religions such as Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. "You are allowed a vision," explains Ouattara, "that is cosmic rather than a nationalistic or village-oriented one. Therefore you are the sun, the rain, the Mexican, the American, the Japanese, etc."²

His paintings reflect this synthetic approach in both form and content. They are amalgams of painted abstract surfaces, found objects, painted texts, and occasionally,

photographic images. He combines Western religious symbols with images and forms derived from traditional Senufo rituals, while often including imagery—in the form of found photographs such as album covers, magazine clippings, etc.—that depict persons or incidents out of contemporary African, European, or American daily life. The ankh, a symbol of life, that occurs frequently in his paintings suggests the deep influence of ancient Egyptian civilization on sub-Saharan Africa. Indeed, Ouattara explains that many years ago his own people, the Senufo, migrated from an area in the Sudan, just south of Egypt, bringing elements of ancient Egyptian culture with them.

For Ouattara the act of painting is itself a ritual act in which the artist attempts to conjure magic forces for the betterment of the world. He hopes to express a link between the ancient rites of his ancestors and today's modern, technological society. "We live in a totally technological world today," he said in a recent interview with Thomas McEvelley, "a world where if you push a button everybody can blow up. Before Hiroshima, they thought man was immortal, but after Hiroshima the world is mortal. I think that spirituality must permit people like us, who are in the grip of technology, to better appropriate and take over technology...to give it a more humane quality."³

The compelling sense of timelessness in Ouattara's paintings derives not from an impulse to transcend the harsh realities of the everyday world, but rather from a profound sense of suspension between an actual past, present, and

future. History is collapsed into a single moment, pregnant with mystery and possibility.

Ouattara was born in the Ivory Coast in 1957. He currently lives and works in New York City.

Lawrence Rinder

1. Interview with author, March 10, 1994.
2. Thomas McEvelley, *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale* (New York: The Museum for African Art, 1993), p. 72.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by the artist):

1. *Gindo Voodoo*, 1994, mixed media on wood, 111 x 96 in.
2. *Gaia*, 1994, mixed media on wood, 111 x 96 in.
3. Untitled, 1994, mixed media on wood, 111 x 96 in.
4. Untitled, 1994, mixed media on wood, 111 x 96 in.
5. *N'krouma, Berlin 1885*, 1994, 111 x 96 in.
6. Untitled, 1993-94, mixed media on canvas, 157 1/2 x 102 3/8 in.
7. *Amon*, 1993-94, mixed media on wood, 118 x 157 1/2 in.
8. *Meroe*, 1993-94, mixed media on canvas and metal, 107 x 78 3/4 in.
9. *OZB*, 1994, mixed media on wood, 85 x 70 3/4 in.
10. *Braza*, 1993, mixed media on wood, 85 x 70 3/4 in.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Centre Culturel de la Rochelle, La Rochelle '86; Marilyn Butler Gallery, Los Angeles '89; Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, NY '89, '90 (catalog), '92; Galerie Philippe Boulakia, Paris '90 (catalog); Akira Ikeda Gallery, Nagoya, Japan '90, '94; The New York Kunsthalle '94.

Selected group exhibitions:

Musée National des Arts Africains et Océaniens, Paris '85; Galerie Georges Lavrov, Paris '86; The Alternative Museum, Syncretism: The Art of the XX Century, NY '91; The New Museum of Contemporary Art, *Africa Explores: New and Renewed Forms in 20th Century African Art*, NY '91 (traveled; catalog); Cavin-Morris Gallery, *Other Drums: Visionary Works*, NY '92; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago '94; Museum for Contemporary African Art, *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale*, NY '94.

Selected bibliography about the artist:

Surrans, Alain. "En noir et en couleur," *Nouvel observateur*, no. 1174 (May 15-21 '87).

Veve, Catherine. *Afrique élite*, no. 1 (Feb. '89).

Warren, Ben Michael. *Ouattara* (Kyoto: Art Random '89).

Bollon, Patrice. "La dame en noir qui donne le ton," *Le Match de Paris* ('89).

Mifflin, Margot. "Ouattara's Ritualistic Paintings," *Elle* (Mar. '89).

Levin, Kim. "Ouattara," *Village Voice* (Mar. 14 '89).

Barrière, Gérard. "Ouattara ou l'Afrique Universelle," *New Art International* (May '89).

Levin, Kim. "Ouattara," *Village Voice* (June '90), pp. 113-119.

Debailleux, Henri-François. *Liberation*, Paris (Nov. '90).

"Ouattara," *L'Express*, no. 384 (Nov. '90)

"Ouattara", *Elle*, Paris, no. 2344 (Dec. '90).

Wein, Lilly. "Ouattara," *Art in America* (Sept. '91).

"Ouattara, Monographie," *Revue Noire*, Paris (June-Aug. '92).

"New Art from Africa," *Kunstforum International* (May '93), pp. 301-303.

MATRIX is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, the California Arts Council, Mrs. Paul L. Wattis, the University Art Museum Council MATRIX Endowment, Byron Meyer, and Stanley M. Smith.

The Ouattara exhibition is part of the Shared Voices program of the Art and Film Collection Access Project.

Permanent Collection Exhibitions, Films, and Public Programs in the Art and Film Collection Access Project at the University Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive are made possible through the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative.