

WIDEWALLS

Searching For New Modes of Figuration - An Interview with Famakan Magassa

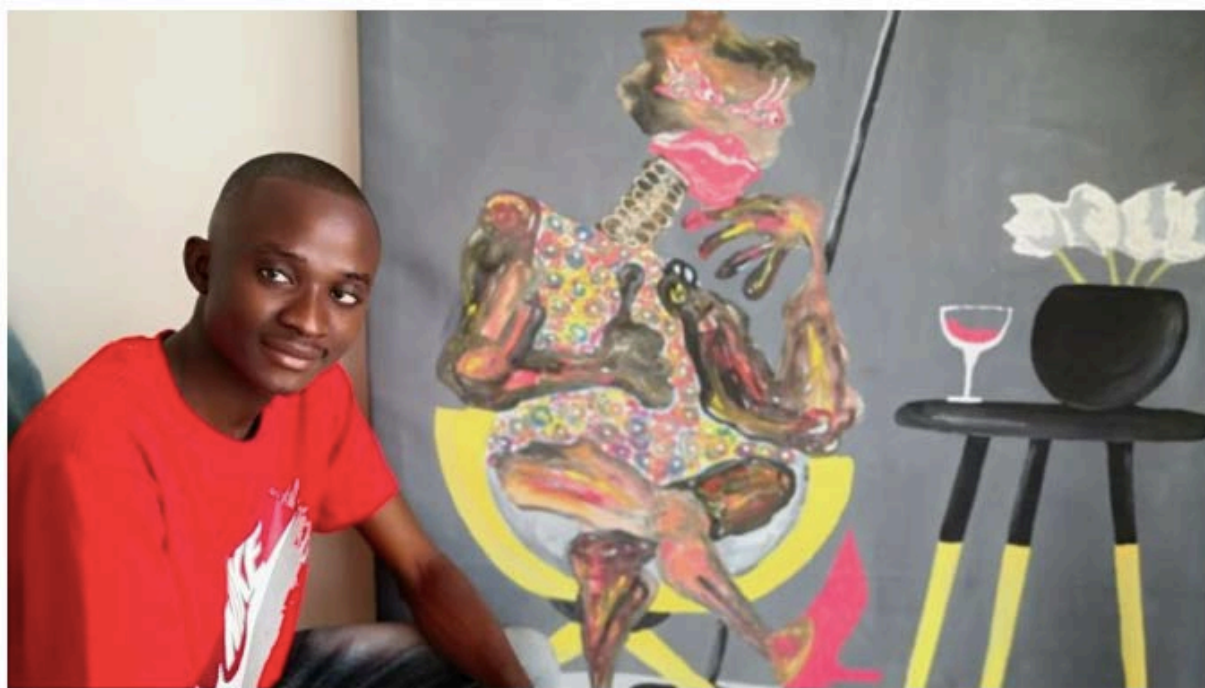
Interviews



In recent times, art institutions are showing an increased interest in showcasing the works made by African artists, an interest which is long overdue. Special attention is directed towards figuration that apparently allows younger generations to search for new representation models.

Such is the case with a burgeoning Malian artist, Famakan Magassa, whose vibrant style seems to develop rapidly. In 2018, he received BFA from the Conservatoire Arts et Metiers Multimedia Balla Fasséke Kouyaté in the capital of Mali, Bamako. Since then, Magassa has participated in several group exhibitions and was one of the 2020 Laureates of the Cité Internationale des Arts Residency in Paris.

Currently on display at albertz benda is his debut exhibition in the U.S. titled *SOIFS* or *THIRSTS*. This captivating body of work was initially developed in collaboration with Floreal Duran of 5Mondes Gallery and exhibited at the L’Institut Français du Mali, Bamako and La Cité Internationale des Arts in 2021.



Famakan Magassa. Courtesy of the artist.

Driven By the African Reality

While growing up in Mali, Famakan Magassa was exposed to obvious contrast between contemporary cultural developments and the local traditions. The artist carefully observes human behavior, using humor to represent it.

The exhibition title, *soifs* or *thirst*, does not refer solely to the most literal need for water, although it is an essential issue in his native country. Moreover, Magassa tends to underline a myriad of thirsts found in contemporary society, for instance, thirst for addiction, freedom, or power, to mention a few.

Works on View

This body of work is comprised of midsize and large-scale formats, including collage in combination with acrylic on canvas. Although they differ in tone and atmosphere, what all the works share in commons, is Magassa’s capability to fuse figuration and abstract patterning.

The artist flirts with social satire, caricature, and self-reflection, like the Belgian painter James Ensor or the writer Honoré de Balzac. Western modernism highlighted *flaneur* or the urban explorer, a (privileged) figure who wanders the city's streets in a search for inspiration. In West Africa, there is a similar yet more emancipated figure of a griot - a historian, storyteller, poet, or musician, to which Magassa relates as an artist.

As mentioned earlier, Magassa's thirsts are universal; however, most of his imagery refers to Mali's cultural and geographical landscape. Furthermore, his works also reflect environmental concerns such as dried lands, pollution or lack of water. This young artist is definitely an observer who articulates reality in a unique way.

The exhibition *Famakan Magassa: SOIFS* will be on view at albertz benda gallery in New York until February 26, 2022.

We had a chat with Magassa on the occasion of his current show. In an exclusive Widewalls interview, the artist talks about his recent body of work and much more.



Famakan Magassa - Soif D'addiction, 2021. Acrylic, oil pastel, paper towel on canvas 46 1/2 x 57 5/8 inches, 118 x 146.5 cm.
Signed and dated recto Inv# AB13140

The New Imagery

Widewalls: Your solo show titled SOIFS is currently on view at albertz benda gallery in New York. Could you tell us something about this concept of societal thirsts you are exploring?

“THIRSTS” are not only what one might think, even when considering the water problem so crucial in Africa. In my work, I refer to very real “THIRSTS” rooted in our societies and others more immaterial or even allegorical. The project aims to be Afro-universalist because it concerns all individuals and countries. I talk about desire and pleasure, as well as the evils of society on different levels.

Widewalls: You relate yourself to a griot, a figure from West Africa who maintains a tradition of oral history. How do you think your storytelling approach relates to this concept?

There is a relationship between my work and that of the role of a griot, which is an oral transmission because it is through that that I see and hear what feeds my inspiration.

The Inspiration and The Process

Widewalls: The figures in these canvases directly reference “kouredougas”, members of a non-religious community in Mali who were also the subject of your previous body of work. Could you tell us more about the cultural role of “kouredougas” and how they fit into your work?

The Korèdugaw is a traditional society specific to certain regions of Mali whose goal is to bring peace, joy and understanding in the social atmosphere, ideally putting an end to the conflict. The Korèdugaw was my defence theme when I was finishing my degree in fine arts. It inspired me a lot, not only in my work but also in life itself. The Korèdugaw has several roles, including bringing peace and entertaining the population claiming cures for many diseases. Their way of life and their perception of life is specific. This part of society interested me. Above all, they are endangered. So I found it important to convey the usefulness of this society, bringing voice to the voiceless.

Widewalls: What is your painterly process like? Do you nurture the preparation process, or do you enter the production more intuitively?

I do not work intuitively in my pictorial approach. As a matter of fact, there is a great deal of preparatory work. It starts with a quest for the theme. After writing a text on it, I look to find titles for each canvas and the number of canvases that feels right to tell the story.

The Future Plans

Widewalls: You are currently based in Paris. How do you think this move has influenced your career?

I actually just spent six months in Paris for two residencies, one at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris and the other with the Renoma house, which works with fashion. Otherwise, I live and work in Bamako. My stay in Paris was beneficial because I had a lot of visibility and was able to network; I gained a lot of experience in my work as well.

Widewalls: What is next for you? Could you share some of your future plans and projects?

I am working on exhibitions to come - one of which opens at the new albertz benda space in Los Angeles. My work will be part of the exhibition *Endless Summer*, opening on February 19.