

Herald St

Herald St is pleased to present the gallery's second solo exhibition with Sanou Oumar, taking place in its East London premises. The installation features over twenty vibrant works on paper in two scales: one intimate and familiar, and the other expansive and immersive. Grouped by size and hung in one continuous line around the gallery, the exhibition evinces the artist's daily, repetitive practice of meditative drawing, layered with memories and loaded with visual potency.

Growing up in Burkina Faso, Oumar had little exposure to art. He found aesthetic pleasure instead in the orderliness of the everyday: clean dishes, crisply folded sheets, buildings with neatly aligned windows, a brochure of Paris displaying the architectural beauty of the Eiffel Tower. His work has previously been considered alongside the early twentieth-century pioneering abstractionists Emma Kunz and Hilma af Klint, whose cosmic paintings were long deemed to be on the fringes of the Western canon. While there are marked similarities on a formal and mystical level, Oumar explains that his drawings are simply about 'someone who is sitting quietly and thinking about themselves'. He began drawing shortly after moving to New York as an asylum seeker in 2015, while waiting for his lawyer at the refugee centre in Harlem or after meetings in Morningside Park. Over time his practice became a ritual, a nightly accomplishment marking a moment of deep reflection.

Oumar starts each drawing by contemplating his *tabula rasa*, the white sheet of paper. Using a compass, he anchors his work by tracing a perfect circle in pencil, and chooses his first colour based on the chance element of whichever is closest to hand. He made his earliest drawings in black and white, mimicking the precision of a computer-generated image. Yet, he invites sleights of hand within his practice, embracing flecks of ink and pencil smudges as proof of a human presence. When asked how his work has evolved in the past year, the artist's answer is to the point: 'Each drawing says the same story about Sanou.' The rigorous mark-making and sophisticated palette is intuitive, less concerned with formal and chromatic experimentation and more closely tied to personal experiences: memories of his childhood and his mother, the architecture which surrounds him, and life events which unfold in his mind.

Beyond their visual spectacle, Oumar's drawings carry a chronology with them. Each work is titled concisely by the day it was made, echoing the conceptual practice of On Kawara. But the matter-of-fact objectivity of their names betrays the personal narrative that becomes apparent when lining up the works in order – revealing the day which called for calmer pastel tones, another which conjured pale green amoeba-like forms, and one with a swirling sea of oxblood and violet waves. Oumar compares his drawings to pages of a journal, and through them we can glimpse, like peering through a keyhole, into the artist's state of mind.

Oumar works in silence in his basement studio, with no other noise than his pen hitting the paper. He traces items close to hand – his identity card, bottle tops, popsicle sticks, and other objects found around the city – and employs humble materials – pen, markers, paper. Yet with these simple tools, he creates dazzling compositions. One might see in them symbols of an elevated mental state, from mandala-like forms to psychedelic colours. By marrying the quotidian with the transcendent, his drawings invite us to find the mysticism in the everyday – or as the artist puts it, 'the limitless positive beautiful in your head'.

Text by Émilie Streiff

Sanou Oumar (b. 1986, Burkina Faso, West Africa) lives and works in New York City.

Recent solo exhibitions include Gordon Robichaux, New York (2021); Herald St, London (2019); Elisabeth Kley and Sanou Oumar, South Willard, Los Angeles (2019). In 2018, Oumar had his first two-person exhibition (with Matt Paweski) at Gordon Robichaux, NY.

Group shows include Feelings Are Facts, Gordon Robichaux, New York (2021); Drawn Out, Herald St | Museum St, London (2021); I KNOW WHERE I'M GOING WHO CAN I BE NOW, The Modern Institute, Glasgow (2021); (Nothing but) Flowers, Karma, New York (2020); A Page from My Intimate Journal (Part II), Parker Gallery, Los Angeles (2020); The Body-Split Trick, Essex Flowers, New York (2020); Mapping Black Identities, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis (2019); Sanou Oumar, KIOSK, Marseille (2019); La terra piatta e la dimensione lirica di un luogo come se regredire fosse inventare, Octagon x Maroncelli 12, Milan (2019); CONDO, Herald St, London (2019); A Page from My Intimate Journal (Part I), Gordon Robichaux, New York (2018); A Concentration of Power, Joost van den Bergh, London (2018); Intersectional Identities, Clifford Chance US LLP, New York and Washington DC (2017); Art and Resistance, curated by the Center for Constitutional Rights, Mormor Studio, New York (2016).

Oumar's art has been celebrated on two occasions in *The New Yorker*, and a book of his drawings (published by Pre-Echo Press with an essay by Matt Paweski) was released in December 2018.