

Meschac Gaba

June 22 – July 28, 2017

Tanya Bonakdar Gallery is very pleased to announce its second solo exhibition with Meschac Gaba. On view June 22–July 28, 2017, the exhibition weaves together three bodies of work, forging a powerful commentary on contemporary cultural identity and the current state of immigrants and refugees.

Inspired by his experience living between the Netherlands and Benin since the late 1990s, Gaba has navigated and closely examined national and transnational identity constructs under the tumult of globalization. By playfully restructuring relationships between the Western world and developing worlds, the local and the global, art and the everyday, Gaba brings into question dominant codes and frameworks of identity and value.

In the gallery's ground floor exhibition space, the artist presents a large-scale, multi-colored participatory work entitled *Reflection Room Tent*. Creating a direct reference to the tents used in refugee camps around the world, this colorful room-sized tent is intended to be used as a 'drawing room,' where viewers are encouraged to create unique expression and hang their pieces up for view.

While refugee tents harbor those in exile and plight, Gaba's *Reflection Room Tent* sets out as a platform for discourse, process, and debate—a live testimonial that grows and evolves over the course of the exhibition as a collective rumination on current events. The tent's vibrant colors and vivid patterns embody Gaba's hopeful concept of *Citoyen du Monde*—an imagined global flag created from a union of elongated versions of all individual world flags.

First shown at Museum Ludwig's 40th Anniversary group exhibition, "We Call It Ludwig" in Spring 2017, this participatory work continues to build on Gaba's concept of 'rooms' that serve as spaces for contemplation, sociability, collaboration and play.

A new set of hand-braided wigs are on view in the main exhibition space upstairs. This is the latest iteration of the artist's iconic wig series, which he began in the early 2000s.

Inspired by landmarks in Washington D.C., these new synthetic-hair sculptures are modeled after key sites of world politics and markers of American history such as the White House, Pentagon, Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial.

Based on traditional African hair braiding styles and techniques, these complex and enigmatic wigs combine architecture and hairstyle—rendering the two as equally powerful signifiers of modern culture. Over the past decade, Gaba has realized this project in cities including New York, London, Paris, Amsterdam, Milan, and Cape Town. In the Washington D.C. series, the artist shifts his focus to the epicenter of world politics, calling attention to the new status and direction of global affairs.

By using traditional African craft, the playful reconstruction of these American landmarks amplifies notions of culture within a globalized and capitalist context, and blurs the lines between commerce and tradition, as well as between art and craft.

A new video work entitled *Perruques of Washington D.C.* presents a procession of some 15 people wearing the Washington D.C wigs that are on display in the next room. The group makes its way through the streets and dirt roads of Cotonou, highlighting the distance between the two cities and stressing the need for a new global narrative—particularly in the turbulent political climate today.

In the project space, the solemn installation *Memoriale aux Refugies Noyees* (Memorial for Drowned Refugees) elaborates on themes of migration and displacement, forming a rippling deliberation on profound loss and international tragedy.

Inspired by an old West African ritual that is performed after a person has drowned at sea, the work is comprised of a set of lanterns and folded felt blankets. At night, families and friends of the deceased place these objects on the seashore to provide guidance and warmth to the spirit of the lost community member.

At once tender, profound and critical, the poetic gesture of this ad hoc ritual now speaks broadly to the global refugee crisis and the countless people who perished while fleeing their homes. The totemic pile of blankets and glowing lanterns that form this local custom allude to the tragedy of voiceless people, who in their plight slip into the sea, never to be heard from again. Here, Gaba's mise-en-scene and performance-like approach invite viewers to look beyond established systems and hierarchies, and ponder an alternate way of thinking that is based on adaptation and collaboration, rather than conformity and exclusion.

Born in Cotonou, Benin in 1961, Gaba currently lives and works between Cotonou and Rotterdam. From 1996–1997, he studied at Rijksakademie voor Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam, where he inaugurated the first installment of his major work, *Museum of Contemporary African Art*, in 1997. Over a period of five years, the artist progressively installed twelve interactive “rooms” of this nomadic museum at institutions throughout Europe—S.M.A.K., Ghent (1999); W139, Amsterdam (1999); Le Pavé Dans La Mare, Besançon (1999); Witte de With Centre for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam (2001); Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2002); and Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2000)—culminating with his presentation of the final room, *The Humanist Space*, at DOCUMENTA 11 in 2002. The entire work now belongs to the permanent collection of the Tate Modern, which showed it for the first time in the UK in 2013.

Gaba has presented major works at the Dutch Pavilion during the 50th Venice Biennial in 2003 and at the 2010 Liverpool Biennial. In 2009, Museum de Paviljoens in the Netherlands opened a survey exhibition of his work entitled *Museum for Contemporary African Art & More*, which traveled to Kunsthalle Fridericianum in Kassel and to Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno in the Canary Islands through 2010. His work has also been featured at Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris; Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre in London; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Mori Art Museum in Tokyo; Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing; Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem in the Netherlands; and MoMA PS1 in New York during his 2003–2004 residency. Recent notable exhibitions include the site-specific work *Citoyen du Monde* at the Socrates Sculpture Park Broadway Billboard in Long Island City, New York (2014) and *Meschac Gaba: The Museum of Contemporary African Art* at the Deutsche Bank KunstHalle in Berlin (2014).