



FONDATION
GANDUR
POUR L'ART



© Godfried Donkor, Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Lucas Olivet

Godfried Donkor (Kumasi, Ghana, 1964)

Pure Ali II

1999

Collage made from newspaper and photocopies, coloured pencils and graphite pencil on Japanese paper

49 x 35 cm

FGA-ACAD-DONKO-0001

Provenance

Piasa, Paris, 17 November 2016, lot no. 15



Combative, belligerent figures, living witnesses on the American soil of the African slave trade, the haloed characters of Godfried Donkor also evoke the passage of bodies towards their commodification in contemporary consumer society. *Pure Ali II*, an emblematic work within the artist's production, testifies to this passage with one of his most celebrated figures: Muhammad Ali.

Collage and juxtapositions

"I am the king, the king of the ring, the king of the world! I am The Greatest"¹. These were the words frequently brandished and thrown at his adversaries by Cassius Clay (1942-2016), better known today as Muhammad Ali. "Cassius Clay is not my name, it's a slave's name," he declared in 1964², when he became world heavyweight boxing champion and converted to Islam, inspired by the Black Muslim movement. A symbol of anti-authoritarian revolt, activist, key figure in popular culture throughout the 20th century, Muhammad Ali is also one of the most ambiguous, and it is his image that inhabits the work *Pure Ali II* (ill. 1) by artist Godfried Donkor (*1964).

Vertical and positioned in the centre of the work, connecting the disparate elements that make up the background, the boxer stands erect, his muscles tense, ready to strike. Are his eyes fixed upon his opponent? Is the opponent the person standing in front of the work? What is he defending, who is he fighting and what does he represent?

His feet stand on shifting ground, on which we recognize the blueprint of a ship. Ali's fists and upper body are surrounded by a vibrant red background that takes up the top section of the work. All of the materials, carefully chosen by Godfried Donkor, an artist born in Kumasi in Ghana and living in London, convey a sense of movement. The solid red background, a colour expressing a form of violence but also an ambivalence between life and death³, is done in graphite pencil on Japanese paper, which gives it a vaporous appearance, whereas the photocopy of a page from a book depicting the cross section of an old ship, pasted onto paper, raises the question of the transportation and trade of slaves from West Africa to the Americas and the "New World". Finally, the collage of the cut-out photograph of Muhammad Ali, juxtaposing with the two background sections, unites the composition. The edges of the cross-section cutting of the ship sharply demarcate the background, forming a blood red horizon. This vessel—a true floating prison—presents the means of transportation that led to

¹ PERRIGNON, Judith (production); GILLON Gaël (direction), *La Grande Traversée: Mohamed Ali, Combats; Champion du Monde*, France Culture radio programme, 16 July 2018, consulted on 01.10.2020 at the following address: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/mohamed-ali-combats/champion-du-monde>.

² PERRIGNON, Judith ; GILLON, Gaël, *La Grande Traversée: Mohamed Ali, Combats; Champion du Monde*.

³ PASTOUREAU, Michel ; SIMONNET, Dominique, *Le petit livre des couleurs*. Paris: Éditions du Panama, 2005, p. 33.



the presence of Afro-descendants on American soil and embodies the life and death that accompanies it.

A tutelary figure of black British artists⁴ such as Yinka Shonibare, Lubaina Himid, Hannah Black and Sonia Boyce, Godfried Donkor uses historical, geographic and sociological documents to account for the colonial history inherited by the contemporary world. The characters featured in his works draw attention to the stereotypes to which they are linked, namely the reification of bodies and the association of these bodies with the idea of entertainment. The artist puts us in front of people who have distinguished themselves in the fields of sport, music or the stage, in activities where false preconceptions about physical power often prevail over claims of intelligence⁵. The figure of the boxer is a recurring motif in the compositions of Godfried Donkor, whether it be Tom Molineaux, Bill Richmond, Muhammad Ali or Mike Tyson. Like all stars, their image generates interest and money. The broadcasting of their matches and their professional trips form a commercial whole from which they profit.

From the commodification of people to that of the image

It is with this fundamental ambiguity that the work of Godfried Donkor plays: from the trade of persons—in this case slaves during the period of the transatlantic slave trade—, to that of images and bodies, are we not following the common thread of a global development perpetuated by our epoch⁶? In other words: if the abolition of slavery marked the end of this abominable trade of human flesh, what are the dynamics inherited by our present, but also by our contemporary culture?

To these questions, the work *Pure Ali II* responds in part through its singularity: the story of Muhammad Ali bears witness to a specific experience. This unique and non-universalizable experience contrasts with the standardization discourse that fueled colonization. “Whether it’s a boxer, a football player or a pin-up, they all have the same value in the trade of human goods, from its most extreme form—slavery—up to the more subtle variations in sport and the entertainment industry”⁷. By shining a light on a continuum of violence and consumerist abuses, which are an integral part of human history, Godfried Donkor reveals the stereotypes to which we fall prey.

⁴ On this topic, see KERMAN, Monique, “Drawing Maps: History and Geography in Contemporary Black British Art”, *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, p. 15-24.

⁵ CHAMBERS, Eddie, *Black Artists in British Arts. A History since the 1950s.*, London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014, p. 305, notably citing NICODEMUS, Evelyn, “Routes to Independence”, *Routes*, exhibition catalogue [London, Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, 22.01-26.03.1999], London, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, 1999.

⁶ CUMMINS, Alissandra; THOMPSON, Allison, “The Unnamed Body: Encountering, Commodifying, and Codifying the Image of the Black Female”, *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 38-39, November 2016, p. 119.

⁷ *Godfried Donkor, label* [Zeitz Mocaa, consulted on 01.10.2020 at the following address: <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/godfried-donkor/>].



Memory and reminiscences



The figure of Muhammad Ali and the technique of collage are also central to the piece known as *Pain quotidien* [sic] (from the *Cassius Clay* series) (ill. 2) by artist Steve Bandoma (*1981). Here, he evokes one of the great fights that marked the career of Muhammad Ali. Held in Kinshasa—Steve Bandoma's hometown—in 1974, this match pitted Muhammad Ali against George Foreman, at the invitation of Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko. Despite being the older boxer of the two, Muhammad Ali won by knockout, defeating Foreman at the end of the eighth round, taking advantage of his opponent's physical and psychological exhaustion. Once again, he became "The Greatest".

Steve Bandoma, *Pain quotidien* (from *Cassius Clay* series), Ink and collages on paper, 140 x 100 cm, FGA-ACAD-BANDO-0001

© Steve Bandoma, Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Genève. Photographer: Lucas Olivet

Steve Bandoma takes this historic episode as the starting point for fifteen works around Muhammad Ali. "In the *Cassius Clay* series, I question the past, because the future worries me. I wanted to highlight for the collective memory of the young people of Kinshasa particularly, and Africa in general, the importance of having hosted an event of this magnitude"⁸. Reviving the memory of this episode, the artist recounts an event when the entire world had its eyes riveted on the Congo. "This battle, once organized at the Tata Raphaël Stadium in the Matonge district has nowadays been reduced to the daily battle that is far from trivial, of the search for bread"⁹.

The work, composed of faces taken from magazines pasted onto paper, as well as an ink painting, presents a somewhat clumsy character attempting to catch his daily bread or *Pain quotidien* [sic], here in the form of a hamburger. The bread, which slips out of his hands, single-handedly evokes the culinary culture of the empire that is the United States.

⁸ BANDOMA, Steve, interview conducted on 23.10.2020.

⁹ BANDOMA, Steve, interview conducted on 23.10.2020.



Symbols of resilience

"No boxer has the glory I have today, nor makes as much money as I do, why? Because they have no imagination."¹⁰ Muhammad Ali used this faculty to explain his success. Indeed, while certain well-known figures inspire the collective memory of an era through the singularity of their career and their popularity, others, less celebrated, offer a similar comment on the emancipatory power of the imagination. This is the case with Sophie, the alter-ego of Mary Sibande (*1982) and a recurring character in her work. In the photograph *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie* (ill. 3), the figure of a maid, recognizable by means of her headdress and apron, is clothed in a majestic dress with imposing drapes and a breastplate necklace partly transformed into a halo. The artist herself is the model for the character of Sophie, and creates all of the elements featured in the images, especially the clothes, worn in front of the camera. With her palms turned towards the sky and held at slightly different heights, Sophie's stature and gestures are reminiscent of Christian iconography, which allows figures to transcend their condition and signal their belonging to the divine realm.

The daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter of maids¹¹, Mary Sibande recounts the recent history of South Africa by tracing the memory of her own lineage, whose existence was marked by the regime of apartheid, its overthrow and legacy in contemporary South African society. "I wanted to approach my personal story, and mould the character of Sophie from my own features"¹², explains the artist who, through this intimate gesture, creates a voice for several generations. If Sophie has her eyes closed, it is to signify that in the face of bondage, the imagination remains a powerful yet common means of escape, at least for a time, from one's condition¹³.

Mary Sibande, *Her Majesty, Queen Sophie*, 2010, Photograph, Pigment print on archive paper cotton, A/P, 104 x 69 cm, FGA-ACAD-SIBAN-0001 © Mary Sibande



Olivia Fahmy
Curator for the collection of African Contemporary Art
and the Diaspora
November 2020

¹⁰ ALI, Mohamed ; PIVOT, Bernard, *Apostrophes: Mohamed Ali et la revanche d'être noir*, television show, INA Archive, 5 March 1976, consulted on 01.10.2020 at the following address: <https://www.ina.fr/contenus-editoriaux/articles-editoriaux/1976-mohamed-ali-et-la-revanche-d-etre-noir/>

¹¹ SCHEFFER, Anne; STEVENS, Ingrid; DU PREEZ, Amanda, "Hysterical Representation in the Art of Mary Sibande", *de arte*, vol. 52, no. 2-3, 2017, p. 5.

¹² SIBANDE, Mary, interview conducted on 02.10.2020.

¹³ IBOS, Caroline, « Les subalternes peuvent rêver : Mary Sibande et la résistance des domestiques sud-africaines », *Sociétés & Représentations*, no. 48, 2019, p. 241.



Bibliography

ALI, Mohamed ; PIVOT, Bernard, *Apostrophes: Mohamed Ali et la revanche d'être noir*, television show, INA Archive, 5 March 1976, consulted on 01.10.2020 at the following address: <https://www.ina.fr/contenus-editoriaux/articles-editoriaux/1976-mohamed-ali-et-la-revanche-d-etre-noir/>

CHAMBERS, Eddie, *Black Artists in British Arts. A History since the 1950s*. London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2014.

CUMMINS, Alissandra; THOMPSON, Allison, "The Unnamed Body: Encountering, Commodifying, and Codifying the Image of the Black Female", *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 38-39, November 2016, p. 110-120.

Godfried Donkor, label [Zeitz Mocaa, consulted on 01.10.2020 at the following address: <https://zeitzmocaa.museum/artists/godfried-donkor/>].

IBOS, Caroline, "Les subalternes peuvent rêver: Mary Sibande et la résistance des domestiques sud-africaines", *Sociétés et Représentations*, no. 48, 2019, p. 239-254.

KERMAN, Monique, "Drawing Maps: History and Geography in Contemporary Black British Art", *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, p. 15-24.

NICODEMUS, Evelyn, "Routes to Independence", *Routes*, exhibition catalogue [London, Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, 22.01-26.03.1999], London, Brunei Gallery, SOAS, 1999.

PASTOUREAU, Michel ; SIMONNET, Dominique, *Le petit livre des couleurs*. Paris: Éditions du Panama, 2005.

PERRIGNON, Judith (production) ; GILLON, Gaël (direction), *La Grande Traversée: Mohamed Ali, Combats; Champion du Monde*, France Culture radio programme, 16 July 2018, consulted on 01.10.2020 at the following address: <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/mohamed-ali-combats/champion-du-monde>.

SCHEFFER, Anne; STEVENS, Ingrid; DU PREEZ, Amanda, "Hysterical Representation in the Art of Mary Sibande", *de arte*, vol. 52, no. 2-3, 2017, p. 4-28.