

CHRISTELLE OYIRI

GENTLE BATTLE

30.04.22 - 14.08.22 / TRAMWAY

Gentle Battle is the debut solo exhibition of Paris based artist, DJ, producer and performer Christelle Oyiri (b.France, 1992). Weaving together forgotten mythologies and the political nature of dance music, Oyiri's work looks for alternative ways to understand and un-braid the complex knot of history, identity and experience.

Gentle Battle charts a path through these often clouded waters, a guided journey conceived as a series of 'time-spaces' in which we are invited to dwell and reflect. Through symbolic elements as diverse as a mirror, an elephant tusk, a four-poster bed, and a karaoke booth, Oyiri generates doors, capsules and portals to other realities in which stories slip into histories - modern mythologies that mix and remix personal and collective experiences.

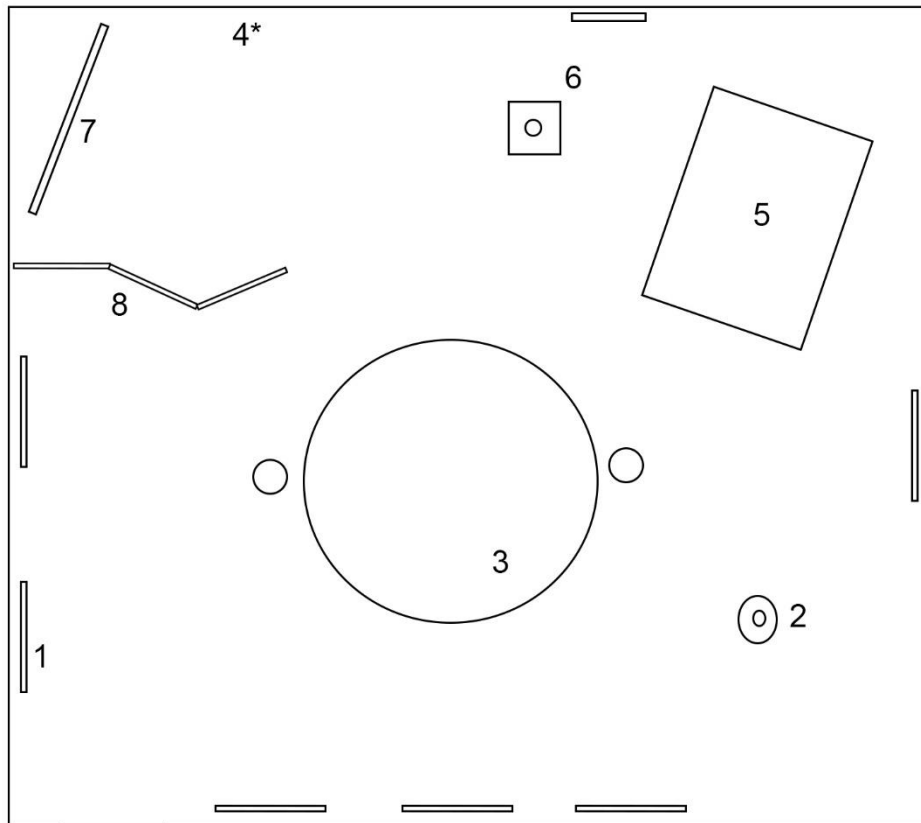
From Ivorian and Guadeloupean descent, Oyiri's identity is shaped by the diplomatic, social, and metaphysical conflicts inherited from colonization, and the trickle-down effect it has on cultural behaviours, familial history, and the experience of a wider African diaspora.

With this conflict in mind, and specifically in the context of The Ivory Coast and the 2002 military coup and ensuing war, Oyiri's work asks; How does warfare display itself? 'In the most insidious and gracious manners: in our breaths, in our bodies, in our psyche, in our lineages, in our sound and in our music.'

In Gentle Battle, Christelle Oyiri becomes her own archivist, creating moments for personal reflection and remembrance. Likening the exhibition to an album, she moves lightly and sometimes humorously across different historical and autobiographical positions, creating an intimate and kaleidoscopic dreamscape which invites us to reflect on the possibility of unlearning, insight and healing.

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1. VINDICTA

Vindicta is a series of masks from the Kru ethnic group (Ivory Coast/Liberia), engraved on backlit domestic mirrors. *Vindicta* operates as a hall of mirrors reflecting on ownership and critiquing the continued legacy of colonialism in the collections of Western Institutions - the etched photos are pictures of stolen masks, part of the numerous African objects and artworks pillaged during colonization. Oyiri also intends the works to have a humorous dimension, asking; What if these masks had a conscience of their own, monitoring the space and acting as agents of a karmic surveillance? Their gaze is directed inward towards the audiences, prompting the questions; where do you position yourself in this battle? Do you feel guilt, anger, relief? Playing with the ambiguous Latin word for "persona" — both meaning "person" and "mask" — *Vindicta* creates a space for personal reflection and also platforms current dialogues around the necessary restitution of African artefacts by the museums of Western colonial powers.

2. TUSK OF ZEGUI

Tusk of Zegui is a monumental sculpture made of polyurethane foam and embellished with gold leaf. The tusk is an exact replica from a 3D scan of a tusk recovered from the 1700 slave ship, the *Henrietta Marie*. These tusks have maintained their general shape and are quite recognizable, but their surfaces are pitted and discoloured from their long underwater immersion. Scaled up dramatically, Oyiri aims at emphasizing the ambiguous symbolism of the tusk, and the animal it comes from. The Elephant is a quintessential totem for both strength and vulnerability as an endangered species. It is also the patriotic symbol of the Republic of Ivory Coast that as a former French colony has been independent since 1960 yet still doesn't possess full sovereignty.

3. WAR! CLUB! ACTION!

War! Club! Action! is the central piece of the exhibition space. This video installation recreates an intimate karaoke booth where a 3-part video is screened, moving between a fictional TV talk show, a eulogy and an actual karaoke video.

War! Club! Action! is an ode to Douk Saga (1974-2006), the creator of the Ivorian-French musical genre called *Coupé Décalé*. This popular music genre plays a great part in Oyiri's music practice with its maximalism and club culture ethos. *Coupé Décalé* was born in the midst of the Ivorian political crisis and civil war yet the genre was always synonymous with a raging optimism and hedonism. *War! Club! Action!* challenges the western idea of protest music, entertainment and anonymity in the music industry. Oyiri deepens and makes explicit the political meaning of Douk Saga's musical production by preceding its "Douk Saga En Fête" video clip with an introductory sequence, as well as a mock interview of a fictional figure: DJ Eminence Grise.

4. LAHAN!

Lahan (or *Dje*) means money in *nouchi* — an Ivorian-French creole. *Lahan!* is a series of fake CFA Franc bills produced by risograph and distributed amongst the exhibition space. As a former French colony, the Ivory Coast has not minted its own currency following France's creation of the French Colonies of Africa (CFA) Franc currency in the wake of World War II. With help from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, this exploitative system of monetary control has allowed France to farm a vast African territory for strategic resources and secure lucrative export markets. Historically, the CFA system has also generated additional revenue for France by requiring CFA nations to deposit initially 100 percent and, in recent years, 50 percent of their reserves into France's Treasury where it has served as productive interest-bearing capital. As much as CFA Franc controversial is a symbol of Ivory Coast's lack of sovereignty, Ivorian club-goers still use it as a celebratory artifact by throwing them in the air in the club, during an *Atalaku*, at a wedding or any other ceremony.

5. WARRIOR REST / SLEEP PARALYSIS

Warrior Rest/Sleep Paralysis is a new version of Christelle Oyiri's piece *Sleep Paralysis*, a king size Canopy bed made of pear tree wood, epoxy resin, and a built-in LED lights system as well as silk drapery. The bed becomes a site of *placelessness* and *restlessness* – its symbolic occupier being a warrior (*le guerrier*) who desires for calm and rest after the fight but is haunted by flashes of a violent past few can know or relate to. The four-poster bed is crossed by a breach of deep blue epoxy resin reminiscent of the depths of a rough sea, evoking the tumult of the psyche. Through the resin, a program of LEDs placed under the bed gradually lights up with untimely flashing like the Rapid Eye Movement of sleep.

6. SUM DEATHS TAKE 4EVER

Sum Deaths Take 4ever is a sculpture made of plasticine and chainmail. A tribute to Bernard Szajner's debut album *Some deaths take forever*. Originally released in 1980, the album is a deeply emotional, sometimes disturbing musical account of the feelings of a prisoner on death row, conceived as the soundtrack to a short film by Amnesty International. The album is "battleground music," a true musical epic poem — it mixes dark, angular and unnerving electronic textures with dynamic rock arrangements and includes guest musicians such as Bernard Paganotti from Magma. Oyiri started a correspondence with Szajner during the pandemic, exchanging ideas about conceptualism in music, protest music survival and trauma as Szajner is a WWII/Holocaust survivor.

Both a tribute to an artist and a reference to fandoms, the sculpture mirrors the original poster for *Some deaths take forever* stuck to the wall near the Sleep Paralysis sculpture — in turn becoming a reference to a heavily decorated 1990s teenage bedroom.

7. COLLECTIVE AMNESIA: IN MEMORY OF LOGOBI

The wider *Collective Amnesia* project is illustrative of Christelle's capacity to highlight prescient discourse within digital image culture, making visible forgotten histories of dance, migration and music culture emerging from Ivory Coast and 21st Century France.

Collective Amnesia (2018-22) sets out to consciously 're-discover' *Logobi* an Ivorian local folk dance that became, for a short time, a working class black French youth phenomenon in Paris's *banlieues* (suburbs) in the late 2000s-early 2010s. *Logobi* originates from the streets of Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and its movements stem from the art of bluffing and mimicking, evoking martial arts in its speed and execution. Rarely existing on the dancefloors of clubs, instead crews would battle each other in subway stations, in malls or on the streets. The film includes 3D, found footage/archives and actual shots directed by Oyiri as it humorously follows teenagers going through the steps of preparation leading to a *Logobi* dance battle.

8. 2002

2002 is 3-meter folding screen sculpture with gold finishing. The folding screen is divided into three boards displaying a fresco of Oyiri's family pictures.

While political tensions had been growing since the early 1990's, they became utterly destructive on September 19th, 2002 when a rebel army from the North attempted a coup demanding proper representation of residents from the North of the country in the national government. While their efforts were stopped mid-way — producing a boundary between the North and the South that until quite recently was policed by the UN and the French Military — neither side was able to overcome the other and a long standoff ensued, interspersed with many acts of violence and terror. The precise date itself marks the beginning of Ivory Coast sinking into a period of unrest such as it had never experienced before. 2002 is also crucial in Oyiri's personal history — it was the last year she was in Ivory Coast before her return nineteen years later, and it was the year some of her family members were forced out of the country.

The folding screen becomes a testimony of that time and of the family history, their relationship to war and the Army (As Oyiri's grandfather served France during the Indochina war and her father was a young corporal in the Ivorian Army before illegally immigrating to France). '*How to process the trauma of a war that wasn't named as such? How to heal when your participation and sacrifice are barely acknowledged?*'

The room divider becomes a metaphor for an ultimate barrier to intimacy, the thin veil before the naked truth, a bulwark both inviting and hiding veracity. But it is also an allegory of the separation the country has suffered for many years, separation anxiety and separation of a nation.