

Barthélémy Togo

Cameroonian artist Barthélémy Togo creates his own visual and psychological universe in installations that use a variety of media to express a wide range of ideas. He uses watercolors, wall drawings, sculpture and video to articulate the dense variability of experience in daily life. Togo relies on various social and cultural tensions to open up the viewer's own perception of the world.

For his installation Pure and Clean at the Institute of Visual Arts, Togo begins with a voyage, shown graphically in the meandering lines painted on the wall and suggested in the floor Togo made out of boxes from products imported from around the world. The movement of goods is more easily accomplished than the movement of people, so Togo adds a series of dreamlike drawings to accomplish the type of emotional voyage he images for people.

In combing abstract imagery with recognizable images Togo creates an entire space for dreaming--suggestive but unidentifiable gestures are interspersed by the shock of recognizable drawings of sandals, rabbits or women. Figures in the lush watercolors come from a wonderful, illogical place in Togo's universe. The meaning of these images fade in and out of focus, never really reconciling themselves but somehow finding a way to coexist.

Central to this particular installation is the character Lily, represented by the doll lounging in her gauzy boudoir in the center of the space. Lily's random thoughts are made manifest in the phrases written on the wall. Lily clearly embraces her own contradictory--and ultimately human--impulses, which range from ferocious to naïve, vindictive to hopeful.

Lily sits opposite a video from 1997 of Togo chopping wood, a gesture relating to the rapid deforestation of his native Cameroon. This note of reality somehow partakes of the dream of a better universe Togo imagines.

Togo's fictional world is invented as a way to disorient the viewer by the strangeness of multi-headed beasts and inscrutable symbols. His broad taste in material expression demonstrates an acceptance of the riches to be found anywhere, even in the most base or mundane objects around us. In destabilizing the physical body in space through a melange of sound and images, Togo triggers extra-aesthetic memories and emotions, approximating the kind of dislocation felt by travelers who enter a new world without the comforting touchstones of family and culture. Although there is often underlying political content in Togo's work, he is most interested in the celebration of beauty that is everywhere.

Born in M'Balmayo, Cameroon, in 1967, Togo lives and works in Paris, Düsseldorf and Bandjoun, Cameroon. He has had one person shows at the Kunstlerhaus von Thum und Taxis, Bregenz - Austria, Galerie Anne de Villepoix - Paris, the Institut Goethe, Yaoundé - Cameroon, Art Basel - Switzerland, La Criée centre d'Art contemporain - Rennes, the Kunstmuseum Düsseldorf - Germany, and the ARC Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris.

He has participated in group shows organized at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst - Zürich, Museum Ludwig - Köln, the Pusan Biennale - South Korea, Villa Medici - Rome, and The Drawing Center - New York, among others.

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