

CAMEROONIAN ARTIST SALIFOU LINDOU: 'I DON'T CALCULATE ... I START FROM NOWHERE'

Ahead of a solo show in London, the 'master of materials' talks about using soil for pigment in his early days, how he finds inspiration in people watching – and his constant search for surprise.



Politiciens 13. A work in pastel on paper by Cameroonian artist Salifou Lindou, who has an exhibition in London.

At the centre of Cameroonian artist Salifou Lindou's first solo exhibition in London is a series of paintings showing politicians dressed in striped suits. It is a recurring theme stemming from his childhood.

"I remember that every time I saw politicians on the TV, they were dressed in a western fashion, mostly in striped suits. It was a way for them to distinguish themselves from the general public," the artist says from his studio in Douala, Cameroon, before his show at the Africa Centre, London, in collaboration with Almas Art Foundation.

"I used that as a technique to make politicians recognisable in my work. It's a mark of them being rich, and people in Cameroon recognise that at first sight – the more stripes, the finer the suit. There is no trust in our politicians."

One striking artwork shows politicians in striped suits carrying a dead body, a work inspired by the recent murder of a radio host near the Cameroonian capital, Yaoundé, in January. The politicians depicted cast their eyes over the dead body of Martinez Zogo, whose popular radio show highlighting government corruption led to his abduction, torture and murder.



Salifou Lindou in his studio in Douala, Cameroon. Photograph: Courtesy of Almas Art Foundation

When he moved to Douala at the age of 18, he worked in a print shop but couldn't afford paint, which was normally imported from Europe. Instead, he used soil from his birthplace, Foumban, "where the dirt is even redder", to mix with binders before putting on canvas.

"When you're in need, you become more creative," he says.

In 1989, he co-founded Cercle Kapsiki, a group of like-minded visual artists who transformed Douala's art scene by organising exhibitions and events, such as screening films. He held a major exhibition in 1995 at Doual'art, one of the first cultural spaces in the city.

His works have also been exhibited in museums in Cameroon, France and Denmark. Last year, he was represented in the Cameroonian pavilion of the prestigious Venice Biennale.

"The human being is my biggest source of inspiration," he says. "When I am not working, I spend a lot of time observing people. I'm fascinated by the vulnerability and the force of the human being. This duality has inspired my work more than anything else. When people are seeing my work, I want them to be conscious of the narcissism that exists in them – I want them to acknowledge that."

"We hear about a great number of assassinations in the world, but this one was particularly villainous, and that was something that affected me greatly. Martinez was simply a journalist doing his job," says Lindou.

"My canvas of Martinez Zogo is inspired by Caravaggio," the artist adds, referring to the Entombment of Christ.

Born in 1965 in Cameroon – "Africa in miniature" it's called, because of its spectacular landscapes and diverse culture – Lindou is part of a large Muslim family of 10 children from Foumban, a city with many hills. He grew up mainly in nearby Bafoussam, where his father was a civil servant.

He started drawing at the age of 13, using pencil and watercolour for portraits of family and friends.



Lindou's canvas of murdered radio host Martinez Zogo.

In *Combattant*, which is also part of the exhibition, Lindou depicts himself as a boxer. “I wanted to show the fragility of myself, and that’s why the fighter is only wearing a glove on one hand and not the other. The fragility is always present in the human being, even if it is a powerful fighter with great muscles.”

The death of his wife in 2015 has also influenced his work: his tribute to her came in the form a performance with Cameroonian artist Gabriella Badjeck in 2018 as part of the Ravy biennale in Yaoundé. *Mâ Kua* (My Beloved) shows Lindou and Badjeck in close proximity as he studies her beauty.

Ruth Belinga, a professor at the Fine Arts Institute of Foumban, says that Lindou’s work falls somewhere between “problem-solving in the visual arts and social criticism, placing the human being at the centre of his preoccupations. Salifou is a sharp observer of the society in which he lives.

“He is one of a small group of experienced artists who have led the Cameroonian art scene into the contemporary movement. To this day, he is regarded by his peers as a master of materials.”



Combattant 2. Pastel and posca on paper mounted on canvas.

Lindou's work has been likened to that of a child in a documentary shown as part of his London exhibition, because of its spontaneity, and because, like a child, he is "not calculating".

Lindou agrees with that description. "I don't calculate before doing art," he says. "I start from nowhere and I let things happen and surprise me. I want to be taken by surprise by how things evolve on the canvas. I'm always in the search of surprise."

Social Game, by Salifou Lindou Fouanta, is at the Africa Centre, 66 Great Suffolk Street, London SE1 0BL, from 14 to 26 November



Social Game 2. Acrylic pastel posca and collages on canvas.