

## A Phenomenal Conversation with Salifou Lindou



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A self-taught artist, Salifou Lindou was born in Foumban, Cameroon, but lives and works in Douala. He is part of the former generations of artists in Cameroon who now teach the new generation. In 1998, he co-founded the Kapsiki Circle to introduce the arts in Douala by organizing exhibitions, projects, and residencies.

While Salifou Lindou started his career mainly creating installations, sculptures, and mixed collages on canvas, he has been working with pastels on paper for a few years now. His pastels emerge from an energetic and spontaneous tangle of lines and strokes. When the artist deals with topical issues, he always illustrates the passion and desire to live in opposition to the vulnerability of the body. He puts forward the duality of human beings: between strength and weakness, immobility and movement, peace and chaos.

On paper and on canvas, Lindou explores the complexity of human beings through scenes of daily life, fed with references to legends and classics within modern painting. From internal fights to TV debates, going through political instability that leads to an exodus, Lindou's work talks about and starts from daily life. It is both introspective and inspired by his observation of society.

In 2022, Lindou celebrated the 30th anniversary of his career. However, it is his participation in the 1-54 London art fair in 2020 with AFIKARIS Gallery that truly marked his recognition on the international art scene. Since then, his work has been featured in numerous international fairs, such as Art Paris (France), Investec Cape Town (South Africa), and 1-54 New York (USA). It has also been part of exhibitions in institutions, including the National Museum of Yaounde (Cameroon), Institut des Cultures de l'Islam (France), and Art Hub Copenhagen (Denmark). Finally, Lindou represented Cameroon at the Venice Biennale (2022), and he recently had his first solo institutional exhibition in Europe at the Ettore Fico Museum in Turin, Italy (2024).

I had the pleasure and honor of asking Salifou how he summarizes his art creation in one sentence, how he envisions the progress of young African artists in the art world, and so much more.



*Collines de l'espoir 1*, 2023 Acrylic and soil on canvas 150x200 cm © Courtesy of the artist and AFIKARIS Gallery

**U:** In 1989, you co-founded Cercle Kapsiki, which began with a group of like-minded visual artists that transformed Douala's art scene by organizing exhibitions and events, such as film screenings. How important is keeping artists' communities like this in Cameroon and other African sites?

**S:** The Cercle Kapsiki is a group of artists who met at a time when the artistic scene was fairly quiet in Cameroon - unlike in Western countries where we could observe a certain dynamism (fairs, galleries, institutions, etc.). Here, our daily lives were mainly based on discussions about the local art scene, which lacked any cultural venues. We had projects but didn't know where to carry them out. Driven by this desire,

we decided to take matters into our own hands and found this community. Our plans were to create a meeting place where we could lay the foundations for our discussions and ideas. In a context where there was a lack of artistic proposals, we felt it was necessary to arouse the interest of the Cameroonian public. So we focused our work on public projects, often outdoors to meet people. And we didn't just focus on plastic art. For us, it was really about touching on all forms of art and giving artists the opportunity to express themselves. We wanted to bring together different disciplines (cinema, painting, etc.) and make our actions visible and accessible to the public. I think the public has recognized the impact we've had on the Cameroonian and even the international art scene. This impact had ramifications for other initiatives that followed. Our influence was not only practical but also ideological. Private galleries were created, and art schools were set up to train many young people who then found their way onto the art scene and continued the projects we had initiated.



*Politicians 63*, 2023 Pastel on paper mounted on paper 50 x 275,5 cm © Courtesy of the artist and AFIKARIS Gallery

**U:** As a self-taught artist, what freedoms do you find that let you be unrestricted from formal training? How does this freedom enable you to create your own unique artistic statement?

**S:** I realized very early on that I wouldn't be able to go to art school, but I'm by nature a handyman and a DIY enthusiast. I quickly gained confidence by practicing intensively and then by reading and meeting other artists. I learned on the job and through hard work, as I believe that excellence stems from diligence. Academic knowledge is valuable, but without hard work, it won't lead to success.

As a self-taught artist, I feel an immense freedom. Without academic training, I feel I have nothing to lose. I explore, I'm curious, and I seek to evolve by working and producing, understanding techniques, and daring to experiment with them. Academicism can sometimes format artists, locking them into a precise framework and preventing them from seeing things from the outside. The absence of academic influences means that you can dare to experiment, and my work is very experimental. When I look back,

I feel like ten artists in one. I can have ten exhibitions, and they'll all be different. Not being formatted by academism gives me the advantage of seeing things differently. That doesn't mean that I don't care about public opinion or how my mentors and colleagues view my work, but I have the impression that I am always creating in total freedom.



*La famille réunie*, 2023 Pastel and acrylic on canvas 160x200 cm © Courtesy of the artist and AFIKARIS Gallery

**U:** How do you create artwork according to a theme, like your most recent group show?

**S:** I always start with words and their meanings, then create a story around them by associating them with objects. For example, for the group show *Ce que nous donne la terre* (*What the Earth Gives Us*) presented last year at the AFIKARIS gallery, the word 'earth' caught my attention. I used the Earth as the main material to tell a story. Earth evokes an ancestral history, while metal, which I have also been exploring, tells a contemporary story. For me, telling the story of a work of art is a different method from writing, it is more tangible and more physical. I use materials metaphorically to create a transposition. Every time I tackle a theme, I transpose the words into matter. I create links; just as words tell stories in writing, I tell stories with materials.

For the *Inhabiting the World* exhibition, which looks at the complexity of the human experience through our relationship with the world, we selected the work *La famille réunie* (*The Reunited Family*), which I created in 2023. This piece is part of a series that I have been developing since 2019, which mainly explores the exodus linked to the geopolitical and economic situation in Cameroon. By examining the causes of this forced migration, I aim to illustrate the concept of departure and highlight the challenges

families face when they leave, as well as the transformations they undergo on their return. So, this artwork was a perfect choice.



*Brise juvénile*, 2023 Acrylic and pyrography on sheet metal 50x60 cm © Courtesy of the artist and AFIKARIS Gallery

## **U: What is the most important part of your day when creating artwork?**

**S:** Creation is an arrangement of things that leads to the search for a precise moment: a kind of spark of enjoyment. This happens when several factors come together, creating the definitive hatching of the work. I often make a comparison with a kitchen, a place I particularly enjoy. Cooking with others creates a magical moment of sharing and reunion. The joy comes not just from the meal itself but from the shared experience. I approach painting in the same way: I explore, and there's a central moment where everything connects. The final arrangements are more like finishing touches. I stand back and enjoy the moment.

Every artist has this moment. You could call it a quest, a search for balance that, when achieved, brings great satisfaction, what I call 'jouissance' (enjoyment). It's that point where everything seems to align, a particularly intense moment, especially when it opens the way to new possibilities, to an evolution towards other aspects of the work. Sometimes, the creative process seems more arduous because this harmony doesn't come easily.



*Social Game 3*, 2022 Acrylic, pastel, posca and collages on canvas 166x160 cm © Courtesy of the artist and AFIKARIS Gallery

**U:** If you could say why you create art in one sentence, what would it be?

**S:** I'm constantly looking for that joy I mentioned earlier, that moment of creation that leads to the final work. It's the quest for that perfect balance, that intense satisfaction. That spark touches the audience's eyes and heart because it's through that connection that the audience can appreciate and understand the work. Sharing the commitment is crucial because it is that moment of personal investment that manifests itself in the work and is reflected in the eyes of the audience.

In the beginning, my work was mainly based on a more social commitment, focusing on portraits of family and friends. Over time, this commitment evolved into a more political act. For example, installations such as *Weststrasse*, shown in 2003 at the MAM gallery [Douala, Cameroon], in which a car is embedded in a wall, and through which I address the road accidents caused by dilapidated infrastructure. Similarly, in *Les lumières de la ville* [Dans le bruit de la ville exhibition, AFIKARIS gallery, May 2023], I deal with the invasive advertising hoardings that are transforming the urban landscape. Although these works were not

explicitly political at the outset, they have gradually taken on a committed dimension. My commitment isn't immediately obvious. It's suggested. For me, subtlety is essential to art; it is the raw material of artistic thought. Art cannot exist without this subtlety. It doesn't have to be instantly understood; there's a certain poetry in this nuanced approach. I want my work to be understood in a universal way, allowing everyone to appreciate it, whatever their culture or nationality. This subtlety enriches each culture in a unique way, in keeping with their own visions. Each interpretation is nourished by this cultural diversity.

To sum up, in one sentence [laughs], I would say that I am constantly seeking the joy and satisfaction of creation, which, by establishing a deep connection with the audience, enables the commitment to be shared and the work to be revealed in all its splendor.



*Politicians 69*, 2023 Pastel on paper mounted on canvas 100x130 cm © Courtesy of the artist and AFIKARIS Gallery

## **U: Where do you envision the future of young African artists in the art world?**

**S:** When I compare our time with today, when opportunities were very limited, and we had to create everything ourselves, my main concern for today's young artists, who have more opportunities to study fine art and exhibit, is whether they will maintain the same commitment and determination that we had. I remain optimistic that their commitment will not necessarily be altered by the greater ease and opportunities they now have to access fine art and galleries. Having all the resources at your fingertips can be an advantage, but it's often by overcoming the difficulties that you really grow. I realize today that our lives are shaped by the challenges we face.

I sincerely hope that these young artists will always maintain this commitment in spite of everything. Can

we be as relevant in our work when all the resources are available, or do challenges make us stronger? That's a question I ask myself. If they can exploit all the opportunities available to them today, they will undoubtedly be able to achieve even more than what we did. Our case with Cercle Kapsiki was atypical because we were close friends, and over time, things have changed, and the context has changed. We were 'fauves' [wildcats]. We evolved at a time when there was nothing. Today, there are more options, and commitment is no longer as radical. Social networks and other contextual developments have transformed the situation. It's not that engagement has disappeared, but the context has changed, offering new possibilities and perspectives. So I'm very positive about the future of young African artists, and artists in general, in the art world.



*Water Research*, 2023 Acrylic and pyrography on sheet metal 100x400 cm © Courtesy of the artist and AFIKARIS Gallery

**U:** Can you describe the biggest challenges you have faced as an African artist in the art world?

**S:** I spent many years working as a computer graphics designer, which enabled me to earn a good living at first. However, when I started exhibiting my art, I had to make the difficult decision to leave that job to devote myself fully to my artistic practice. I started traveling to take part in exhibitions and artistic residencies, and it became impossible for me to reconcile the two. The first two years after this transition were particularly difficult because I no longer had a stable income.

Not being able to study fine art was also a frustration for a long time. Back then, this program didn't exist in Cameroon, and I hadn't been able to get a grant to study abroad. However, this reality is not specific to Cameroon or Africa; it is common to many artists around the world, many of whom are self-taught. At first, I believed that being born in France or the United States would have afforded me more opportunities, especially through access to educational programs and grants. My perspective has shifted today. I think that life's circumstances can drive you to become more determined and dedicated to achieving your dreams and goals. I have no regrets about how things turned out; this journey has shaped me both as an artist and as a person.

For more information about Salifou's artwork, please visit the AFIKARIS Gallery [here](#).