

GÉRALDINE TOBE



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GÉRALDINE TOBE WAS BORN IN 1992 IN KINSHASA IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO WHERE SHE LIVES AND WORKS.

She finished her studies in painting at the Institut des Beaux-Arts in Kinshasa in 2012. Not satisfied with her paintings, she burnt her canvases. She then began to paint with the smoke from an oil lamp, linking her art to the traumas of her childhood: night, fire and spirits. Seeing art as a way of soothing the soul, Géraldine Tobe has created a cultural structure (Losa) in Kinshasa which organises art therapy workshops for psychiatric patients.

Accused of witchcraft as a child and subjected to a violent exorcism, her work now questions ancestral beliefs and the place of the coloniser's religion. She imbues her work with her suffering and the pain of women and the Congolese people. Her paintings deal with ethnography with a more specific focus on the church in colonial history and ancestral spirituality. In her canvases, African

masks mingle with disjointed, dancing bodies. She says that using fire and smoke enables her to link the immaterial and physical worlds.

Tobe's work attracted particular attention during the 2018 Dakar Biennial. It has also been the subject of solo exhibitions in Brussels, Kinshasa and Madagascar. It will be part of the upcoming exhibition *The True Size of Africa* at the Völklinger Hütte in Germany.

GÉRALDINE TOBE

b. 1992 in Kinshasa, DRC
She lives and works in Kinshasa, DRC



EDUCATION

2012-2014 - State Diploma in Artistic Humanities, Academy of Fine Arts, Kinshasa, DR Congo
2007-2012 - Student at the Academy of Fine Arts (Painting), Kinshasa, DR Congo

SELECTED SOLO SHOWS

2024
Dans la fumée (In the Smoke), AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
Sans visage, sur les traces des oubliés, French Institute of Kinshasa, Kinshasa, DR Congo

2022
Kalunga, Laver House, Brussels, Belgium

2018
Écrans de la fumée, French Institute of Kinshasa, Kinshasa, DR Congo
Sans couleur, La teinturerie - artists' association (IS-ART Gallery), Antananarivo, Madagascar

SELECTED GROUP SHOWS

2024
The True Size of Africa, Völklinger HütteMuseum, Völklingen, Germany
ReThinking Collections, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium

2023
Investec Cape Town Art Fair, Cape Town, South Africa

2022
Memory of today, Memory of the future, African Space Art Project, travelling exhibition (Paris, Bruxelles, Cotonou, Casablanca, Kinshasa)

2021
History's Foot note, Marres Gallery, Maastricht, Netherlands

2020

International Biennale of Jinan, Jinan, China

Kinshasa Chronique, Cité de l'architecture & du patrimoine (Architecture and Heritage City), Paris, France

African Women Artists, ART-Z Gallery, Paris, France

2019

AKAA Art fair, Paris, France

2018

Permanent exhibition, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium

La Voix de Kinshasa, Grassi Museum, Leipzig, Germany

Exhibition as part of the Grand-Duchy's 'Luxembourg Art Prize', Pinacothèque Museum, Luxembourg

Dakar Contemporary Art Biennale (IN), Dakar, Senegal

2017

Eblouissement, Biennale Picha, Lubumbashi, DR Congo

2016

Contemporary art salon of Mali (Ségou' art), Segou, Mali

2015

Music is a feature of Man, Kampala, Uganda

Parcours d'artistes, Mont Saint- Guibert, Belgium

2014

Avancer, Yango contemporary art biennale (OFF), Kinshasa, DR Congo

AWARDS

2016 - First prize of the Minister of Culture and Arts of Mali, Ségou 'art, Ségou, Mali

2015 - Special prize awarded by the UN (UN Women department)

INTERVIEWS

[France 24](#)

[TV5 Monde](#)



The artist in her studio

Photo credit © Jeanpy Kabongo



‘I don’t like labelling works. When we create, we create for others. I want to open doors and not cage the explanation of the works.’



EXHIBITION VIEW

Dans la fumée, AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
September 2024

Photo credit © Studio Vanssay



ROYAUME DES DAMNÉS, 2021

Smoke on canvas

200x170 cm / 79x67 in



ROYAUME DES DAMNÉS, 2021
(details)



The solo exhibition of the artist - *Dans la fumée (In the smoke)* - unveils an intricate body of work. Géraldine Tobe's work's genesis stands in her life journey - from the death of her older sister, whom she senses to be the reincarnation, to the spiritual duality in which she grew up: between traditional Congolese beliefs and catholicism. Her practice grows from these multiple experiences, giving birth to the stories happening in her canvases. In this, Géraldine Tobe's art is akin to Socrates' maieutics - the art of delivering minds. In a form of reminiscence, the smoke draws on her questions and suffering to exhume her truth.



EXHIBITION VIEW

Dans la fumée, AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
September 2024

Photo credit © Studio Vanssay



VOYAGE DANS LE TEMPS, 2021

Smoke on canvas

170x140 cm / 67x55 in



VOYAGE DANS LE TEMPS, 2021
(details)

The skin displays a dense network of symbols. The head of an eagle tirelessly comes back, staring at the viewer, sometimes joined by masks and other signs. These recurring drawings form scarifications. In ancestral society, they were the teachings that followed humans throughout their lives. They also represented the divine. Through them, Tobe explores the mechanisms of transmission between generations and connects the living to the spirit of the ancestors.



VOYAGE DANS LE TEMPS, 2021

Smoke on canvas

170x140 cm / 67x55 in



VOYAGE DANS LE TEMPS, 2021
Smoke on canvas
170x140 cm / 67x55 in



‘Symbolically, ancestors are represented by masks. Through the representation of masks and other ethnographic objects, I symbolise the spirit of the ancestors who are with me. We don’t see the ancestors. We’ll never see them again. But they are always present through what they have touched.’



EXHIBITION VIEWS
Kalunga, Laver House, Brussels, Belgium
November 2022

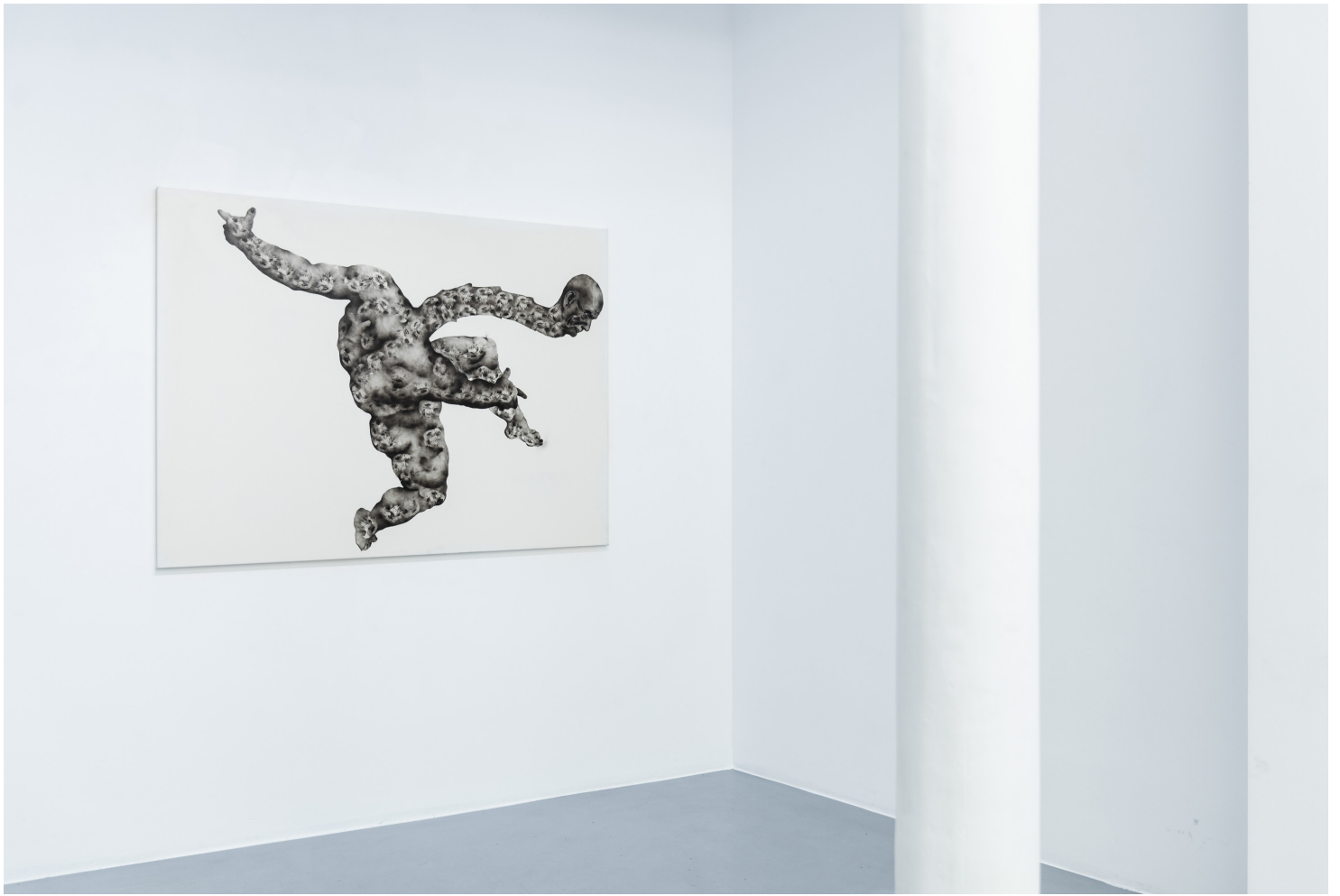
Photo credit © Jean Cosyn



TERRE-MÈRE, 2022
Smoke on canvas
130x170 cm / 51x67 in



TERRE-MÈRE, 2022
Smoke on canvas
130x170 cm / 51x67 in



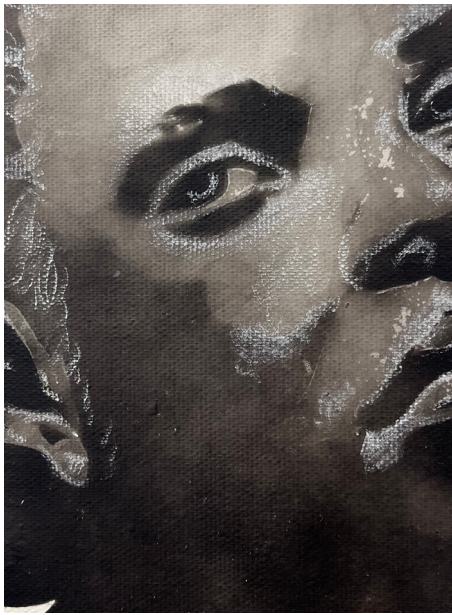
EXHIBITION VIEW

Dans la fumée, AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
September 2024

Photo credit © Studio Vanssay



TERRE-MÈRE, 2022
Smoke on canvas
200x160 cm / 79x63 in



TERRE-MÈRE, 2022
(details)

'I paint the faces of people who have lived in the past or are living today, particularly the elderly. It's to get a message across to my community, to the younger generation who have a different way of looking at the elderly. They are sometimes seen as witches. But they are the ones who have made us what we are.

But there's also an element of imagination. I'm more interested in the idea of chance. A lot of things happen by chance in our lives. So I give myself the freedom to choose the faces by chance.'



EXHIBITION VIEW

Dans la fumée, AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
September 2024

Photo credit © Studio Vanssay



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022

Smoke on canvas

130x170 cm / 51x67 in

On the walls, weightless bodies evoke the fragility of human life (*Vanité de vanité*, 2022). “We will all end up flying away one day” she says. Through the image of this evanescent flesh, Tobe delivers a personal interpretation of vanitas. With these beings who dissipate in volutes, the artist says: “You will continue to live by the memories that we will keep of you”. The memory of past actions outlives the carnal envelope.



EXHIBITION VIEW

Kalunga, Laver House, Brussels, Belgium
November 2022

Photo credit © Jean Cosyn



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022
Smoke on canvas
130x170 cm / 51x67 in

An aura of mystery surrounds Tobe's paintings, the woman who creates to heal, the woman for whom art has the miraculous virtue of exorcising ills. Her works invite dialogue and exchange. Once born, they escape her to belong to the others. And amid these celestial figures guided by smoke, they find themselves listening to their heart speak.



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022
(details)

‘It’s all vanity. One day we’ll fly away. It’s not the body that’s going to fly away but the being inside. You get rid of it. I’m passing on a message: before you fly away, if you think you can do something for someone else, do it. You’ll continue to live on through the memories people have of you.’



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022
Smoke on canvas
170x130 cm / 67x51 in



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022
(detail 2)



EXHIBITION VIEW

Dans la fumée, AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
September 2024

Photo credit © Studio Vanssay



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022
Smoke on canvas
170x130 cm / 67x51 in



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022
(detail)



EXHIBITION VIEW

Dans la fumée, AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
September 2024

Photo credit © Studio Vanssay

‘Smoke is a process of destruction and re-creation. I began to understand that smoke was a tool that helped me to heal. For me, it’s a form of therapy, a way of opening up. This smoke gave me the path, the elements to exploit. Each of us has something to heal in the search for truth.’



VANITÉ DE VANITÉ, 2022
Smoke on canvas
170x130 cm / 67x51 in



EXHIBITION VIEW

Dans la fumée, AFIKARIS Gallery, Paris, France
September 2024

Photo credit © Studio Vanssay



LEFT
SANS TITRE, 2023
 Smoke on canvas
 170x140 cm / 67x55 in



RIGHT
LES ZOÉ, 2023
 Smoke on canvas
 170x140 cm / 67x55 in



DILEMNE DE NZINGA, 2023
Smoke on canvas
140x170 cm / 55x67 in



EXHIBITION VIEW
Sans visage, sur les traces des oubliés, French Institute of Kinshasa, Kinshasa, DR Congo
February 2024

Photo credit © Grody Lokumu, Precilia Sadiki



RÊVE INTERMINABLE, 2022

Smoke on canvas

160x200 cm / 63x79 in



EXHIBITION VIEW

Sans visage, sur les traces des oubliés, French Institute of Kinshasa, Kinshasa, DR Congo
February 2024

Photo credit © Grody Lokumu, Precilia Sadiki

CONVERSATION WITH THE ARTIST

YOU ARE OFTEN DESCRIBED AS AN ARTIST WHO HAS TAMED FIRE. HOW DID YOU COME TO USE SMOKE IN YOUR CREATIONS AND WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES THIS ARTISTIC APPROACH HAVE FOR YOU?

In my work, smoke came later. My practice was initially devoted to painting. I was driven by the desire to do something other than painting. I was looking for freedom. And it was this search that led me to smoke. I set out with the idea of destroying and rebuilding. Something just clicked.

Throughout my childhood, I was taught only to paint. You either do sculpture or painting. Contemporary artists are shifting away from traditional materials like clay and are using different mediums for their sculptures. For example, Freddy Tsimba uses balls, spoons, etc... I wanted to do the same for my paintings. I wanted to find a medium other than paint. And I found smoke. It's the fire that consumes, the force that incinerates. When life ends, we are reduced to ashes. That is all that remains of my beloved mentor and dear friend, Hans de Wolf.

Smoke is a process of destruction and re-creation. I began to understand that smoke was a tool which helped me to heal. It allows me to express myself because there are certain things I'm unable to say with words. For me, it's a form of therapy, a way of opening up. This smoke has given me the path, the elements to exploit. Each of us has something to heal in the search for truth. And generally speaking, when we create, it's the expression of the soul that we transmit.

WHAT ARE YOUR MAIN SOURCES OF INSPIRATION AND HOW DO THEY INFLUENCE YOUR ARTISTIC APPROACH?

Art has profound depth. I often listen to Gregorian chants, and there's something about their depth that always draws me in. My work may not be flashy, but it's present, grounded. Art carries the identity of its creator, and I'm someone deeply attuned to the world—its injustices, its suffering. An artist, like a sponge, absorbs everything around them. What I express comes from my surroundings. We're all unique, and that's the beauty of art and culture. Life is intense, constantly throwing challenges at us, but we rise, fall, and keep moving forward. In some ways, I guess I'm a bit old school.

Still, I encourage the viewer to experience my work not as a passive observer but to engage with it, to listen and have a personal dialogue with it. Art should be read and felt in your own way and interpretation should remain free. I remember when I was in art school, our art history teacher told us that every work holds multiple meanings. I dislike the idea of putting labels on art. When we create, we do so for others, but each person will see something different.

I want to open doors, not confine the meaning of my paintings.

THERE'S A MYSTICAL DIMENSION TO YOUR WORK. WHAT ROLE DOES SPIRITUALITY PLAY IN YOUR LIFE AND IN YOUR ART?

Spirituality is very important. This approach is first and foremost a form of autobiography. I'm a child who grew up in a duality between two spiritualities: the ancestral cultural side and the beliefs of the Catholic religion. On the ancestral spiritual side, I was able to benefit from certain teachings passed on to me by several people. This is just one piece of the puzzle.

In my family, in the 70s, my mother had a daughter who died tragically at the age of 9. Her death was a blow to the whole family. My mother always cried in the name of her ancestors, for her daughter to come back to her. Children are angels, innocents. I, Géraldine, was born in 92. When I was born, the whole family thought that Patricienne (my sister) had returned. I ask questions for which I have no answers but sometimes I feel like I've already lived, I've always behaved as if I were the eldest. People often say that I'm an old soul in a young body. It's because of all this that I feel I have a kind of duty to pass on.

CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR CREATIVE PROCESS?

Before I start creating, I first think about a concept, a theme or a message. It's at this point that I move on to the concrete phase, determining how to give shape to my idea. There are a lot of steps involved in arriving at the final result. I start by drawing on paper, sketching shadows and other details. To get a precise shape, I have to prevent the smoke from diffusing. I cut out and collect the cut-out pieces, taking care to maintain the circumference. I glue all around to fix the paper to the canvas; without the glue, the paper could be weakened by the fire. Then I collect all the details sketched in pencil, drawing all over the place. I think about the cuts, tape the papers to fix them, then my assistants hold the canvases up. It's about teamwork and patience. Once the final result is achieved, I remove the paper, leaving the drawing in place. I create the volumes with the smoke, by drawing and letting the smoke unfold. I aim the lamp, wait, adjust and keep the process moving.

I like stories that make me think, and I like a challenge. Often, when I'm looking at a painting, I don't know where to start. On the one hand, I accompany the creation itself. When the canvas is hanging, I don't yet know what the final result will be, despite my preparatory drawings. It's the

smoke that decides. I'm impatient to see the final work and I'm often surprised by the result. When I start working, I lose all sense of pain and enter an almost transcendent state. At that point, it's no longer my own actions, but other forces that seem to take possession of my body.

Some things are left unexplained.

YOUR WORK IS MAINLY FIGURATIVE. ARE THE CHARACTERS YOU DEPICT INSPIRED BY REAL PEOPLE, OR ARE THEY FIGMENTS OF YOUR IMAGINATION?

There's an element of imagination in my work, but it's mainly based on the idea of chance. Many events in our lives are linked to chance, so I allow myself the freedom to choose faces randomly. Each series I create is autonomous and everything depends on the context. For example, the series I did for the exhibition at the Tervuren Museum - ReThinking Collections - focused on spirituality. The subject was abstract, and the characters represented were not clearly defined individuals.

In other series, the characters are more detailed and precise. It all depends on the concept and the theme that accompanies each series. I've painted the faces of people who existed in the past or contemporary figures, particularly old people. It's all about getting a message across to my community today. The younger generation sometimes has a different way of looking at the elderly, sometimes seeing them as witches. Yet they are the ones who have shaped who we are today. My works depicting children illustrate the transmission between generations, as in *Untitled* (2021).

YOUR EXHIBITION 'DANS LA FUMÉE' AT THE AFIKARIS GALLERY BRINGS TOGETHER DIFFERENT SERIES, INCLUDING ONE ON THE THEME OF VANITY. WHAT DOES THIS EVOKE FOR YOU?

Everything is vanity. One day we'll all be gone. It's not the body that goes, it's the being inside. You get rid of it. It's a work about vanities. I'm passing on a message: before you fly away, if you think you can do something for someone else, do it.

You'll continue to live on through the memories people have of you.

THE BODIES OF YOUR CHARACTERS ARE ADORNED WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF SYMBOLS. ONE OF THEM IS THE LETTER 'K', UNDERLINED BY AN ARROW. CAN YOU TELL US WHAT IT MEANS?

This symbol represents scarification marks. I was inspired by the symbols found on women's bodies. Scarifications were the teachings that accompanied humans in ancestral society. They also represented divinity. A circle was drawn on a woman's navel. This kept the child in the womb in communion with its great-great-grandparents. The mother is the descendant. Individuals are forever connected to their ancestors through their mothers' navels. When you get scarified and die, you take it with you to the grave. Wood is part of nature. That's also why wood is carved into statuettes.

Man becomes dust and nature remains.

THE FIGURE OF THE EAGLE ALSO FEATURES A LOT IN YOUR WORK. THE ANIMAL'S HEAD IS REPRODUCED INSIDE THE BODIES OF THE CHARACTERS. WHAT HISTORY IS THIS SYMBOL LINKED TO?

The eagle is an important animal. When I was a painter, in this spirit of innovation, I wanted to do something other than painting. When I started painting with smoke, my work was very much rejected and criticised. Back home, academicism dominated. I struggled to build my career around smoke until one of our elders, the photographer and film-maker Kiripi Katembo, contacted me. He was behind the first Kinshasa Biennale in 2014. He contacted me and told me that he found my work very strong. I agreed to take part in the biennial. The curator of the biennale [Sithabile Mlotshwa] wrote a lot about my work. This opportunity exposed my work to other eyes, which enabled me to go to Europe in 2015 following the biennial.

In my village, there's this myth that's passed down orally. Myths teach us how to live with others through anecdotes. My grandfather used to tell me the story of the eagle [tshikolo in my mother tongue]. A female eagle was looking for a place to lay her eggs. She travelled through several villages. Each time she arrived in a village, she asked the

village chief if there was a place where she could lay her eggs. The traditional chiefs all rejected her request: 'There's no place for you'. She continued on until she reached the last village. The traditional chief told her: 'All the places are taken, but in our village, we can't let foreigners leave. Behind the cage, there's a place where you can lay your eggs'. The eagle laid its eggs. The land became fertile thanks to their presence. So much so that the whole village became fertile: everything they put in the ground grew. People from neighbouring villages flocked to the village to find food.

This story reminds me of my own. When I started the smoke technique, everyone rejected it. Eventually, I received an invitation to exhibit at a biennial, which opened the door to many other opportunities to show my work. I started thinking about other forms of art, such as art therapy, to benefit the rest of society, especially those who are ill and don't necessarily have access to art. That explains the eagles. It's a personal symbolism.

ON THE SUBJECT OF ART THERAPY, IN 2019 YOU LAUNCHED A PROJECT OF EXPERIMENTAL WORKSHOPS AT THE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL IN KINSHASA IN WHICH ARTISTS COLLABORATE WITH PATIENTS. CAN YOU TELL US ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

I'm the president of an organisation in Kinshasa [Losa] that does art therapy. The aim of this approach is to reintegrate patients into society, teach them a trade and use art as a treatment. The practice of art therapy also sometimes allows psychologists to benefit from a new treatment medium for these patients. I'd also like to extend the project to the mentally handicapped. The University of Kinshasa has an art therapy centre. The energy of the city of Kinshasa is enormous, but the idea is also to extend to the provinces. We also have a twinning project with other European centres to benefit from their expertise in mental health. This project goes beyond art, as we are working with doctors and psychologists.

The reason I'm in the arts today is because of my older brother, who is mentally disabled. When he was 8, he stopped going to school because of the psychological problems he suffered from. But he used to make art at home, and he introduced me to it and turned me into a real artist.

WHAT ARE YOUR UPCOMING ARTISTIC PROJECTS?

I'm currently in residence in Germany to prepare the group exhibition *The True Size of Africa*, to which I've been invited by the Völklinger Museum and which will be on show from November 2024. For this project, the idea is to launch an invitation from beyond to represent all the people who worked in this factory. I'm going to give them a face again through the smoke. I can't reproduce all these faces. It will be random : I'm not targeting, I'm just taking it as it comes. I'm going to reproduce certain faces and imagine others. Not all the workers had the chance to be photographed.