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The matter of memory

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Marcel Proust used the metaphor of the madeleine to illustrate the complexity of the memorial question. What do we remember when we remember things if not, to Gabriel Toshome's term, ruins? Ruins is what is left when we have forgotten everything. It functions as a spring that sources all our perception of times long gone.

It seems to me that this broken memory is the core of Theresa Traore Dahlberg's quest. The artist is half Swedish and half Burkinabe, which indicates that her attempt to define an identity of her own has no other means to exist but to become a fiction. A fiction made of sensations, tales, words and images located in the most active part of her unconscious. There are stories she witnessed and stories she was told. With this material, she decides to embark on a construction of her own, to weave the different narratives she grew up with into something new.

Africa certainly plays an important role in this attempt of reconstruction, but labor as well. Maybe labor above all. The power of the hand, the power of the making, the ability to transform any *materia prima* into something else.

This first matter is the basis of her alchemic process, where reality is subtly confused with dreams and remembrances, voices and scenes. Proust needed his grand-mother's madeleine to take off from a constraining present. He needed the smell imprisoned in his senses to rebuild a world that would never equal the one he left. The madeleine functions as a ruin upon which new constructions can raise.

In works like *Hakili* and *Idrix* where she plays with ancient African tales or *Studio Seydoni* represent a perfect illustration of performed past. In those cases, the matter is altered and used to become a sculpture or installation, when in other cases wool is just wool and copper, even if it is metaphorized (walls of hieroglyphs like inscriptions), remains copper.

In these post-colonial times where the exploitation of African natural resources is at the core of an economic and historical debates the artist does not seem to take a stand but remain within the poetics of the matter and its brutal strength. There is certainly a dose of nostalgia in the way she displays the material but there is no tension nor revendication in her proposition. Things should speak for themselves and convey whatever is needed despite a time and space dislocation, the artist's gaze is the only strength able to bring those objects to life.

"Time remains the same because the past is a former future and a recent present, the present an upcoming past and a recent future, the future finally a present and even a past to come, that is to say because each dimension of time is treated or targeted as something other than itself, that is to say, finally, because there is at the heart of time, a gaze (...)." [1]

The gaze is what makes things move and that contains the ability of abolishing time. Through Traore Dahlberg's eyes, the past is not past and everything is infused with a sense of urgency and immediacy that reminds us of the ancient tradition of storytelling which always, but using an heterochronic language, bring into the here and now.

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard, 1945)

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