

Exhibition Guide

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré

28 July – 16 September 2007

First Floor Galleries

This is the first solo exhibition of work by Frédéric Bruly Bouabré in the UK. Born into a non-literary tradition in Zéprégühé, Ivory Coast in 1923, Bouabré was amongst the first of his generation to be exposed to the idea of written language. On 11 March 1948, he claims to have had a religious vision that transformed his life. As a result, Bouabré became a 'man who never forgets', one driven to shed light on the causes and reasons for all things and as part of this mission, he invented an alphabet to record his native Bété language. Bouabré's prolific generation of artistic production is symptomatic of his assumed identity. As a thinker, inventor, writer, poet, storyteller, educator and artist he conveys a remarkable energy for the sharing of knowledge and an astute understanding of the way the world works.

On entering the gallery, visitors have the rare chance to see a number of Bouabré's notebooks, one of which outlines his quest to develop a new alphabet in a long letter to Queen Elizabeth II. Written in the 1980s, it accounts for the principles of his innovation in an idiosyncratic English, which he had learnt solely for the task at hand. It explains how he arrived at a sequence of symbols based on the shapes of little quartz stones, common to his native land. Each is rooted in Bouabré's cultural heritage yet can be used to write any language – the universality of the aesthetic forms providing more than simply a technical solution to the problem of transcription. It suggests not just a fervent desire to communicate but also a realisation of how such communication determines understanding.

Bouabré's work is an accumulation of thousands of postcard-sized drawings. Like a diary, the images record countless observations on everyday life. They are modest in both medium and subject matter, in contrast to the philosophical ambition that is conveyed by the umbrella titles of works exhibited here: *Connaissance du Monde* (Knowledge of the World), *Musée du Visage Africain* (Museum of African Faces) and *Haute Diplomatie* (High Diplomacy).

In the latter, each drawing depicts a figure (usually male) draped in the colours of a national flag with an arm outstretched, as if in anticipation of shaking hands. The images are presented in alphabetical order – Afghanistan, Afrique du Sud, Albanie, Algerie, etc – thus counteracting a hierarchy whereby superpowers precede so-called developing countries. The work chimes in with the artist's fundamental multiculturalism – despite the national labels, Bouabré suggests citizenship of the world. He explains,

Whether you come from America, Africa, Asia or elsewhere, I show through my work that we are all part of this same entity, just as two or three children suckled at the breast of the same mother are part of the same body. Because we are all created by the earth, we are truly related in terms of race and colour.

A book featuring *La Haute Diplomatie*, published by Ikon, is available from Ikon Shop on the ground floor for a special exhibition price of £11.95, full price £14.