



In the Studio with Libasse Ka

Words by

Lydia Earthy

We're standing in your new exhibition at Carlos/Ishikawa, your first solo exhibition with the gallery, and also in the UK. How do you approach an exhibition like this? Does the exhibition have a title?

No it doesn't have a title. None of the works have any titles. All my work is a kind of research into light, painting, and the conversation of painting. My approach has changed: my first show, some months ago, was entirely small paintings. The whole paintings are built at first to be dark, dark black almost. And I build up from there with white, step by step. After that first show, I began to feel like, okay, 'How can I make this a conversation?' It's always the same conversation.



Installation View, Libasse Ka, 2024, Carlos/Ishikawa, London 2024, Courtesy of the artist and the gallery.

I'm wondering about the formal qualities of the materials you use. All of these works look entirely different. How do you go about starting a painting?

There is a kind of logic that keeps me busy. I like thinking with the brush. I don't think it's strictly formal - even with the drawings that I used to make, I



like to begin with rhythm. I don't want to make shapes that just stand like blocks: I want to find something that's free. I also really want to engage with painting as a conversation: when you put a line on canvas, or when you make a brushstroke a bit sharp - it's the little things that change a lot. I think that's what keeps me busy.



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To ask the opposite, how do you know when you're finished?

It's really hard. You begin to feel like, no, I don't need to add more because I don't want to force anything. This painting [points] is from a picture I saw of Francis Bacon that I really loved. I find that when you look at an image you get different information. For example, a figurative image, like a painting of Goya, or Egon Schiele, when you see these works and study them, there is always something else that is happening. And I'm often intrigued about that. If I take the drawings in general, and I close my eyes a bit, I only see shapes and different things jump out. When I see this, it touches me: I don't want to make the same one, you know, It just makes me start. It's this starting point that is super important for me.



For me, the best thing about Bacon is he's so good at the interplay between the figural and architecture. And I think what makes his work haunting is that you can never really tell where his paintings are located. I get the same sensation with your work - in some of them, you can recognize figurative elements, but it's very difficult to orient yourself as a viewer.

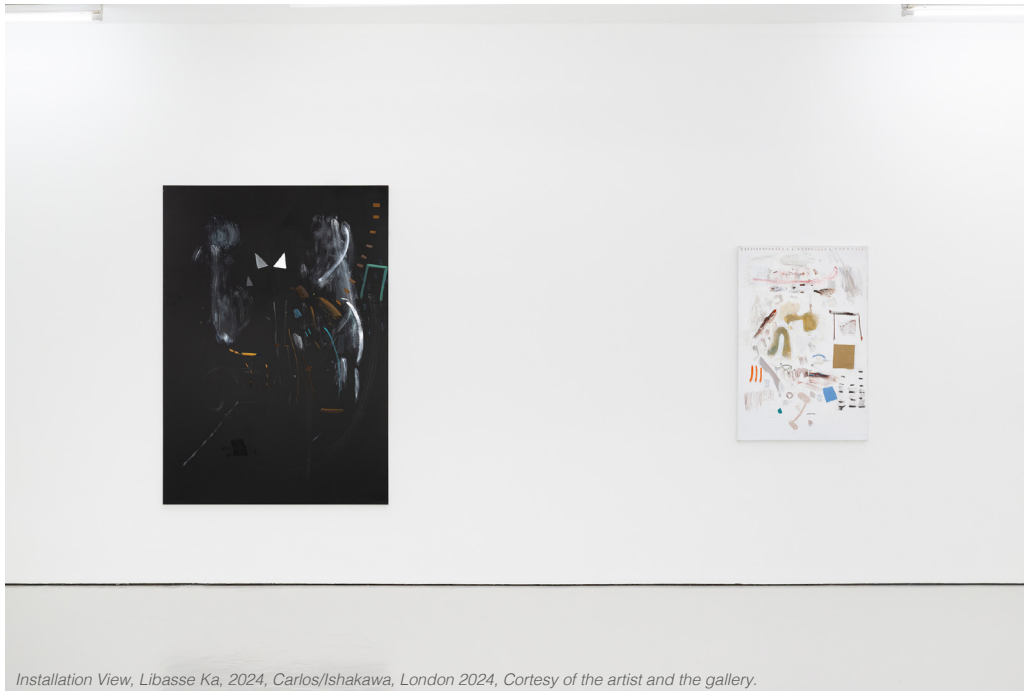


Libasse Ka, Untitled, 2023, Oil on canvas, 198 x 140 x 2.5 cm

When I make these works, I'm not really interested in whether things are figurative or not. People love things that make sense. But, I believe that things have sense anyway. For example, people like to read politics into my work, when everything is already political. It's just that you don't always need to scream it. I think that my whole struggle is the image, because sometimes I do make figurative works. I believe that the real thing is discovering something that you haven't seen before. Like, for example, when you paint an eye, you make black dots on the canvas. But, it's also paint: there's always a gap, an illusion. And when people begin to believe in it, but in real life it's just paint still. How do you deal with these things? That conversation interests me much more than trying to tell something: whatever I might say, it's going to just be what it is at the end of the day. People love to make their own stories, so why should I make them?



If I understand correctly, you spent the first half of your life in Senegal, and the second half in Belgium, where you now live. How does this figure into your work?



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I grew up partly in Senegal, but spent a bigger part of my life in Belgium. When someone sees me, they forget I'm really a mix of cultures. I speak Flemish super fluently, even better than English. So in the painting tradition of abstract works, you have so many artists who are doing this. I like to deem painting as this abstract language that's open for anyone, but culturally it's actually closed. In some countries, your social class is your cultural class. In other countries, it's determined by the money that you have. In Belgium, I think it's really also a cultural thing, not only in terms of money, but in education. I like to laugh and challenge people, because there are different cultures coming together they're not aware of. I feel like this is what happens to me. I'm confronted with that all the time. Someone sees me and says, 'Oh, we didn't expect you to make this type of work'. Maybe they're expecting a guy with a beard! Often when people see someone they just make assumptions, and I do it too.



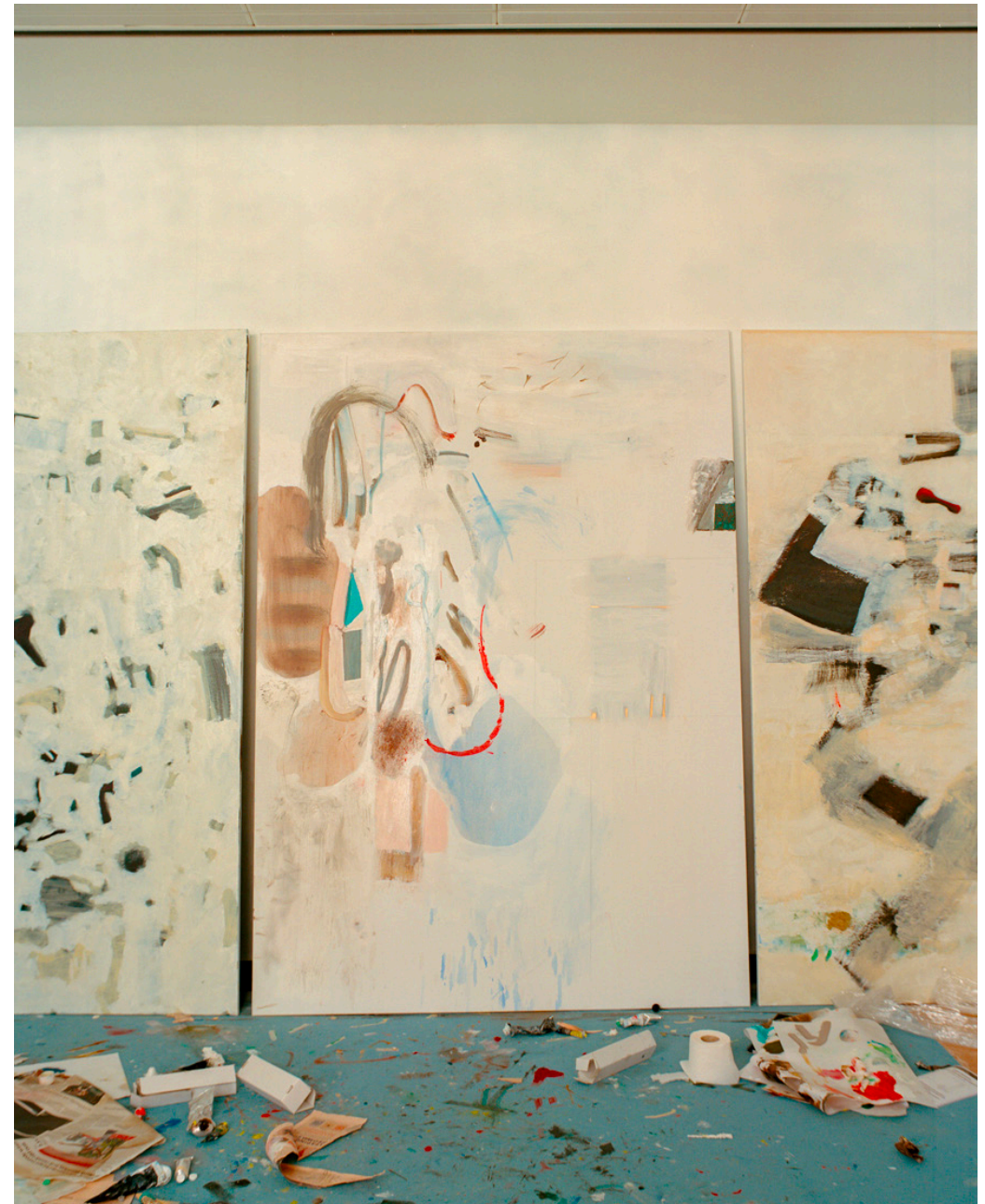
Your work seems to build on a lineage of abstract expressionism, but seems to be doing something different to the abstract expressionists and the action painters of the 50s and 60s. Do you have any thoughts on what abstraction as a genre does differently today, or means to you?

I grew up with a lot of images. As a child, I've been soaked in images, and in our everyday life, we have access to so many images. Personally for me, being interested in abstraction put me in a position where I was obliged to be more greedy with information and to try to get kind of deeper into things. When I'm in front of an abstract painting, I can see movement and rhythm clearly, but the paintings need time. At first, someone who doesn't paint can't easily make sense of a painting. I like to take the time to look at something. Today it's super relevant to have images or things that are not especially inviting you to see something, but instead make you think, and invite you to feel. What I would like if someone goes away from my work, is that they ask themselves questions. For example, I admire artists like Picabia and Sigmar Polke for this, as they were both super free. When I'm in front of an abstract painting, in the first place, you like it or you don't like it. Afterwards, it needs time. As a painter, especially, you need time to look at it and try to understand what is happening more than just what is in front of you. There is always something happening that you don't see directly. I like this, the fact that you cannot directly access it.

I think that's so important today, because there aren't many things that you can't have instantaneously. When we want food, we can get it on Deliveroo. If we want information, we can just Google it. It's interesting that you think abstraction today engages with slowness.

I think taking time to look, especially because sometimes it's right in front of us. If you want, you can see at any moment a picture of the Simpsons. I really like just the time to read things because it always means more. We, humans, love to take a rock and make it a god. I think it is important today to be connected with this other part of us. When you're a child, you find little things and you play with. When you grow up, you lose these things. I think I don't really lose those things. Or at least, I try not to.

I really love that whilst these paintings seem quite aesthetic, about the formal movement of paint, rhythm, and structure, you also have these ideas of the technological contemporary at the fore...



Of course. I can wake up and be busy with one thing, or more busy with another thing. But of course, all those thoughts are there. I have so many ideas and ways of thinking, but should I write it on the work? You know what I mean? I think it's after people make the mistake to say that the work stands by itself: work can stand by itself, but I think you miss a big, big part if you don't have the chance to make a conversation with it, to discover things. When you look at this painting, it's like someone who's been busy with Josef Albers. I'm a big fan of Imy Knoebel: I love so many artists, but when people see me, they cannot always have this in their mind, and they don't have to.

You've spoken a little bit about your influences, Sigmar Polke, for example, could you talk to me a bit about what else has inspired you?

It's really just a lot of things. I like to read Spinoza, I'm actually translating it. It's complex - when he says passion, he means passio - a Latin word, meaning divided in action and suffering. He says passion without action is suffering, These complex conversations stay in my mind. For example, when someone spoke to me about Guy Debord and The Society of the Spectacle. These things inspire me. When I was little, I didn't have many toys, so I made my own. In the same way, everyday, I'm inspired by so many things. when I see Japanese drawings, when I look at design, clothes, the different colors they choose - little things. Recently I found pictures of these little toys made from mint sweet wrappers. I used to use this to make these little bands, when I was ten. Can you imagine when you're ten and you look at a samurai movie and you're like, 'Oh, I like that thing', so you make one? It's just constantly being moved by everything we come across every day.

What do you want people to know about your work, or about this exhibition in particular?

I like it when people come and look, and when they feel something. I think that's the most important thing for me. When you're in your studio, you're just making your works. And then when I come outside, I hope that if someone is sensitive to it, they can feel it, and that puts them also in a drive. One of my best friends is a painter, and what I like is when something you see gives you energy, and you can take that energy and use it to do something. It doesn't matter what you do really. And that's what I want to share, I want to try to give that to people. It may not always work, but at least trying to share something. Sometimes words are limiting, that's why

I love thinking with the brush. I just don't want to be stuck in what I think of myself. I see this reflected in life - it's horrible when you go through a city and you can say this neighbourhood is the more hipster neighbourhood, and this one that, or this one that. You're often conditioned to think certain things, such as oh, I listen to rap music, so I'm going to wear this thing, or this thing. I don't limit myself in what I think of my work: painting for me is always a way to grow.

Libasse Ka at Carlos/Ishikawa runs until 17th February 2024 as part of Condo London 2024 - a collaborative exhibition by 50 galleries across 23 London spaces



Studio Images by: Adrien de Hemptinne