

# frieze



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## Libasse Ka Turns Painting into a Dramatic Event

For his first institutional exhibition, at Deurle's Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, the artist presents energetic, hand-worked canvases, joyfully probing paint's physical limits



BY BILLY DE LUCA IN EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 15 DEC 25





Libasse Ka, *Cycles*, 2025, oil on canvas, 2 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: © Libasse Ka and Carlos/Ishikawa, London; photograph: Useful Art Services

Muddied paint, washes of splotted oil, mediums mixing or refusing to mix, yellowing varnish coagulating over a trapped fly and a loose hair on stretched linen. There is no coherent subject matter to be seen in Libasse Ka's painting *Untitled* (all works 2025), yet it is undeniably rich in substance. Scratched lines like tally marks dig into the skin of the background, and small spherical shapes of colour are shaded to perfection.

For his first institutional solo exhibition, 'Notes on Shape Shifting', the Senegalese-born, Brussels-based artist presents 19 oil paintings of varying dimensions, installed in a gallery space perforated by a glass atrium, at the Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens (MDD) in Deurle. His gestural strokes, heavy textures and all-over expressive intensity form the essence of each work. In the exhibition text, Ka's methodology is explained as a culmination of his experimentation with the material properties of paint, exploring how, despite its chemical variations, paint sits on a surface, its behaviour guided and manipulated by layers of primer, or else, by bare canvas.

The incessant physicality of applying paint – in which Ka scuffs, leaps over and tears into the surface – is central to this practice. In some works, the upper sections of the canvas have been rendered by the grain of a scrunched T-shirt. In others, sheets of pigment-covered plastic are pressed into the surface, while Ka's loose hands zigzag over the midsection with nervous lines from chalky paint sticks, such as in *Negotiations*.

He often produces his larger works by dispensing with brushes (except for the occasional finishing touch), applying the paint instead with his fingers, different fabrics or directly from the tube. Painterly splotches, rendered globular through shading with medium, and whips of paint break the deadpan white of the primed canvas, reminiscent of a long scratch on a keyed car. In another *Untitled* work, a chalky yellow ground contains the squared impressions of a paint roller, and dense rust-coloured skeins drag swiftly down from the midline through gravity rather than brushwork. Everything appears in motion; nothing is fixed or final. The floating letters and vivid orange box in *No Competition* are pared back and airy, while *Gueno's Tree* is anything but. Fizzing blues and pinks spread across the canvas, and a splash of splintering russet recalls the chromatic transformations of Dale Frank's work.

A square *Untitled* painting appears to have been made with the transitory glow of the sun in the gallery in mind. Its bare white becoming most operative when the natural light from the atrium interrupts its volatile surface. Set between two tall, inch-wide windows, shafts of light strike the edges of the canvas. Deep green, red, black and blue splatters cluster at the centre against a pale, airy ground. Running up the left and right edges are two vertical yellow stripes, inch-thick, echoing Barnett Newman's 'zips' and mirroring the light outside. In this way, light becomes an active collaborator with the canvas in the conveyance of the painting.



Libasse Ka, *Untitled*, 2025, oil on canvas, 2 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: © Libasse Ka and Carlos/Ishikawa, London; photograph: Useful Art Services



Libasse Ka, *No competition*, 2025, oil on canvas, 2 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: © Libasse Ka and Carlos/Ishikawa, London; photograph: Useful Art Services

*Exit Through a Window* is stained with a thin turquoise wash, over which yellowing, glossy patches float, carrying the scent of linseed oil. *Untitled* bears the same odour but is surrounded by matte splotches of clear medium with a sharp, pine-like sting, as if it were still wet. These smells serve as an index of process, narrowing the distance between the making of the work and the results hanging on the gallery walls.

Ka's work is in flux. His approach seems to follow what Harold Rosenberg termed, in his essay 'The American Action Painters' (1952), the 'arena in which to act', whereby the canvas becomes an event. Painting is an adaptive system, capable of materially articulating many things. Ka's experiments in recording the ways paint interacts with a surface are promising and, crucially, appear to be heading somewhere.

*Libasse Ka's 'Notes on Shape Shifting' is on view at Museum Dhondt Dhaenens, Deurle, until 21 December*

*Main image: Libasse Ka, Gueno's tree (detail), 2025, oil on canvas, 2 × 1.5 m. Courtesy: © Libasse Ka and Carlos/Ishikawa, London;*

*photograph: Useful Art Services*