

RASHID DIAB

BEYOND LOCALITY

BY ANTONIO ZAYA

AZ: Why did you settle in Madrid?

RD: I was awarded a grant by the Foreign Ministry at the end of 1979. It was the only art scholarship for Sudan and there was tough competition for it at Khartoum university. It was for post-graduate research.

AZ: That was the basic professional motive. However, did your wish to visit Spain have something to do with the situation in your country and the African context?

RD: Yes. It was related to the kind of teaching that we always had in Sudan, always exceedingly English in character, and I wanted to leave behind such an influence. The whole art education system is a replica of the syllabus at the Royal College of Art in London. All of the teachers have been trained in London or in the USA. I wanted to find another culture that would broaden my perspectives.

AZ: Since when has the system you describe been functioning?

RD: Art education began in Sudan in 1943. The first art school was called Bajet Al Ruda. Its purpose was to graduate draughtsman for state education. The British system was copied and established. The syllabus excluded the teaching of Sudanese art. We were only taught European, western art. It was an illusion for me to go to Khartoum, and study the art of my own country at the Faculty in Khartoum, (I come from a nearby town), but it was simply not taught. That was the fundamental motivation for writing an art history of Sudan.

AZ: That is the thesis of your PH.D. in Madrid?

RD: Yes.

AZ: Why do you decide to settle in Madrid, where you have lived for the past fifteen years, once the Complutense

University of Madrid publishes your thesis, and once, therefore, you had fulfilled the purpose of your visit?

RD: There are various reasons. Some are political, and other artistic. Sudan really lacks an artistic structure, there are no galleries, museums, critics and collectors. Surprisingly there are some very good Sudanese art critics. After the recent Islamic coup d'état all the intellectuals have left the country. I wanted to return to Sudan at the end of the 80's, at least share my time between both countries, six months in Spain, six in Sudan, hoping to help my country to set up new schools that would teach Sudanese art. However, after the coup d'état, there's no way artists can work freely, and most of them are in exile. Spain, has many points in common with Sudan, the climate, the sun, the friendliness of the people; the art scene was once just as dynamic there as it was here, with plural tendencies and many activities. Now I feel I have a very clear mission ahead of me in Spain. I have to develop that relationship with my own inheritance, for although Spain is the country nearest to Africa, it is in Europe the country that least knows Africa. It is a country that either consciously or not rejects the initiative of artists who want to live in it. I will continue to support all of those who like me want to settle here.

AZ: Other than your work as painter and engraver, for which you are basically known in Madrid, you are an art theorist who has participated in past editions of the Habana Biennial, and

will now also participate in Atlántica, you will be a member of the Editorial Council of the magazine and at the moment you also coordinate the Exhibition Room of the Madrid Great Mosque, at the Islamic Centre.

RD: Yes, I'm the adviser for Exhibition Room. I have written for other magazines and newspapers before your offer to participate in *Atlántica*, in *El País*, for example, on the history of the theoretical movements of African philosophy, on Senghor, on the relation between politics and African art, because it is here that the real problem lies. We have a load of art.

AZ: *In this sense, have colonial religions, Christianity, Islam, had a negative effect, in your opinion?*

RD: I think that influences are part of human evolution. The problem is how they are understood.

AZ: *Again, in the same sense, have you had to give up your culture and integrate in the Spanish context in order to develop as an artist?*

RD: That's the dilemma that besets all exiled artists. However, it's been very clear to me from the start. I have enough ideas, enough history, what I wanted to do is to reach a technical level that was on a par with these ideas and history, I've come to Spain to learn techniques, to commune with another culture, not to assimilate it. The artist who loses his roots, his knowledge, loses everything. It's necessary to be an avid reader, a discoverer, a philosopher. Art is knowledge. Those that aren't sufficiently

prepared will easily dissolve into the surrounding cultural establishment.

There's also an economic problem. I've always had limited funds, but just enough not to betray my art. I haven't been tempted by quick, easy money gains.

AZ: *The fact you married a Spanish woman presumably made your residence in Spain easier?*

RD: No. She was an art student, like me, though we were in different years.



Rashid Diab. *I tale*. 1992. Watercolor. 43 x 58 cm.
Courtesy Medani, Madrid.

She is a person with a great capacity for cooperation, a tireless worker. Before our marriage, she spent two years in Sudan, on her own and with me in order to get to know my country's culture. Now she is preparing her doctorate on contemporary African art. We are therefore both involved in the same historical theoretical work. At a human level, despite the fact the Spanish are trying to forget their roots and moslem

domination, there are clear similarities with the Sudanese.

AZ: *The Greatest hispanic delusion is that Spanish integration in Europe should necessarily imply, as some politicians see it, the exclusion of the Latinamerican and the afromediterranean from our rich racial melting pot. Does Spain want to deny its past?*

RD: Yes, it's the worst delusion. The problem is that, occasionally, political thought moves within limited coordinates, in the area of convenience and opportunism. The problem also lies in the fact that the politicians have tried to alter and wipe out the real physiognomy of culture in order to embrace Europe blindly, to accept its model in every detail. The arts and communication are geared towards the exclusion and ignorance of the South. For this reason, as a new democratic country, Spain becomes a test country for discriminatory immigrant legislation and xenophobic attitudes that consolidated democracies wouldn't dare to ratify. In this sense, Spanish politicians don't foment with sufficient cultural impetus the entry of other cultures into Spain, like the creation of a Museum of African Art, through the European Community. They do everything possible to try and act as the big southern frontier, as if that concept had not been rendered obsolete by technology and the media, yet they scarcely play the role of guardians of the gate. According to their criteria, and to

the contrary of what many politicians think, the obligation to act as a supposed southern frontier forces Spain to develop its relations with Africa.

AZ: Curiously, the renewal of interest in Africa that occurred during the period of the european historical avant-garde, was up to a point stimulated by a Spaniard like Picasso, and presently, some individuals continue to look at Africa, although not directly. We can notice this in the work of Barceló, whose most recent work is incomprehensible without the presence and the influence of Mali. However, I think you are right about the involution of Spain's official cultural relations with Africa and even with the Arab world.

RD: In any case, I'd prefer to give my thinking a universal cultural frame. If Barceló paints Mali it's because he lacks that experience, he goes there like someone looking for a vitamine. He finds it there, like Picasso or Matisse once did as well. Other cultures have always been the source of nourishment for western culture. Yet this precisely is the problem. Picasso's work is recognized but not the work of the anonymous craftsman who fashioned the mask. This unknown creator is the true author, who made the mask out of nothing.

AZ: The debt is greater when the fact of direct African influence on the historical avant-garde isn't recognized. The West doesn't teach the historical avant-garde as the direct outcome of its relation with Africa, but as an inherent break with

naturalist, nineteenth century tradition.

RD: This no doubt has some relation with general philosophy of races. One of the most interesting issues of cultural influence is that certain societies are born with art while others manage to acquire it. Art that follows the dictates of power, as happened in Spain during the 80's, art for the market, for banks, who serve power, doesn't exist in Africa, but art does exist, and people are born with it. For this simple reason African art is pure. Yet, on the other hand, in general, africans have a great capacity for syncretism, for absorption. All characteristics of foreign religions are adapted to our cultures.

AZ: Can we explain this attitude as the african's chameleon's ability to adopt the formal aspects, that are less relevant, to retain the essential, as happens with santería and syncretism in Brazil and Cuba?.

RD: Yes. Western eurocentrism also proclaims that. The difference is direction. Western art is directed to mankind, to society, African art tends to integration with nature, to which man also belongs. This integration art is much wider in basis. This kind of integration enables free ideas to flow, well defined and strong in their general meaning. But if you concern yourself with man, then he changes. That's why western art depended on the commissions of patrons and princes and now it is directed to a very limited sector that dominates the media. The rest don't count. In Africa it's not necessary to

understand art, it just happens, yet the new fluidity of the media makes the theorizing of artists inevitable, and this changes the terminology and the mechanism of art. When people point out to me how strange writing from right to left is, (arab and chinese style), I see the difference I have with the general European perspective. Being an African, my information will prevent me from saying something similar about European style writing from left to right, because my ego isn't as big as to imagine that my way of writing is the only and fundamental one. Furthermore, who's written history?. A bunch of French colonisers in a moment of cultural dominance?. Imperialists dominated by interests who thought "primitive" people have to be taught everything?.

AZ: Don't you feel that in spite of all this the relations between African and European art are changing sign?.

RD: All the damage inflicted, that still continues, can't be set right in a century, or during several generations. It's a very severe injury that's gone right down to the bone. In Europe people still don't know that some areas of the African continent are unexplored and haven't surrendered through violence to western culture. Another serious problem is the studies that Africans do in Europe and which are alien to their needs and which they pretend to transfer and apply out of context, in imitation, to their country. This tends to happen in large pretentious cities. Western dress and

plastic are examples of this stupid imitation that only undermines the wealth of their own cultures. However there is a stage of combination and cohabitation that is very positive. The fact African cultures are oral is a further disadvantage for their study. The cultural war is less evident but more decisive. In this sense the resistance that the new generations are prepared to put up against the West is a source of hope for the survival of human civilization that we mustn't confuse with war-imposed Empires.

AZ: Given this context that you explain, how has your work been received in Spain?

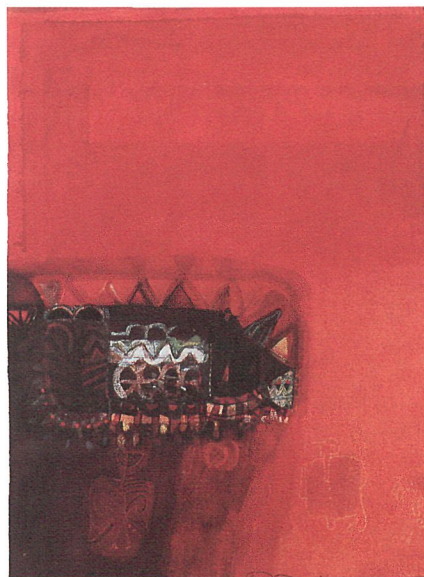
RD: I want to create a universal, international work. I don't think locality matters any more in our world. Where one is, is a secondary problem. I can get to Alaska from Sudan in the same day. The problem is how can I discover my own reality in my thinking. Because thought is one thing, and another is expressing ideas. I devoted my beginning years to the learning of new techniques, I did all the courses I could, painting, frescos, all technical procedures, as well as painting techniques, and my own study of printing, till I was able to dominate them. This control of technique was essential in my work because my subjects are very strong and very difficult. I am the result of many thousands of years, and it isn't at all easy to be Rashid. I think that as an individual, as the outcome of ancient civilizations, an amalgam of creations

and experiences, I need to express myself better in my work. My relation with time, because time is man's worst enemy.

AZ: To what kind of time does your painting refer?

RD: To Time in its totality. I've done some series on the last dynasties, representing historical characters.

AZ: These recent works that we are



Rashid Diab, *Red Series*, 1992. Watercolor, 43 x 58 cm. Courtesy Medani, Madrid.

publishing in this volume, these sublime abstractions, are referring to what meanings?

RD: They can be divided in two areas. The first, made up of watercolours traces the history of colour. When red saturates symbols, when it dominates the subject. Form follows colour and not vice versa as in the West. I think colour determines form. The second is a tribute that I make to a poet friend. Hadn't I been a painter I would have chosen poetry. Together with philosophy, poetry inspires my work.

AZ: What is your present relation to Islam?

RD: Well, I'm really a mixture of African Arab culture by birth, with an African greatgrandmother and an Arab greatgrandfather. And then, my contact with the world. I left my country twenty five years ago when I was eighteen. I've always been willing to know and experience other ways of life. All of this has created the feeling that I don't belong to any particular place, but rather that I come from everywhere.

AZ: Do you think that is the sensation felt by contemporary artists?

RD: It should be. An artist doesn't produce for a specific public, but for culture. For this reason I support the idea of rewriting the Universal History of Art from this perspective, where nothing is established and where everything is modifiable. As my interests are universal my ideas are going to be more open. In this sense I think that to write on European art today it is vital to know Oriental art and vice versa. The media will finally get rid of exclusivist discourse. One of the most satisfying discoveries of recent months for me has been ATLANTICA. I can see the growing interest that exists in the development of other cultures. If we consider the role of the artist in different cultures, then the artist acts as a catalyst for his own history, he has to filter things, and not act like is happening with mimesis in Africa, or in Spain, where the artist is living off the credit of north American aesthetics.

AZ: *Does your painting occupy a fundamental place in your work?*

RD: Painting is spoken about as something different and parallel to culture. A society with a reasonable standard of living can exist although it lacks painting. Painting is another value. Barceló's case can be an example. He is a good painter but he lacks culture. I could have come to Spain to do the same thing. That is simply a human liability. That's what Barceló does. I, as African artist, deny the art of those paintings. That is the tendency of the twentieth century. Yet economic power never fosters "good" painting. Art is art, whether painting or not, and stems from its own context. He may be a good theorist and a good painter but he's not an artist. This conflict emphasizes the need for an art history of our time written by critics, theorists and historians of different cultures, with gallerists excluded. What's most important is the meaning of the work in its own context. For geographical reasons, as they are nomads, the Arabs have not paid particular attention to their pictorial expression, though they do have it. Space itself gives that dimension and that pictorial sense. To react to space directly gives you landscape which is the predominant European art, but painting beyond landscape is something new in Europe, stimulated by industrial culture. Yet such an attitude is old in Islamic culture, and furthermore, it's been stimulated by poetry, the first of the arts, but also by

painting; Islamic art is very abstract. However, people come and inform me that abstract art was born in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century with Kandinsky and Paul Klee. If you study the work of both you realize this is untrue. They have gone to other places and copied or interpreted other cultures. In this sense other cultures have influenced the genesis of European art. They take advantage of the artist, they imitate and copy him yet they look



Rashid Diab, *Invisible Love*, 1992. Watercolor, 108 x 74 cm. Courtesy Medani, Madrid.

down on him. This is shocking. Furthermore, they've put around the idea that African art is a collective, communal enterprise; this is a ploy adopted to conceal European borrowings, and so pejorative terms are used. Artists have always existed in Africa. This is an example of the repression exerted on African art constantly, while our artistic innovations

are reproduced outside, out of context. Yet as Western gallerists think that this is the method of creating great artists, they're forming some good painters that only correspond to their fraudulent manipulation and don't represent anything. This kind of artist is a market design creature, similar to certain cases in Spain during recent years. The artist is art in himself, and if he lacks ideas and has to glean them elsewhere then he isn't an artist. That's why artists can change, because they are the source, and they don't have to be in bondage to any one style for eternity. His are all styles. We have artists that merely show us he repetition of their style year in year out, their stalemate and lack of content. This type of fraud is rife in Europe.

AZ: *Do you think that the exhaustion of Western discourse needs to vampirize the South again to overcome the end of its history?*

RD: Yes. I think one of the problems of Western culture is that it never had the initiative, it has always depended on other cultures, and it has always appropriated, taking advantage of other's innocence. Yet many of us ponder the contradiction implied in the pictorial act, in painting that we have adopted as our own. Other groups, refer us to the short-lived painting on skin that has centuries of tradition. I don't pretend to be chauvinist and state that everything comes from Africa or India. What I pretend is a genuine dialogue where things are truthfully admitted.