

Emails, Paintings, Loops

By Ditte Ejlerskov

Emails

On the 9th of April 2011, when I received my first letter from lawyer Amadi Omorose Azagba, I was excited. In fact I was not sure what to believe. This could be the real thing! The lawyer writes that he has been trying to reach me for quite some time now, since one of his former clients, Gabriel Ejlerskov, had tragically died in a car accident and that this man has left an astronomic amount of money. Gabriel has earned his money as a gold merchant and by lending out exotic animals for fashion photography. He leaves behind a fine French house, a pool surrounded by exotic plants, and some mysterious artefacts from Africa where he lived until his death. The lawyer who administrates the possessions is unfortunately limited by a deadline given by the local bank that holds Gabriel's money. If I pay the fee, I will gain access to the legacy.

I answer the email which becomes the beginning of a long dialog between Azagba and me. The lawyer sends me elaborate information and descriptions in words and photos that he himself, presumably, has taken to authenticate his scam. The email correspondence will be available in the gallery while the show "My African Letters" is exemplified through painting. Everything is based on the reverie constructed throughout several months in words formulated and sent across the globe.

Paintings

Taking painting as my starting point, I seek to explore its potential as a tool for interpreting reality. Some of the paintings linked to this project are renderings of the photos Azagba sent me via email. Others are translations of his words and some are pure imagination. All are they experiments in formal painting as well as they are unfolding the narration of my opportunity in Africa.

Several of the paintings are physically layered where canvases are cut out and mounted on top of each other. By doing so I am affirming the nature of this exchange of ideas where dreams and fragments are picked up, built on top of each other.

In my studio as I reduce my framework of components to pure painterly elements, I am able to blend and explore without a fixed point in time. The pure painterly elements once were translations of Azagba's photos, but they were also found in historical photos for example of a colonial house, an expensive floor, a tropical plant, an insect, a wild animal, a safari, a French battleship, or a contemporary fashion photo of a woman in a cheetah body-stocking. Weighed against the viewer's readings of these layered paintings, my privilege is the sentiment in the former identity of the cut canvases. I remember the strengths and failures of the pictures I have trimmed down or hidden behind other layers of canvas. I hope, however, that parts of this experience of sacrifice will translate to those who look at my paintings.

By blending pictures and impulses into my own daydream, I try to question the space between the personal and public, and I strive to define individual experience within a world order of collective consciousness.

Collective consciousness is built up by published information. What is published is real. Therefore I find Orientalist paintings from the 19th century exceptionally inspirational. These artists were imitating the exotic instead of essentially representing it. I believe that much of today's tourism is also constituted through personal interpretations. We project what we want to see. In order to satisfy visitors, the places we visit imitate what we expect to see. In the vein of the Orientalist painters I am, in this project, playing with completely constructed exotic environments. So is Azagba. We both play a game of the white man's expectations of Africa.

Loops

After the last email is sent, in the final stages of the painting project, the great burden of colonial guilt happens in me. That is how it felt; I got caught in my own game. I had exploited Azagba for the sake of art. We do not know who he is, but he is a victim. I experienced how the project suddenly took a significant turn as I explicitly tried to find an alibi and a moral solution to the fact that I had exploited my pen pal. My crime is that of spending his time and acting upon his credulity. He believed in anything I wrote to him. I now had several solutions on how to compensate Azagba. I could pay the fee as of payment for my art project, and as a sort of fake goodwill sign of him "winning" the battle of lies. That, of course, would be a construction since I did not believe him. I could also confess and share my potential economic surplus of the exhibition with him. He would then have to admit that he had been lying to me and he would have to reveal his identity to me. Then I could help him into a better life. He is probably in a tight situation where ever he is... Most criminals are forced into unconstructive circumstances I guess...? I could help him, play on, and send him the money as a reward. We could perhaps even do an art-project together and I would release him from this sad job of his...

First I exploit him and then I want to save him? I am acting like a colonial businessman from the 19th century! Or a priest! In the end of my search for a suitable moral solution, I understand that this political correctness was only one to satisfy my own ego. I do not really care about Azagba. But I care about my self-image. I do not want to appear uncivilized! Well, I am only guilty if Azagba in fact *is* less privileged than I am myself. Is it not only my prejudgement of him that places him under me? I do not know enough about him to be able to consider who is more privileged...

The last painting is now dry and I wonder if it is actually possible for me to dress up in these post-colonial feathers? Must I really bare this enormous guilt just because I am from Europe and Azagba is from Benin in Africa? More importantly; I now realize that it is in fact not when I *mock* Azagba that I am acting superiorly. Is it not when I bring in morals and want to help him be a better person that I act wiser, superior and missionary?

It is interesting to experience how political correctness can change facts totally: This relationship would never have existed had Azagba not initiated it. It is driven by the fact that I *myself* am a victim of scam. Who is then the winner? Is the victim always the less privileged? And how do I measure that when I know nothing about him?

Well, what happened then in this strange tale was that I much later got in contact with him again. My remorseful suggestion now was that he admitted his game and we would do an art project together. He was interested and I was relieved. Sadly, despite his interest in art he still insisted on Gabriel resting in imaginary peace. So we can never be collaborators and the dialog ends here with a pending apology in my email drafts box.