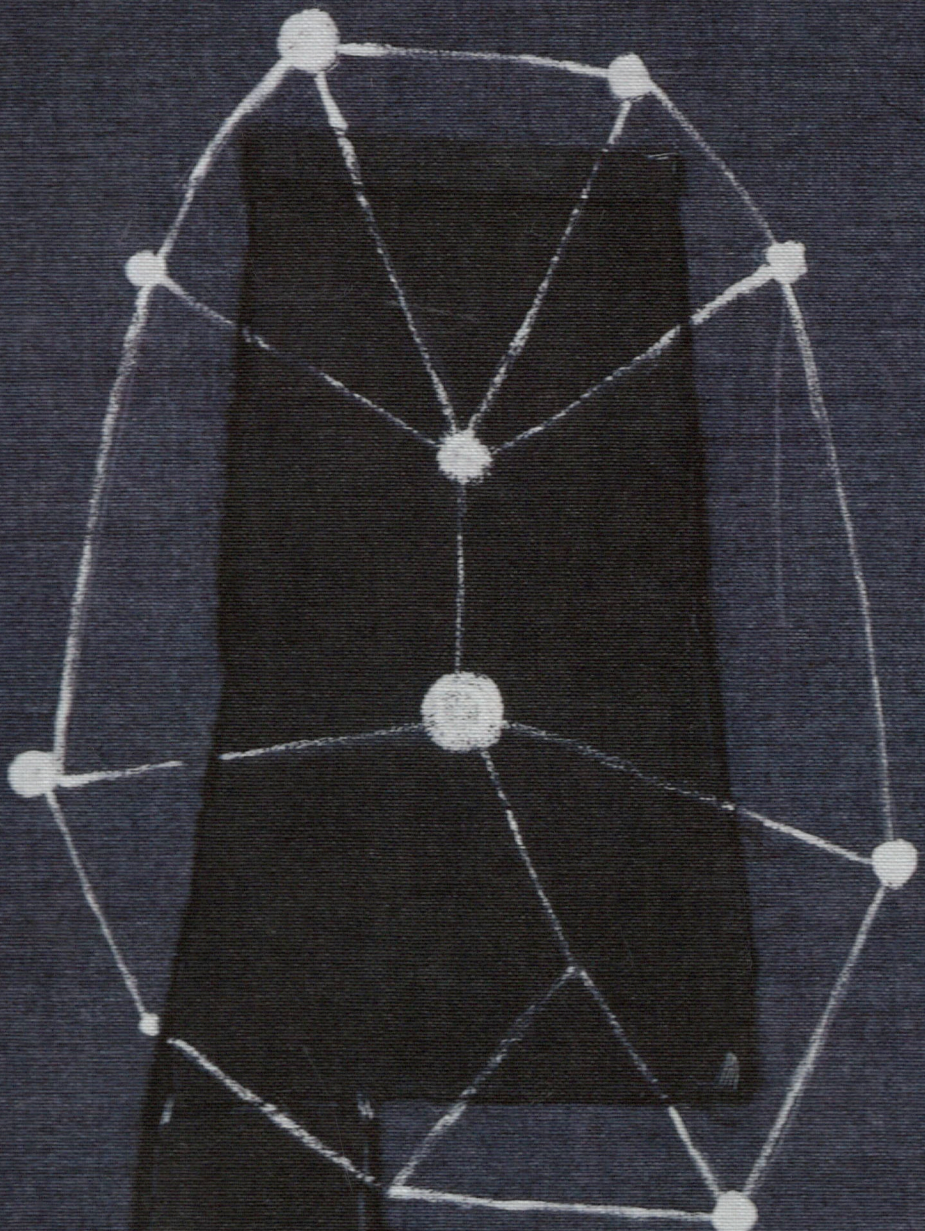

Galerie Cécile Fakhoury
Atelier EXB

OUATTARA WATTS

OUATTARA WATTS

Essays by Mara Hoberman,
Smooth Nzewi,
and Stéphane Vacquier

Galerie Cécile Fakhoury
Atelier EXB

Mara Hoberman

RENCONTRES OUATTARA WATTS × NEW YORK

ontres—the coming together of people, ideas, or materi-
are a vital part of Ouattara Watts's life experience. They
lso a defining feature of his practice and oeuvre. Watts
uses this French term, which translates as "encounter,"
escribe important moments throughout his personal
ney—one that has taken him from Abidjan, where he
orn in 1957, to Paris, where he arrived in the late 1970s
udy at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts,
finally, on to New York City, where he has been based
1988. Watts applies *rencontre* in a literal sense when
owledging fortuitous meetings that have helped bolster
eputation and shape his career—Jean-Michel Basquiat,
Baghoomian, Francesco Clemente, Keith Haring, Brice
len, and Rene Ricard to name a few. Conceptual and
rial discussions about his paintings, however, beg an
nded interpretation of *rencontre*.

he surfaces and compositions of Watts's paintings
nd with poetic and metaphorical meetings. His patch-
ed supports comprised of tarp or canvas (or combina-
thereof) are further embellished with found objects
tishes" including scraps of textiles, photographs, maps,
hes, and shells. On top of these heterogeneous cus-
zed surfaces, Watts paints enigmatic compositions of
ingly unrelated symbols and shapes. Animals, figures,
eometric forms mingle freely with scientific notations,
ous symbols, and strings of numerical code. Watts's
ings are conceptual and material *rencontres* between
etic, linguistic, historical, and geographical references
nirror his own transnational trajectory and multicul-
affiliations.

he *rencontre* that ultimately brought Watts to New
occurred in January 1988 in Paris, when Watts met
Michel Basquiat at the latter's opening at Galerie Yvon
ert. Just two years apart in age, the young artists hit
immediately and decided to skip out on the gallery
and do an impromptu studio visit at Watts's live/work
on rue Marx-Dormoy, in Paris's 18th arrondissement.
iat bought several paintings on the spot. During the
ving weeks, Watts and Basquiat were almost insepara-
f their time together in Paris, Watts remembers long
sions about "the place of Africans in art history" and
Basquiat was moved when he recounted his own dif-
es breaking into the art scene in Paris as a Black art-
romising better opportunities in New York, Basquiat
raged his new friend to cross the Atlantic as soon as
le. Three months later, in April 1988, Watts arrived.

t if Watts's *rencontre* with the "radiant child"[2] is what
ly drew him across the Atlantic, it was the greater New
rt scene that convinced him to stay. Compared to Paris,
Watts's Beaux-Arts professors told him his paintings
not African enough" because they were colorful (rather
rown) and gallerists dismissed him, saying there was
rket for contemporary African painting,[3] New York
d a welcoming artistic community, favorable critical
rse, and a thriving contemporary art market. Almost
diately upon arrival in New York, Watts was offered a
at Vrej Baghoomian's gallery and, via Basquiat, made
ctions with an eclectic group of successful painters
ncluded Haring, Julian Schnabel, Clemente, Marden,
Salle, and Ross Bleckner. While Watts's time in Paris
fered him "true cultural and intellectual freedom," the
vas eager to escape what he saw to be a "real problem…

Julian Schnabel, The Mutant King, 1981. Oil, wax, dirt on tarpaulin, 274.3 × 365.8 cm

about black painters' and sculptors' non-recognition in the Parisian art community."[4]

Watts met Haring along with writer, tastemaker, and Warhol superstar René Ricard on his very first day in New York. The *rencontre* took place at Baghoomian's SoHo gallery, where Basquiat had recently exhibited and where he envisioned doing a show with Watts in the near future. In anticipation of this duo show, Watts had shipped a selection of tarp paintings from Paris. As Watts unpacked and unrolled these canvases in the gallery, Ricard—whose influential essays published in *Artforum* in the early 1980s helped launch the careers of Basquiat, Haring, and Schnabel—began furiously taking notes. Ricard's raw, spontaneous impressions were never published, but the enthusiastic and energetic response to Watts's work was a welcome change to the ambivalence he had often experienced in Paris.

During the summer of 1988, Watts participated in a group show at Baghoomian that placed his paintings alongside work by George Condo, Andy Warhol, and Basquiat. After Basquiat's tragic death in August 1988, Baghoomian offered Watts a solo exhibition—which would be his first in New York. The untitled show opened in February of the following year and featured approximately a dozen paintings of various sizes, all made in Paris. In the immediate aftermath of Basquiat's death, Watts was not yet sure about making a definitive move to New York. Although Baghoomian offered him a local studio, for a time Watts preferred to paint in Paris and exhibit in New York.

Among the paintings Watts made at the rue Marx-Dormoy studio for his solo show was a memorial to his late friend. Titled after Basquiat's graffiti tag and sometimes signature, *Samo the Initiated* (1988, see pp. 28–29), is a large-scale diptych of what appears to be an Egyptian Pharoah's body inside a sarcophagus. The bodily form, painted matte-black and spanning the entire length of the two canvases, is larger than life and surrounded by a bright yellow halo. Watts applied his acrylic paints roughly, leaving visible drips, brush marks, and chunky evidence of added materials, like paper pulp, which he often mixed into his paints to create what he has described as

1 Ouattara Watts quoted in Alexis Campion, "Exposition Basquiat : 'Il aimait qu'on aille dans les restos africains de Paris'," *Le Journal du dimanche* (October 3, 2018).

2 Rene Ricard, "The Radiant Child," *Artforum* (December 1981).

3 Conversation with the artist in July 2023, Paris.

4 The artist quoted in *Ouattara Watts, Résonances* (Eymoutiers: Espace Paul Rebeyrolle, 2019), 47.

a "thick sauce."[5] Fetish objects attached to the upper corners of the two panels made from sticks, shells, and other organic materials reinforce the dimensionality of this painting as well as its spiritual significance. Typical of Watts's work, *Samo the Initiated* is overtly symbolic and also highly personal. As a poignant evocation of Basquiat's final rite of passage, this painting contributed to the show's overall otherworldly ambience by helping to make Watts's references to ancient iconography and the afterlife appear uncannily relevant.

It is no exaggeration to say that *Samo the Initiated*, a highlight of his commercially and critically successful debut at Baghoomian, initiated Watts into the New York art scene. In a review in *New Art International*, critic Gérard Barrière praised Watts and also provided important art historical context for the show: "four years after the exhibition 'Primitivism in Modern Art' at the Museum of Modern Art and more than eighty years after [Picasso's] *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, [an African artist] is reappropriating the 'primitivism' on which modernity has never ceased to drawn upon and which continues to haunt it."[6] Such thoughtful and positive reactions to his work as well as the general atmosphere of the city itself, whose energy Watts found similar to Abidjan, helped the artist make the decision to settle there permanently. Watts set up his first New York studio in a large loft in Tribeca and worked there until 2001, when he moved to a space in Hell's Kitchen. His studio is now in Brooklyn.

Watts's paintings did not—and still do not—fit neatly within the dominant painting styles of their time: not in 1970s Abidjan, nor in 1980s Paris, and not even in 1990s New York. Watts was, however, part of the international art world zeitgeist of the '90s, a period which saw critical reevaluations of non-Western art and a revival of painting spurred by the rise of neo-expressionism in the 1980s. Though never considered a neo-expressionist, Watts shares certain aesthetic commonalities with artists who were assigned this label—including Haring, Schnabel, Bleckner, and Basquiat. The stylized shapes, bold colors, and prominent outlines found in Watts's paintings bring to mind Haring's pictograms. His rugged supports and textural paint (often thickened with additives and applied directly with his hands) recall Schnabel, particularly the 1981 *Mutant Kings* series which features primitive-style markings on swaths of tarp. The overt references to spirituality in Watts's work resonate with Bleckner's mystical combinations of abstract and representational imagery as well as with Basquiat's evocations of mythology and religious symbols. Watts's interest in the cosmos connects him to another unclassifiable New York painter, Nancy Graves, whose large-scale colorful abstractions from the 1970s were based on NASA mappings of the lunar surface and satellite imagery of weather patterns.

Ultimately Watts's pluralist combinations of specific, seemingly unrelated cultural and historical references set him apart from these peers. In the catalogue for *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, a groundbreaking exhibition that traveled across the US and Europe in the early 1990s, curator Susan Vogel describes Watts's paintings as "a storehouse of forms without specific meaning or location."[7] Vogel goes on to list, from left to right, all of the references cited in *Painting of the Soul* (1988, see pp. 18–19):

> [A] shield from the Papuan Gulf in Oceania; paired heads adapted from Ouattara's own Senufo tradition . . . ; an upside-down stick figure wearing an animal mask, perhaps also Senufo; a heart-shaped form recalling a yam-leaf pattern found in Igbo decoration from Nigeria; an actual mask, probably made in Gabon for export; and an abstracted graphic device suggesting the tops of Dogon Kanaga masks from Mali.[8]

This researched, hyper-specific inventory would not be accessible to most viewers and is certainly not necessary to appreciate Watts's work. Throughout his oeuvre, the idea of symbology is more important than what any one specific symbol ostensibly represents. More so than particular stories, historic events, or philosophies, Watts's interest lies in how visual language is created, interpreted, and diffused. Explaining the expansive role of symbols in his work, Watts has said, "Even though I localize [my vision] to make it better understood, it is wider than that. It refers to the cosmos."[9] Referring to his entire artistic practice, the "vision" includes the artist's earliest works up through those he is making in the studio today.

It is precisely by liberating symbols from their prescribed meanings that Watts is able to create personal codes. He invites viewers to contemplate somewhat mysterious combinations of notations and symbols, each according to their own set of references and associations. Each painting is therefore an intimate and unique *rencontre* between coder (artist) and decoder (viewer.) Affirming Watts's ambition to paint universally, Vogel concludes her formal analysis of his 1988 painting, stating that the artist "succeeds in making all these forms his own, and in shaping them to fit his own meanings."[10] In Watts's more recent works from the 2000s, Egyptian and Senufo symbols (the *ankh*, Pharaonic crowns, and Senufo ladder motifs, for example) mingle with the digital realm's ubiquitous "at" symbol, the Greek Sigma, and the mathematical notation Pi. Such decontextualized and recontextualized imagery (symbolic, representational, and abstract) ensure that no two viewers will have the same impression or experience.

Returning to Watts's New York debut in 1989, Barrière's *New Art International* review of the show at Baghoomian introduced an important context for the artist's work—one that extends the frame of reference beyond Watts's African roots, Beaux-Arts education, and cohort of contemporaries in New York. Describing Watts's ability to "transform a gallery on Broadway into a sacred space where, among other

Nancy Graves, Areol, P-78.010, 1978. Oil and encaustic on canvas, 162.6 × 223.5 cm

"Ouattara Watts
th Amanda Millet-
rsa," *The Brooklyn*
il (March 2024),
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/2024/03/art/
attara-Watts-with-
anda-Millet-Sorsa.
Gérard Barrière,
uattara ou l'Afrique
iverselle," *New Art*
ernational (May 1989)
thor's translation).
Susan Vogel,
spiration and
rden," in *Africa*
plores: 20th Century
ican Art (New York:
e Center for African
, 1991), 235.
Vogel, "Inspiration
l Burden," 235.
Ouattara Watts
ted by Chris Spring
Angaza Afrika:
ican Art Now
ndon: Laurence King,
08), 324.
Vogel, "Inspiration
l Burden," 235.

Ouattara Watts, Sigui, 2002. Mixed media and collage on canvas, 273.4 × 304.5 cm, Nasher Museum of Art Collection

mysteries, the hierogamy of the ancestral and modernity, of the tribal and the universal, of Africa and of painting takes place right before our very eyes,"[11] Barrière evokes a spiritual marriage between old/new, local/global, and African/Western art (three quintessentially Watts-ian *rencontres*.) Referring to the gallery as a "sacred space," Barrière highlights Watts's use of ancient symbols, but his analogy also has twentieth-century connotations. Reminiscent of conversations that artists like Jackson Pollock, Ad Reinhardt, and Mark Rothko were having decades earlier about art's spiritual qualities and capacity to sanctify spaces and evoke transcendental experiences, Barrière's observations link Watts to this older generation of New York painters. Not only are Watts's paintings spiritual in terms of their references to ancient cultures and the artist's own Senufo traditions, but they also commune with the conceit and experience of Rothko's chapel. Barrière was not alone in identifying this connection (*rencontre*) with Modern art. Watts himself has likened Boloye—a ceremonial dance performed in his parents' native Ivorian village of Korhogo, during which "the dancers wear costumes dripping with paint"—to Jackson Pollock's paintings.[12]

Watts's broad embrace of spiritualism connects him visually and conceptually to previous generations of New York painters and also resonates with art world conversations about contemporary African art in the 1990s. In 1993, Watts's work was included in the Venice Biennale as part of the exhibition *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale*. Curated by Susan Vogel and Ousmane Sow, the show aimed to place contemporary African art "firmly within the framework of the transcultural aesthetic."[13] Taking Watts as a prime example, Vogel described his paintings as, "new places for us to visit, spaces in which our minds are free to wander and to encounter spirits both ancient and modern."[14]

While still living in Abidjan, Watts sought out books featuring reproductions of paintings by Picasso, Pollock, and Rothko in the library of the Centre Culturel Français (now the Institut Français Côte d'Ivoire.) In Paris, he saw his first Rothko in person at the Centre Pompidou—a visual *rencontre* he has described as similar to being "hit by a tornado."[15] And in New York, of course, he had even greater access to paintings by Pollock, Reinhardt, and Rothko in the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art, Guggenheim Museum, and Whitney Museum of American Art. Watts's appreciation for these artists is, in part, tied to the rhetoric surrounding American modernism. During a radio interview with Rothko in 1943, Adolph Gottlieb summarized their ideas about the universality of art:

> All genuine art forms utilize images that can be readily apprehended by anyone acquainted with the global language of art. That is why we use images that are directly communicable to all who accept art as the language of the spirit, but which appear as private symbols to those who wish to be provided with information or commentary.[16]

These words complement those Watts often heard from his great uncle, a Senufo shaman who told him: "Artists are the guardians of the cosmos."[17] Fusing these two cultural understandings of art's capacity to provide universal and transcendental experiences, Watts further expands the idea of a "global language of art."

While there are few stylistic similarities between Watts's oeuvre and Pollock and Rothko's mature work, there are strong affinities with both of these artists' early paintings (where, notably, the influence of ancient and non-Western art are most apparent). Before settling into his signature compositions consumed with creating light out of color, Rothko experimented with surrealism, as in *Sea Fantasy* (1946), which describes a spirit-world inhabited by floating non-human figures and cryptic symbols.

Painted over fifty years later, Watts's *Sigui* (2002), recalls Rothko's curiously buoyant earth-toned forms. Describing his choice of subject matter during this period, Rothko wrote, "The picture deals not with the particular anecdote, but rather with the Spirit of Myth, which is generic to all myths at all times."[18] *Sigui*, whose title refers to an elaborate Dogon ceremony dedicated to the star Sirius and celebrating the rebirth of the world approximately every sixty years, is similarly "generic." While the painting is rife with mythological and ceremonial references, it also describes tradition and cycles in general terms, thus presenting mythology as a broad concept.

In *Sigui*, Watts stages a *rencontre* between the double-sided axe of Shango (lord of thunder in the Yoruba religion), a six-pointed star (a symbol associated with various religious and cultural contexts), a diagram of an atom, a hand signing "I love you" in American Sign Language, and an illustration of an orbital path. While Watts is loath to interpret the content of his paintings, he justifies the diversity of his symbolic references. Describing the role of an artist, he explains, "You are allowed a vision that is cosmic rather than nationalistic or village-oriented. Therefore you are the sun, the rain, the Mexican, the American, the Japanese, etc."[19] These words resonate retroactively with some of Pollock's earliest paintings, such as *Guardians of the Secret* (1943), which features colorful pictographic forms inspired by Native American mythologies as well as African and prehistoric art. Whereas Pollock and Rothko famously moved away from figuration and symbolism and towards complete abstraction, which they found to be even more universal, Watts's mélange of representation and abstraction remains an essential part of his pluralistic approach to style and content.

11 Barrière, "Ouattara ou l'Afrique Universelle."
12 "Ouattara Watts," *The Brooklyn Rail*.
13 Thomas McEvilley, *Fusion: West African Artists at the Venice Biennale* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 6.
14 McEvilley, *Fusion*, 7.
15 Conversation with the artist in March 2024.
16 Mark Rothko, "The Portrait and the Modern Artist," radio transcript, WNYC, https://www.wnyc.org/story/rothko-and-gottlieb-discuss-portrait-and-modern-artist-wnycs-new-york/.
17 Conversation with the artist in July 2023, Paris.
18 Mark Rothko, *Mark Rothko 1903–1970*, exh. cat. (London: Tate, 1987), 81.
19 As quoted by McEvilley in *Fusion*, 72.

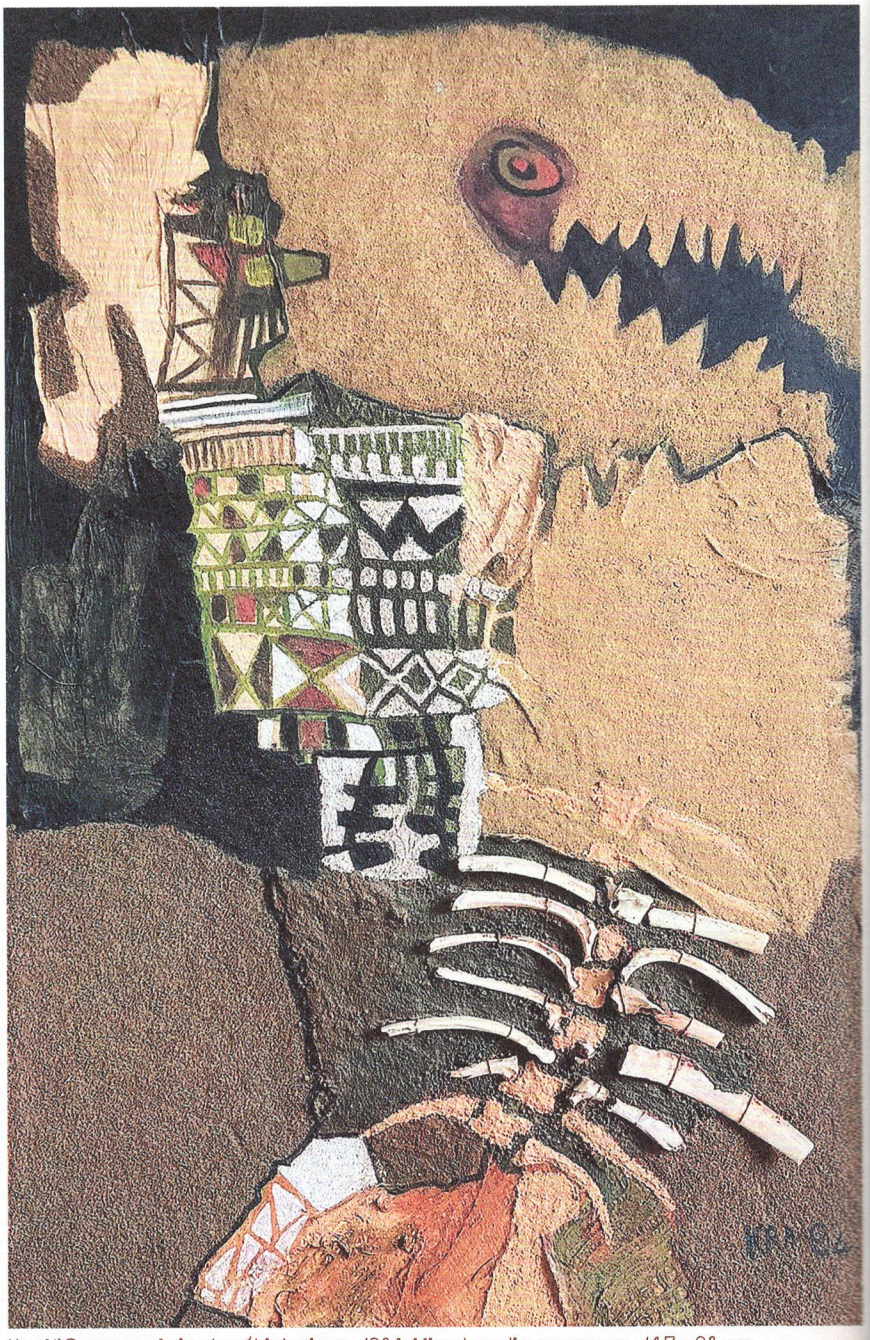
Mark Rothko, Sea Fantasy, 1946. Oil on canvas, 111.8 × 91.8 cm

Watts's relocation from a northern district of Paris to the southern tip of Manhattan came decades after the center of the art world relocated to New York in the aftermath of World War II. Unsurprisingly, the historic shift looms large in many of Watts's paintings. Explicit references appear in *Paris: 1907* (2023, see p. 13), whose title is a reference to Pablo Picasso's seminal, controversial painting, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Painted in Paris in 1907 (though not publicly exhibited until 1916). *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* changed the course of Western painting by ushering in cubism and shocking viewers with its subject matter, disregard for pictorial conventions, and indifference to idealized notions of beauty. Capturing the magnitude of Picasso's painting, Watts's *Paris: 1907* is cosmic in terms of its size as well as its compositional structure. In this painting, abstract forms, objects, and symbols appear to be orbiting a central yellow nugget that suggests the center of gravity for European Modern Art. Evoking the influence of West African sculpture on Picasso (and, by extension, France's colonization of Africa) Watts has painted a Dogon-style sculpture hovering near the blazing "sun." The imagery relates to an epiphany Watts remembers having while studying art books in the French library in Abidjan: "Picasso, Matisse, Brancusi, and Modigliani were all completely inspired by the art in Africa."[20]

In addition to highlighting derivative aspects of Picasso's masterpiece, Watts cites another painter in this work—one whose presence ultimately dwarfs Picasso's and further ties Watts to the New York school.

The concentric rings that read as orbital paths in *Paris: 1907* strongly recall Jasper Johns's *Target* paintings, the first of which was made in 1955. In addition to the circular motif, the mottled blue paint Watts used to build up the background of his painting is reminiscent of the uneven texture of Johns's signature encaustic, a mixture of wax and pigment that was notably used in ancient Egypt to create portraits of the dead. Writing in 1984, Carter Ratcliff described the "meditative surface" of Johns's paintings as "heavily worked but quiet, reflective, ruminative."[21] The same could be said of Watts's surfaces, which the artist rubs with his hands in a gesture that recalls the Senufo technique of plastering huts with mud. In some paintings, Watts even creates peaks with the paint, which recall Sudanese architecture. On top of his encrusted hand-worked surfaces, Watts often adds small objects or "fetishes" such as decorated sticks to his paintings. This aspect of his practice connects him to the *vohou-vohou* art movement, which emerged in the Ivory Coast in the 1970s, shortly before Watts moved to Paris. *Vohou-vouhou* artists including Youssouf Bath, Théodore Koudougnon, Mathilde Moreau, Kra N'Guessan and Yacouba Touré used recycled materials found in their immediate environment as alternatives to traditional Western painting supplies such as canvas and oils. Watts's use of mixed media of course also recalls the objects—rulers, brooms, newspaper clipping, and silverware—that Johns added to his large-scale painted compositions.

Like Watts's paintings, Johns's compositions are filled with familiar, but enigmatic images that appear again and again across his oeuvre: flags, skeletons, numbers, and citations from Picasso, to name a few. Johns has referred to these puzzlingly mundane references as, "Things the mind already knows."[22] Similarly, the elements that populate Watts's paintings in different permutations are comfortingly common even if their precise connotations remain mysterious. The



Kra N'Guessan, Animal préhistorique, 1984. Mixed media on canvas, 147 × 98 cm

intriguing *rencontre* of recognizable imagery in *Paris: 1907* includes the Pi symbol, directional symbols, arrows, a cross, the sun, and what appears to be a constellation. The fact that Watts associates Picasso with the cosmos provides yet another connection to Johns. Johns's *Untitled* (2016) cites the disconnected facial features of Picasso's *Straw Hat with Blue Leaves* (1936). The eyes, nose, and mouth from Picasso's portrait appear at the far edges of John's composition accompanied by black and white images of a galaxy and the Big Dipper. The strongest argument for a connection between Watts and Johns, however, is the engagement they both court from the viewer. Both artists desire each *rencontre* to be an experience by which the viewer draws on their own self-awareness in order to gain a sense of universal understanding. What initially comes across as intimidatingly idiosyncratic in Johns's and Watts's paintings, is actually refreshingly pluralistic.

While Johns's *Flag* and *Map* paintings disassociate familiar colors and forms from their symbolic meaning and political content, Watts's paintings have more explicit

20 "Ouattara Watts," *The Brooklyn Rail*.
21 Carter Ratcliff in *The Meditative Surface*, exh. cat. (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 1984).
22 Jasper Johns quoted in "Art: His Heart Belongs to Dada," *Time* (May 4, 1959), 58.

geopolitical underpinnings. *Oté-Fê* (2018, see p. 173), for example, is a symbolist nightscape hovering above an outline of the African continent. The upper half of the composition, which Watts has painted on raw tarp, features a gold and silver starburst, a white molecular form, the numbers 5 and 7, and rows of white triangles that hang from strings like kites or flags. Below this complex cosmos, Watts has painted the shape of the African continent on top of a two-toned piece of Italian brocade. The *rencontre* between the two support materials—one luxurious and European, the other raw and humble—speaks directly to the politics of this painting. So does the painting's title, which Watts has borrowed from a 2018 song by New York-based Ivorian reggae singer (and friend of the artist) Alpha Blondy. In a mix of English, French, and Dioula (a Mande language spoken in parts of West Africa), the song "Oté-Fê" recounts the exploitation of Africa's natural resources by foreigners. In addition to evoking a material contrast between brocade (rich) and tarp (poor), Watts visualizes an invasion by painting five shadowy forms. Approximately the same shape and size of burn marks left by a hot iron, these menacing marks read as boats or, perhaps, heavy footprints encroaching upon the massive, but also vulnerable, landmass.

While Watts's own journey from Abidjan to Paris and onto New York has been blessed with positive and inspiring *rencontres*, his work also concerns negative encounters. In many paintings references to historic and contemporary pillages of Africa, for example, effectively add colonialism and its consequences to what Johns described as "things the mind already knows." The painting *1885* (2019, see p. 202), evokes the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, a *rencontre* during which European nations regulated colonization and trade in Africa by dividing up the content between themselves. *1885*, *Oté-Fê,* and the paintings in Watts's *Intercessor* series (2022, see pp. 178–79, 187, 189, 191, 192, 205, 221) encourage viewers to ruminate and remember difficult histories, rather than reject them. Intervening on a spiritual level, Watts is himself an intercessor, making sure that the harmful impetuses and outcomes of negative *rencontres* are not forgotten.

Jasper Johns, Untitled, 2016. Oil on canvas, 102 × 102 cm

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