

# ROMUALD HAZOUmé

MADE IN  
PORTO-NOVO



# SONG OF LIFE

Romuald Hazoumé was born in Porto-Novo, in the Republic of Benin, in 1962. He was raised in the Yoruba tradition and traces his ancestry back to a powerful *babalawo* (a priest or specialist in the *ifá*) who became a prized councillor to a King of the Porto-Novo region. The 'respect name' given to this influential Minister was *Hâtozoumé*, which even when condensed into French as Hazoumé, still today evokes that special aura associated with this proud ancestral line. Hazoumé's artwork first sparked interest in the U.K., in 1992, with the inclusion of his witty, tongue-in-cheek offering of 'masks' in the Saatchi Gallery's "Out of Africa" show. Since then his work has been widely exhibited in many of the major museums and galleries of Europe and beyond, including the British Museum, the Guggenheim, Bilbao, the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, ICP, New York and the Mori Museum, Tokyo, to name just a few. The stellar trajectory of Hazoumé's rise to prominence during the intervening years has catapulted him into the first rank of the international artistic community, and, with a lengthening list of prestigious prizes to his name and major acquisitions by important collections in place, he now holds a pre-eminent position amongst African contemporary artists.

The occasion of the opening of **Made in Porto-Novo**, his latest solo exhibition at the October Gallery, offers a novel opportunity to examine the wide variety of media that Hazoumé so skilfully exploits. Hazoumé is somewhat exceptional in the diversity of media with which he works, and the ascription of multi-media artist sits easily upon his shoulders. His major installation work, *La Bouche du Roi*, (1997 – 2005), added photography, film, a looped ambient soundscape and the introduction of carefully crafted smells as supporting elements to the large installation of sculpted masks that dealt so movingly with the complicated issues surrounding the western slave trade. Each distinct element added supplementary layers of meaning to the whole, setting up different dialogues and creating multiple, co-existent possibilities for interpretation. When offered various avenues of approach the spectators enter into dialogue with the work in ways of their own choosing, and consent to embark on imaginative voyages of discovery - the disturbing nature of the subject notwithstanding.



Nature Vivante, 2004.  
Baryte print, 120 x 80 cm

Front cover:  
*Wax Bandana*, 2009.  
Found objects, 27 x 12 x 27 cm

Back cover:  
*Made in Porto-Novo (detail)*, 2009.  
Found objects installation





Nest Violeta, 2009.  
Found objects, 29 x 12 x 30 cm

## MASK-SCULPTURES

**Made in Porto-Novo** provides a welcome return of that perennial favourite the individual 'mask' sculpture, with eight new offerings developing trends already seen in embryo in the earlier series. Masks are magical power objects, and Mankind has exploited their potent properties for ritual and performance purposes since time immemorial. African masks were amongst the earliest items of value exchanged between Africa and the western world, and they gave early evidence of what, to western eyes, seemed unexpected signs of artistic sophistication on that great continent. The power of the mask is never to be underestimated. As prized possessions of many of the early modern artists their inherent otherness operated as a critical catalyst in transforming western ways of seeing, thus helping to precipitate the birth of Modernism. However, Hazoumè's systematically modernised masks, latter-day versions composed of plastic bottles and other found objects, come freighted with rebellious subtexts and overtones as well. Indeed, thus freed from their ritual and performance functions, they have become iconic emblems of Hazoumè's drolly subversive take on the ongoing inequalities of exchange between contemporary Africa and the western world.

Yet, these sculptures are more than merely clever examples of *bricolage* – the transformation of rejected objects from everyday life and their startling elevation into something new – something of value. Rather, they should be seen as timely aperçus – real-life portraits of people we recognise. As 'portraits' they are taken 'from life' every bit as accurately as any nude model sketched in the studio, and, as their given name titles suggest, each sculpture represents an actual person or 'type' that Hazoumè has observed and captured after his fashion. Seeing them as contemporary 'portraits' rather than modern 'masks' also helps preserve us from a common mistake. The mysterious powers and magical properties attributed to masks within the Yoruba culture, are such that, if they were really authentic African masks, no Yoruba mask-maker or artist would ever be allowed to display them in a gallery as simple 'art objects.' Hazoumè is well aware of the boundaries within which he must work when exhibiting his sculptures to people who have little understanding of the traditional significance of masks as powerful, sacred objects.

Even today, throughout Africa, masks invoke a mysterious world of initiate knowledge and secret societies. What continually surprises us with these consciously bathetic portraits, though, is the enduring quality of the illusion achieved when one sees how a discarded bleach container combined with a piece of patterned fabric can so completely capture the essence of a 'Lolo' or a 'Violeta.' In the sudden recognition of the type so deftly delineated, we realise we're in the presence of an authentic act of artistic magic.

## SIGNS

If the mask-sculptures remain resolutely exoteric objects, however, the canvases do not. Instead, they point towards more complex shared systems of knowledge in which the viewer may or may not participate. These works on canvas have not, so far, been widely exhibited, in part because of their obdurate resistance to easy interpretation, in part also because of their value and importance to Hazoumè himself. The canvases are shown here for the first time in London, and add another, more puzzling dimension to the exhibition, since they indicate an unknown and more private side to the artist. Hazoumè describes these canvases not as paintings, so much as 'evocations,' and notes that they are central to his creative practice, nourishing the tap-root of inspiration. These particular canvases, then, are fundamental: they provide an interpretive framework that activates the masks, they breathe life into the photographs and they imply the ordered environment against which the larger installations become animated.

Though the series of glyphs shown appear quite simply structured, and we can even discern certain resemblances between say, *La Sortie* and *Avanti*, they offer no easy access to understanding without the provision of some clue or key. In another context, *Avanti* could be read as the planet Mars, or as standing generically for the male principle, and yet, here, those very similarities with *La Sortie* deny such a reading since the latter doesn't belong to the Greco-Roman symbolic set. If the mask-sculptures represent the material aspect or 'hardware' of African art, then with these canvases we are dealing with the 'software,' with the symbolic language of signs, encoded cryptograms whose concealed categories reveal the structure of thinking itself – if we know how to read them. Hazoumè has long





*La Sortie*, 2009. Acrylic and ochre on canvas, 154 x 140 cm

been interested in scripts and signs, and like many others before him has explored some of the many symbolic languages of the African continent, the extant remains of the knowledge systems of the many different groups – some now extinct - who used them to express the nuanced complexities of their bounded but consistent worlds. Amongst his sign series, developed and added to each year, can be found *Zarma* signs from Niger, glyphs of the *Fante* people of Ghana,

examples of the *Bamun* script of modern-day Cameroon – still just surviving today - and many others, *Nsibidi*, *Uli*, *Adinkra*, etc. in what rapidly becomes a long list of literate societies. To understand each sign requires particular knowledge of the group who used it and the purposes for which that language served. To unpack each sign takes both time and an empathetic understanding of the world-view it represents. *Acadja*, for instance, a barred diamond within an enclosed space, describes a prison or place from which it is difficult to leave. As such, one might imagine a bad place, and yet *Acadja* implies a sense of voluntarily remaining in a prescribed place in which some necessary function is performed. Thus, small fish living around reefs cannot exist elsewhere, and if they were not there to feed the larger fish, who are prey to larger predators still, then man also would go hungry. The *Acadja* sign invokes this vital interdependence of things in linked chains.

For Hazoumé whose ancestral line begins with a *babalawo*, ('Father of the secrets') of great skill and reputation, the core meaning of symbols is contained within the system of geomantic divination known as *iFá* – a vast repository of oral traditional knowledge that sits at the centre of Yoruba civilisation. *iFá* is, if anything, an even more elaborate system of divination than the more widely known Chinese system of the *I Ching*, which is based upon eight signs, or trigrams, that interact to give sixty-four possible outcomes. The *iFá* system, being based upon sixteen *Odu*, or 'books,' reaches to two hundred and fifty-six possible interpretations, and the poems, sayings and proverbs associated with each one of these possibilities has been passed from generation to generation over the centuries by means of an unbroken oral tradition. There are four basic families of signs relating to Earth, Fire, Air and Water and although many of the signs exhibited here are derived from other traditions, (*Extraction* shows a set of *iFá* symbols) the medium used for each canvas is based on an old mural technique that covered buildings in elemental Earth made from ochre colours mixed with cow dung. In these 'evocations' the medium itself adds a deeper layer of significance to the veiled message displayed. The complex cultural deposits still transmitted in the *iFá* system today is rightly recognised, by UNESCO, to be a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

## PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs return us from the hidden meaning of signs to the everyday reality of Benin today – a subject that much exercises Hazoumé. Here, slavery is the recurrent theme. Not the historical slavery of the dominant western powers in search of cheap labour, but more modern equivalents that see young children still sold daily into slavery - to supply more cheap labour. The film accompanying *La Bouche du Roi*, the model British slave-ship installation, showed real footage of a modern form of slavery which sees Beninese men forced into extreme conditions of servitude as they ferry contraband petrol between Nigerian sources and their Beninese consumers back across the border. Estimates suggest that 90% of all the fuel used in Benin passes through these black-market channels known locally as *Kpayo*. Hazoumé first picked up a still camera when he realised there was no other way to convince people in the west of the truth of this thoroughly shameful reality, which sees many of the traffickers lose their lives in explosive crashes and other disasters. His photographic series exposing what is essentially an undercover system of gross exploitation shows images that still shock and amaze. Hazoumé is not in the least interested in the excellence or formal beauty of the image – he wants these photographs to bear undeniable witness to the awful realities shown, with his grimly ironic titles serving only to sharpen the focus.

Indeed, it is the inflated plastic canisters, stretched and stressed almost to breaking point to carry ever more fuel on these overloaded journeys, that have become Hazoumé's own stock-in-trade signature. For these are the objects, once no longer fit for purpose, that furnish the raw materials from which he composes the masked faces that people the imaginary worlds of his installations: his slave-ships, his dream-boat of escape to distant shores (2007) his *Rainbow Serpent* (2007) etc. In fact, it has become almost impossible today to see a pile of old jerry-cans and **not** see the hidden faces of the unknown individuals to which Hazoumé's work has sensitised us. The installations that Hazoumé creates are peopled by the passive, long-suffering faces of hundreds of nameless modern-day workers. Their instruments of torture, the jerry-can, stands in their places as the mute, unflinching, soulless piece of plastic that describes them.



*Dan Ayido-Huedo, Rainbow Serpent*, 2007. mixed media and found objects



*La Bouche du Roi*, 1997 - 2005. Mixed media installation. Collection The British Museum. Photo Georges Hixson





Made in Porto-Novo (detail), 2009.  
Found objects installation

These photographs, if we are permitted to see the drivers rather than their freight - unknown souls taken from behind at some anonymous point in their long journey home – give the lie to that metaphorical usage of the canisters. For, we are forced to recognise, in the unconscious gesture of a hand steadying a redundant cotton hat – that we are looking all too directly at real human beings. The subject of *Beninese Roulette* returns the camera's inquisitive gaze without emotion, as if to ask – "How else would you have me survive?" In this brief encounter, questioning might elicit the information that he is married, with five children, and that he needs money to buy medicine to help his sick parents. The honesty of Hazoumé's portrait, which all too literally is a 'life study,' renders further questions superfluous.

### MIP – MADE IN PORTO-NOVO

Hazoumé's work is fuelled by a smouldering resentment of the overwhelming realities of life – more specifically life on the African continent today. A driving sense of indignation pushes him continually to invent new pieces that confront other parts of the general problem, often with barely concealed irritation. The title of this exhibition, **Made in Porto-Novo (MIP for short)** is taken from his latest creation, an installation of the same name. As so often with his installations, this work sets out in a new direction and explores new possibilities. Here the trade-mark canisters have been adroitly shaped to suggest the instruments of a band – aptly named MIP - a quartet comprising drums, bass, saxophone and trumpet. There is also a quartet of backing singers, the only humans present, represented by a fan-tail of jerry-can portraits in front of the instruments. What is entirely new, however, are the sounds emanating from the instruments depths, sounds unlike any four-piece jazz band one has ever heard before. This music is composed from recordings made when Hazoumé followed members of the Kpayo-army, the illegal petrol traffickers, over the course of an entire day, from their early morning wake-up and meagre breakfast before departure to their late-night, exhausted return. Whilst not the first sound-scape that he has produced, MIP marks the first time that sound has become the privileged instrument of description. Replacing still or video camera by a good pair of microphones and a recording machine – Hazoumé has traced the topography of the day not as a visual sequence but as an enchainé series of recorded sounds.

What results is a wild and otherworldly music, shocking and aggressive at times, but always captivating. The interlocking rhythmic sequences of the looped track are so beautifully laid down that we listen spellbound to the intricate selection of sounds, as we attempt to recognise and imagine: the creaking door of the early-morning house, the startled cough as the engine awakes, the roar of the welding torch used to fix the breakdown and, in the background, the birds' careless soprano, carolling of other possible worlds. As we parse the densely woven logic of this wall of sound we are startled to feel its direct action upon us. The distancing effects of filtering reality as sound entirely transforms the way we interact with the difficult subject we already know from the photographs. Yet, we are totally entranced – and the power of music, an unclassifiable stream of utterly African music, separates out the rage we might more normally expect to feel – leaving us, with rapt attention, enchanted by the instrumental rendition of the haunting song of life.

### Gerard A. Houghton, Paris, 2009

Bye Bye, 2009.  
Found objects, 33 x 18 x 22 cm







*Sénégaloise*, 2009.  
Found objects, 33 x 22 x 25 cm



*La Mère Cotivet*, 2001.  
Found objects, 44 x 15 x 12 cm