



**GÉRARD
QUENUM**

cover:

Mère du Secret (Mother of Secrets), 2008.

Wood, doll, plastic and metal, 200 x 30cm.

opposite:

Japonaise (Japanese Woman), 2009.

Mixed media, height 231cm.

GÉRARD QUENUM INTERIOR VOICES

On a November evening in 1998 whilst relaxing alongside friends eating their “poulets bicyclettes” in the Maquis Dunya restaurant in Cotonou, I was unable to take my eyes off a badly-lit picture hung far too high up on the opposite wall. I say picture; more like a collage! Where, sticking out of an ochre background were the head of a doll, several small bones and a statuette. Three or four similar offerings could be discerned

strung up, in semi-obscurity, on other walls of the dimly-lit room. On leaving, I noticed, on a small label, a name and the presumed title: “Gérard Quenum: Interior Voices.”

Still today, more than ten years on, my fascination with the work of Gérard Quenum remains intact, and indeed is renewed each time I pass before the gate of his patio *cum atelier* facing onto the lagoon of Porto Novo. But how do I explain to myself this fascination? It is, perhaps, that Gérard’s sculptures leave me standing at a crossroads of disconnected questions, interrupted thoughts, all vying for expression, fighting to be heard.

There are, of course, Gérard’s dolls. They speak to me directly of his pain, of his revolt against the sufferings inflicted on the children of Africa, and not of Africa alone, by a destabilised society blinded by its own greed, enthralled by King Money, who fosters nothing but the interactions of power, the seeds of violence – the source of barbarity.

There is history: that of Gérard himself, and that of his country, Benin, a country of vital traditions whose roots stretch far back into the dark tunnel of time. But Benin’s traditions are not merely folkloric, as with so many western traditions, they are the expression of a deep spirituality that enriches daily life even as it insinuates itself into the creative gestures of her artists. Let us take, for example, the *Bocio*, a sort of totem figure that can represent an individual, a family, a deceased member of that family or even a spirit according to the old ways of thinking. Although, as Gérard reminds us, “They have almost disappeared today; forgotten, lost, or without any spiritual value. Fascinated by their simplicity and the stories that lie hidden within them, they inspire me to use woods which are old and have “lived,” old dolls within which still hide all sorts of histories, so that I can pursue, in this present moment, the work of my ancestors. My work





is made by confronting tradition with modernity.” In Gérard’s work, the resulting combination is marked by a powerful emotional charge that appeals as much to the senses as to the spirit of people today.

Quenum’s work has the ability to synthesise, with an incredible economy of means, the cruellest of actualities. Take *Clandestins (Stowaways)*: three pieces of wood, a number of dolls and a fragment of blue cloth with gold-painted stars taking flight in disorderly fashion. Everything has been said; all the real questions have already been asked. And in a manner both different to and more striking than a long magazine article, a television report or even a debate between “professionals” about humanitarian operations.

Yet there always remains a mixture of tenderness and violence, as if to emphasise that behind the violence lies hidden another aspect of humanity, the constant possibility of hope. But all these “insinuations,” and others too, so often recurring in Gérard’s sculptures, become transformed into complete works of art when subordinated to his incisive instinct for a perfectly realised, aesthetic whole.

One day, whilst seated in his patio, I watched Gérard at work on a sculpture that he’d “almost finished.” Between his fingers he held a tiny piece of red cloth, no larger than the head of a drawing-pin. He concentrated his gaze on the sculpture, immobile for a long, drawn-out moment. Suddenly, he advanced, fixed the tissue to a precise part of the sculpture, and declared: “It’s finished!” At that moment I was struck by a double realisation: the fragment of red cloth could not have been placed anywhere other than that exact position and, without it, the sculpture would have remained forever incomplete.

It is often said that Africa is a continent of speech. So be it! The work of Gérard Quenum speaks out loud to all and sundry. These sculptures speak to me personally of so many things – requisitioning, perhaps, those “interior voices” which we all share. Conscious of his roots in a past that he owns, his work bears frank witness to the present and asks pointed questions of the future. Nor is this work exotically “African” for it leads us towards thoughts profoundly human and universal.

I’d like to quote, in concluding, a few lines from J. M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*, which so perfectly express this disquieting fascination we have for dolls, especially when put into contexts – as Gérard always does – where they operate upon the inner feelings of those who observe them:

“Can a doll know death? No: dolls grow, they acquire speech and gait, they perambulate the world; they age, they wither, they perish; they are wheeled into the fire or buried in the earth; but they do not die. They exist forever in that moment of petrified surprise prior to all recollection when a life is taken away, a life not theirs but in whose place they are left behind as a token [...] living not life but an idea of life, immortal, undying, like all ideas.”

André Jolly

Art Consultant; Former Director French Cultural Centre, Benin and Namibia. Former Cultural Attaché, French Embassy, Brazil and Trinidad & Tobago.

(translation: Gerard Houghton)



Bocio, 2008.
Mixed media, 47 x 18cm.
Private Collection.



Voix Intérieures

Un soir de Novembre 1998, au maquis Dunya à Cotonou, tandis que mes amis dégustaient leur « poulet-bicyclette », je ne pouvais détacher mon regard d'un tableau trop haut accroché et mal éclairé sur le mur en face de moi.

Tableau ? Collage ? Sur un fond ocre se détachaient une tête de poupée, un petit os, une statuette. Dans la semi obscurité de la salle, on apercevait trois ou quatre autres tableaux. En partant, je vis une affichette : « Gérard Quenum, voix intérieures ».

Aujourd'hui, depuis plus de dix ans, ma fascination pour l'œuvre de Gérard Quenum est intacte et toujours renouvelée à chaque fois que je passe la porte de son patio-atelier, face à la lagune de Porto-Novo.

Comment puis-je m'expliquer cette fascination ? C'est peut-être que les sculptures de Gérard me placent, en quelque sorte, à un carrefour d'interpellations, de questionnements, d'interférences.

Il y a les poupées de Gérard. Elles me parlent de sa douleur, de sa révolte face aux souffrances infligées aux enfants en Afrique, mais pas seulement en Afrique, par une société déstructurée, aveuglée par sa cupidité, par l'argent-roi qui n'engendre plus que des rapports de force, source de violence, voire de barbarie.

Il y a l'histoire, celle de Gérard et celle de son pays, le Bénin, pays aux traditions très vivantes venues de la nuit des temps. Et au Bénin, les traditions ne sont pas un folklore, à la mode occidentale, elles

sont l'expression d'une spiritualité très riche qui imprègne la vie quotidienne et le geste créateur de l'artiste. Prenons, par exemple, le 'Bocio', sorte de totem représentant un individu, une famille, un mort ou un esprit dans les traditions, Gérard dit « Il a presque disparu aujourd'hui, volé ou sans valeur spirituelle. Fasciné par sa simplicité et les histoires qui se cachent derrière, je m'en inspire et utilise des bois qui ont 'vécu', de vieilles poupées qui cachent aussi toutes sortes d'histoires, pour poursuivre, en contemporain, le travail des aïeux. Mon travail se construit en confrontant traditions et modernité ». Il en résulte chez Gérard une œuvre marquée par une forte charge émotionnelle qui s'adresse autant aux sens qu'à l'esprit de l'homme d'aujourd'hui.

Il y a cette capacité à synthétiser, avec une incroyable économie de moyens, l'actualité la plus cruelle. Prenez 'Clandestins' : trois morceaux de bois, quelques poupées et un petit morceau de tissu bleu où sont peintes des étoiles jaunes partant un peu à la dérive. Tout est dit. Toutes les vraies questions sont posées. Et de façon autrement plus percutante que par un long article de journal, un reportage télévisé ou un débat entre 'professionnels' du discours humanitaire.

Il y a toujours un mélange de tendresse et de violence, comme pour dire que derrière la violence se cache une part d'humanité, une possibilité d'espoir.

Mais toutes ces 'imprégnations', et d'autres, que je vois dans les sculptures de Gérard se transforment en œuvres d'art parce que sublimées par son sens aigu d'une esthétique parfaitement aboutie. Un jour, j'étais assis dans son patio. Gérard avait

'presque' terminé une sculpture. Il tenait entre ses doigts un tout petit morceau de tissu rouge, pas plus grand qu'une tête de punaise. Il était immobile et observait intensément la sculpture depuis un long, très long moment. Soudain, il s'est avancé, a fixé le morceau de tissu rouge sur la sculpture et a dit:

« C'est fini ». Et à ce moment-là, une double évidence me sautait aux yeux : le morceau de tissu ne pouvait être ailleurs qu'à cet endroit précis et, sans lui, la sculpture n'aurait été qu'une ébauche.

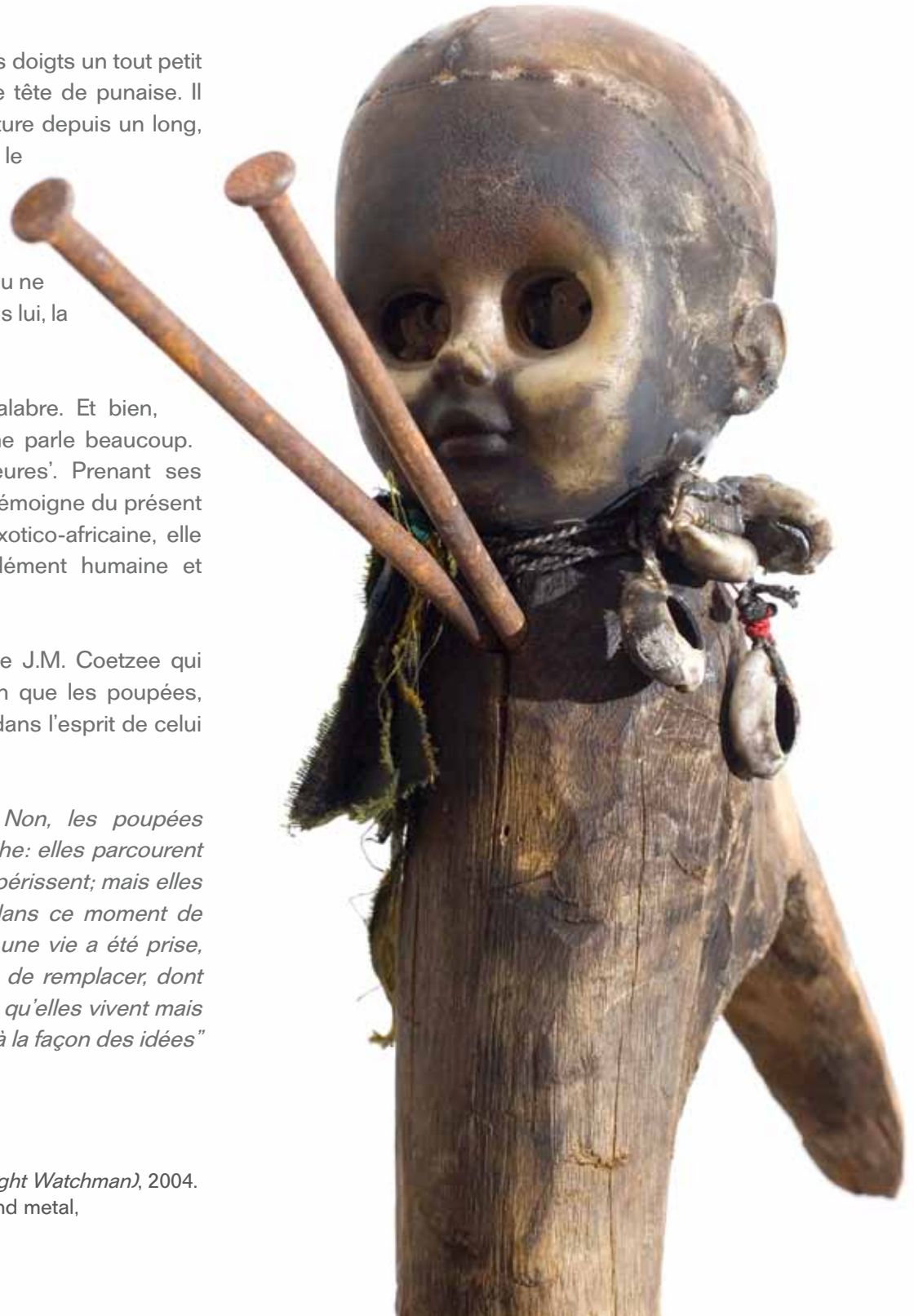
On dit que l'Afrique est le continent de la palabre. Et bien, soit ! L'œuvre de Gérard Quenum parle. Elle me parle beaucoup. Probablement le langage de nos 'voix intérieures'. Prenant ses racines dans un passé qu'il assume, son travail témoigne du présent et interpelle le futur. Et son œuvre n'est pas exotico-africaine, elle nous accompagne dans une pensée profondément humaine et universelle.

En conclusion, je citerai ces quelques lignes de J.M. Coetzee qui exprime à merveille ce trouble, cette fascination que les poupées, telles que Gérard les met en situation, exercent dans l'esprit de celui qui les observe :

"Une poupée peut-elle connaître la mort ? Non, les poupées grandissent, elles maîtrisent la parole et la marche: elles parcourent le monde; elles vieillissent, elles se fanent, elles périssent; mais elles ne meurent pas. Elles existent pour l'éternité dans ce moment de surprise pétrifiée antérieur à toute mémoire où une vie a été prise, une vie qui n'était pas la leur, qu'on les charge de remplacer, dont elles sont le simulacre.../...et ce n'est pas une vie qu'elles vivent mais une idée de vie, immortelle, incapable de mourir, à la façon des idées"

André Jolly

Le Gardien de la Nuit (Night Watchman), 2004.
Wood, dolls, nails, wire and metal,
171 x 35 x 4cm,





Portrait Gallery of the Streets

Gérard Quenum belongs to a new generation of sophisticated young artists from Benin now demanding wider recognition for their art on the international stage. Benin has long been blessed with a wealth of outstanding artists, and elders such as Cyprien Tokoudagba and Georges Adeagbo came early to the attention of western museums in the late Eighties. Throughout the Nineties another group of artists materialised: Dominique Kouas, the Dakpogan brothers, Julien Sinzogan amongst others, with this generation reaching a critical peak when Romuald Hazoumé was awarded the prestigious Arnold Bode prize at Documenta 12, the first time an African contemporary artist was unanimously elected as the *primum inter pares*.

The new century has seen a rising generation of “street artists” developing within the principal cities of Porto Novo and Cotonou. This tightly-knit cohort, marshalled by the creative energy of Dominique Zinkpé, arranged cyclical exhibitions of their works not in fine art galleries (of which Benin boasts precious few!) but outside on the city streets, amongst the people. They called this succession of guerrilla street exhibitions “Boulev’art” (Art on the Boulevard). Amongst these younger *tyros* Quenum stands out as the originator of a distinctive sculptural style, and today, with the growing maturity of his work, his pieces can be found in galleries on the grand Boulevards of Paris - not to mention the finer streets of London.

Like that of several contemporary African artists, Quenum’s work is composed of found objects whose diverse histories contribute much to the overall significance of the sculptures themselves. But what gives his art its unique twist is his signature use of discarded dolls. Together with an eclectic mix of objets trouvés, the incorporated dolls elevate the pieces into witty and whimsical ‘portraits’ of individuals the artist has observed in his local environment or other ‘types’ his imagination creates. It is important to understand the pre-existent ‘history’ with which these dolls – none of which are African – are freighted. For, they are all remnants of aid parcels sent to Africa by well-meaning overseas organisations that imagine the second-hand toys of first-world children might somehow prove essential to an African child’s development. Through this new African adventure, the dolls become involved, first-hand, in the African experience and sharers in the secrets of the place. When finally cast aside by the street kids, missing the odd eye or limb, to Quenum’s thinking, they are already half-naturalised denizens of the place.

With this ready supply of raw materials to hand, Quenum embarks on a transformative process that renders them darker. A blow-torch blackens the white skin and singes the blonde hair into a better approximation of an “Afro” hair-style than the originals ever possessed. All that remains is the weaving of a narrative around these newly-Africanised actors to complete their transformation into players who will reprise imaginative roles upon the innovative stages he devises for them. The invention lies in the subtle details of the tales re-told – and the manner in which each doll assumes the part it plays before its intended audience. With deceptive ease Quenum employs



*L'Ange (Angel), 2008.
Wood, clay, metal, twine and plastic doll,
229 x 28cm.*