

OCT 29, 2017 — MAY 21, 2018

PASCALE
MARTHINE
TAYOU
BEAUTIFUL

Much of Pascale Marthine Tayou's itinerant practice involves a core resistance to identification and definition. When encountering the Cameroonian artist's work, nothing can be taken at face value. Beginning from the transformation of his name (a combination of his mother and father's names) to create a feminized persona, and continuing with his treatment of the materials and forms within his work, Tayou sets out to subvert and transmute narratives. Through the context of existing social, cultural and political structures, Tayou's creations both mediate between cultures and question the frameworks in which they exist.



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Beautiful is an exhibition of work by Pascale Marthine Tayou created over the last decade. Presented alone and within the museum's founding collection gallery, Tayou's visually disparate selection of works utilize colorful, sometimes opulent material that, when amassed together, probe discourses about colonialism and the fetishization of the Other.¹ Often blending everyday items (chalk, plastic bags, tourist souvenirs) with precious materials, like crystal and alabaster, Tayou's mix of high and low elements reveal the human propensity toward beauty, as well as our celebration of, obsession with and commodification of beauty in everyday life.

To enter the demarcated exhibition galleries housing *Beautiful*, you must pass *Welcome Wall* (2015), a new work by Tayou commissioned for The Bass. *Welcome Wall* is descriptive

of its contents; colored LED signs that are clustered together on the wall of the museum's lobby, with the word "welcome" flashing in over 70 languages. Tayou selected an even distribution of "dominant" (English, Spanish, French and Russian) and "non-dominant" (Cherokee, Tagalog, Tamil and Yoruba) languages for the configuration. The signs, found broadly in convenience stores and gas stations, participate in the legacy of the readymade. Usually displayed singularly, the signs in *Welcome Wall* are amalgamated into a bright, blinking lingual map. The work, at once emphasizes the global connectedness of humanity as well as discussions about fractured or erased communities, and the civic role of the institution.

Beyond the museum's newly constructed stairwell, *Beautiful* begins with Tayou's colorful *Fresque de*

craies (D, K and L) (2015) on the walls of the space along with his towering *Colonnes Pascale* (2012)—two bodies of work that combine quotidian elements with more costly materials. The *Fresque de craies*, which are made up of numerous sticks of chalk collected together within ornate frames, change the nature of the material to call attention to the artist's hand. By foregrounding the creative tool within the composition of the work, Tayou signals his presence in the process of creating of the object.

Exemplifying Tayou's questioning of material identity, the chalk, typically used as an instrument for mark-making, becomes the mark itself. The frescoes are layered over with various media, including gold leaf, glitter, plastic eggs and African colonial figurines, known as *colon*. The wooden polychromatic figures, depicting Europeans and Africans

in Western dress, are produced predominantly in Western Africa for sale in tourist markets. With the *colon's* incorporation into Tayou's *Fresque de craies* and his other works, the artist cites the Western market demand for African objects.²

In the same gallery, Tayou's *Colonnes Pascale* again incorporate the readymade with stacked enamel pots that span from floor to ceiling. Each vertical column (reminiscent of Brancusi's *Endless Column*) is varied in color and pattern. Like the *Fresque de Craies*, Tayou subverts the intended use of the materials forming the *Colonnes Pascale*, their verticality rendering them unable to store or transport. More *Colonnes Pascale* are presented within the neighboring historic collection gallery alongside vessels from Japan, Korea, and Greece, opening a broader dialogue about daily rituals and the value of resources.



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The fluid, yet chaotic joining of materials and cultures seen in Tayou's work speaks to his method of approach to his intervention into the museum's historic collection. Within

the final gallery, Tayou brings together a selection of the museum's collection along with his own, creating an environment that explores and exploits theorist Homi K. Bhabha's notion of cultural "slippage".³ The Bass' collection of objects is largely Western in authorship and subject, while Tayou's works, though using Western materials like Tuscan alabaster and Venetian crystal, have distinctly non-Western forms. Tayou's deliberate selection of works highlights these formal and cultural contrasts. Further, by placing his contemporary works with paintings, sculpture, and objects (both religious and secular) dating from the 9th century BCE to the 20th century, Tayou creates an environment that deliberately breeds confusion, resisting cultural and temporal identification. The resulting gallery display is a liminal space, which gives us the opportunity to ponder questions of authorship and provenance. Like with Tayou's *Welcome Wall*, the relational dynamics between "dominant" and "non-dominant" cultures are brought to the fore.

Among his own work presented in this gallery Tayou mixes multiple *Poupée Pascale* (2006-2010) with three dimensional objects from The Bass' collection. Utilizing the crates used to transport them as pedestals, the crystalline *Poupée* reference mystical African objects, called *nkisi*, which were regarded as objects with hidden, living, healing power, usually constructed of opaque materials like wood.⁴ The *nkisi*, were principally vessels, whose medicinal and spiritual contents could help manifest outcomes desired by their owners.

The *Poupée Pascale* are created from clear Venetian crystal, making visible the hidden materials, and externalizing them on the form. The adornments are found materials like human hair, nylon stocking, metal forks and raffia, which along with the names of the works (*Alice*, *Fabrizio*, *Rossella*), allude to their totemic, portrait-like nature. Tayou refers to the process of imparting aesthetic life or "breath" to his artworks as "the voodooization of everyday life."⁵ Like the *nkisi* owner, Tayou performs and acknowledges a type of artistic mysticism that directs power and commerce within our lives and the art market.

The interspersed *Masques délavés* (2015) comparably tout a similar exotic and mystical quality. Made of wood and adorned with more found materials including sunglasses, chopsticks and sewing pins, the twenty-five *Masques* are a meditation on the market and processes of commodification, particularly regarding objects, ideas, and raw materials that travel from Africa to the rest of the world, and in reverse. The final work placed into the collection gallery is *Pascale's eggs*. These colorful ovoid forms, constructed from Tuscan alabaster, dot around the walls of the gallery, between paintings and *Masques*, and scatter out into the preceding gallery. Each installation of the eggs is site specific and collaboratively formed by Tayou and the exhibition's organizers. Each placement foregrounds the artist's and his assistants' hands through a stippled mark-making, which demarcates the exhibition's territory. Here again, Tayou underscores the

cultural in-betweenness of his artwork, taking European-originated materials—Tuscan alabaster—to generate his creations, *Pascale's eggs*.

While *Beautiful* presents a visually dazzling, opulent set of works, the exhibition simultaneously addresses darker topics like the impact of colonial legacies on the complex nature of our globalized economy, perhaps illuminating our simultaneous collectiveness and division. Here and throughout his work, Tayou, "claim[s] the right to appropriate foreign traditions and to make something completely different out of them," underlining a duality where notions of belonging and cultural appropriation contend with unifying gestures, like the act of erasing borders.⁶

Pascale Marthine Tayou (b.1966, Cameroon) lives and works between Belgium and Cameroon. Tayou has contributed to several major international exhibitions, including documenta 11 (2002) and the Venice Biennale (2005 and 2009), as well as solo exhibitions at Museo d'Arte Contemporanea di Roma (2004 and 2013), Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (Belgium, 2004), Malmö Konsthall (Sweden, 2010), Mudam (Luxembourg, 2011), Kunsthau Bregenz (Austria, 2014), Fowler Museum at UCLA (2014), the Serpentine Sackler Gallery (London, 2015), Bozar (Brussels, 2015), Musée de l'Homme (Paris, 2015) and CAC Malaga (Spain, 2016).



Notes

Nicolas Bourriaud and Pier Luigi Tazzi, "Pascale Marthine Tayou: Le grand sorcier de l'utopie" (Gli Ori, 2009), PDF.

Steiner, Christopher B. "The Trade in West African Art." *African Arts* 24, no. 1 (1991): 42-43. doi:10.2307/3336870.

Kalua, Fetson. "Homi Bhabha's Third Space and African Identity." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 21, no. 1 (2009): 23-32. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.sfpl.org/stable/40647476>.

Rodrigues, Gemma. "The Voodooization Of Everyday Life: Pascale Marthine Tayou," in *World Share. Installations by Pascale Marthine Tayou*. (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum, 2016), 32.

Rodrigues, "The Voodooization Of Everyday Life," 23.

"Fall, An Archipelago of Thought: Pascale Marthine Tayou in conversation with N'Goné Fall," 57. "We have this idea of belonging and cultural appropriation, and then there's the act of erasing borders."

Images

Colonne Pascale, 2012
Arabic pots
Approx. 6.5 m high
Installation view, Marrakech Biennial, 2012
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana.
Photo by Lorenzo Fiaschi

Fresque de craies K, 2015
Chalk, mixed media
240 x 330 cm
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana.
Photo by Veronica Tronnolone

Pascale's eggs, 2014
Alabaster eggs
Site-specific dimensions
Exhibition view, Update ! - GALLERIA CONTINUA / San Gimignano, 2014.
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana.
Photo by Ela Bialkowska

Massimo, 2006
Crystal, human hairs, tooth brushes, thread, clothes, raffia, straws, metal wire
70 x 35 x 35 cm
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana.

Masque délavé, 2015
Wood, mixed media
40 x 33 x 12cm
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIA CONTINUA, San Gimignano / Beijing / Les Moulins / Habana.
Photo by Rémi Laval

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