

Freddy Bienvenue Tsimba: “Works which are meaningful”

“It was certainly a shock to the system: leaving the Congo for the first time after so many years, being in a country like Canada, exhibiting my works there and meeting other people.

It was a fantastic experience. When I won the Francophonie second prize for sculpture, I knew immediately that I had a mission in life.

This prize belongs to all those who suffer and who will never have the opportunity to see what I see today.”

Aya Kasasa

The artist with the heart of gold has won the silver medal. Freddy Bienvenue Tsimba, a 34-year-old sculptor, left the Academy of Fine Arts in 1989 and since then has worked tirelessly for what he believes in. His obsessive ongoing passion is to learn to work in bronze, whatever the cost. And this quest has required of him an unflinching will. For seven years he travelled the length and breadth of “all the nooks and crannies of Kinshasa”, listening, working and developing the particular style which is the driving force behind his work. “I wanted to do something other than work in wood, which was the fashion at that time”.

Six years later, his projects led him to stage an exhibition at the *Wallonie-Bruxelles* centre in Kinshasa. But the public found his work difficult to grasp, and they didn't properly understand what he wanted to express. Tsimbe carried on with exhibitions and, without realising it, his works began to acquire a following. In 1996, *Revue Noire* published an article about the sculptor, speaking very highly of his work and finally “launching” him on the path trodden by genuine professionals. The revue described him as “an artist evolving in a symbolic universe of expressive sculpture, with complex, tense forms, between voids, hollows and intertwining”.

“People began to understand that I had something original to say, something very personal.” He then began to exhibit his works everywhere he could in Kinshasa, – cultural centres, embassies, etc. Nevertheless, even after twelve years of intensive work, he had still never left the Congo.

At last, opportunity knocked at his door: “I had the opportunity to submit my works to a selection jury organised for a Francophonie competition. Out of about a hundred artists who submitted works, I was the only one to be selected to represent

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*“The glances of others”
A group of people on a boat travelling towards a better world.
There are figures, silhouettes, worried looks about the future of the world, symbolised by the boat.
We have to struggle so that the boat – the world – doesn't sink.*

my country in the competition. The pressure was enormous, but I was also extremely proud”.

“Yes, I rummage through dustbins!”

Where can one find the right materials in Kinshasa? Freddy is all in favour of recycling, and he also works with the street children who love to watch him creating his sculptures. He helps them when he can: a meal, perhaps a few coins, or simply a listening ear. “They think about me all the time – when they see something they think about ‘the old man’ as they call me”.

He has his “workshop” in his father's house, although this is rather a grand description of the premises! When his father realised that Freddy was really determined, having heard him hammering away on his creations in the middle of the night, he made a corridor available to him, just outside the house. “Gradually, I began to understand that I was a creator. I am with my works from start to finish, in my workshop, where the smallest square centimetre is ready to receive the work in progress.”

He has the ability to work rapidly, and those who have trained him are often impressed by his beginners' luck.

“By offering them a drink, and letting them know I was interested in their work, these craftsmen gradually taught me. I would take them my works for finishing – I went everywhere, all over Kinshasa, to work. I also learned the virtue of patience, which came from tramping across town with my sculptures on my back, so that I could cast them.

*“First cries, or the displaced”
A refugee family flees from war. The father talks to his child, who appears to be ill.
The mother's head, bent, indicates the gravity of the situation.*

© Miss Photo



That's how I was able to complete three sculptures and submit them to the Ciciba in Brazzaville”.

Inspiration from life

Freddy's works are quite different from what tourists usually buy in Kinshasa. His approach is original in that he does not set out to please: “I have never accepted commissions imposing a certain way of working – even for a big fee. What I aim to do is to speak about what I see. I want to represent reality in my own way. I'm not going to produce works which show smiling people dancing or singing. I come from a family where there are 15 mouths to feed; I know what suffering is. I want to pay homage to my country's people, and to help them be understood. My figures are sombre, bent and thin, intermingled. I try to make a contribution. It's a form of gift. There is war, refugees and hunger, and I can do nothing specific, but I watch and bear witness. I work for others.”

Victime malgré elle (Victim, despite herself), 2001

He said that he wept when he heard his name. Tsimba's sculpture, which won the Francophonie second prize, touched the jury with its subtle blend of artistic perfection and the message it sought to convey. Who better than the artist to explain?

“I wanted to show the absurdity of war and the damage it causes, so I made use of cartridge cases I picked up on a battlefield in the Congo. I set up a large case to represent a woman's body: she is symbolised by breasts which I created from smaller cartridge cases. A spoon, which I've also recycled, is used to portray her head. Perhaps this object belonged to a woman who sold food by the roadside and who was killed by an explosion. It also symbolises the act of eating, survival. The spoon has a hole in it because it can no longer contain anything. Is it really necessary to translate this work into words? If so, I would say that it's an affirmation: we are children of the world, and this is what we have done with it. We now need to get a move on and to put an end to all this”.



© Magaly Jacq

The cost of recognition?

“In the Congo, people are beginning to understand what I do. I know that my work hurts and that some find it disturbing. Visitors now come to see “what he's done now”.

Après la guerre (After the war) is a sculpture shown at an exhibition entitled *Arts et la paix* (Art and peace). It provoked a great many questions. A lot of people came to find me, to ask why I had done it! It was a structure into which I had incorporated an army boot that I had found by the roadside. It might have belonged to a soldier who chose life and left the army instead of fighting. After war comes ruin: I included a spade without a handle, to show that there is no more work, and a clock to symbolise time in suspension – it has no hands and no longer indicates anything. Just after the gallery preview exhibition, some soldiers came to see my work, and I know that some of them were deeply shaken. The piece was finally withdrawn.”

The market in Africa

For Tsimba, as for the majority of African artists, it is difficult if not impossible to make a living from art. “In Africa, people do not purchase art. Particularly in a country at war, there is no investment in art. It is the immediate that is preferred: a nice car, a comfortable home, pretty women. You also have to remember that, to an African mind, works of art are not for showing “at home”. The work has something to say, it has a social function - here, people are afraid of art. Weren't statues used to honour the dead? Don't some of them represent spirits? Aren't they vectors between the next world and ours? You have to take all that into account” .

Influences

When one looks at Tsimba's sculptures, it is impossible not to make certain comparisons. “But the fact is, no one comes out of nothing! It would be ridiculous to claim not to have been influenced by other artists. We are taught to look, and, fortunately, I was able to study the great masters. If you really want me to talk about what I like, I should mention Zadkine, the Bulgarian. His forms also reflected suffering, because he himself was a refugee. It has often been said that some of my works are reminiscent of Giacometti – I do indeed like his work, and he also drew his inspiration from African art, Dogon art, in fact. In this country, I like a whole series of artists, particularly those who portray what is close to themselves.”

After the prize...

Although it is difficult for a Congolese artist to travel, Tsimba dreams of foreign destinations: “I would love to spend longer in Europe, to absorb what's being done there. My thoughts are now turning to other biennial festivals – I would like to go back in order to improve, to have the opportunity to do more things. I'd like to immerse myself in more ambitious, larger creations. I had the opportunity to discover new techniques, to which I would never have had access at home. Yet, what I really want to do is to carry on portraying what is dear to me, and to encourage others to do the same. In Montreal, I met some really great people. I hope I left a good impression”.