

## Kamala's lesson

1

### Friend in need

One afternoon, while I was in my first year at the art school,(1971), Bola, my friend and my drawing teacher, entered the room with a white board and asked me: «Can you make a landscape on this board? It is urgent !». I was surprised because a landscape request was the last thing that I expected from Bola at a time where we were busy making The Revolution! At that time we were in the middle of a sophisticated quarrel about the image of the identity, and the problematic question of a Sudanese art was dominating the debates in the art school: How to paint Sudanese identity?

I was also surprised by Bola's request because in the little community of the art school, Bola was known as a skillful landscape painter.

I asked:

«Why don't you do it yourself?».

-«I can't paint these days, I am writing and I need this landscape as soon as possible!».

-«What are you going to do with a landscape?».

-«I need it for somebody », answered Bola .

-«Who?».

-«Kamala, she asked me to make a landscape for somebody, I don't know who?She said she had promised somebody a landscape and she passed me the board».

-«We have better things to do than wasting our time in stupid landscapes to be hanged in places we never go for the somebodies we do not know!». We laughed but Bola was serious.

- «Kamala is very insisting, she keeps reminding it to me everyday because she promised somebody. I think it is a relative and I am in no mood for painting these days!». The white board remained in the room for three or four days with Bola harassing me several times a day that Kamala was waiting for the landscape. One afternoon I took the board and made one of these sunset landscapes with a baobab tree in the center of the painting. I remember, few years before coming to the art school, I was fond of making baobab tree landscapes. The baobab tree dominated the space of the landscape. It looked human. I borrowed the trunk from the Venus de Milo but the branches came from Shiva multiple arms. I was satisfied of my colourful image but I was not sure it would satisfy the Kamala's «somebody».

Bola was happy. He took the painting to Kamala and I think Kamala was happy to give the landscape to the «somebody» who asked for it. I think I was happy also because I was able to interrupt the suite of «friendly» harassments.

2

The «white canvas» paradox

One year after «the baobab affair», I entered Kamala's office and I was surprised to recognize my Baobab landscape hanging over her head. I remember she was busy

practicing Arabic calligraphy and she was talking without raising her eyes from the paper crowded with fine «Diwani» lines. My attention was captured by the metamorphosis that Kamala operated over my image :She preserved the drawing of the Baobab figure as it was but obliterated all the colourful surface with her gray and green browns and made a monochrom like landscape. I left her office but the second day I found a pretext to come back to contemplate Kamala's work over my image. I was really fascinated by the way Kamala appropriated my painting. May be because I was not considering my painting as worthy of interest and Kamala saw what escaped my attention in my image. It seemed like when you see your shirt worn by a different person. Anyhow I gave that «shirt» as a present to Bola for Kamala!

When I told the story to some of my classmates, they were critical about Kamala's «use» of my image. I was advised to protest Kamala's appropriation of my work. But I think I saw something else beyond the act of appropriation . I found the idea of painting over my painting stimulating. To me, Kamala's action opened the problematic question of «the white canvas» :To what extent a white canvas can be considered a «*Tabula rasa*» ? A supposed empty space where the idea of an image occurs. Kamala re-painting my painting aroused my attention to the support as a space animated by divers iconographic elements. A «white canvas» is inhabited by its whiteness, its texture, its size and by the vast multitude of images stocked in our collective visual memory. Each one of these elements is eager to get selected to appear in the image. So, Kamala cleaned out my colours the way she cleans the inside of a

melon and maintained my drawing against the new grey background. The painter who builds his image on a white canvas is instinctively aware of integrating an environment already crowded with many stories. I think Kamala's action helped me, later, to deal with the question of the support in less conventional attitude.

The story of the metamorphosis «endured» by my baobab landscape came to my mind few years ago when I discovered the Rauschenberg's «*Erased De Kooning Drawing*» (1953). The legend says that, «.. after a series of all-white canvases, Rauschenberg set out to discover whether an art work could be produced entirely through erasure « .. ». .He started by erasing his own drawings, but felt that the result was lacking, so he sought out a drawing by an established artist—clearly already a work of art—that he could erase.”

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erased\\_de\\_Kooning\\_Drawing](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erased_de_Kooning_Drawing)

The trouble with the Rauschenberg process is that the artist needed a «guarantee» from an established artistic authority. The research of a recognized arbitrator enlightens Rauschenberg's ambivalent attitude towards the act of creation. His own erased art works were not worthy enough as an art work. So he sought De Kooning's approval !.

When I examine Kamala's «erasing(?)» experience through the Rauschenberg's erasing of De Kooning Drawing, I find Kamala's action indifferent to the external recognition of any established referee. Kamala's work seems to be an endless process of painting and obliterating as if the act of painting and the act obliterating justify each other mutually. Even when her painting is «finished» and

exhibited, Kamala returns to her old paintings to re-paint them again and again. This is why some of Kamala's works appear with different dates. Kamala's painting is functioning as a visual diary witnessing her different states of mind.

3

« Working together »

Hans Ulrich Obrist asked Kamala about her teaching experience in the Khartoum art school, where she was head of the Painting Department for two decades. (In her talk at The Royal College of Art, October 7, 2022).

Kamala described her method of teaching as «working together and learning from each other».

I remember when I arrived in the painting department, Kamala was the only teacher who worked with the students in the same studio. When I say «We worked with Kamala», I mean that students were sharing the physical space as well as the critical gaze on each other's works.

At that time I was deeply involved in the realistic representational aspect of image making. I was so eager to earn academic skills about Still life and Portrait making etc., that I used to watch Kamala's big size images metamorphosing under my eyes as a strange exotic exercise. Kamala used to start by sketching her image with a large brush dipped in a grey turpentine. This first image appeared like a pale grey «ghost» with several vertical lines

made by the flow of paint running down to the ground. After this first stage, Kamala used the brush to spread layers of reds, blues or blacks on the surface, but each time she introduced a colour she immediately rubbed that colour down with a piece of rag. The rag that the painter usually uses to clean the brush seemed to replace the brush or may be, in Kamala's hand, it became the principal tool.

For some of my classmates, the use of a dirty piece of cloth in making painting seemed like a sacrilege but I was intrigued by Kamala's use of the rag as a painting tool. A tool with no pretention to appear as a technical object, a tool with no handle, no history, just a shapeless object of no apparent program other than be in the hand like a glove or a second skin, a kind of a stowaway passenger sneaking secretly in the painter's toolbox.

The rubbing actions do not remove the colour entirely from the surface because I could see the palimpsests of red or of blue layers covering part of the initial figure. Sometimes, Kamala returns to old paintings, obliterates her image with layers of grey or brown, recovers it with new layers of colour before applying the rubbing and polishing process. Kamala's image came out from successive overlapping of paint carefully elaborated through a particular rhetorical process of rubbing, polishing, and, sometimes scrapping with a painting knife. Kamala's concern about obliterating, rubbing, scrapping and repainting her graphic patterns reveals her interest in the

painting as a visual knowledge occurring on the surface. These actions enabled her to build a monochrome like image. But when you look attentively to the image, you realise that it is far from being a monochrome. It is the result of a daring leap in an unexplored chromatic region.

Kamala's liberty of handling the painting tools was a lesson I received beyond the sphere of words. We were «working together» and Kamala's work inspired me to reconsider the material conditions of image making in a period where I was almost confined in the conventional European methods of painting.

Sometimes I think Kamala's actions on the support enabled her to get away from the figurative burden of the image so that she can expose the surface of the support considered as the most legitimate argument for the painter.

When I contemplate Kamala's work, I see the same portrait pattern repeated in most of her images. The repetition of the same pattern erases the singularity of the initial pattern, a portrait, (or a “self portrait”?), in a vast visual multitude. When Kamala repeats the same portrait for decades then it is no longer a portrait, it is a “visual mantra” enabling her to go beyond the figurative conventions of image making. The repetition of the same pattern becomes a pretext to proceed on manoeuvring and exploring the material elements of the image. I think the tactile involvement in Kamala's work made her immune to

political propaganda of the nationalistic “Khartoum school” group as well as to the “conceptualist” abusive use of her connection with the “Cristalists” group. Several commentators of Kamala's work presented her as the woman artist in the “Khartoum School” group and the founder of the “Cristalist group” which is untrue, but that is another story..