

Moussa Kone: they called me a drawer (possibilities are limited)

Inspired by his recent sojourn in New York during his residency at ISCP, Moussa Kone's latest series is born from the artist's liminal state temporarily living and working in a foreign environment and experiencing the world through the uncanny filter of a foreign language and culture. Arriving in New York and embarking on a new phase of life, Kone was naturally attracted to notions of reevaluation and inventory, and endeavored to apply these concepts abstractly to his existence, as one often does in times of change.

Kone's creative pursuits involve the use of mark-making tools such as pen or pencil, and substances such as ink or watercolor, to produce elegant, refined works on paper. During interactions with his cohort at ISCP, the artist was often referred to as a "drawer" - someone who draws - exchanges that highlighted the absence in the English language of a good term to describe such an artist. Indeed, terms such as "illustrator" or "draftsman" have a technical association that is never quite appropriate for artists such as Kone who produce mainly drawings. "Draw-er" is an awkward term that sounds as though it is missing a consonant. And "drawer," of course, is a box-like storage component generally found in a chest, desk, or similar item of furniture. For Kone, however, it is the latter usage of the term, rife with abstract meaning and philosophical possibility, that proved the more appropriate one.

Kone's new series mines the symbolic and semiotic value of this linguistic (dis)connection, revealing personal truths that speak to greater, universal ones. To define Kone by his artistic activities, one might indeed refer to him as a "draw-er". To define him as a human being, however, one might also define him as a "drawer," a vessel containing a precious collection of hopes and desires and fears and memories and organs and tissues, all of which must be safeguarded and nourished and sometimes taken out and revealed to the world, or sometimes simply discarded when things change or life gets in the way, and the world is a different place than it once was. With this series, Kone's clever appropriation and exploration of the ambiguities found in the term "drawer" serve as a point of departure for a poignant set of questions regarding his own artistic identity, on the one hand, and the universal urge to self-define (and perhaps, self-preserve) on the other.

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“they called me a drawer” can be heard and visualized in manifold ways. The play on “draw” “drawer” and “drawing” was not lost on Moussa Kone’s new-won colleagues in New York during his ISCP stipend when they introduced him to their fellow artist friends as “the drawer”. Melting the theme of his drawings with the act of his craftsmanship provided Moussa Kone with a new identity, one that condensed in one word his works with the act of creating them. With this new title, “the drawer” Kone began to experiment with the limited and yet unlimited possibilities such a metaphor entails. In contrast to the saying that “one can put all in one box” (man kann alles in eine Schublade stecken), Kone went ahead and explored the outer and inner lives of a series of drawers, leaving the spectator puzzled at how to unravel the meanings and mysteries hidden behind and inside these finely executed chest of drawers. For the usual orderly life of a drawer, this intense and detailed focus upon its interiors and exteriors poses a new challenge, drawing the viewer into a world of order and chaos, illusion and disillusionment.

Are the spectators to be as overwhelmed as the little comic-strip figure, floating from one drawer to the other, holding onto two handles and balancing one foot on a single handle? Are we to identify with him and think of life as a similar balancing act where we are overwhelmed by the immensity of a bureaucracy hiding behind rows of faceless drawers? What is where? How do these drawers hang together and what do they contain? The juxtaposition of the small figure and the huge filing cabinet evokes many tales of ardent struggles where individuals’ lives are crushed by the enormity of an anonymous, devastating bureaucratic power. A system that is supposed to create an order, that files documents, papers and records away, looms large in Moussa Kone’s drawings, leaving the lonely man feel powerless and overwhelmed as he faces a dark filing system that may contain secret information about his own life or those of others. The TV series, “Cold Case” comes to mind where a young woman detective solves older crimes that have never been brought to justice. Once she has found the culprits and put the present back together with the past, the file can be closed and locked up for good. Stasi file systems, Nazis’ penchants for keeping records on all those millions they killed, come to mind, as we are contemplating the many files, possibly containing records of past lives, unsolved and clandestine crimes.

The theme of “drawer” takes yet another turn as we are searching for psychoanalytic meanings about the subject of “drawers” or “boxes”. Throughout Freud’s works, we come across two principle meanings with which drawers tend to be associated: 1) a chest of drawers is equated to a torso of a woman, as Salvador Dali already depicted it in both painting and sculpture with The City of Drawers and The Woman with Drawers. The “empty” drawer, on the other hand is a symbol of a woman’s uterus, a space that produces life but also forebodes death. Thus by extension, the drawer/ box also acquires the meaning of the final box/ the casket in which we place the dead body. In his *Interpretations of Dreams* (1900), Freud writes: “that the heart will be represented by hollow boxes or baskets (p.86.); “Boxes, cases, chests, cupboards and ovens represent the uterus” (p. 354); A man had a

dream of his brother being in a *Kasten* [box]. In the course of interpretation, the *Kasten* was replaced by a *Schrank* [cupboard-also used abstractly for 'barrier', restriction]. The dream – thought had been to the effect that his brother ought to restrict himself [sich einschraenken]-instead of the dreamer doing so. "(407) In Freud's famous case history of Dora, the symbolism of box/ *Schachtel* acquires center stage as one of her dreams reveals the close unconscious link between a box and a woman as well as the tie between a key and a man. Freud (1905) writes, "Where is the key?" seems to me to be the masculine counterpart to the question "Where is the box?. They are therefore questions referring-to- the genitals." (p.97) In a later, less known essay, *The Theme of the Three Caskets* (1913), Freud discusses *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear* and derives at the conclusion that when a man has to choose between three caskets as the suitors are obliged to do as they woo for *Portia*, the suitors are not really choosing between three caskets but between three women. "If what we were concerned with were a dream, it would occur to us at once that caskets are also women, symbols of what is essential in woman, and therefore of a woman herself-like coffers, boxes, cases, baskets and so on." (1913, p. 292)

Moussa Kone, who had hoped to establish a new order in his life as he moved to New York, inadvertently returned to the very subject matter that had dominated his previous works, i.e. the naked body, male and female sexuality and the power of the erotic.

Turning our view back to Moussa Kone's second drawing where he juxtaposes three sets of drawers side by side, in which the drawers take on a life of their own, resembling faces with the two knobs standing in for two eyes, empty labels standing in for the mouth, and the lock standing in for the nose which again acts as an upward displacement for womens' genitals. In this second drawing, the chest of drawer loses its anonymous identity and obtains a face of its own, distinct and other from the rest of the drawers. One is invited to play with the different graphics, comparing the criss-cross sections with the more tone –in- tone grey drawers. One's mind wanders between the different designs and empty labels which do not disclose the inner contents of each drawer. However, one structural element remains the same throughout the variety of these drawers, and that is the number three. No matter how differentiated these drawers' lives come to be, they are always held in an encasement of three. What significance could this number three entail?

In *The Theme of the Three Caskets*, Freud contends that "the third" has a powerful symbolic stance,; whether it is King Lear choosing between three daughters to divide the fortunes of his kingdom or Paris choosing between three goddesses or Cinderella being the third preferred one to her older two more obnoxious sisters, "the third", Freud writes, "is the most excellent one " yet also most often the quiet and unassuming one. In one stroke, Freud equates the "excellent third woman" with dumbness, silence and concealment and eventually death as "Hiding and being unfindable- a thing which confronts the prince in the fairy tale of Cinderella three times, is another unmistakable symbol of death in dreams. " (1913, 295) "But" Freud continues, "if the third of the sisters is the Goddess of Death, the sisters are known to us. They are the Fates, the Moerae, the Parcae or the Norns, the third of whom is called Atropos, the inexorable" (296) These Moeraes, also known as Horaes were known as spinners, from being the "divine representatives of the Seasons", they became the goddesses

of Fate, spinning and presiding over the fate of each human being. Clotho, the eldest spun the thread of life, Lachesis, “the allotter” measured the thread of life and Atropos, the “inexorable” was the one to cut the thread of life. “She chose the manner of each person’s death, and when their time was come, she cut their life-thread with her abhorred shears”.

What lives and destinies are spun through Moussa Kone’s chest of drawers, what signifiers and signifieds are hidden from us as we are also allowed to peak inside Kone’s finely sketched drawers? As we pull them open, we are surprised not to be confronted with written files or dark secrets but with circles, squares and triangles as well as light-coloured air-brushed aquarells spanning across the colors of the rainbow. Do those fundamental structures and colors constitute the inner lives of drawers or are they the back-and-underground for what we, the viewers, placed inside of them? Were our dark forebodings of secret, unresolved destinies merely a figment of our imagination or did Moussa Kone’s drawers just provide enough of a potent symbol to draw us in, and then drew a curtain over the disorder that may lay behind. From black, white and grey to soft, lilac colors, from lists, categories and orders to multiplicity of beings, from eros to thanatos, Moussa Kone’s seemingly simple drawers evoke a world of phantasy and imagination for which he, in the final drawing, also provides a set of four keys, offering each viewer the opportunity of unlocking the drawers of their own imaginative choice. And there is no draw-back to that.

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References:

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Moussa Kones Serie „They called me a drawer (possibilities are limited)“ setzt sich mit den Eigenschaften und Möglichkeiten des Mediums Zeichnung auseinander, ist eine Reflexion des Zeichners über sich selbst und seine Ausdrucksmittel.

Das Motiv der Serie ist entsprechend gewählt und im Titel erläutert, der ein bewusstes Wortspiel ist, mit dem englischen für Schublade und dem nicht ganz korrekten „drawer“ für Zeichner. Die nach dem selben sich wiederholenden Muster gezeichneten Schubladen der Serie stehen für das Ordnen, Sortieren, Kategorisieren, die auch dem Zeichnen als Tätigkeiten zu Grunde liegen. Moussa Kone sucht die Charakteristika und Ursprünge der Zeichnung in einem Akt der Ordnung, Sammlung, Reflexion und (Selbst)betrachtung. Die Zeichnung zielte, zumindest in ihren Ursprüngen, darauf ab, ein Sujet systematisch zu erarbeiten und ist eine logische, rationale, ordnende Tätigkeit. Die Linie ist dabei ein abstraktes Zeichen und es ist erst die kognitive Leistung, die ein Motiv aus gezeichneten Linien zusammensetzt.

Nicht zufällig ist bei dieser medienreflexiven Serie ein Motiv gewählt, das auf den Grundformen Quadrat, Kreis, Dreieck basiert, die ein Spiel zwischen Abstraktion und Gegenständlichkeit in die Blätter bringen. In jedem Blatt wiederholt sich das selbe Muster, betonte Flächigkeit und Zweidimensionalität oder starre, klassische Zentralperspektive bei den von oben gesehenen Schubladen wechseln sich ab.

Die Zeichnung als ein abstraktes Zeichensystem interessiert Moussa Kone hier besonders. Dazu befragt, verweist er auf eine Parallele der Zeichnung zur Schrift, denn die Arbeit an der Serie folgt vorgegebenen Strukturen, das leere Blatt wird nach einem genauen theoretischen Plan, einer Choreographie sozusagen und mit der klassischen Schreibfeder als Werkzeug mit einzelnen Zeilen gefüllt. Diese Struktur wird nicht mehr oder nur ganz wenig variiert, wird wie eine Schablone von Blatt zu Blatt übertragen.

Das Schreiben wurde zu Beginn aus Gründen der Administration und Ökonomie heraus entwickelt, weniger um Mythen zu überliefern oder „poetische“ Texte festzuhalten. Information wurde zu den Anfängen der Schrift als Liste dargestellt und durch abstrakte Zeichen übermittelt. Kreativer Ausdruck war durch die vorgegebene Ordnung noch stark eingeschränkt, Organisches wurde Systematischem, Logischem untergeordnet.

Moussa Kone untersucht in dieser Serie die Zeichnung als eine Übung in Ordnung, Sammlung, Logos, die notwendig ist, um aus einem abstrakten System von Zeichen einen Gegenstand zu erarbeiten. Gleichzeitig stellt er die Frage nach den Möglichkeiten des kreativen Ausdrucks innerhalb dieses Systems, etwa mit den opulenten, gestischen, „emotionalen“ Linien der schraffierten Flächen.

Auch knüpft er hier thematisch gewissermaßen an frühere Serien an. Mit der Serie *en pointe* (2009) etwa beschäftigte er sich mit dem Ballett, als er Zugang zu einer privaten Tanzbibliothek hatte. Auch dieser Serie war inhaltlich die Reflexion über das eigene Medium, die Zeichnung, das Zeichnen, bereits inhärent. Ähnlich wie Tänzer eine Kunst ausüben, die auf Disziplinierung des Körpers basiert, ist das Zeichnen eine Disziplinierung der Hand. Sie nutzen ein antrainiertes, standardisiertes Vokabular als Grundlage für ihre Kunst, erst darauf baut der poetische Ausdruck auf. Moussa Kone verfolgt die Frage, wie Kreativität einerseits ebendiesen Strukturen entspringt und nach Möglichkeiten andererseits, Emotionales und Poetisches in diese vorgegebenen Strukturen zu bringen. Kreativität wird als ein emanzipatorischer Akt, Akt der Selbstbestimmung und Selbstverantwortung untersucht.

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