

“They put flowers on tombs and warm the Unknown Soldier
 You, my dark brothers, no one calls your names
 They promised 500.000 of your children to the glory
 Of future deaths and thank them in advance, future dark dead
Die schwarze Schande!”

Léopold Senghor,
To the Tirailleurs Sénégalais Who Died for France
 1938

The exhibition *Guis Sou Me Le Mbao (I Do Not See You at Mbao)* invites contemporary African artists to shed light on a silenced chapter of colonial history: the story of the *Tirailleurs Sénégalais*, African soldiers who were conscripted for the French army from 1857 to 1964. The conceptual and physical starting point of this endeavour is the Thiaroye military camp outside of Dakar (Senegal), the site of a brutal massacre in 1944 of hundreds of Tirailleurs Sénégalais who had protested for fair and immediate payment after fighting in WWII and being freed from German concentration and war prisoner camps.

The title of the exhibition draws on the Wolof language expression “Guis sou me le mbao” (“I do not see you at Mbao”), which is used to warn someone that he or she is in great danger. The saying originates from the event of the Thiaroye massacre, when the soldiers’ families rushed to the nearby village of Mbao where the survivors had found refuge, hoping to see their loved ones. “I do not see you at Mbao” is one of the many traces revealing the ongoing trauma caused by the massacre.



Mansour Ciss Kanakassy, *The Memory of Time*, 2016, Silkscreen on canvas, dimensions variable (detail)



Djime Diakite, *Apotheose des tranchées*, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, 49 x 29 inches (detail)

Thiaroye 44, as the massacre is called in everyday language, is a significant starting point for an investigation into a historical chapter that spans more than a century, countless colonial wars on three continents, and two world wars. The story of the veterans who were killed that night is more than a story of silenced colonial brutalities, it is a story of a challenge towards the very logic of colonialism, a logic that persists up till now. By remembering Thiaroye 44, thus, we will not only pay homage to the lives of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, but also shed light on the continuity of colonial logic which impacts the lives of people on the continent and beyond until today. Remembering Thiaroye is a painful reminder of how little seems to have changed since 1944.

The night of December 1, 1944, was the lowest point in the history of the deployment of soldiers from the French West African colonies in the French army, but for this very reason it was also the beginning of a new discourse on colonialism. While the story of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais is in its very essence one of racial injustice and discrimination, of lives that are worth less than others, of promises not kept, the massacre in Thiaroye brought all of these aspects to a painful crescendo. Not only had the veterans killed that night fought for France in Europe in WWII, survived the cruelties and hardship that came with being a Tirailleurs, such as being positioned in the most vulnerable military positions in the battle fields, they had also survived the horrors of German concentration and war prisoner camps, in which many of their comrades had fallen victim to racist violence.

Thiaroye 44 was a wake-up call to many that, despite the sacrifices West Africans had made for France, they had come home to the same colonial brutality and discrimination. The news of that night sent shock waves throughout French West Africa and became a central part of the various anti-colonial movements’ discourses in the following decades, a paradigm of the corruption of the colonial system which amplified calls for independence.

Returning to Africa and demanding their fair treatment, the arguments of these veterans had suddenly become a threat to France’s imperial power, whose foundations had been profoundly shaken by the war. They were protesting the fact that some lives, white lives, were worth more than their own. They based their request for equal payment for their services in the war on the fact that they refused to be seen and classified as any less human, that their lives mattered any less, than those of the French soldiers who they had fought with side by side. The fact that they were killed precisely for daring to stand up for this logic, was nothing more or less than a determined answer: within a system and logic of coloniality, black lives do not matter.

Thiaroye, situated in the poor suburbs of Dakar by the seaside, is nowadays a place from which young Senegalese men depart in pirogues (wooden boats) in order to reach Europe every year. Recently, a boat with 200 men from the community on board disappeared on the Mediterranean Sea. When popular Senegalese musician Jreemaak sings



Meissa Fall, *The Canon*, 2016, Reclaimed metal (detail)

“During the war, I was French, after the war, I became a clandestine,” he summarizes the absurdity of a situation that saw 33% of the male Senegalese population go to war on the same continent that their grandchildren now risk their lives to reach for a better life. Their bodies on the ground of the Mediterranean Sea in 2016, lie side by side with the bodies of their ancestors who did not survive their deployment at the very front of every battle field.

Until today, there are controversies as to how many people died in Thiaroye 44, with the numbers ranging from 30 to 300 casualties. Until today, there are controversies as to how many Tirailleurs Sénégalais died in WWII, with the numbers ranging from 15,000 to 30,000 casualties. The remembrance of this great imbalance of numbers, still a contested issue, always results in a wide range of polemic debates. Much of the brutality of the colonial past gets “silenced” through the uneven distribution of power and means to produce historical narratives, amplified by the fact that massacres were often committed with full impunity and legitimized by the authorities in power. While there are many representations of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais and Thiaroye 44 in songs, poems, and books from the African continent (and not least in Ousmane Sembène’s seminal film *Camp de Thiaroye*), they are mostly absent or at best side notes in official historical accounts of the world war in Europe, including those taught in schools not only in Europe, but also on the continent.

Our present is deeply informed by the way our past is remembered and understood, especially through cultural practice. How do we challenge the silencing of historical narratives and which effect will this process have on our present? Which questions will we have to ask? What kind of (artistic) language does this process require? These questions inform the exhibition project *I Do Not See You at Mbao*, with its title issuing a literal warning of the dangers of non-remembrance of the colonial past and the invisibility but severity of its repercussions in our present through the persistence of colonial epistemologies, social, and economic structures.

The project will feature African artists based on the continent and in the diaspora working in different mediums, who have been invited to reflect on the history and politics of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais from their diverse vantage points.

Claude Gomis’ mask sculpture *Thiaroye* references a medal-adorned military attire. It is part of *The Witness* series, which features sculptures made up of a myriad of

contrasting recuperated materials and precious traditional *pagne mandjak*. They reference traditional African masks, objects that have been deemed backward by a colonial gaze and are rarely displayed on equal terms among contemporary artworks in the West. Each mask refers to a particular event or historical figure within the history of colonialism, slavery, and ongoing racial injustice.

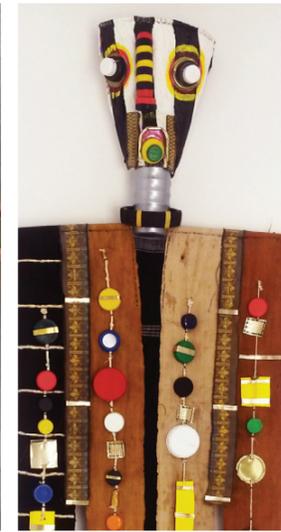
Mansour Ciss, whose grandfather had been deployed as a Tirailleurs Sénégalais in WWI, will present an installation of five silk screen prints titled *La Mémoire du Temps*, that features images of a well-known African hero of WWI: Captain Charles N’Tchoréré (1896-1940). Born in Libreville, N’Tchoréré became one of the few African soldiers who was awarded the military rank of captain after fighting in both WWI and WWII, and was executed by the German army in 1940.

Cool Diabang Mory’s performance on December 1, the anniversary of the massacre, titled *Regard sur le passé?* will feature a myriad of mirrors that spectators will be encouraged to look at. The conceptual premise of the work is that every look one takes at oneself in a mirror is a look at the past that informs our present.

Nathalie Mba Bikoro’s audio and video installation *If You Fail to Cross the Rubicon* features the voices of Tirailleurs Sénégalais, who were prisoners in colonial



Pierre Marie Ciss, *Independence Day*, 2016, Wood, metal (work in progress)



Claude Gomis, *Thiaroye (The Witness Series)*, 2015, Pagne mandjak, bottle lids, plastic bags, metal, 78 x 39 inches (detail)

camps during WWI in Germany, and the artist’s translation and reinterpretation of those voices in English and French. They were recorded by the German linguist Wilhelm Doegen in their native languages in order to be displayed in the first world culture museum, alongside objects from the continent. While the interest of the recorder was solely in the sound of the dialect, the content of the recordings was often cries for help that went unnoticed.

The title of **Hassane Sar’s** mixed media sculpture *Thiaroye Dem Dik* (“go to Thiaroye and come back”) refers to the “car rapides” driver’s exclamations calling passengers for a trip to Thiaroye from Dakar. The piece consists of a portrait of a Tirailleurs Sénégalais mounted on a broken windshield recuperated from a “car rapide” after an accident and alludes to those who haven’t returned from Camp Thiaroye.

The concept of the shadow as an alternative narration to the dominant historical discourse, as the silenced historical event or figure that continue to shape our present, is central to **Jean Marie Claude Bruce’s** work. The untitled sculpture represents an abstract shadow of a person, and consists of rusty and polished metal pieces and other materials that the artist collects on the streets of Dakar and assembles into a new symbiosis.

Tita Mbaye’s untitled mixed media sculpture is part of a series of works of the artist that portray Tirailleurs Sénégalais in an effort to honor the African soldiers who fought in both world wars in Europe. The pieces are a continuous exploration of the concepts of identity, aesthetics, and history as these are inscribed onto the sculpted form.

Djime Diakite’s painting *Apotheose des tranchées* alludes to the horrors the Tirailleurs faced in Europe during the Second World War. In a multi-layered, abstract depiction of a grey landscape of destroyed houses, tanks and weapons.

Pierre Marie Ciss’ work *Independence Day* explores the question of how a truly independent, post-colonial aesthetics might look. Although formal decolonization took place, the repercussions in politics, economics and not the least culture, will still take much effort to expose and overcome.

Claude Gomis and Saskia Köbschall © 2016
 Franchise Program Winner 2016-17



Hassane Sar, Thiaroye Dem Dik, 2016, Acrylic on canvas, broken windshield (detail)

Guis Sou Me Le Mbaou (Je ne te vois pas à Mbaou)

On fleurit les tombes, on réchauffe le Soldat Inconnu.

Vous, mes frères obscurs, personne ne vous nomme.

On vous promet 500 000 de vos enfants à la gloire des futurs morts,

on les remercie d'avance, futurs morts obscurs

Die schwarze Schande!"

Léopold Sédar Senghor

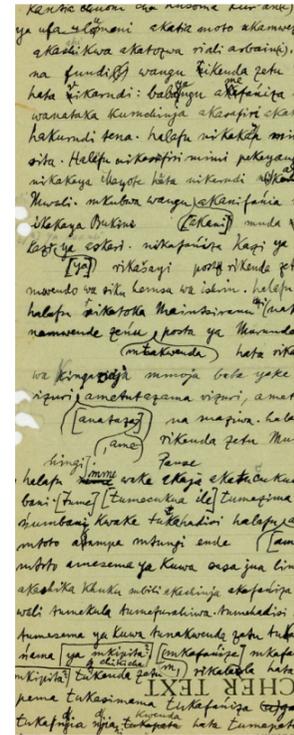
Aux Tirailleurs Sénégalais, morts pour la France

1938

Le projet "GUIS SOU ME LE MBAO" (Je ne te vois pas à Mbaou) sera l'occasion de créer une exposition in situ sur les lieux du "Camp Thiaroye", situé en périphérie dakaroise. Ce lieu fut celui d'un violent massacre de Tirailleurs Sénégalais (soldats africains enrôlés dans l'armée française) exécuté par l'armée française en 1944. Les commémorations du massacre et l'enrôlement des tirailleurs, qui, dans l'histoire coloniale, demeure un

chapitre largement controversé et mis sous silence, seront le point de départ pour des réflexions sur les politiques (postcoloniales) de la mémoire, les modes de résistance, et la perpétuité des injustices économiques et raciales qui forment des relations asymétriques entre l'Occident et le non-Occident.

Peu après que les nouvelles sur le massacre au Camp Thiaroye aient commencé à circuler, les familles et amis des soldats se précipitèrent au village de Mbaou. Quelques soldats survivants s'y étaient réfugiés dans l'espoir de voir leur bien-aimés. L'expression «Je ne te vois pas à Mbaou» - qui signifie «tu n'es pas parmi les survivants» - est entrée dans la langue Wolof comme une expression que l'on utilise de nos jours pour prévenir quelqu'un en grand danger.



Nathalie Mba Bikoro, If You Fail to Cross the Rubicon, 2016, 2 channel audio and 1 channel video installation (detail)



Tita Mbaye, Untitled, 2016, Wood, reclaimed metal (work in progress) (detail)



Cool Diabang Mory, Look at the Past?, 2016, Durational performance

Cette expression est l'un des vestiges qui montre le traumatisme profond causé par ce massacre dont la brutalité et la cruauté ont choqué toute l'Afrique de l'Ouest. Ce fut la sonnette d'alarme pour beaucoup qui se rendirent alors compte que, malgré les sacrifices d'une centaine de milliers de soldats ouest-africains avaient fait pour la France pendant les deux guerres mondiales et les maintes interventions militaires sur trois continents, ils rentraient pour retrouver la même brutalité coloniale, l'injustice raciale et la discrimination.

Les Tirailleurs Sénégalais qui ont été tués à Thiaroye avaient été déployés aux fronts de guerre contre les troupes d'Hitler pendant la deuxième guerre mondiale. Beaucoup d'entre eux avaient été détenus dans des camps de prisonniers de guerre allemands, certains avaient vu des milliers de leurs camarades soldats être tués et torturés, et étaient soulagés d'avoir survécu et d'avoir été destitués de leur fonctions. Mais au lieu de recevoir leur paiement et d'être envoyés chez eux, ils subissaient des traitements discriminatoires, souffraient de pénuries de nourriture et de logement, se voyaient refuser l'équité salariale, et dans certains cas, on refusait tout simplement de les payer (jusqu'aujourd'hui). Leur revendication pour un traitement d'égalité fut brutalement réprimé et plusieurs soldats furent tués (les chiffres varient entre 35 et 300). Il y eut également une centaine de blessés et une douzaine furent condamnés à la prison.

Le titre de l'exposition - «GUIS SOU ME LE MBAO» - évoque littéralement un appel contre le danger de l'oubli du passé colonial et de l'invisibilité de ses répercussions sur notre présent, malgré la sévérité des faits. Ces répercussions se manifestent à travers la continuité des épistémologies coloniales, sociales et des structures économiques. Le projet invitera artistes à s'engager avec la communauté de Thiaroye et les vétérans survivants, dans le but de créer des oeuvres liées au Camp. Ces oeuvres réfléchiront aux modes de résistance et aux moyens employés pour la mise en question des politiques post-coloniales de la mémoire, afin d'imaginer un futur qui se définit par lui-même.

Gagnants du Programme Franchise 2016-17

Ce n'est pas une traduction de la version anglaise



Jean Marie Claude Bruce, Untitled, 2016, Reclaimed metal (work in progress)

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Guis Sou Me Le Mbaou (I Do Not See You at Mbaou)

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Nathalie Mba Bikoro
Mansour Ciss Kanakassy
Pierre Marie Ciss
Jean Marie Claude Bruce
Djime Diakite
Meissa Fall
Claude Gomis
Tita Mbaye
Cool Diabang Mory
Hassane Sar

apexart Thiaroye (Dakar)