

CÉLIA RAKO

(Célia Marie Nalysoa Rakotondrainy)

Born in 1994

Self taught artist from Malagasy origin, born and raised in Paris, currently based in Berlin.

Graduated in 2018 from l'éseg School of Management in Paris, France and continued her education in Art History at Oxford University.

From a very young age she was immersed in diverse art practices, through her grandfather, a painter, and her father, a musician. At first focusing on photography after she repaired her family's rangefinder camera, she then took on drawing after having learnt the art of perspective with her grandfather, but put her artistic practice to rest for several years while she focused on studies. Prompted by their conversations, her partner gifted her canvases, brushes and acrylic paints in December 2017. A few months later she started to paint.

The inspiration came naturally. It was necessary for her to link photography and painting and to paint from personal or family pictures or from much loved photographs, with the agreement of the picture's owner.

2018 was the first year she couldn't make her yearly trip to Madagascar, her grandfather's homeland, a Betsileo from the village of Antsosa, located halfway between Ambositra and Antsirabe in the south-central part of the country. However, the stories offered through her paintings present another part of the country : the Sakalava region, north of Madagascar. Fuelled by nostalgia, she dives back into her previous journeys, always amazed by the beauty of the landscapes, the intensity of the experiences and especially, the gap between her life in Madagascar and her day to day in the West. The culture shock is real every time. With her paintings she tells a story that is rarely told. All too often, the beliefs about Madagascar tend towards negativity and are typically poorly informed echoes gathered in the press. For Rako, the red island is too often forgotten, marginalized and underestimated. With her project she ambitions to share scenes from the daily life of a nation which has plenty to offer but which unfortunately lacks the material and financial means, its population mostly suffering through great poverty.

Rako's debut series, is an invitation to travel, but first and foremost it is an opportunity to meet the Malagasy people, experience their daily lives and their vibrant culture through paintings that highlight expressive figures and scenes of ordinary life. This ode to the ordinary was born out of a desire to show that these people are no more different than elsewhere. Despite the poverty that prevails in the country, these people want, above all, to have the opportunity to enjoy and make the most of their lives. Shocked by some of the questions she endured in the past, Célia Rako is concerned by the lack of interest for the island, the fifth largest in the world. A land of Austronesian origin, from the Indonesian archipelago but a part of the African continent, these Southeast Asian origins can be found at every level: from language to morphology, from rhythmic signature to ancestral customs. All this makes Madagascar a country rich of its history and culture.

Her work also has a strong personal aspect that allows her to understand more precisely where she comes from, the history of her family and a culture in which she has partly grown up. It is therefore an intense research as well as practice; each painting being a new story, a new challenge, a new learning. The artistic process is constantly evolving and that's what she finds fantastic about painting. She didn't look for the medium, it was the acrylic that came along. For some people, the short drying time of this paint is a disadvantage, but this is what seems to have mainly seduced her. This allows her to work in several layers and thus obtain more depth. In terms of style, we find simple and colourful backgrounds, which are often monochromes and sometimes polychromes not too much detailed. This bias, inspired by the Congolese artist Zemba Luzamba, whose she discovered the work while working for Ebony Curated (a South African gallery), allows the viewer to focus more on the figures, removing them from any space time and thus insisting on the action. Despite the fact that each painting hides a story, the spectator is in total control of the interpretation he wishes to give. The dialogue between the canvas and the observer is something precious for the artist for whom a work of art can often express much more than words.

In another register Célia Rako also works with epoxy resin, mixing it with different pigments and acrylics. Through this medium she wants to interpret in her own way elements that are more raw, more natural with a focus on gemstones, of which the red island, also known as the treasure island, is full. These stones have many properties and virtues for Malagasy people. Since the dawn of time, man has attributed extraordinary benefits to stones depending on whether it is worn or layed in a particular place. These benefits, specific to each stone, depend on the color, composition, variety or numerology. Rako's work has not only an aesthetic purpose but also questions the over exploitation of local primary and secondary fields. The list of stones on the country is impressive, it is easier to mention the stones that cannot be found in Madagascar such as Lapis lazuli, turquoise, jade or the eye of the tiger. According to the World Bank, 15% of the global sapphire production comes from Madagascar and this rate approaches 10% for rubies. Unfortunately, this industry is far from being controlled and supervised, leaving a wide open door to informal practices and illegal exports. In economic terms, the potential of the stone-making sector is incredible, but the problem that has arisen for decades is of course the impact on the environment and the safety of miners, who are usually not trained or equipped. Thus, too many people put themselves in danger or lose their lives in the hope of extracting stones from the earth that would allow them to build a better future. The abstract, fluid and textured style makes direct use of this strong illusion or delusion.