

Interview with Jean-David Nkot and Cécile Bourne-Farrell on the occasion of the exhibition *Théâtre des Corps – Drame de la Matière*, Galerie Afikaris¹, Paris

Curated by Christine Eyene

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https://afikaris.com/exhibitions/51-theatre-des-corps-drame-de-la-matiere-jean-david-nkot/installation_shots/

"Imagination is not, as is sometimes believed, the ability to invent; it is the ability to reveal what already exists," John Berger²

This final instalment of an exhibition project between Douala and Paris, *Théâtre des Corps – Drame de la Matière*, Galerie Afikaris, Paris, marks a major evolution in the practice of this Cameroonian artist trained at the IFA, Mbalmayo, Douala. Through this fourth solo exhibition, Jean David Nkot continues his critical engagement with the extractivist logic and forms of exploitation that have permeated the history and present of the African continent. Jean David Nkot's work speaks to the human condition resulting from the relentless extraction of the soil and the unlimited exploitation of local populations, whether in Cameroon, across the continent or far beyond.

Jean David Nkot speaks of the theft of resources, but also of those who, at the mercy of others, are the first victims of the barbarity of man's exploitation of man, which has persisted in this part of the world for more than three centuries. All of the works presented at the Afikaris gallery speak of mining and raw materials extracted from the abused bodies of the Global South for the benefit of the Global North.

Since we first met in his studio in Douala in 2014, I have noticed that Jean David's pictorial work has evolved towards multidisciplinary artistic practices. This began in 2017 with his tribute to *Ruben Um Niobé* as part of SUD2017³, which already addressed the painful history of Cameroon.

Although our daily lives are bombarded with images, documentary photographs and archives never seem to do justice to the gravity of the physical and mental abuse inflicted on populations, especially children, both today and throughout history. Jean-David Nkot appeals to our imagination to better discern what is inscribed in every cell of these bruised bodies and minds. Jean David Nkot introduces us to this abusive cycle of child exploitation by offering different ways of interpreting it with his proposal 'Theatre of Bodies - Drama of Matter'.

¹The exhibition was preceded by two previous instalments: *Epigraphie des corps*, Galerie Anne Kadji, Douala and *Map of Resources*, Espace doual'art, Douala; Cameroon

²'Imagination is not, as is sometimes thought, the ability to invent; it is the capacity to disclose that which exists', John Berger ('The difficulty of being an artist', in *Permanent Red*, ed. Verso 2025, p. 45)

³ <https://www.cecile-bourne-farrell.com/exhibitions/sud2017> and <https://biennialfoundation.org/biennials/sud-salon-urbain-de-douala-cameroun/>

1/Cécile Bourne-Farrell: We are greeted by a huge painting entitled '*BP.the-story-of-a-treasure@fr.com*', 2025, which introduces us to the harvest of the cacao tree, whose fruit is meticulously cut by the protagonist at the heart of the tree. This tree embodies knowledge, that of a long usurped history of plant diversity since the colonial presence opted for monoculture. The continuity of the colonial strategy is still very much present, with its primary objective: yield. In this exhibition, the other paintings and ceramics show bodies in tension, and when they are at rest, you show the fatigue in their features, their clothes or the burlap. You express the weariness of the features in the portraits of children who are too old or of hands already too damaged by gold mining. These bodies seem to be repositories of messages. In '*Corps//matière.cm.org*', 2025, and also in '*#@l'origine de nos délices.fr*', 2025, can you tell us about these paintings?

Jean David Nkoti: These bodies are objects of study, they are epigraphs⁴. For me, the body becomes a medium through which many clues can be conveyed about people who are unable to speak about what is happening to them. I try to analyse and understand the information that can be extracted from them. I try to go beyond the marks, towards a metaphorical and allegorical approach where we don't just see the traces but above all the implicit gestures. There is a choreography, an observation of the movement of these bodies at rest, which intertwine or dialogue with each other, as in 'The Raft of the Medusa', painted in 1818 by Guéricault. It is a theatre of bodies staged to tell a story in a given space.

2/ Cécile Bourne-Farrell: At the same time, what is interesting, and this comes up often in your work, is that the hands and feet are almost always in the foreground?

Jean David Nkoti: These are the first elements I use to start painting my canvas. It's a part of the body that's complex to render, but one that I always find fascinating. If I manage to paint the hands properly, the rest of the body becomes obvious. Depending on the subjects I'm working on, these parts tell the story that these bodies are going through. For me, the foot is the most emblematic object for telling the story of migration, because it's the part of the body that's in contact with the ground. It's the foot that tells the story of borders, of crossing such different worlds. But when you're in the world of extraction, it's the hand that performs the same principle of observation.

3/ Cécile Bourne-Farrell: There is also a constant theme in your work, which is the relationship to stamps and postage, as if you were sending messages out into the world. Although the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour was ratified by the International Labour Organisation in 1999, it is almost never enforced, either in Cameroon or in many other countries around the world. There are things you didn't want to show in this exhibition, out of modesty and also because they are taboo and dangerous. Here, you talk about pain and its consequences in this project. How do you go about creating this work?

Jean David Nkoti: The stamp takes its original place with an envelope, and this notion of postage continues to exist. The canvas is an envelope that has a dual function: it is both a container and its contents. In the past, the recipient paid the postage, which was very expensive. So the strategy was to write the message on the envelope, which meant that you only had to read the envelope. Then the post office introduced stamps so that the sender would pay the postage. So I used this metaphor, going back to the first version of stamping, considering the work as an envelope carrying a message. This is how, with the tribute to Ruben Um Nyobè, for SUD17, the words inscribed on the façade allowed us to understand the violence behind the anti-colonialist's actions, who in 1952 and 1954 at the UN headquarters in New York denounced French colonial injustices and pleaded for independence, which led to his assassination. I tried to make his plea accessible. I don't show blood in my work, but I offer a theatrical poetry reinforced by the insertion of archival images screen-printed under the paint, which allows the viewer to contextualise more deeply what they are seeing. In the silkscreen print '*Corps à corps*', there is a dialogue between the past and the present. Those who lived through that period understand, because there is a stark historical parallel between the colonial period and today.

⁴ The science of epigraphy studies the traces left on objects.

4/ Cécile Bourne-Farrell: In the Afikaris gallery, there is a sound installation where you can hear testimonies while walking on sand-covered ground in a high-alert space. What does this installation tell us?

Jean David Nkot: I travelled to Batouré in eastern Cameroon, which is a gold mining area, to immerse myself in the community and spend three weeks working with photographer friends. We worked on site to build trust and engage in dialogue. During this time, we noticed that the majority of children were working in the mines. I worked from photographs of these real situations, which I haven't shown here. This series of paintings remained in storage at the gallery because the public doesn't necessarily want these images on their walls. I am thinking, for example, of the painting that shows the sieve used to filter the mineralised earth, under which this child is resting. Sometimes I also superimpose these images on those of other children, bodies on top of each other... There is a series of these children that is even harder to look at, entitled '*Corps à mine*' (*Mine Bodies*), evoking the power exerted over these children's bodies, with chairs and sofas from the colonial era weighing down on them to represent how multinationals are still systematically crushing this youth.

5/ Cécile Bourne-Farrell: The 'Blue Bodies', made from a single piece of blue ceramic, are presented like relics from an archaeological dig. These busts and heads of women, men and children embody souls whose past, present and future existence is linked to the fate of these exploited lands. The expressions on their faces and their gestures show that they were captured in the midst of their work, the tools having disappeared from their hands. These ceramics evoke death masks, as if the function of these people alone remains inscribed in them, suspended in time.

Jean David Nkot: I am a fan of cartoons, especially "Saint Seiya," whose protagonist is a warrior named Medusa who freezes her opponents in stone. Here, I have captured the frozen moment of these work gestures. I was inspired by videos of mine collapses, observing how bodies were engulfed by the earth. Like an archaeologist, I wanted to show the pain of these characters. In the myth of Orpheus, the stones of the underworld speak... Greek mythology has been with me in my work since the beginning.

6/ Cécile Bourne-Farrell: These six 'Blue Bodies' sculptures are also a real technical tour de force, made from a single piece and beautifully glazed. These blue bodies are those who extract cobalt from mines, enabling us to have components for superalloys, glass, magnets and guidance systems for weapons. When we begin to realise the extent to which cobalt is used, but also other minerals such as copper in your installation, we understand the cynicism of our society, which consumes these minerals on a daily basis without any ethical considerations. The Cameroonian government, like all of us, is complicit. We are all concerned by our consumption of communication tools. How do you see the contradictions in our world?

Jean David Nkot: I worked with Madeleine Tchabon, a teacher at the Mbalmayo Training Institute (IFA), who kindly helped me to produce them all in one go. The world we live in is greedy. Since slavery, the body has been nothing more than an object of exploitation that produces added value. As long as this perspective does not change, we will remain stuck in the same pattern.

7/ Cécile Bourne-Farrell: I would like to come back to the omnipresence of the paramilitary guards, the '*Byeri Mine*', who are there to keep the workers in line. They are perched like vultures, ready to pounce on anyone who seeks justification for the constant injustice... Their anonymity is disturbing. Who are they?

Jean David Nkot: They represent the supreme hegemony that controls the course of events. They are anonymous and contrast with the representation of children and young adults. They are shadows lurking in the shadows, manipulating things as they please, protected.

8/ Cécile Bourne-Farrell: Finally, what role do you think you have as an artist in the midst of this reality?

Jean David Nkot: I participate in our society like a sponge, observing the environment and spaces in which I live. I am not an educator, but I understand the frustrations, contradictions and fears of life below the surface of the environment in which I find myself. I capture moments to spark debate, so that we can talk about this reality that has been pushed aside.

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