

CURATORIAL TEXT

JEAN DAVID NKOT, *THÉÂTRE DES CORPS / DRAME DE LA MATIÈRE*

22 MAY – 21 JUNE, 2025

AFIKARIS GALLERY, 7 RUE NOTRE DAME DE NAZARETH, 75003 PARIS

Théâtre des corps – Drame de la matière (*Theatre of Bodies – Drama of Matter*) is the final chapter in a trilogy of exhibitions showcasing new works by Cameroonian artist Jean David Nkot, presented between Douala and Paris. While embracing new formats and venturing into techniques that depart from his usual approach — including sculpture and ceramics — Nkot remains committed to a theme dear to him: raising awareness about extraction practices and the exploitation of labor.

The artist first approaches the subject through the human figure, with a painting depicting a worker cutting a cacao pod with a machete (*BP.the-story-of-a-treasure@fr.com*, 2025). The realism of this work is revealed in the meticulous detail, the treatment of shapes, volumes, and shadows — from the folds in the clothing and the ridges of the cacao pods, to the moss growing on the branches of the cacao tree. The vivid colors immerse us in the immediacy and contemporary reality of agricultural labor in Cameroon today and, by extension, in other countries across Africa and the Global South.

In the background of this painting, as if in watermark, appears a series of black-and-white images repeated in a Warholian manner. Referencing archival photography, these images seem to link the colonial past — where industrial plantations originated — with the present-day extractive practices driven by capitalism and globalization.

A similar treatment is found in other paintings, notably in scenes of female figures dressed in predominantly blue pagnes with detailed geometric patterns. Gathered on a mound of brightly colored cocoa beans, reminiscent of M&Ms, the scenes they inhabit depict moments of intimacy and sisterhood around the enjoyment of a cup of coffee or chocolate. Yet the artist allows a shadow to emerge. In *Po.box.pain-and-false-laughter.org* (2024), one sees a figure sitting away from the group to enjoy her drink, bearing a far more subdued and reserved expression. This expression reappears on the central figure in www.corps-en-corps.cm (2024), whose gaze engages us and prompts reflection on the bodies surrounding her — interwoven bodies with torsos revealing lingerie. Sensual and voluptuous at first glance, a prolonged look reveals the sadness and exhaustion they carry.

For Nkot, women also symbolize the African land, whose fertility is exploited — or alternatively, the often-invisible female workers. He depicts them with a theatricality that evokes both classical naturalist painting traditions — reminiscent of Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818–19) — and a contemporary aesthetic rooted in Africa's reality.

Another sensitive topic addressed by the artist at the exhibition's entrance is child labor, with a series of mixed-media works depicting hands against an imaginary cartography (*#@l'origine de nos délices.fr*, 2025). On these are inscribed major chocolate manufacturers' contractual commitments to the Convention on the worst forms of Child Labor, ratified in 1999 by the International Labour Organization. Here, the artist implicitly invites us to acknowledge the impotence of international law in the face of ongoing child mistreatment and exploitation.

This theme recurs throughout the exhibition, with ceramic busts and heads (*Blue Bodies*, 2024), and a series of portraits on jute canvas (*Corps//matière.cm.org*, 2025). The fusion between body and material is reflected in the ceramics, which blue tone and texture simulate

a patina marked by time. Their color evokes cobalt drawn from the earth, coating the miners' skin, and their aesthetic recalls ancient ceramics. Displayed like relics unearthed from an archaeological dig, the busts and heads of women, men, and children embody souls whose past, present, and future are tied to the fate of these exploited lands. The positions of the busts suggest they were seized in the midst of labor, the tools now vanished from their hands.

The jute canvas portraits in the second room contribute to a similar narrative. The artist presents us with the paradox of a childhood both joyful and powerless in the face of a burdensome existence. The posture of two portraits curiously evokes the image of the Muzzled Slave published in *Souvenirs d'un aveugle, voyage autour du monde* (1839) by Jacques Arago, as well as Caravaggio's *Young Sick Bacchus* (1593–94), seen from a reversed angle. Once again, the gaze takes us as witnesses and urges us to reflect on our lifestyles, our daily consumption, and their impact on the innocent lives caught in the gears of the capitalist machine. Here, the jute canvas is more than just a surface — it becomes a stand-in for worn clothing, leaving no doubt about the children's condition. Yet, the artist portrays them without stripping them of their dignity or the hope for a better future.

To deliver this ever-relevant message, Nkot employs a visual signature unique to his aesthetic: a seal, a postal stamp imprint, or, in his titles, the at-sign of an email address.

Finally, *Map of Resources* (2025) immerses us again in the notion of fertile ground, with an installation transforming the gallery's final room into a mining site. Embedded in the ground, mud-covered pipes emerge like pruned trunks in a stripped forest. At their top sits a glass jar containing sculpted forms simulating precious minerals: aluminum, silver, bauxite, cobalt, coltan, lithium, manganese, platinum, and more — all treasures from a fertile land caught in the grip of greed.

Above the jars are small anthropomorphic figurines with contorted, marked forms. These are inspired by Kota reliquaries — statues that protect the precious remains of a deceased elder, serving as an intermediary between the visible and invisible worlds. Their blue helmets symbolize this protective role, while also alluding to the ambiguity of military presence on African soil. Tools and traces of labor — such as a shovel or an abandoned sandal — are scattered throughout, resembling curious still lifes encountered while wandering this rugged terrain. Littered across the ground are small pouches of various alcohol brands — spirits whose power lies in their ability to dull the pain of labor, completing the cast of this *mise-en-scène*.

Lastly, a soundscape evoking the atmosphere of a mine rounds out this installation.

Théâtre des corps – Drame de la matière (*Theatre of Bodies – Drama of Matter*) marks a decisive turning point in Jean David Nkot's work, transporting us from the two-dimensional space for which he is well known, into the three-dimensional field of an imaginary world imbued with realism — conveyed through painting, sculpture, and found objects. These objects bear the imprint of economic and social realities which impact stretches far beyond Cameroon, and affects us on a global scale.

Curated by Christine Eyene