

# ARTFORUM

DAKAR

## El Hadji Sy

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Can you critique an artwork as you might an entire city? In El Hadji Sy's multiform practice, where does one end and the other begin? "I am a pure product of Dakar," he once declared, and his to-date largest gallery exhibition held in his hometown begged the question, Which Dakar and, moreover, which heritage is he claiming? The gallery occupies a centrally located, late-Art Deco building from 1953, a onetime department store whose former splendor and colonial legacy remain palpable. Entering via a grand marble spiral staircase, viewers encountered banner-like paintings—flowing from the ceiling—that lent their title, *Now/Naaw (kites)*, 2022, to the exhibition. This juxtaposition tapped into a tension between arrival and a sense of elusion, as *Naaw* can mean "to fly away" in Wolof.

Inside, the show predominantly consisted of paintings teeming with countless eyes of stock characters drawn from the city's daily life, among them migrating country folk accompanied by their personal effects, myths, and circumstances. Sy frequently paints their portraits on canvases propped on wheeled scaffolds, which here gave the viewer a sensation of wandering around a disbanded parade with the art stopped in its tracks. More faces appeared on partition screens, such as *Talibé Tidjiane*, 2022, which refers to the ubiquitous presence of the titular *talibé*—boys from rural parts of the country who are sent to the city streets to beg on behalf of their Koranic schools. Another wide-eyed boyish face painted on papier-mâché was roughened by the texture of this surface. Titled simply *Le soldat (The Soldier)*, 2022, the image imbues Sy's overall picture of community and nation with an ambivalence that verges on unease. In a startling diptych asking *Qui est là? (Who's There)*, 2022, the left figure was more naturalistic, somber in ochers, while the right figure had been abstracted into a bash of neons, visibly contorted.

Confusing by blending, combining, and disordering media and meanings constitutes one of Sy's strongest moves. A primordially shaped bust with a mother-of-pearl shell cladding set on a worn pedestal was titled *Coco Chanel*, 2021. *La coiffeuse (The Hairdresser)*, 2021, presented another unstable object: a convertible display table that opened up to reveal one of Sy's characteristically rudimentary yet vibrant visages. The lid's reverse bore a color-drained scarified "painting" that channels postwar tachism à la Wols. Such blunt interfacing between styles might also constitute a postcolonialist gesture within postmodern painting, hinting at the historical extraction of Africanity by European abstractionists that continued well into the late-colonial period. Picasso in particular maintains a notable presence on Dakar's

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El Hadji Sy, *Le regardeur (The Watcher)*, 2022, textile, rope, shells, 29 7/8 × 70 7/8".

art map, hanging around like one of those stores that perennially advertises liquidation sales yet never actually makes room for new merchandise. In *Ombres bleues (Bluish Shadows)*, 2020, Sy quoted Picasso's by-now-well-established proto-Cubist reconfiguration of portraiture adapted from West African Kota figures, stacking flora and fauna motifs atop one of these appropriated faces.

More cryptic were wall works in which seashells were assembled into Sy's signature eye and curlicue forms, ominously titled *Le regardeur (The Watcher)* and *Le pouvoir (The Power)*, both 2022, the latter suggestive of a ceremonial staff. One room was converted into a commemorative space devoted to Sy's trajectory as an artist, curator, performer, and cultural ambassador, as he arguably represents Senegal's most significant artistic position since the decay of the Ecole de Dakar in the late 1970s. Videos, laminated press clippings, and photos pertaining to his collaborative, sometimes pop-cultural, consistently multimedia and extra-institutional endeavors—such as the Laboratoire Agit'Art collective initiated in the 1970s, or Tenq, an itinerant artistic workshop founded in 1996—retraced their exhilarating content. Placed together with *Le dernier commandeur (The Last Commander)*, 2020, a portrait of the late Issa Samb, the city's avant-garde pioneer and Sy's key collaborator for decades, the archival presentation superfluously also struck the heavy note of irrevocable "musealization." Less cloistered from the new works on view, that flurry of images and actions would have transmitted the full extent of their enduring formal innovation and their challenge to the legacies of discriminating Western reception and valorization.

El Hadji Sy, *Le regardeur (The Watcher)*, 2022, textile, rope, shells, 29 7/8 × 70 7/8".

—Daniel Horn