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“Stations of the Cross” by Souleymane Balde

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Abstract

Souleymane Balde, an embroidery artist from Guinea, left his hometown in 2014 to travel across Africa in an illegal journey to France. At his arrival at his final destination, he managed to express himself and pay tribute to his travel companion in a series of fourteen paintings made of paint and embroidery. This creation was the best way of curing and relieving himself, and of finding reconciliation with his past and suffering. The series is called *My Stations of the Cross* or *Via Crucis*, since it is the artist's intention to simulate the catholic images of Christ's death, and thus reflect on the meaning of suffering, symbolism, resurrection, and art. In this article we will explain Souleymane's life and work, and then will analyze the main symbols and meanings in his paintings.

Keywords: immigration, journey, embroidery art, Souleymane Balde, France.

Introduction

Souleymane Balde, an embroiderer craftsman from Guinea, left his country in 2014 and began his illegal journey across Africa. He reached his final destination, France, two years later with his only possession: a needle. In France, he was sent to a migrant's camp in Lille, in which he met a French volunteer artist who helped him represent his perilous travel across Africa and Europe through a set of fourteen paintings. The title of this series, *Mon chemin de croix* (*My Stations of the Cross*; or *My Way of the Cross*, *Via Crucis*, an allusion to the catholic practice), defines the long journey as a painful learning process in the search for happiness, change and freedom.

Each painting, made with embroidery and paint, depicts the different steps in Souleymane's travel and most particularly the passing of each border. With a subtle technique, the violence of each stage and each situation is represented with embroidered discontinuous lines and taint colors. The last painting bears a conclusion of reconciliation and peace.

The meaning of these fourteen paintings is often explained by the artist himself: it was the best way of expressing himself, of paying tribute to the friends he made (and sometimes lost) during his journey, and, finally, of curing himself as in psychological therapy – through testimony and artistic expression.

The goal of this article is to explain and introduce the courageous and powerful work of this artist who was capable of transforming and sharing his pain in an artistic form.

Firstly, we will explain his journey, accompanying it with the paintings. Then we will analyze the technique and meaning of these paintings, and also the particular definition of art they convey.

Souleymane Balde's Journey

Souleymane Balde left his hometown Mamou (Guinea-Conakry) in 2014 in search for freedom. Unlike other African immigrants that he met during his journey, his search was not for food or peace. His ambitions did not match the poor possibilities offered by the lack of international mobility and the misery characteristic of Western Africa: the impossibility to travel, to meet new people, to find jobs, or to study. While he sees his country as full of natural wealth, the path is barren.



Painting 1: Guinea-Conakry

Besides, the declaration of Public Health Emergency of International Concern in Western Africa due to the Ebola virus epidemic (2013-2016), accelerated his departure. The first borders he crossed (Senegal and Mali), were closed, and he remembers particularly well the illegal crossing of the border with Senegal, where stands of Red Cross and police control where set. All the border crossings since then were done at night.



Painting 2: The Senegalese border

In Senegal, he stayed five months in M'Bour, hidden on the beaches along the ocean, earning some money from selling crochet works to the tourists. He then took a bus to Bamako (Mali), passing illegally (on foot and by night) because of the closed border.

He then took a bus from Bamako to Gao where he paid a “*passeur*” (smuggler) to cross the Malian desert towards Algeria. There he met with the first smugglers, cornerstones of the migrant mafia that allow and supervise the passing from one dangerous point to another – in this case, from central Mali to the dangerous desert region of Kidal. There he saw for the first time the ghettos and the perfect organization devoted to, as he describes it, “the amputation of the money from the migrants’ hands.”⁸

At Gao station, the “*passeurs*” lead them to a packed military truck meant for the transportations of camels. It is in this bus where the real clandestine and mortal journey begins, according to Souleymane, since from then on, they would be officially banned from each country they will touch. From the Malian desert (controlled by the Tuaregs) to Europe, every land will be hostile, in each of them they will be the “Other” (the black), facing mortal dangers and continuous fear of repatriation.

As they move along the Malian desert, they are stopped by rebel barricades that take their money away, with subsequent episodes of extreme violence. Until they get to Kidal where they are again attacked – Kidal is a region in Northern Mali, that was taken over by Tuareg rebels the 30 March 2012, by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).⁹

8 All the quotations come from the unpublished short story Souleymane wrote in 2018, “Mon premier jour à Paris” (“My First Day in Paris”). The results of my conversations with the artist or the testimony he gives in the film *Au fil du voyage* appear in this article without citation. Testimony of Souleymane Balde and his explanation of his series *Mon chemin de croix* can be found online at: <https://vimeo.com/234044204?fbclid=IwARiWIDEJR-ZgQfnWXuNWofDk24VrKZGe5H-PcVCozHJIOHpfAgWfaBKbEN7E>.

9 The 30 March 2012, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) took the city of Kidal and its military bases, killing 150 soldiers of the Malian Army. After two years of war (in which the French Army intervened), the MNLA forced government troops in Kidal to retreat, and have been controlling the region since 2020.



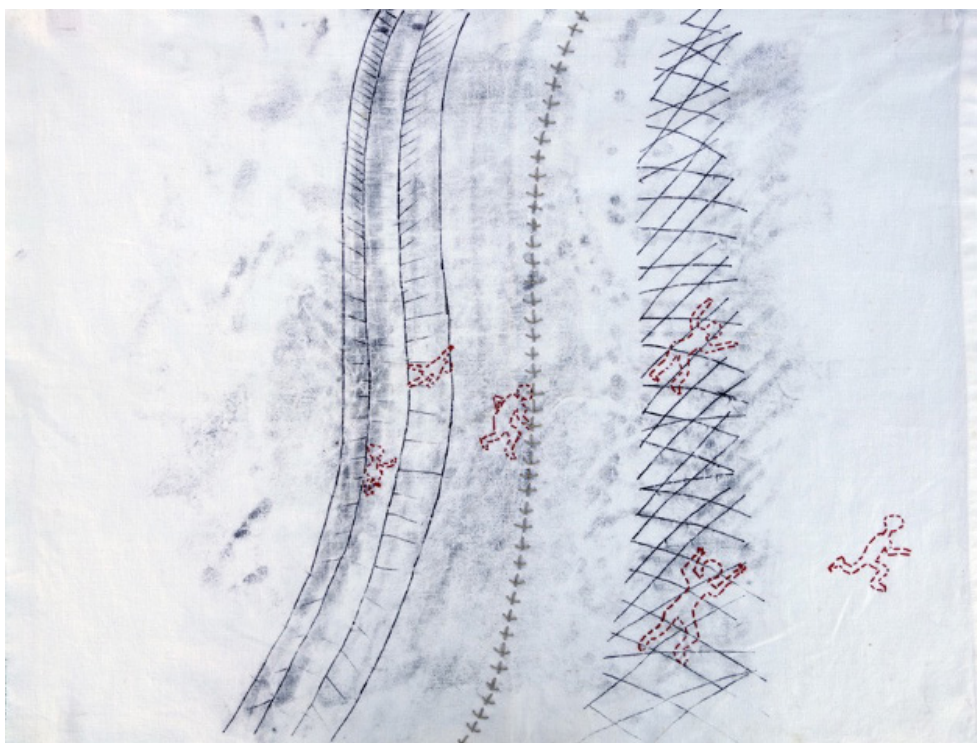
Painting 5: Kidal, the Malian desert

After three days in the desert, the convoy crossed the Algerian border in Borj Moktar, and Souleymane then went to Ghardaïa – at the border with Mali – to work in the construction sector in order to recover the money lost in the desert to the Tuareg barricades. He will represent in his paintings the rough work migrants do to gain this money back, as well as the system of abuse and exploitation. After Ghardaïa he travelled across Algeria, and went to Maghnia, on the Moroccan border, where he worked for a while on the land, living in a well-organized ghetto, and one of the worst in the Maghreb: a perfectly organized mafia, where there is a “president” of the ghetto, with his own ministers (including “security minister” responsible for the punishments and crimes). Thousands live there waiting to be able to cross the border with Morocco, and therefore are vulnerable and at the mercy of these smugglers.



Paintings 6 and 7 (detail), 6: Algeria: construction site in Ghardaïa 7: Camp in Maghnia

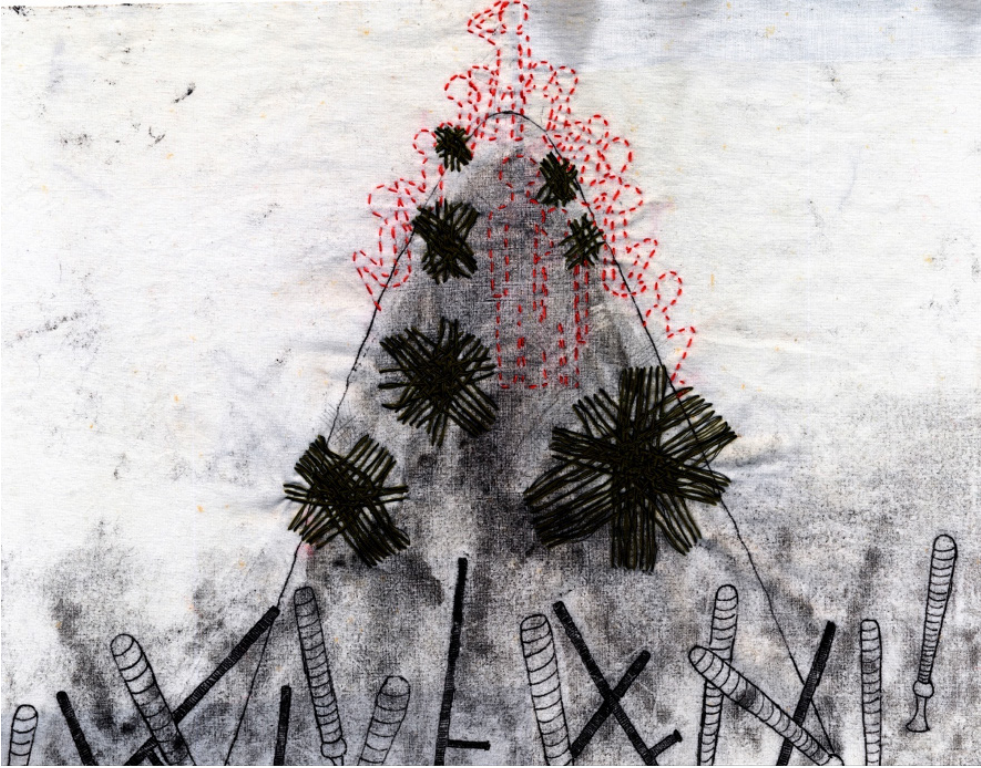
In Maghnia, smugglers advised him on how and when he could cross the Moroccan border, one of the hardest in Africa. Borders between both countries have been closed since 1994, because of the Algerian war. At the Algerian side there stands a trench 3-meters deep, and at the Moroccan side a wall 3-meters high, with barbwire. Besides, when migrants arrive in Morocco, they are often pursued by the military forces, so they are told to run towards the lights and the forests once they have crossed it. Souleymane managed to cross this border at night, running as all the others towards the mountains of Oujda to hide from the police.



Painting 8: the crossing to Morocco

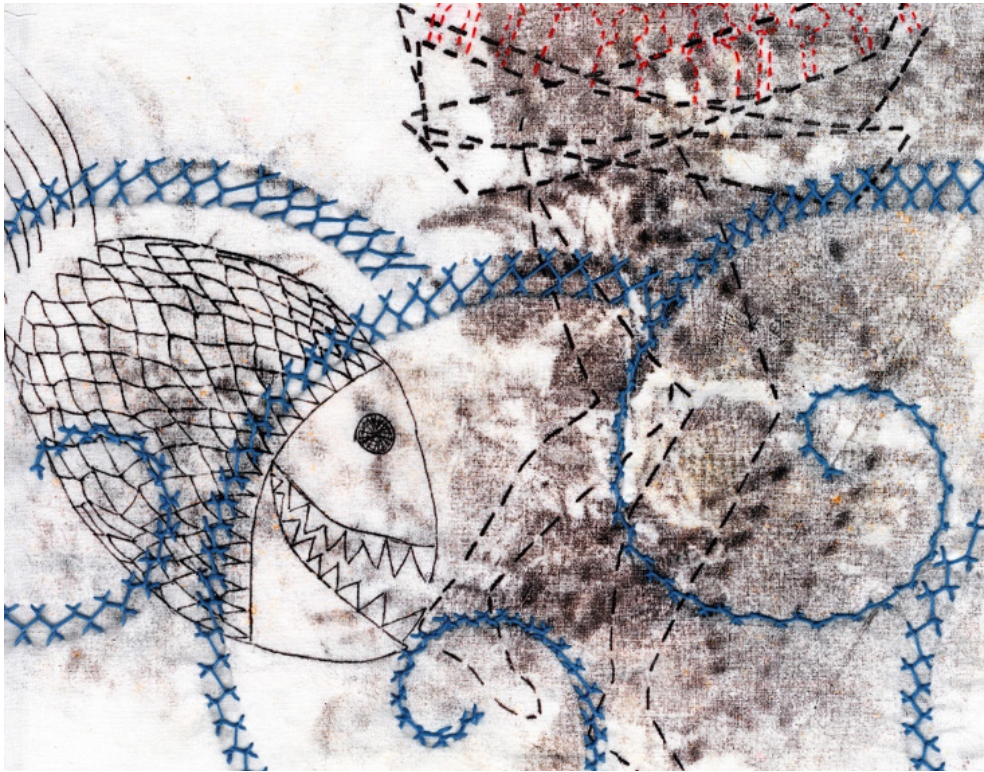
He hid for a month in the mountains and forests surrounding Nador (the last city before the Spanish post in Africa: Melilla). He stayed in the Gourougo forest for some months, threatened by the military forces: when these came, the migrants had to flee to the mountain top where they could not reach them; when they came back, they would find their tents and belongings destroyed. The extreme violence of the Moroccan authorities would be shown in his paintings: in this case, with nightsticks with which police have beaten to death many of the

illegal migrants.



Painting 9: Nador, Gourogo forest

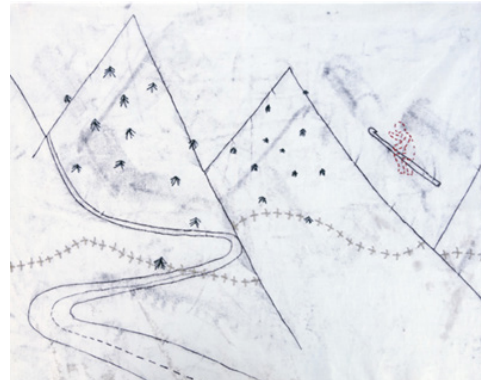
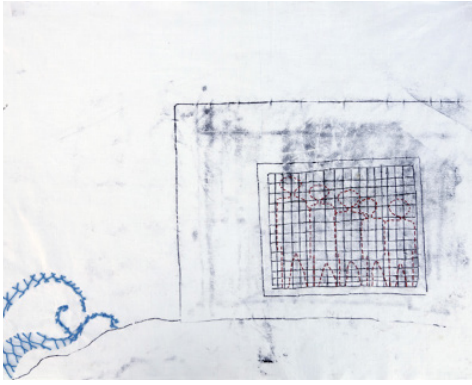
Once he is in Morocco, as all the others, Souleymane will try to cross the Mediterranean Sea two times (approximately 100 miles lie between Nador and the first European Spanish city of Almeria), although unsuccessfully. The first time, a broken compass had them sail aimlessly for hours until they were rescued at sea by the Red Cross. The wind led Souleymane and his companions back to Morocco where they were registered by the police; and punished with “*refoulement*” – a Moroccan punishment that consists in taking the migrants back into the desert with no money. After some months in the desert, he came back a second time to Nador. He tried again the sea. But the boat was broken. Nevertheless, he and the other sub-Saharan migrants were forced to enter a small zodiac full of holes, since the smugglers were armed and forced them to do it. At sea, they shipwrecked and sank. Souleymane fainted on top of a wreck and was brought back to Morocco. Thirty-five of his companions died in the wreckage. He will show the dangers and wreckages of the sea in one of his paintings.



Painting 10: The crossing of the Mediterranean Sea

Back in Morocco he managed to get into Tangiers, then to Ceuta, the Spanish city in Northern Africa closest to Europe (approximately 10 miles away). In Ceuta he waits for five months in a retention center (the Spanish “Centro de Estancia Temporal de Inmigrantes,” CETI – often criticized and denounced by international organizations of Human Rights) until he got a safe passage to enter legally continental Spain, called by them “La Grand Espagne” (Big Spain) – he was sent afterwards to Madrid. He remembers the Ceuta period as one of the worst, feeling absurd and lost in the walls of the prison (CETI), suffering from moral distress, fearing every moment that he would be repatriated. For, as he says, Ceuta itself is a prison, with its barbwire around the whole city to stop migrants from getting in.

In Madrid, he stayed in a small town called Ambite, where a local association (Dianova) helps migrants with paperwork and health issues. He is fascinated by the European landscape and infrastructures, since it is the first time since Mali, that he is able to contemplate nature with a cool mind (and from a safe place).



Spain. Painting 11: Retention center (Ceuta) Painting 12: The crossing of the Pyrenees (Aragon)

Finally, he took a bus to France, and after a short time in Paris, he arrived at his final destination, Lille. During his journey he had lost all of his belongings (including his travel notebook in which he was writing his story), except for one: his treasured needle. While he was waiting for regulation in Lille – living on the streets, in the Olieux Park with other migrants – he was desperate due to this excess of time and memories, so he tried to find a way to express all his pain and all his traumatic experiences on the road, as well as all his grieving for his dead companions: one way to alleviate the need to express himself was by talking and remembering. That is because he was and still is convinced that the more he talks and tells his story, the better he feels: he sees it like a kind of therapy.



Painting 11 (detail): Lille, Olieux park

That is when he met the plastic artist Capucine Desoomer, volunteering in the camps with an artistic workshop for the migrants. With her, Souleymane will conceive of the idea of telling his story through a set of fourteen paintings in which he will narrate his journey, with his own manner of expression, and craft (embroidery), and with his only possession (his needle).

The Paintings

As we have said in the former section, during the time he waits for regulation and housing in Lille, Souleymane Balde undertakes the creation of fourteen paintings describing his journey across Africa and Europe.

The fourteen paintings consist of nine paintings of Africa (5 in Central Africa: 1 of Guinea, 2 of Senegal, 2 of Mali; and 4 in Northern Africa: 2 of Algeria, 2 of Morocco), one of the sea, and 3 of Europe (Spain, France).

Through rough symbolism he would show a Central Africa full of wealth and natural beauty (the mountains and rivers of Guinea, the beautiful beaches of Senegal), but this will end at the entrance of the Malian desert. There, nature will be overtaken by violence and guns as the heat becomes unbearable. Paintings 6 to 9 (Morocco and Algeria) show a barren landscape full of camps, tents, and exploitation. As in Mali, natural landscapes are tainted by human work and human violence. Painting 10 shows the Mediterranean Sea, very concisely, but with a brutal fish symbolizing its perils. Paintings 11 and 12 are of Spain. Then France (Lille), and the collection finishes with painting 14: a mouth talking and throwing out a conclusion.

The style the artist uses is to be simple and plain, almost innocent or childlike. The technique: drawings and embroidery. No other materials than paint and thread. The landscapes, houses, and ghettos are portrayed in the simplest way, through pure symbolism as if they were asking to be reconstructed from the imagination of the spectator, or from the artist's explanatory tale – in his exhibitions Souleymane would often explain the paintings or would put descriptions under them, as if the paintings were unfinished or unbearable and needed an explanation.

The people represented in the paintings, which includes the artist himself, are simple outlined figures, colorless drawings, outlined with red thread: sometimes with a full outline, others with a dotted line. The characters are sewed in red, for the artist means *life* with this color. Despite continuity or discontinuity, what holds humanity together is the profusion of blood. On the other hand, dead people are absent in

most of the paintings.

In fact, episodes of explicit violence or death are absent from the fourteen paintings, despite the obvious presence of violence in the places depicted and in Souleyman's travels. The journey is reduced to the crossing of borders, the outlines of the migrants, waves, mountains, tents, natural phenomena, and lots of roads – as if the main theme was the path or way, and not violence.

We will now analyze the main symbols and meanings of the fourteen paintings, to understand the vision of the world and of this extreme journey that many undertake, which were made by this young artist, in an optimistic and subtle manner.

The Title

It is the firmest conviction of Souleymane Balde that there is but one humanity. That is why, one of his artistic guidelines is to “break the barriers” between the preconceived ideas that separate humankind. In physical terms: to break or overthrow the borders (or cross the borders, as he did).

Often, he tells this when he has to explain the title of his collection: *Chemin de croix*, in Latin *Via Crucis*, and translated into English *Stations of the Cross*, *Way of the Cross*, or *Way of Sorrows*. A catholic reference, while he is a Muslim. His intention is thereby to reconcile both creeds, and although it is certain that Capucine Desoomer helped him with this title and conception, the intention is to bring them together.¹

The choice of the title is very important. The *Via Crucis* refers to a series of fourteen images depicting Jesus Christ on the day of his crucifixion. These images of pain and sorrow, in which, as it is known, Christ the son of God is humiliated and killed, are exposed in many cities along long paths, as an example to pilgrims and penitents to contemplate them, reflect on them, and imitate them. They describe the different scenes of Christ's ritual death carrying the cross along a long path or way, that will become however the path of resurrection and of a better life.

Souleymane takes from Jesus's *Via Crucis* not only the number of stations (14), but also many other elements. To begin with, the *Way of the cross* (“*chemin*,” road, path, associated with words as “destination,” “destiny,” and “direction”), already foretells one of the main meanings of this series: the path, the walking, is the main subject. In fact, this

1 For further information on the *Via Crucis* in the Black and African American communities, see (Cressler).

path or road, full of crosses (borders, tortures), is the meaning of the journey; and not the violence or the brutality encountered. The recreation of the experience through artistic form is a way of reconciliation, and not of repeating the trauma. The artist tries to express the journey, tell the story, but he does not want to fall into any pathos that would interrupt his therapy: that is to move on; to walk through the new life or destination (a new destiny).

Second, another important topic is inspired by the *Via Crucis*: the presence of the cross – and we need to remember Souleymane's cross is an artistic symbol (non-religious) for the artist is Muslim. The cross is present in many of the paintings. For instance, all borders will be symbolized through lines made of small crosses. Besides, we draw attention on the proximity between the noun “cross” (*crux* in Latin) and the verb “to cross” (formed from the Latin “*crux*,” plus a suffix), since the main subject of the collection is the crossing of borders. This means in its catholic or original meaning of the *Via Crucis*, the necessary pain (*a* cross) we need to suffer in order to walk towards a new life or resurrection.

Third, the reference to the *Via Crucis* is important to understand the intention and function of these paintings: *catharsis*, remembrance. As well as the penitents that contemplate the fourteen stations of the Cross of Jesus Christ for understanding and reflecting on pain and salvation, Souleymane's paintings want to reach the spectator, make them closer to the drama of the migrations.

Finally, similarly to the *Via Crucis*, in Souleymane's series *Chemin de croix*, there is a strong symbolism. Everything has a meaning beyond what is shown. The paintings are images in a religious or metaphysical way, references, symbols, representations, and in no way about real drama (this has to be lived or experienced, or evoked, by the penitent/spectator).

Nature

According to the definition of image as symbol that we explained in the former chapter, natural phenomena appear in Souleymane's work in the most abstract and symbolic way. Embroidered waves, trees and mountains concentrate the different landscapes the artist encountered.

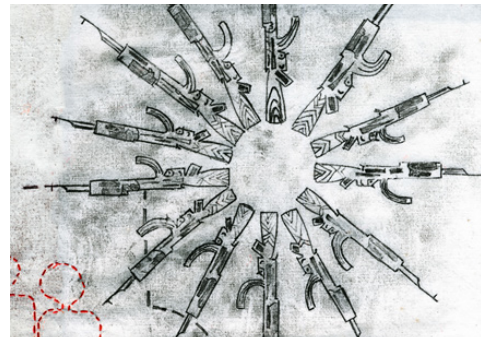
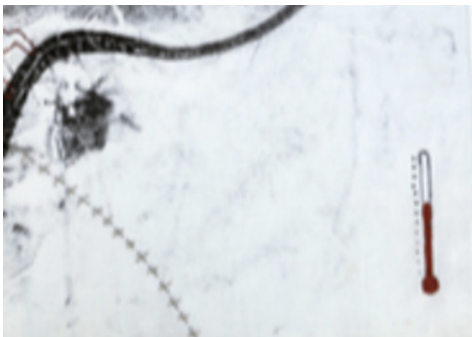
The landscape suffers constant alteration from human activity. In the first paintings, of Western Africa, we see (or imagine) an exuberant nature. The first painting describes a Guinean landscape, full of natural wealth. The mountains and the river represent a pregnant

woman, holding all the wealth inside of her. By a tree full of fruits, there stands the artist, alone, contemplating his country. The dotted water of the river means life, unlike the seawater depicted later on as something threatening. In this painting, we see the meaning expressed in simplicity and symbolism, which would be characteristic of the whole series. Likewise, in Painting 3, of Sali Beach in M'Bour (Senegal), where the artist is sewing by the beach, everything is calm and full (the sea is full of fish).



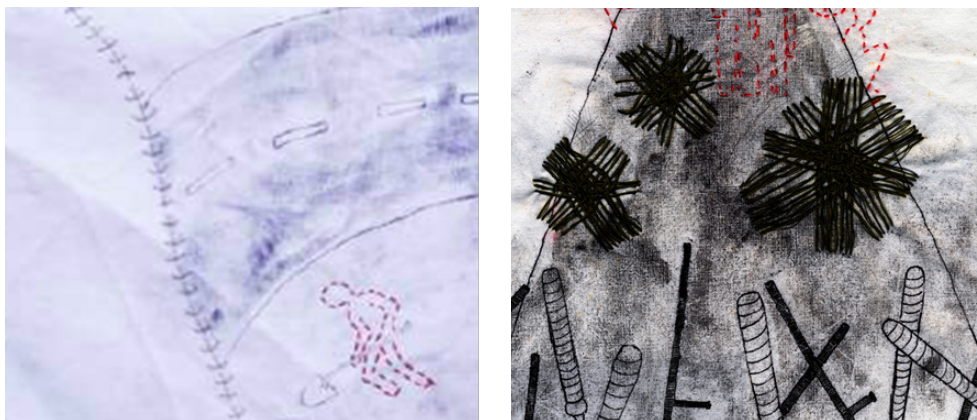
Paintings 1 and 3 (Guinea-Conakry and Sali beach in Senegal)

However, this landscape changes in Mali, where nature becomes tainted by the human hand because of war. In Painting 5, of the desert of Kidal, the desert would be described in rough wicker (the only material used apart from thread), and on the right of the painting there would be a brutal sun: the "*soleil des kalachs*" (Kalashnikov sun) – a painting of a sun whose rays are guns. It seems as the artist would be unable (or unwilling) to draw any of the violent people encountered, but would abstract it, detach it in symbolizing this violence as a natural phenomenon (the sun) that would mean heat, drought, thirst, and war. Some of these Kalashnikovs are pointing at the migrants, one at a child.



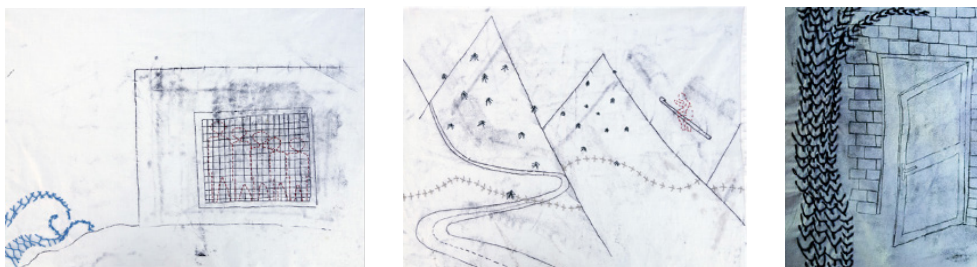
Mali: Details of paintings 4 and 5 (a thermometer and the kalash sun)

In Algeria and Morocco as well, nature will be full of human abuse, in a symbolic way: asphalt in the Algerian desert, built by migrants working as slaves, nightsticks planted in the Moroccan forests where migrants hide.



Details of paintings 9 (Bork Moktar in Algeria; Gourougo forest in Nador, Morocco)

In Europe, we find both violence and freedom recovered, imprisonment and hope. While the depiction of Ceuta (the Spanish city on the African coast) shows a sea neglected and forgotten, seen through the prison; in Madrid the artist is able to contemplate nature again and move about it as a safe person. In France, the roughness of the winter on the streets is shown through a leafless tree, however, hope is found in an imaginary door showing the next step.



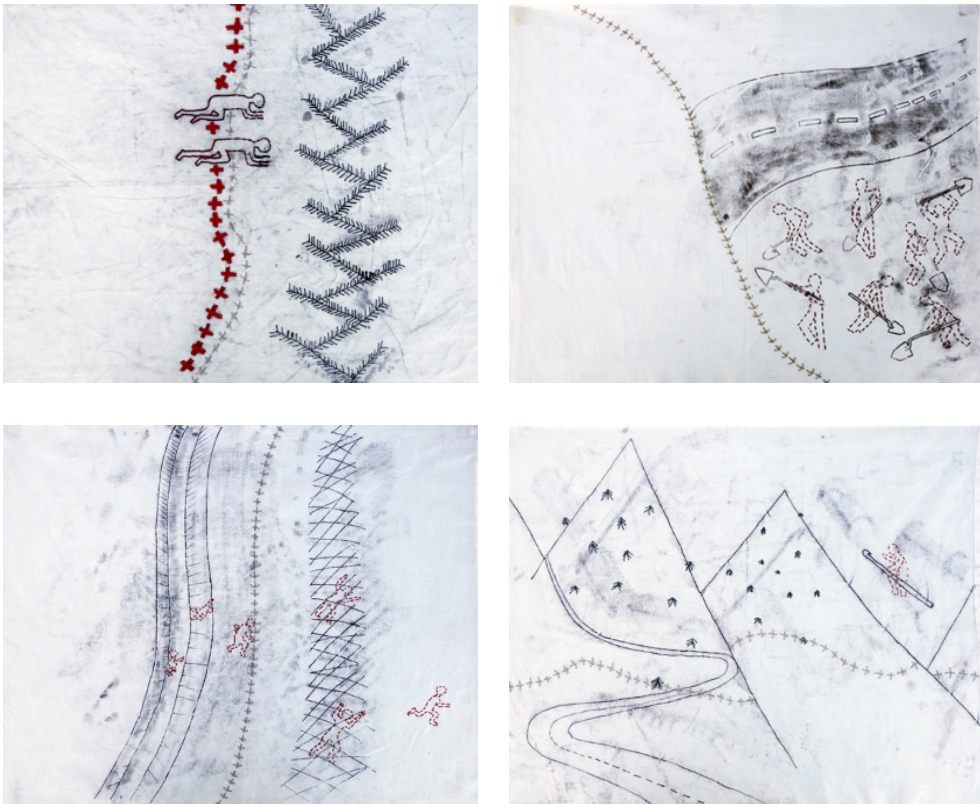
Details of paintings 11, 12 and 13 (prison in Ceuta with the Mediterranean Sea; Pyrenees mountains in Spain and France and the Oileux park in Lille, France).

Borders and Roads

Another important image or symbol in the collection are the borders between countries, present in six of the paintings. The different stations of the cross (or crossing of the barrier), as in Christ's story, means new torture, but also a new step towards a "new life."

All of the borders depicted by Souleymane Balde are marked with a simple line composed of small crosses. Although many journalists and the artist himself have seen in this representation barbwire or a grid (present on the real borders of Morocco, Algeria, and Spain), in our opinion this representation is one more allusion to the title, and a reference to Christ. A border is a limit as well as an extreme danger, but it is also a crossing and a breakthrough, a step towards the destiny (destination) chosen by the migrant/pilgrim.

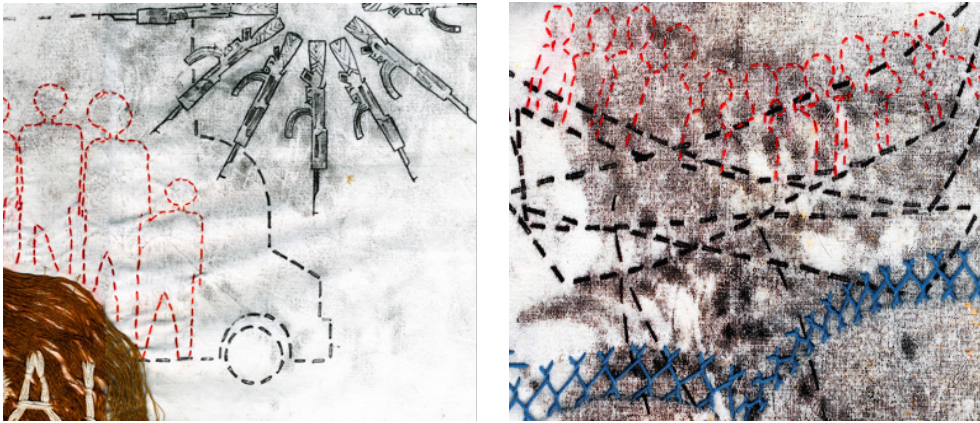
Some of the roughest borders are Algeria-Morocco (Painting 8) and Senegal-Guinea during the Ebola crisis (Painting 2). The border between Algeria and Mali (Painting 6) is also quite interesting, while Mali (most specifically the Kidal) is barren and empty, while in Algeria there begins the construction in which migrants are enslaved. (We added the border between Spain and France, since it has the same “border of Crosses,” while it is not in the least a barbwired or closed border).



Borders of the paintings 2, 6, 8 and 12
(Guinea-Senegal; Mali-Algeria; Algeria-Morocco; and Spain-France)

In each of these passages between countries, there begins a road, a new direction, or a new *station*. The absence of a road only occurs at

the two stations that Souleymane believes to be the roughest: the desert (Painting 5) and the sea (Painting 10). In both, travelers lose their path. In the hostility of the desert, the meaning of the journey is doubted because the desert is the point where there is no coming back (the absence of roads means the absence of the possibility to return, the impossibility of getting back through the same *path*), so it is the *anagnorisis* of the hardness of the decision of leaving. At sea, as well, constant shipwrecks and losses make everyone lose their direction. In these two paintings there is a contradiction: although migrants are moving (in a truck and in a boat), their destiny-destination exceeds them, is controlled by others.



Details of Paintings 5 and 10 (the desert in Kidal and the Mediterranean Sea)

Violence and Death

Despite the brutality depicted in each of these images and symbols, actual explicit violence is absent. In fact, we see no death, no killing, and no armed or violent people. All the brutality is concentrated in the symbols (the Kalashnikov sun; the nightsticks forests; the empty desert), all the violent people or murderers are erased – unlike in Christ's *Via Crucis*.

It seems, as we have earlier evoked, that the intention of this creation is not the recreation of the trauma, but its purgation. Therefore, the most violent scenes are foreseen but not told. The artist himself, when he explains his journey in exhibitions or in conversation, rarely tells any details. He is very private about the personal details and respectful towards his lost friends. However, this also entails an intention of generalizing, representing all the journeys. And, at some point, to transfigure them. We may also add, that this means that the spectator has to recreate it themselves.

For instance, in the painting of the desert of Kidal (Painting 5), the artist transforms the experience when he erases its specific horror. When he gets to Gao, Souleymane faces the entrance to the desert, the entrance to war with rebel barricades, brutality, heat, and corpses. However, Souleymane Balde chooses to paint this illegal humanity with the subtlety of the dotted technique: what was a convoy packed with dying immigrants, fearful of death and torture, becomes a truck with standing people, expressionless, helpless, and trapped. To describe the desert, he sews a golden circle with the name KIDAL on it. The extreme violence seen during this three-day trip in the desert is concentrated only in the symbols, as if the artist did not want to include the people at war in the field of humanity, or in his art.



Kidal (detail of Painting 5)

However, the absence of explicit horror, is also able to generate in the spectator a great psychological horror of the untold, the unknown.

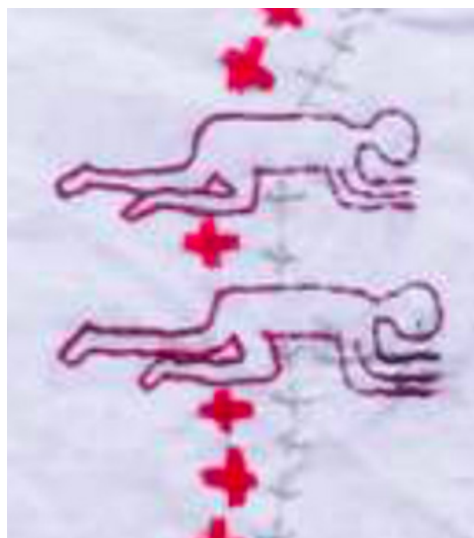
The Depiction of Humanity

In the paintings, all people (including the artist) appear without precision, all are represented equally, as outline figures standing, sitting, running, climbing, hiding, crawling, or crossing borders. The brutal people of the tale are absent,² only the migrants outlined in red appear, they have no color, or nationality, seeming to say that all nationalities lay confused on this brutal and illegal journey.

2 Only their objects are present (guns, nightsticks), as we have said.

Some are fully outlined, others with a dotted line, this technique represents their invisibility when they are illegal.

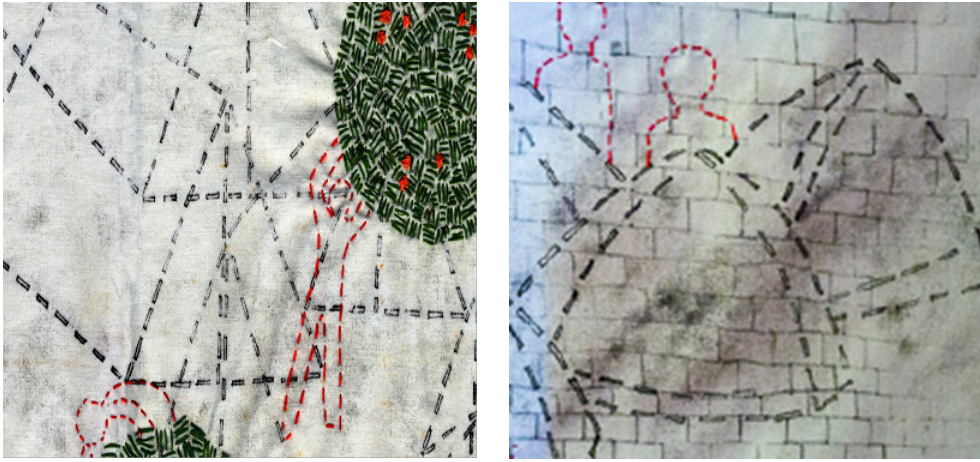
The first character to appear is the artist himself, in the first painting and in his own country, Guinea. His heart and his body are fully sewed with a continuous line, for the last time. It means he is free, legal, that he exists. He holds a heart, human dignity. In the next painting, the Senegalese border, this human condition will be lost through the passage: from then on, these people would be illegal, and as Souleymane understands it, invisible (in hiding).



Details of Paintings 1 and 2
(the Guinée-Conakry and Senegalese border, where people lose their contour)

During the trips, the group of migrants will always have a dotted line, until the end. Besides, this condition makes them always needing to run, hide, or crawl. In each painting we see some people fighting for the next step (none are standing).³ They have lost their condition and legal claims. Often too packed (as on a bus or boat), their houses and objects are discontinuous too. Especially the tents in which they hide in Algeria (Paintings 6 and 7), or in France (8) – a country where there is a global crisis of people living on the streets, sometimes even along the highways.

3 For example, on the border between Algeria and Morocco (Painting 8), we see these dotted-line figures climbing a trench, crossing a border, climbing and being trapped in the wire, one (possibly the artist) at last running towards the land, towards de "lights," as Souleymane explains it (he says that on this border there is no time to wait for the others). All seem trapped and afraid, we see the same dotted lines and faceless figures.



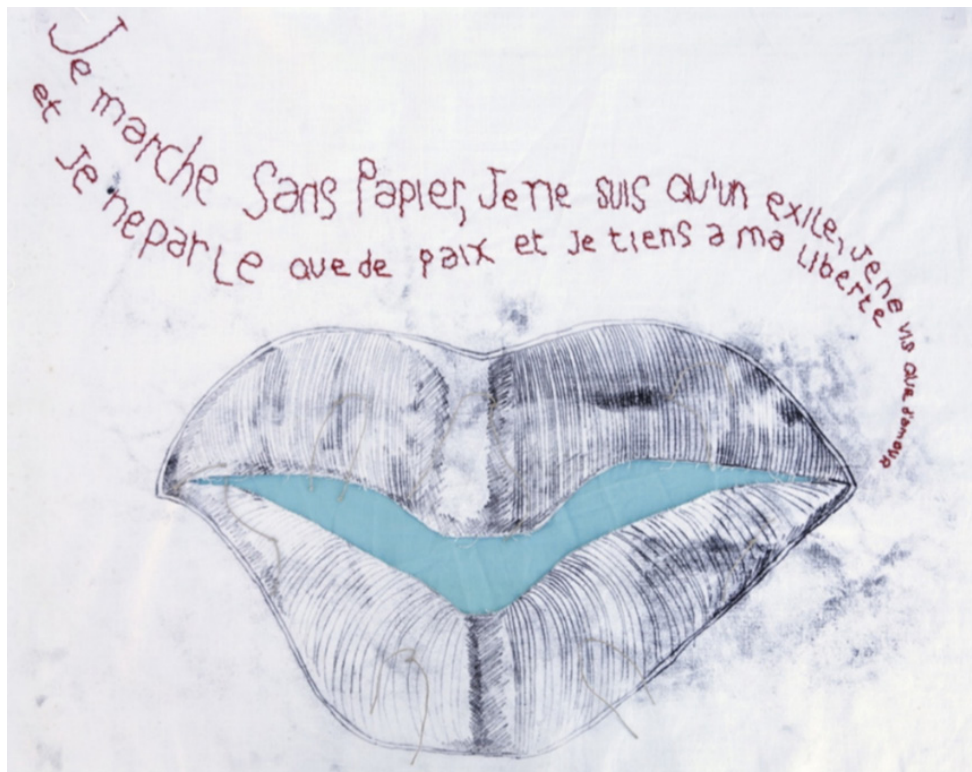
Details of Paintings 7 (Maghnia, Algeria) and 11 (Parc des Olieux, Lille)

These images and symbols seem to imply that dignity has been lost during the journey, during the 13 first stations of the cross, as it happened to Jesus. However, the last painting reconciles all this pain through a conclusion of peace.

Painting 14: Closure

All the lost humanity, the absence of an outline, the excess of human violence and exploitation, seem in fact to converge in the streets of Europe. In the case of Souleymane, in France, where he is again invisible, living in an invisible and illegal tent and suffering from a cold and bleak winter. Not far away from Lille, where Souleymane waited for regulation, there stood the Calais Jungle (*Jungle de Calais*), one of the biggest refugee and migrant camp in Europe, dismantled in October 2016 because of local pressure. When they demolished it and evicted their inhabitants, Iranian refugees sewed their mouths shut as a sign of protest and despair.

Souleymane pays tribute to these refugees in the last painting. There, a mouth has been sewn shut to imitate this sign of protest, and to denounce the loss of dignity and freedom during the journey, and particularly in Europe. However, in the painting, this mouth has at last been released and unsewn, and it speaks the words above it: “Je marche sans papier, je ne suis qu’un exilé, je ne vis que d’amour et je ne parle que de paix et je tiens à ma liberté” (“I walk undocumented, I am only an exile, I live only of love and I speak only of peace and I believe in my freedom”).



14: La bouche décousue (the detached mouth)

This last painting gives a message of peace, in which freedom, love, and peace (*liberté, amour, paix*) seem like the perfect combination to stop all war, brutality, hostility, and excess barriers, borders, jails, camps. Souleymane recognized that this message is simply a hope, an expectation for the future, almost a piece of advice.

But what seems important to us is that, in this open mouth, all lost dignity, silence and hiding is overthrown. Artistic experience and expression are the ultimate claim for human dignity and respect. The conclusion is that wherever there is a voice that can express the violence suffered and the need for reconciliation and moving on, humanity will be recovered.

Conclusion

To sum up, the fourteen paintings in Souleymane Balde's collection are a recreation of his perilous travel across Africa and Europe, conceived as a way to soothe the artist from the pain and impatience of arriving at a final destination. His personal intention was to cure himself through the expression and sharing of his pains and memories, to find repair. In this he joins the famous Italian writer and WWII Resistant

Cesare Pavese, who wrote that art and literature “[are] a defense against the attacks of life” (34).

However, the technique he chose exceeds mere recreation or protest, and offers us a personal interpretation of the meanings of the journey. Through a set of symbols (beginning with the main one expressed in the title: *The Stations of the Cross* or the *Via Crucis* of Jesus Christ), he depicts horrors and steps towards his new destiny-destination in Europe. He conveys thus a message of hope and movement that leaves behind any actual or explicit pain, any realistic form. He would rather use personal symbolism in which people are outlined figures moving and fighting for freedom, nature is wealthy or threatening according to the humans inhabiting it, and borders, crosses and roads are signs of the next step or the future. Thus, he manages to create a universe of symbolic and religious meaning where migrants will go on in invisibility until they reach the step in which their mouths and words will be released, breaking their former invisibility and political injustice. In his choice not to represent all the horrors, there is also a wish of reconciliation. He does not want to condemn or to create new barriers; his only hope, expressed in the last painting, is a hope of freedom, of overthrowing these barriers and these borders. In this, as we have said, he mingles his natural religion, Islam, with a Catholic faith focused on peace and forgiveness, and also with a religion encountered on the road: Rastafarianism.

Even the choice of the technique speaks of reconciliation and simple beauty. No baroque or excess of detail to show the journey: just simple colors and simple contours.

Besides, there is in the young artist a need or an obligation of testimony that defines his type of art: bearing witness to the dangers and reasons of his journey, speaking for his lost friends and other suffering people (as were the Iranian refugees). As an artist, he accepts this position as a spokesperson incapable of forgetting his and his partners’ pain.

This is at the origin of Souleymane Balde’s ongoing projects: a novel and a collection of crochet against racism (as part of the Black Lives Matter movement).

The novel deals again with the journey across Africa, but in a different and more detailed (realistic) way. In a chapter of this unfinished novel, he talks of art and writing as a necessity for a traumatized person that cannot and will not forget the suffering. The chapter finishes with this paragraph:

This moment, I want to forget, turn the page or pull it out. But I can still see the smiling, sad and anguished faces of the companions of my journey. I repeat that I do not want to talk, in a low voice, as to myself.

In my mind, I say that maybe one day I will write this story. This story that is mine but the same of millions of other people, that we meet sometimes but that are still invisible.

In this new artistic form, Balde changes the intention he had in his paintings. The complexity of literature and writing will be used to transform or explore the psychological side of the journey. However, we will need to wait a bit to read this novel, for the author lost his travel book on the journey and is still working on its reconstruction. It will be with no doubt a great work.

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