



JULIEN SINZOGAN  
SPIRIT WORLDS



Photograph : Jonathan Greet

# JULIEN SINZOGAN

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# SPIRIT WORLDS

The artist, Julien Sinzogan, was born and grew up in Benin, today a small west-African country situated between the larger states of Nigeria and Ghana. Formerly known as Dahomey (*Danhomè*) this region was governed by the warlike Fon tribe, whose thirteen, hereditary kings controlled, between 1600 and 1900, a broad territory ranging from North of their inland capital of Abomey right down to the Atlantic coast. Revealingly, this stretch of coastline, marked on western maps as the 'Slave Coast', was a primary destination for European trading vessels. Having delivered their consignments to other ports, the unladen ships were tasked to take aboard cargoes of African men, women and children who would then be sold abroad as slaves. These human cargoes were often the fall-out from inter-tribal conflicts that saw bellicose peoples, such as the Yoruba, Fon, Ashante, Mbangala, etc. round up sufficient captives every year to sell on to the indiscriminating white traders in exchange for guns, alcohol and other sought-after western products. Dahomey's coastal towns of Ouidah (Whydah), Cotonou and Porto Novo became major trading centres during the complex and turbulent 400-year long history of the transatlantic slave trade, which dates from the early 1500s – when Portuguese vessels first appeared in the Bay of Guinea – to the late 1900s when the terrible trade was

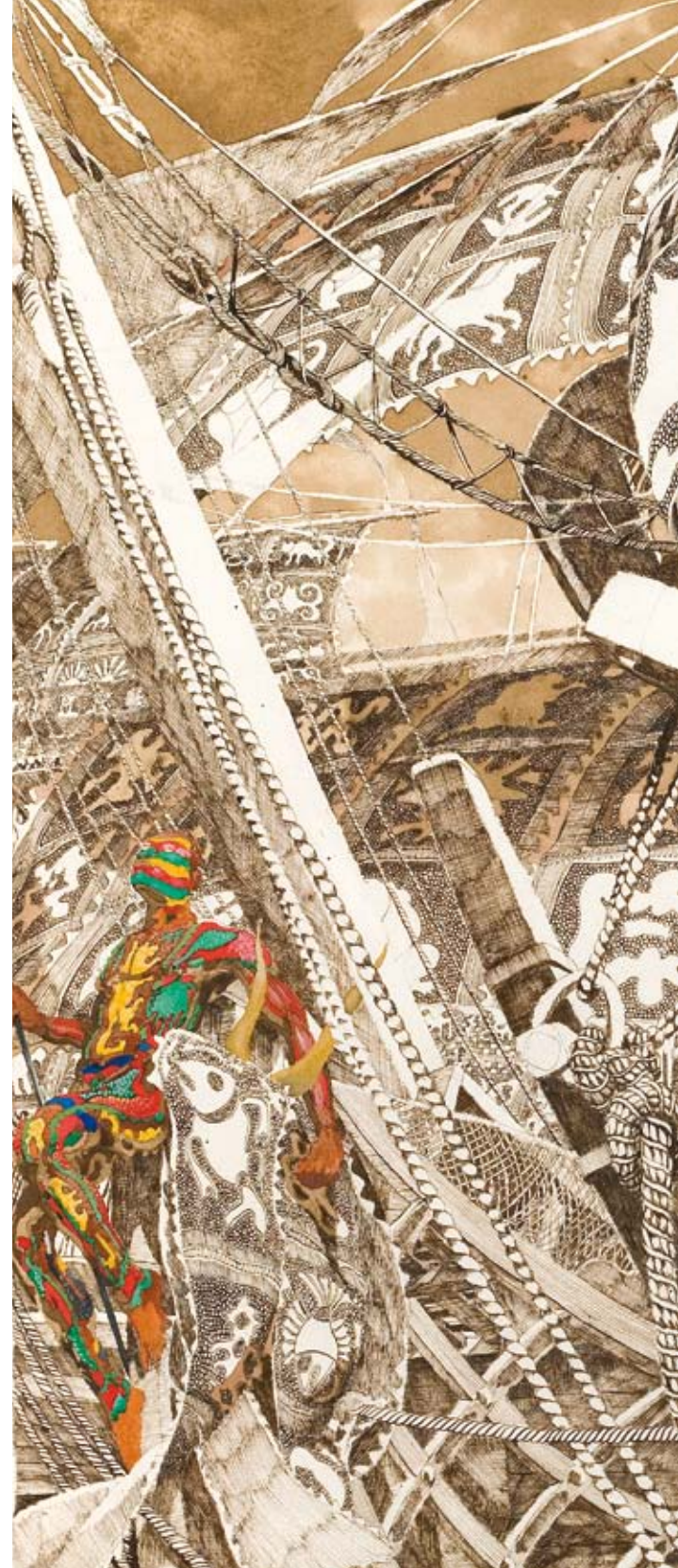
finally halted. It is estimated that between 8 and 12 million Africans were captured around the continent before being forcibly transported across the Atlantic under indescribably brutal conditions. Those 'fortunate' enough to survive the dreadful perils of the 'middle passage' were then sold into slavery in the Americas and Caribbean where, under appalling conditions of servitude, they laboured to fulfil the insatiable demands for cotton, coffee, sugar and cocoa that gripped Europe between the 17th and 19th Centuries. The 'free labour' of these captured African slaves helped fill, to overflowing, the European venture capitalists' coffers – leaving a shameful blot on the escutcheons of those European families whose fortunes were founded on the inhumanities of this cruelly asymmetric trade. The ruthless and co-ordinated efficiency of the perpetrators still ranks the African diaspora as the largest ever movement of displaced peoples in history.

Britain recently commemorated, in 2007, the bicentenary of the Parliamentary abolition of the slave trade to somewhat muted response, since not only did slaving continue, almost unabated, for several decades beyond 1807, but it also became apparent how little Britons understood the history of those times and the manner in which national progress and prosperity were directly related to the triangular trade between Europe, Africa and the Americas. Conversely, continuing African impoverishment today can equally be seen as in direct proportion to the centuries-long leaching away of significant swathes of her youngest, most

energetic inhabitants to killing fields on foreign soils. Sinzogan adds the rider that it is likewise possible to grow up today in Benin, and other parts of Africa, understanding little or nothing about African complicity in the atrocities of the slave-trading era, remembering that he himself knew little of the historical realities until invited to participate in the Ouidah '92 Festival. Celebrated in 1993, this First International Festival of the Arts and Cultures of Voudun was a collaboration between UNESCO and the Beninese government that brought together local west-African artists and artists from the African diaspora whose ancestors had been sold into slavery. Sinzogan continues 'It came as a complete eye-opener! to meet these incredible artists - like the Cuban Manuel Mendive, and Edouard Duval Carrié from Haiti. We spent some intense times with each other, talking, working, singing, drumming and dancing together whilst excitedly exploring our common yet separate inheritances. When I heard their stories I was shocked! I had no idea at all about the things they'd lived through, or the places they came from – and yet we all shared a set of living traditions. They had come to Benin, to my home, to celebrate the place from which their ancestors had been taken, and to encounter it for the very first time. It was an incredibly moving experience, and each one of us wanted to render homage to those shared ancestors' stories and to recover some of the lost details of that incredible history of departure and return'. Since 1993, Sinzogan has devoted his work to recognising, remembering and re-presenting the sights, scenes and shared histories of those almost forgotten times, and attempting to combat the dangers of mutual misunderstanding.

To appreciate Sinzogan's work requires a passing familiarity with ideas found amongst west-African peoples such as the Yoruba, Nago, Ewe and Fon, ideas generally stemming from the *Voudun* religion that is common to many indigenous groups in the region. Wole Soyinka, the well-known Nigerian Nobel Laureate, talks about 'the cyclical reality' of the 'Yoruba world-view' which

Plate 2.





Laboza

sees each human being arriving from the world of the Unborn, and transiting this human world before, at death, exchanging this earthly existence for a 'life-beyond' (*Èhìn-Ìwà*) and returning to the spirit world again. In this after-world spirits who have led meritorious lives become an *Egun* or 'ancestor' figure and are remembered and venerated by their earthly descendants. A spirit who has not led a good life, however, is left floating above the haunts of men in a disembodied state, lost in an indeterminate part of the 'abyss of transition' and tormented by the lack of any hope of release. Our material world and the spirit-world of heaven (*Òrun*) co-exist and rub shoulders with each other, although the spirits remain invisible to us. Periodically, however, during the *Egungun* masquerades, the ancestor spirits manifest in the human world where they interact with those descendants who remember them. These elaborate masquerades, where members of the secret societies incarnate *Egungun* spirits, form a principal part of the annual cycle of ceremonies. Here the important lineage ancestors 'return', wearing richly embroidered costumes and masks to cloak their identities, (Plate 4.) performing dynamic, whirling dances (Plate 5. and Plate 19.) as they ritually renew the compacts governing the relations between the spirits and their living descendants.

*Spirit Worlds* (Plate 12. and Plate 13.) indicates some of the complexities of this world-view, for the right-hand tableau, *Those of Ifè*, depicts the highest deities in the Yoruba pantheon, inhabiting *Òrun*, in the skies above. The supreme

god, Almighty *Olorun*, the Owner of the Sky, is shown together with the original creator goddess *Olokun*. Curving around them both is the Fon deity, *Dan Aidohuedho*, the 'rainbow serpent' and messenger of the gods. Below them can be seen many other *orishas*, or gods, of the voodoo pantheon: *Shango*, the thunder god, with his double axe; *Sakpata*, the ruler of the Earth, whose weapon is smallpox, and whose body is pitted with the marks of that disease; the female deity *Gbaadu*, goddess of knowledge, carrying a calabash on her head, next to her husband, *Orunmila*, the spirit of wisdom and patron of the *Ifa* system of divination, and *Yemadja*, ('Mother whose children are as plentiful as fish') shown with her feet in the water, who links the heavenly world with the watery deeps. Finally, the colourful band of spirits closest to the water's edge represents the *Egungun*, easily identified by their distinctive costumes, former denizens of earth who now live splendidly with the deities in *Òrun*. The left-hand tableau, *Those on High*, however, describes those spirits unworthy of returning whence they originally came. These spirits exist floating near to the heavens but unable to sail high enough ever to return there. They inhabit a separate reality from where they can only look down upon the earth, but can never interact with it – remaining unsatisfied, invisible to and ignored by those now left below. Sinzogan's beautiful *trompe-l'oeil* device renders fleetingly visible these spirits' emblazoned bodies as a flock of living birds soars amongst the gliding forms, outlining, here, an arm, there, a camouflaged torso, and beyond, a floating leg (see also Plate 11.).

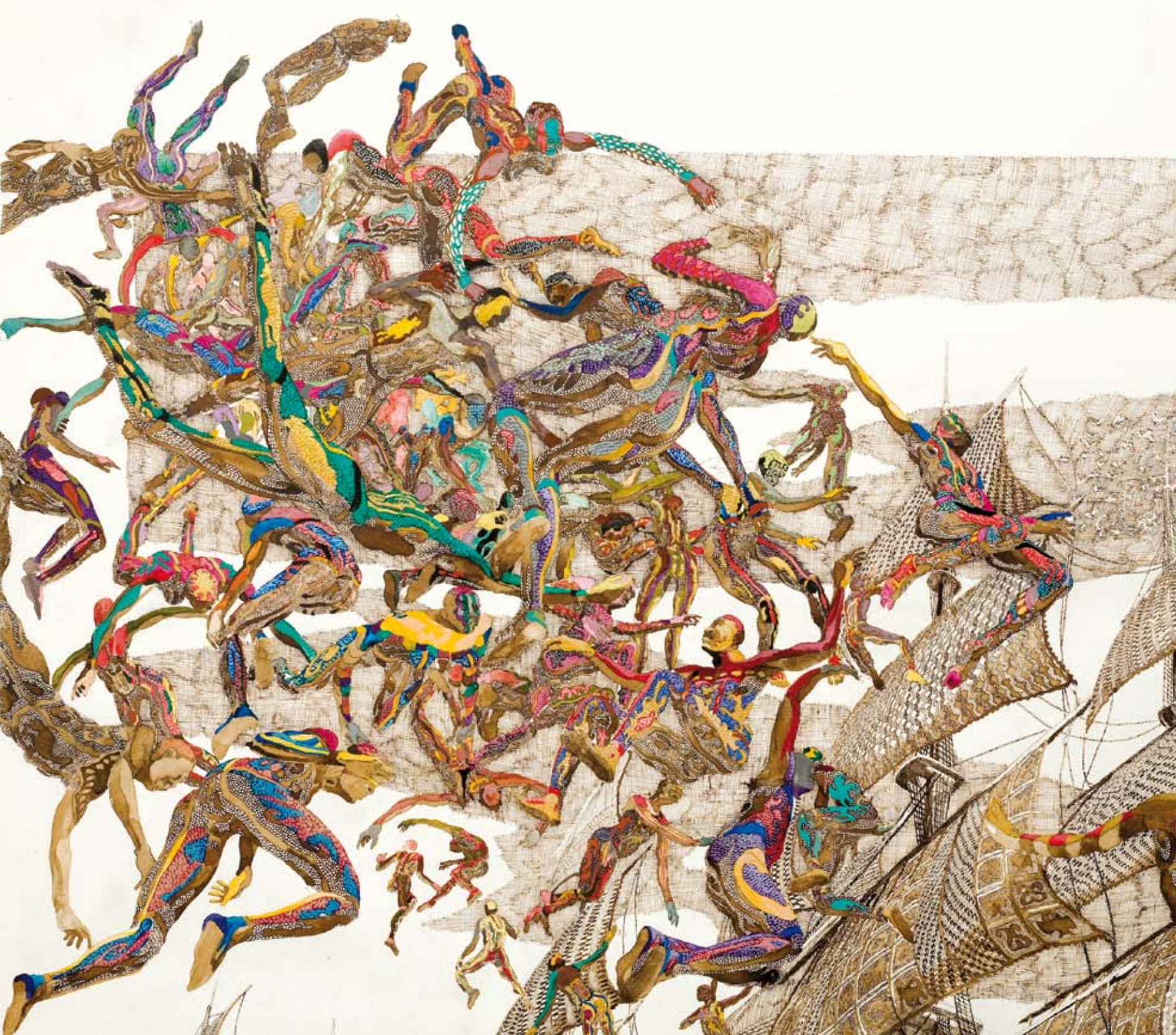




Yet it is with the visionary works of naval architecture, the phantom caravelles and frigates in coloured pen and ink that Sinzogan's name is most intimately connected. In an inspired act of historical re-imagination he has re-appropriated the savage histories of the 'Guineamen' slave-ships and redrawn them using the same cyclical laws of metaphysical transformation that Soyinka describes. The monochromatic phantom brigs have been re-possessed by the liberated captives, and the long-dead slaves, now clothed in the solemn pomp of *Egungun* costumes crowd the decks as the ships retrace their agonising route, now Eastwards, back through the abyssal passage that leads to the shores from which they were so brutally torn. Colours first appear in the figureheads, African forms displacing the bare-breasted, apotropaic carvings of western slave-ships, transfigured into local orishas, known deities of the voodoo pantheon. These guiding spirits – psychopomps – often holding the *assen* symbols that represent portable altars dedicated to the returning ancestors, call phantom winds to swell the square-rigged sails with colour. First the top-gallants at the highest points of the masts and eventually the entire press of canvas becoming filled with the *Egungun* symbols that represent the houses of each one of the spirit revenants. As the ships approach the West African coastline the whole canopy of sail is resplendent with bright glyphs, and the spirits – bedecked in the same livery - throng the decks to catch a first sight of the longed-for shores of home. The penultimate scene in Sinzogan's startling treatment of the transfigured spirits' return – sees them disembarking into long-boats to be carried back to the sandy beaches from where they were rowed into exile. Their statuesque and muscled descendants, in scenes reminiscent of Doré, restrain with batons their eagerness to re-enter the world they'd lost, since their slightest touch would harm the living. The final scene in Sinzogan's nautical series always presents the abandoned hulks of the phantom barques ship-wrecked on the African shore and reduced to monochromatic hulks devoid of all vital and spiritual energies.







This constant theme returns in so many of Sinzogan's works – long lines of captives transferred aboard fleets of foreign ships (Plate 14.) – seized by waspish creatures using technologies as incomprehensible to them as any found in more modern nightmares of alien space invaders. The large work commissioned by the Victoria and Albert Museum, in 2007, (Plate 15.) revisits the actual hemorrhage and the imagined return of many generations of slaves – forced to pass through the historical 'Gates of No Return' such as the one on the beach at Ouidah. But the title of Sinzogan's work still offers hope of reconciliation. An imaginative switch reverses the process to posit a possible 'Gate of Return'. Here, even as the hapless slaves gather to be shipped aboard the prison-hulks, the ancestor figures massing on the other side - both files separated by symbolic batons to ensure these co-existing worlds never actually meet, incurring catastrophes for both - seem to exert a pressure that must surely burst through into this world to change things for the better. The 'black sun'

sailing across the topmost panel represents *Yeku-meji*, the second grand sign of the *Ifa* system, a trademark signature of Sinzogan's when dealing with these complex spirit worlds, which signifies the necessary remembrance of the dead by all of those still alive.

If we forget the ancestors of those times, we are all trapped at that Gate of No Return, and forced to repeat the atrocities from which we can have learned nothing at all. If, however, the spectators are able to participate in a communal act of imagination and realise an opened and welcoming 'Gate of Return', then the hope is offered that we can close the historical cycles of exploitation and violence – of man exploiting man – and recognise the truth of our common humanity. This would complete the cycle and enable us to move forward together into a future which would ensure that such atrocities could never, ever happen again.

**GERARD HOUGHTON, 2010**





Plate 8.





Plate 10.



Plate 11.



Plate 12.

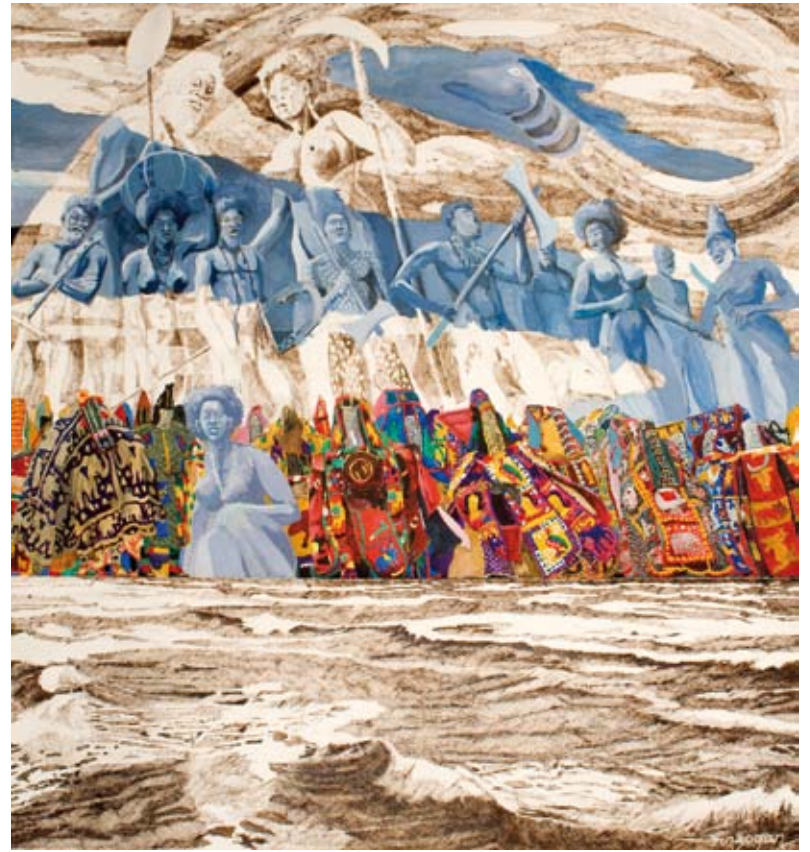


Plate 13.









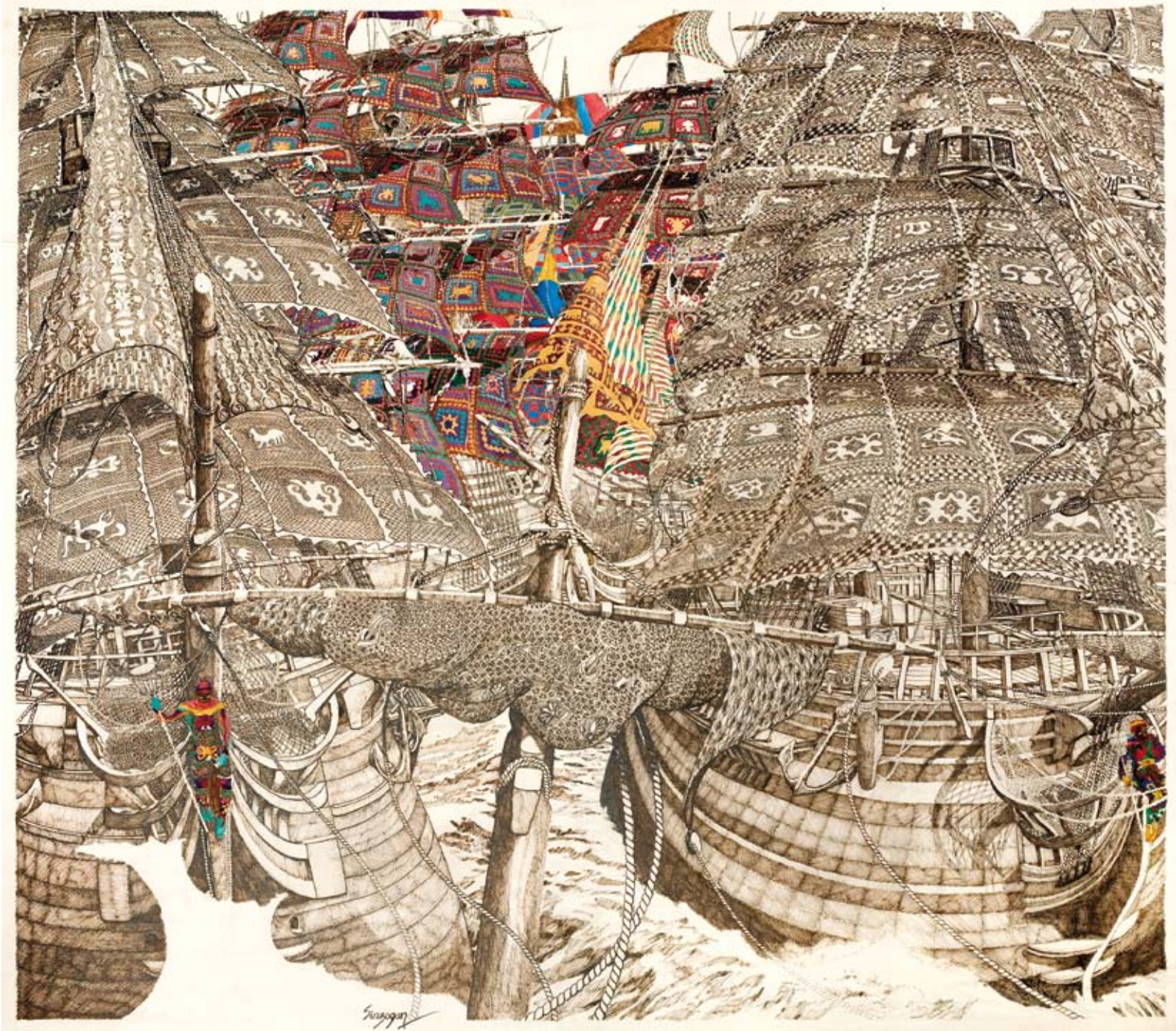


Plate 16.

Opposite page: Plate 17.





Plate 18.



Plate 19.

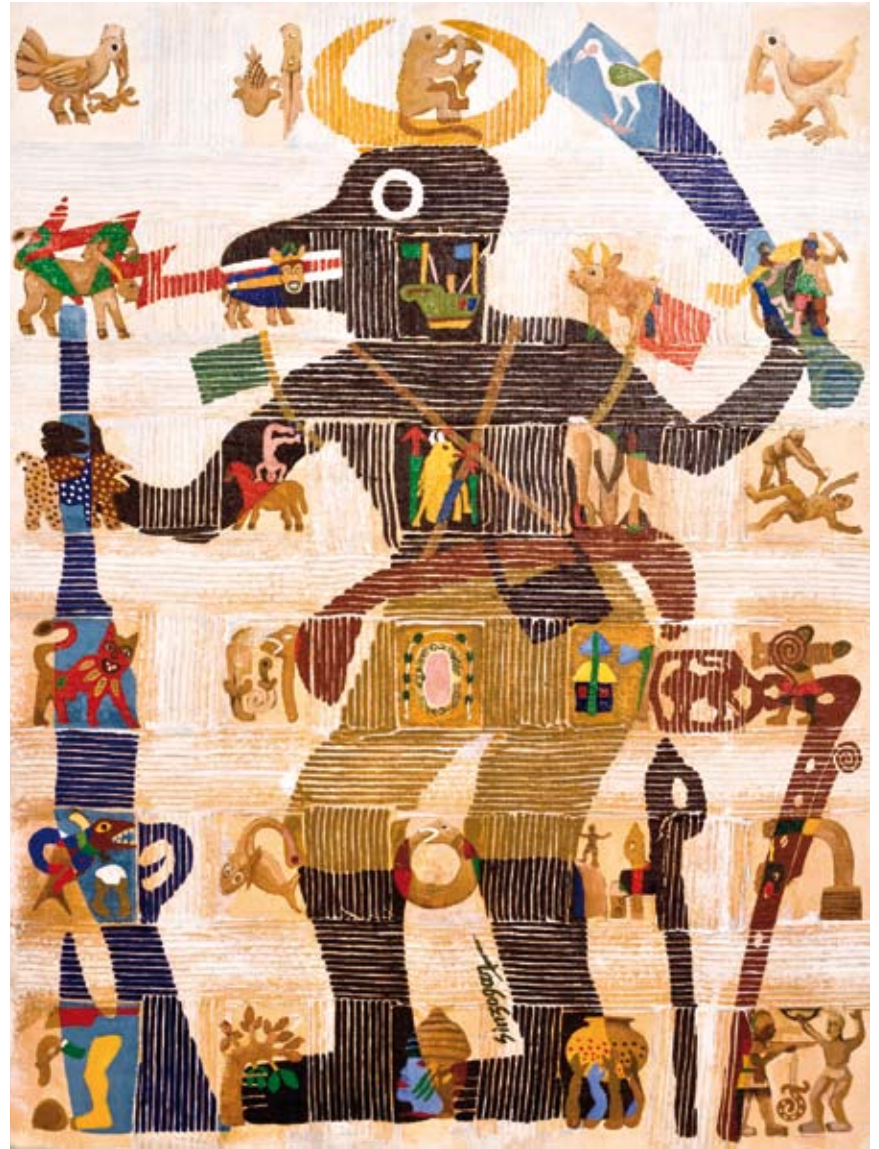


Plate 20.

# JULIEN SINZOGAN

Born 27th of January, 1957, in Porto-Novo.  
Republic of Benin. Lives and works in Paris.

## EDUCATION

- 1978 - 1979** Preparatory Faculty, Art School Tashkent, Uzbekistan.
- 1979 - 1982** B.T.S. de l'Ecole Spéciale des Travaux Publics, Paris, France.
- 1983 - 1987** Head of Images Section, Laboratoire International de Calcul et d'Informatique Appliquée (L.I.C.I.A.), Paris, France.

## EXHIBITIONS

- 2010** *Spirit Worlds*, October Gallery, London, UK (solo).  
*L'Art Actuel d'Afrique*, Collégiale Saint-André, Chartres, France.  
*Jo'burg Art Fair*, October Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2009** *Chemins d'esclaves*, Museum of Angoulême, Angoulême, France (solo).  
*Jo'burg Art Fair*, October Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.
- 2008** *Journées ébène, Voyages: la porte du retour*, Musée de la peinture de Grenoble, Grenoble, France (solo).  
*Jo'burg Art Fair*, October Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa.  
*Angaza Africa, African Art Now*, October Gallery, London, UK.  
*Spring Show*, October Gallery, London, UK.

- 2007** *Uncomfortable Truths: the shadow of slave trading on contemporary art and design*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
*Voyages: Crossing the Lake of Fire*, October Gallery, London, UK.
- 2006** *17th Salon International*, Château de Beaugard, Caen, France.
- 2005** *Aux Grain d'Argent*, Angoulême, France.  
Agence Française pour le Développement (AFD), Paris, France.
- 2004** *Artists from Around the World*, October Gallery, London, UK.
- 2003** *Transvanguard: Zeitgenössische Kunst aus der Welt (Contemporary Art from Around the Planet)*, Kulturbrauerei, Pferdestall Gallery, Berlin, Germany.  
French National Assembly, Paris, France.  
Modub'Art Gallery, Paris, France (solo).
- 2002** The Royal Museum and Art Gallery, Canterbury, UK.  
Permanent exhibition, Atelier de l'Yvette, Epinay sur Orge, France.  
*A Thousand Ways of Being: Memory and Presence in the Arts of Diasporas*, October Gallery, London, UK.
- 2001** *Journées Béninoises*, Dourdan, France  
*The Power of the Word Exhibition*, Archive Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, UK.
- 2000** *Rendering Visible*, October Gallery, London, UK.



- 1999** Maison de l'Île, Auvers sur Oise, France.  
*D'Afrique et de Cuba*, André Malraux  
 Cultural Centre, Le Bourget, France.  
*Couleurs Vodun*, Lille Town Hall,  
 Lille, France.
- 1997-1999** Permanent exhibition, Centre Français du  
 Cadre, Paris, France.
- 1997** *7th Plein Sud Festival*, Cozes, France.
- 1996** Hôtel Novotel, Cotonou, Benin.
- 1994** Espace Kauffman-Eiffel, Paris, France.
- 1993** Petit Palais, Cotonou, Benin.  
*Ouidah '92: First International Festival of the  
 Arts and Cultures of Vodun*, Ouidah and  
 Cotonou, Benin.
- 1992** Ecole pour l'Informatique et les Techniques  
 Avancées (E.P.I.T.A.), Paris, France.
- 1991** Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale,  
 Paris, France.
- 1990** Gallery Gabor Uzvesky,  
 Bussy Saint-Georges, France.

## CONFERENCES

- 2009** *From Slave Trade to the Abolition of  
 Slavery*, Colloquium, Museum of  
 Angoulême, France.  
*Art, Education and Politics*, Conference,  
 IUFM Poitou-Charentes / Poitiers University,  
 Angoulême, France.
- 2006** *The Vodun*, Lille Town Hall, Lille, France.  
 Art and Symbolism in the Vodun Religion,  
 UNESCO, Paris, France.
- 1991** *The Power of the Word / La Puissance du  
 Verbe*, Colloquium, Churchill College,  
 Cambridge, UK.

## SELECTED COLLECTIONS

- UNESCO, Paris, France.  
 World Bank, Washington, D.C., USA.  
 Museum of Angoulême, Grenoble, France.  
 Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University, USA.  
 Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie,  
 Paris, France.  
 Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey, USA.  
 The Presidential Palace, Republic of Benin,  
 Cotonou, Benin.  
 Embassy of the Republic of Benin, Paris, France.
- Various private collections throughout the United States,  
 Europe and Africa.

# PLATES

## Front cover

*Terre en vue! (Land Ho!)*  
(detail: triptych, right panel), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
150 x 110 cm.

## Plate 1

Julien Sinzogan at the October Gallery  
during *Voyages* exhibition 2007.

## Plate 2

*Memories*, 2009.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
80 x 120 cm.

Collection of Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center  
for Visual Arts at Stanford University.

## Plate 3

*Reincarnation I*, 2009.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
100 x 110 cm.

Collection of Peter and Liz Reynolds.

## Plate 4

Costume for Engungun Masquerade.  
Mixed media, 170 x 75 x 55 cm.

## Plate 5

*La ronde d'Egungun II*  
(*Whirling Egungun Dancers II*), 2009.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
80 x 121 cm.

## Plate 6

*Terre en vue! (Land Ho!)*  
(detail: triptych, left panel), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
150 x 110 cm.

## Plate 7

*Terre en vue! (Land Ho!)*  
(triptych), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
150 x 110 cm.

## Plate 8

*Terre en vue! (Land Ho!)*  
(triptych, left panel), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
150 x 110 cm.

## Plate 9

*Terre en vue! (Land Ho!)*  
(triptych, centre panel), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
150 x 110 cm.

## Plate 10

*Terre en vue! (Land Ho!)*  
(triptych, right panel), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
150 x 110 cm.

## Plate 11

*Etat d'esprits II: ceux d'en haut (Spirit*  
*Worlds II: Those on High)*, 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
150 x 110 cm.

## Plate 12

*Etat d'esprits: ceux d'en haut*  
(*Spirit Worlds: Those on High*), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
105 x 100 cm.

## Plate 13

*Etat d'esprits: ceux d'Ifè*  
(*Spirit Worlds: Those of Ifè*), 2010.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
105 x 100 cm.

Collection of Dennis Oudejans.

## Plate 14

*La Jetée (The Jetty)*, 2008.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
76 x 108 cm.

## Plate 15

*Gates of Return*, 2007.  
Oil and acrylic on canvas,  
(multiple panels), 4.65 x 10 m.

Commissioned by Victoria and Albert  
Museum for the exhibition *Uncomfortable*  
*Truths*, 2007.

## Plate 16

*Reincarnation II*, 2009.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
100 x 110 cm.

Private collection.

## Plate 17

*Gates of Return II* (detail), 2009.  
Coloured inks and acrylic on paper,  
160 x 120 cm.

## Plate 18

*Nanigos de Abakua*  
(*Abakua Masqueraders*), 2005.  
Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

## Plate 19

*Egun IV*, 2010.  
Oil on canvas, 120 x 80 cm.

## Plate 20

*Dagbissou*, 2000.  
Acrylic on canvas, 100 x 75 cm.

## Back cover

*Desirade*, 2007.  
Natural pigments and acrylic on canvas,  
100 x 100 cm.

This catalogue was published on  
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JULIEN SINZOGAN  

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SPIRIT WORLDS

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october gallery

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