

GÉRARD QUENUM
DOLLS NEVER DIE





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*Front and inside cover: La bonne bergère (The Good Shepherdess - detail), 2012.
Wood, metal, beads, rope and plastic doll, 168 x 43 x 43 cm.*

Gerard Houghton: Your work involves the imaginative uses of dolls' heads and other found objects to create compelling sculptures. How did you first hit upon this idea of cultivating cast-off dolls as a means of sculptural expression?

Gérard Quenum: Actually, in the beginning, I didn't use any dolls at all. I've always had a sensitivity for objects – for material things – and my sculptures were made using anything I found whose shape attracted me – bits of bone, old pieces of wood, that sort of thing. I first came across a doll's head one day after a deluge of rain, when I saw something sticking out of a muddy puddle. Looking more closely, I could see the face of a doll, covered in grime. It was in a pitiful state – abandoned, half-drowned, its hair caked with filthy mud – and yet its eyes still held the glimmer of an anguished expression that cried out to me. So I fished it out and took it back to the studio to dry. Since it was dirty and sopping wet, I hammered one big nail through the forehead, to attach it to a post, and left it hanging there to dry out. This had an immediate and powerful effect, and the 'hanging head' would invariably draw comments from anyone dropping in. So, really, it was observing the reactions of others that alerted me to this avenue of possibilities, which I then started to explore.

Gerard Houghton: So this entire range of sculptures, which you've been developing for years now, began as a result of that one chance encounter?

Gérard Quenum: Well, chance is a powerful force and shouldn't be underestimated! That original encounter hinged upon my gut reaction to the doll's plight. In fact, similar feelings still inspire me whenever I see a battered old doll that's been played with for years and suffered at the hands of so many strangers. I still get waves of compassion welling up within. So I rescue it and start to work directly with whatever it is I've chanced upon. I let the object itself prompt me and suggest whichever other bits and pieces I've

already collected in the atelier be called into play. If you like, the face of each doll inspires me, almost as if the doll were telling me its history, and my job is to understand and then to surround it with whatever props are necessary to render that story visible. It's the associations struck up between the different elements that shape the creative process. I'm prompted to give these 'foundlings' a safe place from where they can recount the stories of the things they've been.

Gerard Houghton: What do you mean by the words 'story' and again 'history?'

Gérard Quenum: All the dolls I find have become old, broken or somehow transformed, so they've lost their attraction for kids who've happily played with them until then. I see it as if these worn-out dolls have had their own individual life-histories before I ever find them on the streets. I frame them using other objects, mainly of wood, which are also steeped in their own history. These might have served for decades as drums, or mortars to grind food, or as pilings that supported the houses of people living on the lagoons around Porto-Novo. My work arises from the incongruous encounter between them all; each bringing to bear its own previous 'life-story' or 'history.' I find I can't work with any object that's brand-new or completely clean, since it wouldn't contain that essential vibration which allows me to intuit the things about which it's trying to tell me. Without that necessary ingredient I'm prevented from projecting a story onto it or from drawing it into any rich association with other objects.

Gerard Houghton: Often when people see your sculptures for the first time they can find them quite shocking and might think your work is all about sadness and suffering. Do you purposely set out to shock people?

Gérard Quenum: Absolutely not! There's never any intention, on my part, to shock or to provoke people. Obviously, the works can



Babaláwos, 2012.
Wood, cloth, metal and plastic dolls,
155 x 80 x 44 cm.

be quite intense, and it's not necessarily the sort of art that everyone might want in their living room! But, the inspiration for my sculptures goes right back to my own childhood. A large part of my life has been spent in the middle of a very traditional culture, and evidently that's marked my development and finds reflection in my art. I'm fascinated by the old traditions of Benin, its old sculptures and the things that surrounded me whilst growing up. My grandmother was a priestess of a traditional society and many of the influences in my development as an artist, come from those sources. I pay my respects to the ancestral traditions by mining those resources for new content today.

Gerard Houghton: Do you mean the tradition of sculpting *Bocio* figures, which is found in Benin, and the way some of your sculptures echo those forms?

Gérard Quenum: Yes, something that's occupied me recently and that's reflected in this exhibition is a return to older sculptures such as *Bocio*, those traditional sculptures from long ago, which describe the manner in which people used to deal with difficult issues and at the same time represent other more complex ideas.

Gerard Houghton: Can you tell me a bit more about those *Bocio* sculptures?

Gérard Quenum: Well, it's not easy to translate, but to break it down into its parts – 'bo' refers to some sort of power object that links into a complete system that describes the particular way of knowing about the world that belongs to the *Fon* and *Yoruba* peoples. This complex system – you could call it a 'science' – includes the way they think about

all living creatures – humans, animals or spirits. Understanding all this was the specialist province of the *Babaláwo* ('father of secrets', a diviner, wise man and healer), who would guard and transmit this knowledge, possession of which gave them their position of power amongst the people. The second part of the term – '*cio*' implies 'death' – and so, when we talk about '*Bocio*' we're talking about a sculpture which represents a particular individual, but – and this is important – is itself *inanimate*. When someone dies – they cease to be and cease to move – and they can be represented by an object – which likewise doesn't move – yet, at the same time, has a spiritual power. By showing all necessary attention and respect to this sculptural form one can have a direct connection with the person represented. The *Bocio*, generally a crudely hewn statue in wood, is the object that provides that necessary *link*. Sometimes *Bocios* are used when someone is sick and needs to be healed, since actions performed upon the *Bocio* can have a beneficial effect on the person. People have always used *Bocio* as 'intermediary' forms in the processes of healing, of burial and for paying respects to a venerated elder who has passed on.

Gerard Houghton: Aren't there two sculptures representing *Babaláwos* in the show?

Gérard Quenum: Yes. Anyone from West Africa will recognise that the staff one *Babaláwo* is carrying is a symbol of his power, and it's an original one too. I didn't make it up from other bits and pieces, I had to find a real one. If I use such objects in a work then I'll go to great lengths to find the real thing, as it contributes to the overall power of the sculpture.

Gerard Houghton: Does that mean the actual sculpture itself becomes a power object and might be used in some sort of ritual sense.





Gérard Quenum: No, not at all! The big difference between the *Babaláwo*'s world and my own is that for them, there's always a world hidden behind this one that becomes active in certain circumstances. The *Babaláwo*s see a whole world of spirits who can interact with beings in this world and controlling these spirits was always their principal objective. I might use some of those same ideas and am certainly imitating those forms, but only as a reference. *La Vendangeuse* (*The Reaper*) evokes a traditional western image of Death harvesting the fruits of the earth, but no one believes that Death will instantly start stalking them if they look at it – do they? I think that work is quite humorous. You can see the absurdity in this representation of the Grim Reaper herself, strutting past like some crazed rag-and-bone merchant, weighed down by the day's harvest of abandoned toys and stuffed animal puppets! (laughs) That's funny! – No?

Gerard Houghton: Well, if you tell me it's meant to be funny, maybe, it is! I suppose that the dolls allow you to go either way with your interpretation.

Gérard Quenum: From the start my work has always looked at those reversals of fate – chance if you like – that are most punishing to children. I try to describe the world exactly as it is - or rather as how I see it. Suffering, poverty, illness and death exist everywhere, on a daily basis, and to pretend otherwise would be naïve. What is perhaps shocking, is to see such situations played out dramatically in front of us. The uneasy feeling of recognition depends partly on the life-like appearance of the dolls, who stand, as mute actors, entangled in whatever situations we contrive for them. But they also give us a distance for objective contemplation. This provides a way of undercutting the seriousness of difficult subjects – like with *La Vendangeuse* – where we can see the whole subject in a wider, less sinister context. Today, we think we can always arrange things better, with fertilisers for better crop yields and medicines to eradicate diseases, we can reduce suffering. So, we cling to our hope that things will improve in the long term. By adding these lighter touches, I'm really saying we shouldn't get too hung up on just the negative side, we should realise there are other approaches too. Humour makes the difficult images easier to approach ... and it becomes better if there's an evident lightness – a *jeu d'esprit* – in the treatment. So my work isn't all about suffering – the world is more multi-faceted than that.

Gerard Houghton: Tell me about your title for this exhibition, *Dolls Never Die*.

Gérard Quenum: That title isn't specific to these sculptures alone, and could be used for any of my exhibitions. It's borrowed from a passage in J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* where the narrator plays with the idea that her life has been lived as though she'd been a toy doll, the unfeeling plaything of forces beyond her control and comprehension. It's also obvious that plastic dolls

Le Vendangeuse (*The Reaper*), 2012.
Wood, cloth, metal objects, soft toys, wooden
mask and plastic dolls, 203 x 63 x 40 cm.





outlast many different 'lives' themselves, and since they're never, in fact, alive they can't actually die. We impose a constant stream of 'stories' on them and they enact roles we choose for them. But as they get older it's as though they start to recount different stories of their own. We want them to represent our ideals: innocence, beauty, happiness or whatever, but they transform themselves into something else and seem to manifest another side that refuses to be ignored, reflecting the onward progress of time, decay and senescence.

Gerard Houghton: Some pieces, *Je suis le Messenger (I am the Messenger)* for example, have little figurines attached to the main sculpture. Are those *Ibeji* figures, the little wooden dolls that the Yoruba use to represent twins?

G rard Quenum: No, those are different figures entirely. Normally you wouldn't see such figures at all - they'd be hidden. The only person who could wear objects like those carries a certain power - a mystical aura, if you like. This *Messenger* is a man of considerable ability and innate power. His function is to transmit important information and he makes critical decisions as he goes along: how much to reveal, what not to say, the appropriate way to deliver the message with which he's been entrusted and so on. All kinds of consequences depend on the emissary's unique ability to perform. So I've made the emblems of his power visible to everyone - by revealing the amulets he carries on his person. One understands the interior, spiritual force radiated by the possessor of such amulets.

Gerard Houghton: You once told me that you wanted your work to represent things that are invisible; to symbolise things which, although they exist, aren't easily seen.

***Je suis le messenger (I am the Messenger)*, 2012.**
Wood, metal, shells and plastic doll, 188 x 25 x 24 cm.

A tall, slender wooden sculpture made of a single piece of wood. At the top, a small, dark-skinned human figure is perched on a branch-like protrusion. The wood has a natural, weathered texture and is set against a plain white background.

Gérard Quenum: Yes, but I didn't just mean such hidden powers as symbolised by those amulets, which not everyone will believe in anyway. I'm also talking about real things or real people that no one seems to notice very much, like the *Nomad aux abords du désert* (*Nomad on the Edge of the Desert*). There are some nomadic peoples in the north of Benin, people who lead a very difficult life and have to move around a lot to eke a living from the barren lands along the edges of the desert. What interests me about these people is that they own nothing and yet understand how to survive with just their basic knowledge of the way things function. They only carry a limited number of things with them: a simple piece of clothing, a handful of nuts, maybe a basic tool and yet with those few items they live their complete lives from cradle to grave. People are constantly fed violent images of Africa and hear about different wars and atrocities and they end up imagining Africa's really like that! It's important, for me, to show the way these nomads live – to suggest that there's a simple upright integrity to their lives that should be admired – and that's a real part of Africa too.

Gerard Houghton: Although you often refer to African traditions, some of your works, like *Nouveau cosmonaute* (*New Cosmonaut*), describe more contemporary subjects.

Gérard Quenum: *Nouveau cosmonaute* is about the strangeness of living in a weird cocoon. The subject's a 'cosmonaut' but not necessarily one who's gone up into space, it's about people living in completely different worlds. Some people in my country, despite the great heat, still dress up in a way which doesn't suit that climate. For example, they wear European clothes, or something totally alien. For me this image is about the disproportionality of the clothing to the person who seems lost inside it. So, I'm using the idea of a cosmonaut, who really does need a complete life-support system surrounding him, as an amusing metaphor for that. If you look at the base you see that this one's wearing enormous shoes, which again are just too much.

***Nouveau cosmonaute* (New Cosmonaut), 2012.**
Wood, metal, cloth and plastic doll, 61 x 28 x 34 cm.



Gerard Houghton: Some of your sculptures almost suggest an element of the fantastic.

Gérard Quenum: Yes, it's a little bit like in dreams, the way things that don't normally occur together in the everyday world become juxtaposed and mixed up together to produce strikingly novel



combinations.

Things get attached to each other, become half-hidden within each other or stick out in odd ways, suggesting a dream element underpinning the whole sequence. Maybe creatures like this could just about exist in some otherworldly space. Dreams are a way of glancing out of the corner of our consciousness at things difficult to examine too closely in our everyday world – so it's natural for the artist to explore such states.

Gerard Houghton: Your main piece in this exhibition, *Mort au dictateur. Vive la dictature! (Death to the Dictator. Long Live Dictatorship!)*, again deals with the world of current affairs, and seems to have quite a political bite.

Gérard Quenum: Always in the news today is talk of dictators

on the African continent and other such 'trouble spots.' The west always tries to eliminate them in order to install 'peace' and 'democracy' in their place. Saddam Hussein was obviously a terrible dictator, who, having reached the top of the pile, wasn't going to let go of his prize easily. I'm not trying to make excuses for Saddam or other dictators, but I'm pointing out the way they're portrayed as 'enemies of democracy' which is championed by the US and other western states. No one mentions

that Saddam was installed by those same powers, or that they supported him while he was useful to them. All puppet dictators around the world are the same. *Mort au dictateur. Vive la dictature!* refers specifically to recent events the world saw unfolding in Libya as the revolt against Colonel Gaddafi moved inexorably towards its end-game. Imagine a young child in Africa who sees Gaddafi's end on TV, how he's captured, assaulted, shot and literally torn to pieces. Does that sort of thing give an image of a better world being ushered in by the democratic process that

the rebels were fighting to establish in place of his dictatorship? On the contrary, it demonstrates that rather than being anything new or different – essentially the two systems are exactly the same thing. A new leader is installed and the game begins again. So even though the incumbent dictator is dead, the insidious system of Dictatorship creates a new version that's exactly the same. I used wooden mortars and soldiers' helmets to create a child's version of the soldier games that all boys play. Then they grow up and replay them again on the biggest stage of all.

Gerard Houghton: Over the last few years more and more attention is being focussed on African contemporary art and artists. How has this affected your own practice?

Gérard Quenum: It always makes me chuckle to hear that we've now been elevated, in Africa, from doing primitive art to being truly contemporary artists! What I'm doing today is no different from what my ancestors have done for centuries. If that's the name you want to give it – it's always been 'contemporary.' Even if the west finds it surprising that we now do 'installations', it's something we've



Mort au dictateur. Vive la dictature!
(Death to the Dictator. Long Live Dictatorship!), 2012.
Wood, helmets, metal pipe, antenna and plastic doll,
75 x 637 x 105 cm.