



2017 - Ph. © Nicolas Gzeley



[WordsArePretext] - 2017 - 138 x 98 cm - Technique mixte sur toile - Ph. © VAH



[Uploaded] - 2017 - 143 x 103 cm - Technique mixte sur toile - Ph. © VAH

VINCENT ABADIE HAFEZ CROSSING CULTURES

T. Nicolas Gzeley

Known as Zepha in the graffiti world, Vincent Abadie Hafez gradually mixed street influences with traditional calligraphy influences. Though he is part of the Calligraffiti movement, he stands out from his colleagues thanks to his double practice and a special use of colors, mixing metallic and more classical tints. Vincent Abadie Hafez is always evolving. He makes one experiment after the other, as much on technique as on materials. This is evident with his exhibition « Back To The Wood » currently shown at the Wallworks gallery in Paris, in which the artist resumes using wood while keeping his smooth and dynamic style.

How did you learn calligraphy ?

By myself. As I was coming from the street to the studio, I put spraycan aside to try new tools. For me, graffiti loses its meaning out of the street. So I tried to find my own way through studio work keeping the energy of graffiti. My meeting with plastic artist Abdellatif Moustad was a turning point. He showed me how to carve calame (ed. a reed or bamboo stem traditionally used for calligraphy), prepare paper, inks... All this echoed my research on materials because I liked trying new tools and different paintings to get specific results. I learnt watching and practicing. My influences mainly come from modern calligraphy with artists like Hassan Massoudy or Rachid Koraïchi. I was appealed by the freedom of their drawing compared with traditional calligraphy. The visits to museums with my grandmother during my childhood are also part of my influences. I was particularly interested in old civilisations. When I led graffiti workshops with young people from the suburb I come from – around Cergy – I tried to introduce them to calligraphy because some of them, through their origins, have this culture within themselves but are not familiar with it. As for me, it's not my culture. I'm doing a sort of cultural appropriation. I try to build a bridge between different cultures : from the East, Africa and the West.

How did this hobby turn into an artistic career ?

Things happened very quickly. I started working on calligraphy on wall around 2007. I took it quite seriously when offers of walls and exhibitions got numerous, in particular after my meeting with David Bloch in 2009. He drew my attention on the quality of my work, the choice of materials, finishing touches... I loved the ephemeral and perishable aspect of graffiti. So I tried to simulate this aspect through some work on patina and chemical experiments.

Your long practice of graffiti distinguishes you from other urban calligrapher. Tell us about your graffiti years.

My main school was graffiti. I discovered it around the railway station of Cergy with the tags of TBK and CAS. After a few years practicing it, I wanted to distance myself from the New York school. I found myself more in the Spanish school that was less strict, less hip-hop, more punk. My graffiti were spontaneous, with something of a naive style. A kind of mix between the PCP (ed. a crew of innovative Parisian graffiti artists in the 1990s) and African art. I have to say that I come from a suburban city quite far from Paris. So I was not subjected to the dogmas, codes or trends of the Parisian school.



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Your exhibition at the Wallworks gallery is only dedicated to wood. Tell us about this material.

My interest in ancient civilisation handicraft made me try different media like clay, ceramics, engraving, copper, brass work and wood. Then I put these materials aside to dedicate myself to painting before I got back to them lately. So this exhibition shows my return to wood. That explains its name. Though working with waste material, I try to obtain a modern even futurist style in opposition to my influences linked to Antiquity. My work is based on deconstruction and rebuilding. I mix manual labour with industrial cutting. I like this mixing, this well-thought assembly that keeps a share of improvisation to composition. In fact, I distance myself from calligraphy to go towards abstraction.

Apart from the shapes, you distinguish yourself through the associations of your own colours. What is your approach to this aspect ?

For this exhibition, I chose brighter and stronger colors than I usually do. It brings you back to graffiti with which you look for the immediate impact. I put aside chrome and golden that I used a lot before in favour of blue and purple that I mix with complementary colours like orange or fuchsia. In general, I paint my pieces before assembling them, then I boost a little bit and I add some light patina.

What does the circle – a key element to this exhibition – means to you ?

It refers to the star, either solar or lunar. It's a soothing and spiritual figure that alludes to unity, on a personal or more general point of view. ■