

Painter Harouna Ouedraogo & What it Means to be Self-Made

Art, Culture

You won't find Burkina painter Harouna Ouedraogo gracing the covers of ARTnews, Vogue or Black Enterprise as the latest and greatest on the African art scene. Though he is on the come up. He doesn't own a yacht, a plane, or a mansion. Though being able to divvy his time between Africa, US and Europe in any given year is not bad #attall. And he isn't amassing millions in an offshore account. Though he manages to lead a global life and family. We sat down recently during the African Art Village's run in Tucson, Arizona, where the up and coming artist schooled yours truly on the re-definition of a self-made individual.

When you first meet Harouna, you can't help noticing his dark chocolate tan. Then, his open and unhurried manner, even as a glint in his eye shows a restrained curiosity to take things in without

calling attention. For yours truly, his work struck first. Yards of wall space taken up by swaths of yellows, reds, browns and greens; layered with what look like formulas, and emoji characters – specifically, the happy face.



Harouna's paintings play with layers in color, line and shadow. Remember that Essence anniversary cover comprising an arrangement of previous covers to create a woman's face? Harouna's similarly "pixelated" works manipulate time and space to form an image. All his work has this quality to draw you in, to look deeper and as you do, to see what you hadn't before – like the emoji faces reacting back at you.

Asked about the "emoji style," he says, "I like to incorporate what's going on around us, where, who we are right now." So he follows the "smiles," as he calls them. "Sometimes I start, then I leave it and work on something else. I come back and add more. I do that again and again until it is done." He speaks simply, like one who heeds inspiration, which he recognizes leads his "piecemeal" efforts. "I start one, I leave it; I come back when the next part is ready." Not surprising considering his origin story.

Those who aren't overnight talents can take heart hearing of Harouna's artistic beginnings. "I couldn't even draw." He recounts how his elementary school was asked to participate in a creative contest. All but Harouna were encouraged to contribute. His face lights up, and he shakes his head vigorously, remembering how teachers and students alike dissuaded his participation. "But I just wanted to do something so bad." And it was; horrible actually; and his class, teachers and judges let him know it.

When the chance came again a year later, he was determined to do better. "I worked really hard; I wanted do something different." So different that he won. An art scholarship and a year's worth of supplies set a hopeful launch to an uneasy artistic journey.

Just as "natural" talent set him apart, non-traditional training took Harouna further. As he talks of drawing portraits for tourists to make money, it becomes clear that his success is not unconnected to how he dealt with his conditions. "I only wanted to do this," he says, noting his other classes suffered as he focused solely on art until, "At some point, my father wouldn't pay my school

fees; I had to choose what I would do, and I decided I wanted to do art."
To make money, he continued to draw and more, making postcards by hand, by the hundreds, in short turnaround for local merchants. He had to make several hundred batches in a day if he was to be paid. So how much did he make? "Nearly nothing. They took advantage, but it was something. And I learned."



He learned supply and demand and furthered his art drawing, painting, even sculpting by the stacks, to sell for a pittance. He got better at the art, and gained some notoriety. But not until classically trained peers began to seek his help finding their own style did things pick up for Harouna. "I didn't do like they taught us in school. People said my style was too different, wild." Now the same people who once ridiculed him sought his assistance tapping their own sensibility. He recalls, "I didn't think I knew anything. But I wanted them to see they don't have to always follow rules, they can try and see what's in their heart, and express that the best."

Harouna's self-expression has garnered awards, bouts with Burkina airport security all too familiar with his face, and opportunities to showcase his work "abroad," as we say. French gallery Get Arty showcases his work in Europe, as does the Nashville collective Nomad in the states. In between, he makes the rounds between Arizona, New Mexico and California to sell his work and connect with fellow artists. When he's not doing that, he's with family in France, or creating back home in Burkina Faso. "I'm not rich. But I can go where I want, and do as I please. I wanted to see the world. I'm doing it. I meet people, I see new places and I get to do what I love for a living. I did this." Yea you did. #SelfMade, indeed.



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