

IF SIX WAS NINE

by Dr. Gerald Geilert



Photo: Zaki Al-Maboren, 2004

In 2004 the Kassel daily paper printed a picture of Zaki Al-Maboren. The artist smiled directly into the camera, while his eyes were covered by dark glasses. His curly hair had grown into an afro. His glittering purple jacket added the final note to make him look exactly like Jimi Hendrix.

Al-Maboren composes his pictures with the same virtuosity with which Hendrix plays his guitar. The scintillating outfit of the artist, who was born in Artul, Sudan, corresponds to his vividly and brightly coloured work. The name of his 2004 exhibition, *Flamboyant*, is also an apt example of this. For this exhibition he presented views of Venice. With brush strokes and a palette knife he applied acrylic and oil paints on canvas to depict the many reflections he saw in the canals of the city built on swamps. However, most of the painting are done with the inks used to fill permanent markers.

Zaki Al-Maboren initially studied graphic design in Khartoum. Driven by curiosity, he moved to Germany in 1987, began to learn the language and eventually graduated from Kassel University with a degree in art history in 1993. At this point, he focused on the symbolic content of African mythology, as well as of Islam and Christianity.

This led several critics to speak of archetypes, in accordance with a prevalent fashion. However, I think that another view is more appropriate. When Al-Maboren lived in Kassel, he had the opportunity to view his homeland from outside. By letting the symbolic language found in different cultures, myths and world religions “wander” through his mind he came upon a position of his own. Rather than drawing generally-valid pictorial symbols or types, he created an individual, unique mythology of his own. His quest was for a new pictorial language with no predefined symbols. One might almost speak of a reinterpretation or an altogether new interpretation of symbols, as Prof. Dr. Horst Giszycki did in a speech. The artist’s work doesn’t show any archetypes, as he is not searching for origins, instead he views mythologies in relation to himself, thus updating them. His paintings should be seen as a record of the worlds he has “wandered” through.

Al-Maboren paints, lacquers, scratches and scrapes on the picture plane, motifs such as animals, flowers and trees, but also houses, cars and airplanes, as symbols of a technological consumer society. He also confronts current political problems. His

work *Septembertraum*, for instance, makes reference to September 11, 2001 and the attack on New York City's World Trade Center. In 2003 he chose the consequences of this dramatic event as the central theme of his workshop, *Who are you?*

The artist is actively engaged in social projects, donating several of his paintings to be auctioned for charity and helping personally, such as by collecting medical supplies and taking them to his native country. Yet he is not only committed to practical aid, but also asks incisive questions.

In 2007, Roger Buerger, the artistic director of the *Documenta12*, chose the following slogan as one of the exhibition's four leading leitmotifs: "*Is Modernity our Antiquity?*" Al-Maboren put this question differently, restating it in Arabic. For the grand opening of this major exhibition, he had his studio, the *Kunsttempel*, in which he has been working since 1993, surrounded with a scaffold, and covered with black canvas. The classicistic temple of art looked like the Kaaba in Mecca. The Arabic text was printed on a white banner, which spanned the black cube horizontally.

With this, Al-Maboren turned to an audience other than the one the *documenta*-directors had envisioned. The artist addressed the Arab world, and proceeded to broaden the discussion about the leitmotif by involving a different cultural group, for whom the terms antiquity and modernity do not create the same sense of identity. Al-Maboren builds bridges between two cultures and tries to expand the field of discourse by bringing the two parallel discussions together. Al-Maboren's black cube also serves as a caricature of the art scene, which normally resides in the "white cube".

In *Traumwelten*, we see the towers of the Frankfurt skyline standing on their heads. The historical city centre stands right side up. The red roofs, timber framework and the small oriental windows look inviting and cozy. A Sudanese design vocabulary blends symbolically with the beautiful Frankfurt city centre to make a new home. Seemingly in



Zaki Al-Maboren: *Septembertraum*, 2001 (116 x 140 cm)



Zaki Al-Maboren: *Traumwelten*, 2008 (100 x 75 cm)

opposition, the crystal palaces of the new world order disrupt the scene, reaching down into the picture like stalactites in a grotto. The work suggests a critical commentary on today's casino capitalism, in which social conditions are turned upside down. How can this spectacle be understood?

For this purpose, a closer look should be taken at another painting, entitled *Fata Morgana*, which is the general German term for mirage. It shows a desert landscape with what seems to be a lake. We are all familiar with stories of thirsty travellers in the des-

ert, who believe they see water or a lake, but find nothing but parched sand instead of the supposed life-giving elixir. The mirage fools our senses and our minds.

However, I'd like to relate another, more complex form of mirage, called the superior mirage. Sailors told of inverted ships, which seemed to float far above the horizon. Such phenomena become visible when a layer of warm air lies atop a second layer of cold air. The viewer sees a ship completely reflected. It is mirrored where the layers of air meet.

Meteorologists describe this situation as "temperature inversion," and the condition is often followed by a violent thunderstorm. Hence, real danger was threatening when sailors happened to see such a ship gliding noiselessly without reacting to signals. It has been surmised, that these phantom ships and superior mirages, where beams of light are bent, may have given rise to legends such as "The Flying Dutchman." Their appearance frightened sailors and made them cringe. Adaptations of this story are manifold.

I'd like to make the assertion that Al-Maboren's painting *Traumwelten* could also be understood as an superior mirage. If he had painted reflections, such as those in the canals of Venice, the rows of houses would have met at their foundation. His painting are "dis-reflected", they do not show the typical sort of reflection with which we are familiar, but an aerial reflection, which is ill-omened and disturbing. The skyline of Frankfurt is standing on its head, because it is mirrored between two layers of air, as occurs during special whether conditions. Al-Maboren's paintings are thus twisted; they are an inversion of our daily experience. They are "dis-reflected": left is right, right left, bottom top and top bottom. The artist shows how deceptive optical perceptions can be, and leaves the rearrangement of the visual information up to the viewer.

In the songs *If 6 Was 9* and *Castles Made of Sand* Hendrix sang about superior mirages. He describes mountains suddenly sink-

ing into the sea. Whereby, he could also be speaking of superior mirages: The alleged mountains sink into a sea. If this were applied to the work of Al-Maboren, this would mean that what we see is a reflection in the sky. In Hendrix's words, he turns the six upside down. A 6 becomes 9.

In order to understand which is the reflection and what its cause, we have to keep our eyes open. What looks like a lake in the desert, is a reflection of the sky. The Frankfurt skyline is inverted and looks like a mirage, but it must exist, in order for us to perceive it as a reflection.

Consequently, the towers in Al-Maboren's painting are an allegory of a hysteria caused by visual perceptions. If we want to understand his art, we must recognize that visual perceptions may be "bent". Light, according to Fermat's principle, like electricity, travels the path of least resistance. The light which in Europe is so often equated with cognition, takes the simplest path through layers of air with various temperatures.

Al-Maboren's paintings are not wilful misrepresentations; rather, they hold up a mirror to us. Perhaps superior mirages pointed the way west to America to the Vikings more than a millennium ago. The coasts of Greenland and the New World, according to tradition, appeared in the sky from as great a distance as 200 nautical miles. Superior mirages, as delusional as they can be, may potentially show us the way. Zaki Al-Maboren's work can also be understood in this positive light.