



FIFTY ONE

CONGO OCEAN

Eric Manigaud

18/05/2023 - 15/07/2023

Opening:

Thursday, May 18th, 2-9 pm, in the presence of the artist

Gallery FIFTY ONE

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**Prices and availability of the works may be subject to change. Prices listed herein include framing..*

FIFTY ONE



Congo Océan
by Eric Manigaud



Opening: Thursday, May. 18th 2023, from 6 to 9 pm, in the presence of the artist
Show: May 19th - July 15th 2023

In his third solo exhibition at Gallery FIFTY ONE, French artist Éric Manigaud (°1971) presents the final piece of his intensive research into European colonial history. This show runs simultaneously with an exhibition at Galerie Sator in Paris. Belgian Congo being the subject in Paris and French Congo in Antwerp.

Manigaud is interested in archival sources that often bear witness to violent episodes in Europe's evolution towards modernity. He appropriates photographic material from the late 19th to early 20th century by projecting it onto a sheet of paper - always much larger than the original scale - tracing the outlines and shades with pencil and graphite powder. This slow and labour-intensive process gives weight to the volatile snapshots he originally started from. The often graphic nature of his photo-realistic drawings, their somewhat blurred, dream-like appearance and their monumental scale, turns his works into a physical and disruptive experience that encourages us to remember painful parts of our history.

France's colonial history is a subject of great interest to Manigaud (see also his previous solo show at the gallery 'R.A.S. (rien à signaler)'). The central theme of this new exhibition is one of the blackest episodes of that past; the construction of the Congo-Océan Railway, which runs over a distance of 502 km from Brazzaville (the capital of the Republic of the Congo, former colony of France) to the port city of Pointe-Noire. The line can be regarded as a symbol of the crimes against humanity committed by the colonial system; during the more than ten years that it took to complete - from 1921 to 1934 -, an estimation of 17,000 to 20,000 workers were killed due to poor (forced) working conditions, malnutrition and disease. For Manigaud this infrastructure project is also emblematic of all other forms of exploitation of the colonial system; the association of the two words 'Congo' and 'Océan' gives the impression that they are synonyms, degrading Congo to merely an extraction area from which commodities leave for transport over sea.

The construction of the train line was not necessary since on the other side of the Congo River, in Belgian Congo, a parallel route already existed departing from Léopoldville (present-day Kinshasa) to the seaside. Because the train was the most economical way to transport goods to the ports and from there to Europe, from the late 19th to the early 20th century many railway lines were built all over the African continent. Also in the Belgian, British and German colonies, this was accompanied by human suffering. As the American author Adam Hochschild writes in his book 'King Leopold's Ghost', chained slaves, burnt-down villages and the 'chicotte' (whip) were omnipresent. "Thousands of refugees who had crossed the Congo River to flee the Leopold regime ended up crossing it again to escape the French. The population loss in the rubber-rich equatorial forest controlled by France is estimated, exactly as in Leopold's Congo, at around fifty percent." This exhibition focuses on how the crimes of this period can thus be considered European, rather than just Belgian or French. A shared history, cleverly emphasised by Manigaud through a simultaneous exhibition in both European countries. An increased awareness in the motherlands of the situation in the colonies, would eventually result in an official ban on forced labor in 1946. This, however, still without questioning the concept of colonisation itself.

The works that are part of this exhibition are all directly or indirectly linked to the central theme; the construction of the railway and, by extension, the devastating effects of colonial exploitation on people and all that is alive. Apart from photographs documenting the construction of the Congo-Océan, little visual material about French Congo exists. Therefore, postcards of the time were Manigaud's main source of documentation. It was mostly in this form that images circulated, and by doing so they shaped the impression of the colony in the motherland. 'Travail de forçats sur les terrassements, Mayombe, années 1920' (2022) and 'Congo français, 1937, travaux chemin de Fer Pointe Noire, PCH 289' (2022) are a direct reference to the railway line, showing the all-encompassing destruction that the construction entailed. The same dark and unsettling atmosphere haunts 'Rassemblement tribal, années 1930' (2021) - a group portrait of figures who seem both literally and figuratively imprisoned in the midst of a mass of land already partially destroyed by works of a non-humane scale - and 'Congo tunnelling, 1914' (2023), that, with the perspective disappearing into a central black hole, reminds Manigaud of that other deadly train journey (i.e. Auschwitz).

Manigaud also does not ignore the animal toll of the colonial exploitation. See for example the drawing of a pangolin, taken from a series of postcards with the, for the time already alarming, title 'l'Afrique qui disparaît'. It

also has a link with our time since the consumption of the pangolin is associated with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. As long as the natural habitats of wildlife continue to be destroyed (as was already the case at the time of the construction of the Congo-Océan), new viruses will continue to emerge. In 'Pointe Noire, caïman sur la rivière Loémé, Pauleau' (2022), we find the jungle motifs of a previous series, but this time inhabited by predators - or prey (since the crocodile was hunted for its skin). The drawings of a dead elephant ('hunting victim of the day') and of the mass grave of four hippos in Brazzaville - based on a photograph by the French agronomist and explorer Jean Dybowski who left in 1891 for the French Congo on a mission to expand and consolidate French influence in the region north of the Ubangi River - shows the animals as preys and sources of a.o. ivory.

Finally, 'Congo français, la Marseillaise, Moreau' (2022) - depicting a group of children singing the French national anthem - is a caricature of what advocates of the colonial period still claim today; that the French have brought civilization to the Congolese, and that they are indebted in return. The drawing shows a variety of expressions and an uncomfortable shift from smile to grimace. Here we see the impact of Manigaud's technique in full effect; watched from a distance his drawings seem photo-realistic, but coming closer, the countless dots and strokes deconstruct the viewer's vision. This ghost-like and elusive quality confuses the eye but also offers the viewer a way of distancing himself from the sometimes hard reality of what is depicted.



Congo français, la Marseillaise, Moreau, 2022

Graphite on paper

97 x 143 cm

Unique

Certificate



Congo tunnell, 1914, 2023

Graphite on digigraphic screen
30 x 43 cm
Unique
Certificate



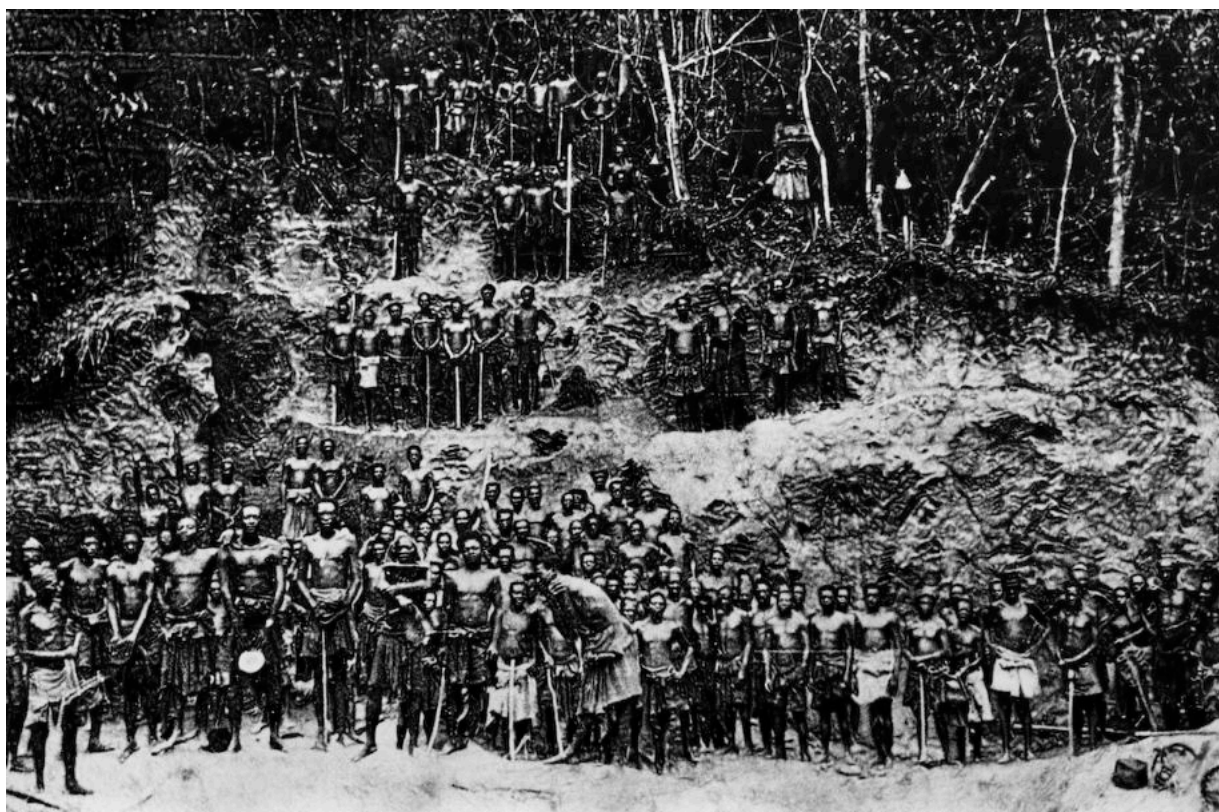
Congo français, 1937, travaux Chemin de Fer Pointe Noire, PCH 289, 2022

Graphite on paper
113 x 171 cm
Unique
Certificate



Travail de forçats sur les terrassements, Mayombe, années 1920, 2022

Graphite on digigraphic screen
29 x 37 cm
Unique
Certificate



Rassemblement tribal, années 1930, 2021

Graphite on paper

120 x 180 cm

Unique

Certificate



L'Afrique qui disparaît, pangolin, 2022

Graphite on digigraphic screen
60 x 70 cm
Unique
Certificate



Chasse, la victime de la journée, 2022

Graphite on digigraphic screen

50 x 70 cm

Unique

Certificate



Jean Dybowski, charnier de quatre hippopotames à Brazzaville, 1891, 2023

Graphite on digigraphic screen
60 x 84 cm
Unique
Certificate



Pointe Noire, caiman sur la rivière Loémé, Pauleau, 2022

Graphite on digigraphic screen
59 x 95 cm
Unique
Certificate



Isekansu, mutilated by sentries for shortage of rubber, 2022

Graphite on digigraphic screen
35 x 30 cm
Unique
Certificate

