

**JOHANNES SIVERTSEN (FR, 1984)**

***Toubab***

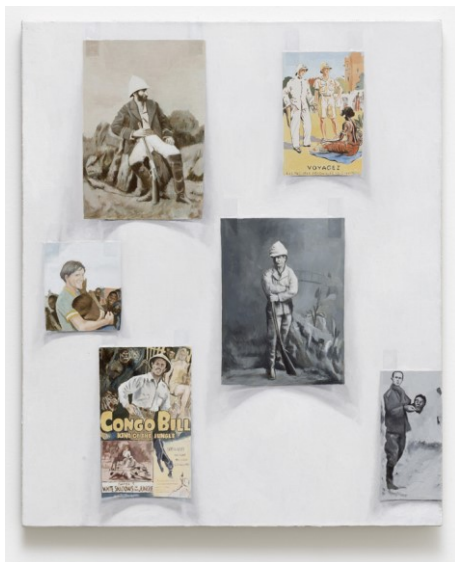
April 9 - May 15, 2021



*Toubab (Baoulé)*, 2021  
 Oil on canvas, 27 x 33 cm

The painting shows a so-called *Toubab* or colon sculpture, created by the Baoulé-people in Côte d'Ivoire in the 1970s. This sculpture is a depiction of the archetypical white man with camera and tropical helmet, carved in wood and painted with vegetable pigment.

The *Toubab* sculptures are part of a pictorial tradition that existed long before the colonial era, but which incorporated the image of the white colonizer into the circle of motifs when he appeared. The motif can be found throughout the colonial period, but the production exploded in the period after the settlement of the colonies, and some art historians believe that the sculptures were partly made for the purpose of white tourists.



*Toubabs*, 2021  
 Oil on canvas, 65 x 54 cm

The Trompe l'oeil painting consists of a compilation of several images, all showing concrete examples of *Toubabs*.

Top left is the official photograph of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza; the French explorer who colonized French Congo. Brazza was a declared pacifist and is famous for having established the colony without bloodshed and by agreement with the local King Illoy Loubath Imumba ler. Brazza promised the local king protection from being incorporated into the Belgian Congo, which was being established during the same period. In the colony's first year, Brazza served as governor, but he was deposed in 1897, as the colony was not considered productive enough.

In the center of the painting, we find the official portrait of Henry Morton Stanley; a British-American explorer whose expeditions to Central Africa enabled Leopold II's conquest of the Belgian Congo. Stanley, unlike Brazza, had a reputation for waging war against the locals and playing off the different groupings of the area against each other.

In the right corner is an advertising print, produced by the French state in the 1930s. The drawing shows two uniformed, white men buying fruit from a local man at a market. Below the picture is



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stated 'Voyage' - 'Go travel'. The purpose of the picture was to encourage young French people to settle in the colonies or join the French navy, by painting a picture of the good life in the French colonies: sunshine, exotic food and exciting interactions with the locals. Le Ministère des Colonies (Ministry of Colonies) at that time had a monopoly on image production from and around the colonies.

The French geographer and author Sylvie Brunel has made comparative analyzes of propaganda from the colonial era and contemporary advertisements from NGOs such as Care. She concludes that the two image types use the same visual language, the same motifs and the same argumentation about the exotic locals to be saved by a (neo-) colonial project.

In the left side of the painting is Jason Russell; an American documentary film director who is behind the film and the SoMe campaign Kony 2012. The purpose of the campaign was to focus on the Ugandan militia leader and war criminal Joseph Kony, who remained free. *Kony 2012* was the first video on YouTube to reach a million likes.

The campaign has since been criticized by, among others, the Nigerian-American intellectual Teju Cole as an example of the White Savior Industrial Complex. He points out that campaigns such as *Kony 2012* are an expression of the same idea that colonization is based on: that white people must step in and solve the problems on the African continent, problems which the locals themselves are unable to take care of.

The painting depicts a press photo of Russel with a poor black child in his arms. The motif is an example of what Sylvie Brunel calls charity business, where celebrities stage their charity for a camera, with black children as the spotlight.

At the bottom center of the painting is a poster from the cartoon Congo Bill. The character Congo Bill appears for the first time in *More Fun Comics #56* in 1940 and is a white hero in uniform and tropical helmet who fights jungle animals and local tribes to save a white woman.

In the right-hand corner of the painting, half of a private photograph taken by French soldiers in Morocco during the Rifle War in 1922 is seen. The photograph shows a soldier posing with the severed head of a Berber rebel. The practice of chopping off the heads of enemies, typically to place them at the roadside to place fear and warning, was widespread in the North African colonies. In 2020, the French state returned a box of 24 skulls for burial in Algeria, after having kept them - and for periods displayed them - at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris since colonial times.



*Photographer, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 27 x 33 cm

Arthur Radclyffe Dugmore was a renowned British photographer, artist, hunter, and scientist. The portrait derives from his book *'Camera Adventures in the African Wilds'* from 1910, which documents his travels in British East Africa, as well as his observations of animal and plant life in the colony.

The work conveys a story of Western knowledge-production in colonial times, where artistic interpretations and scientific observations went hand in hand. In the portrait, Dugmore's rifle points towards the same object as his camera, and the painting suggests that the one who has the defining power and creates images of the other is often the same one who destroys him.



*Study for a collective portrait of Leopold II (l'arbre qui cache la forêt?), 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm

The Belgian King Leopold II was the colonizer and private sole owner of the Congo Free State in the period 1885-1908, when the colony was known for its brutal treatment of the locals. It is believed today that up to 50 percent of the population died as a direct or indirect consequence of the forced labor imposed on them in the colony, and in 1908 the Congo Free State passed to the Belgian state following international pressure.

In recent years, the Belgian parliament has decided to remove the statues of Leopold II from public space, and instead place them in museums where they can be 're-contextualised'. However, the specific statue in the picture still stands in the urban space of Brussels and was painted in connection with a Black Lives Matter demonstration in 2020.

The picture shows the statue's face after the painting, where red color runs like blood from the figure's eye sockets. The motif is painted at eye level - rather than in the frog perspective the statue is meant to be experienced from - and on a smaller scale, not unlike a mold shot.

The work is subtitled *l'arbre qui cache la forêt?* which can be translated to "the tree that hides the forest?". At the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, the European colonial powers concluded an

agreement to hand over the Congo Free State to Leopold II to secure free trade around the Congo Basin. Congo Free State was created with a stamp of approval from the surrounding colonial powers, which - as Pierre Savorgnan stated in his report from the French Congo - did not necessarily administer their colonies with greater regard for the local population. Leopold II never set foot on the African continent himself.



*The final journey of Savorgnan de Brazza, 2021*

Oil on canvas, each 27 x 33 cm

The work which consists of two paintings is about Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza's return from French Congo in 1905.

In 1880 Brazza established French Congo based on non-violent principles and by agreement with the local king. In the first years of the colony, Brazza served as governor, but he was deposed in 1897, as the colony was not considered productive enough. In 1905, rumors began to circulate that living conditions in the colony were deteriorating, and independent observers compared the French Congo to the infamous Belgian colony in the east. The protests against the treatment of the locals in the colony culminated when two French officers were caught executing a local man with a dynamite stick.

Brazza was sent by the French state to draw up a report on the situation. It was probably expected that he would look at the colony - which was basically his own life's work - with mild eyes, but Brazza began his journey home as a disillusioned man. In the letters he sent home, he told of systematic assaults on the locals and an official in the colony who tried to obstruct his investigations. Brazza mysteriously died on the journey home to Europe, and persistent rumors will know that he was poisoned. His report was shelved and only published as late as 2014.

The riverboat in painting number 2 is of the type that was used on the Congo River and thus also indirectly refers to Joseph Conrad's novel *The Heart of Darkness* from 1899, just as both works contain a hidden reference to Hans Holbein's work *The Ambassadors* from 1533.



*Gerboise, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm

The basis of the painting is a press photo showing back-turned soldiers who are observing a nuclear test explosion in the Algerian part of the Sahara. Thirteen bombings were carried out during the years 1960-66, that is, both during and after the French-Algerian War of Independence.

The test explosions were at the time considered harmless, but later many of the soldiers present died from the after-effects of radioactive radiation. A huge area in the Sahara has become uninhabitable after the blasts due to radioactivity, and the clouds from the blasts flew across all West Africa and up to the south of Spain.



*Berlin, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm

The Berlin Conference in 1884-85 regulated the European colonization and trade on the African continent. The conference is often referred to as *'the time when the African continent was divided by a ruler'*, but it is far from certain that this was actually the case. The image of the ruler should probably rather be understood as drawing boundaries which ignored natural demarcations to serve European interests instead.

The conference took place in Berlin on November 15, 1884 with the participation of Germany, Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway, the Ottoman Empire and the United States. After lengthy negotiations, the conference led to the General Act of Africa, approving

the establishment of the Congo Free State as a private colony, ensured trade freedom in the Congo Basin, opened the Niger and Congo rivers to shipping, and banned trans-Atlantic slave trade. In addition, the conference affirmed the right of states to establish colonies.

The abolition of slavery was among the main arguments for justifying the colonization of Africa. The establishment of the colonies liberated local slaves, but soon found other ways to use forced labor to extract resources in the colonies.



*Soldier & landscape with napalm (Algeria), 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm

The painting shows a French soldier looking out over a landscape in Algeria. In the sky behind him is a cloud of napalm used by the French army to fight rebels in rural areas during the French-Algerian War of Independence in 1954 - 1962. The image is created based on a private photo taken by the French soldiers.

Napalm was used to burn down entire villages at once in the French colonies of Indochina, Cameroun and Algeria. The Napalm attacks had the character of collective punishment of cities that housed rebels and resistance fighters.



*Expedition, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm

The painting is based on a private photo showing the French military on an expedition in southern Algeria in the 1960s. The photo that forms the basis of the painting was taken during the French-Algerian War of Independence, where the colonial project in the area was continued.

Before the colonization of the area, traditional trade routes went through the Sahara across the continent. When the Europeans arrived, the traditional trade routes into the country were closed down and new routes were established, going from the center of the continent towards the seas, from where the resources could be shipped towards Europe. These new trade routes became the basis of the infrastructure still found in many places on the African continent. The French army began exploring the Sahara as they began to search for oil in

the 1960s, and it is also during this period they begin to establish an actual infrastructure through the desert, making transport of oil out to sea possible.

The motif has become part of the collective visual culture through advertising. Many expeditions in the Sahara at the time were sponsored by manufacturers of trucks and four-wheel drive vehicles, who used the images to illustrate the quality of the products under extreme climatic conditions. We know the same motive from a race like Paris-Dakar, which runs from the French capital through the former French colonies in North Africa to the capital of Senegal.



*Hammock, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm

This painting shows a white man, probably a French soldier, being carried in a hammock by two locals in French Dahomey in the 1910s. The starting point for the painting is a private photo which has been used as a postcard and sent home to Europe from the colonies.

The image is stereotypical for its time and the motif can be found in popular culture, for example in the cartoon Tintin. It tells an idealized story of the admiration and gratitude of the locals for the white man who brought civilization to Africa. Before colonial times, the same type of hammock was used by local kings, carried by slaves. In accordance with the provisions of the Berlin Conference, European colonizers liberated local slaves, but retained symbols of slavery, such as the hammock.

In the Brazza report, made in 1905 and finally published in 2014, one can read that the local workers who cultivated the plantations or carried around the colonial masters of the French Congo were most often men, whose wives and children were kept in prison camps until the men had carried out forced labor, as a way to pay taxes to the French occupier.



*Yoruba Mask, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm

Toubab sculpture made by the Yoruba people of Benin at an unspecified time in the 20th century. Masks like this are used in a shamanistic ritual called *Gelede*, which also plays an important role in the oral storytelling. In West Africa people talk about *counteur africain*; the fact that the history of the people is communicated orally. That is why it's also said that when an old man dies, it's like a library burning.

In this mask, the image of the white Toubab in the hammock is carved on top. There are several theories as to why the white man is depicted in the mask, but it is not known for sure what role the motif plays.

The photograph of the sculpture, which is the basis of the work, comes from the French anthropologist Nicolas Menut's publication *L'Homme Blanc*, which presents a collection of indigenous people's images of the white man.



*Congo, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm

The painting shows a modern, open gold mine in the mining district of Kibali in DR Congo, Africa's largest mining area. Mining in Kibali draws threads back to the Congo Free State, where Australian gold diggers found gold in 1903. Since then, mining has been uninterrupted, albeit with a slight decline in extraction in the 1960s, when DR Congo after some unrest became independent, and again in 1980s and 90s, when violent civil war-like battles took place in the area.

The mines in Kibali are operated by huge multinational companies owned by foreign shareholders - the main shareholders in this

specific mine are Canadian. The mines in present-day Congo illustrate the theories of African intellectuals such as Kwame Nkrumah and Achille Mbembe that (neo-) colonialization is a manifestation of global capitalism. As early as in Brazza's report one could read that violations of the local population in French Congo were primarily committed by the companies that administered the colony for the French state.



*The Legion, 2021*  
 Oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm

The Foreign Legion is an elite unit of the French army which often acts as a vanguard, a front post, in the conflict areas where France is involved. The Foreign Legion was formerly based in Algeria, but today it is based in Marseille, from where the image originates.

The basis of the painting is a still image from a TV report about life at the fitness center in the South of France, and it shows a brief glimpse of undressed legionnaires bathing. Here you see a black body bathing between the white bodies, which tells a story of how the function of the legionaries is set to cancel the individual differences and merge them into a stereotypical tale of masculinity, of discipline and brotherhood. The painting poses the question of whether being *Toubab* is linked to the white skin color, or whether it primarily describes a colonizing behavior or function - a position.



The Foreign Legion has traditionally been present in the French colonies and fought in all the colonial wars. The Legion is a relic from a time when soldiers with a background in the colonies fought on the French side; eg in Indochina, where Senegalese soldiers fought on the French side against the locals. Today, for example, the Foreign Legion is present in Mali, where the French army is tracking down and fighting terrorist cells. Here, regular reports have been received of foreign legionnaires spreading fear and terror among the locals.

The composition of the painting is inspired by Ingres' *Le bain Turc* to portray the white man's body as an object for a viewer.



*Identitaires, 2021*

Oil on canvas, 33 x 27 cm

The painting shows members of the right-wing nationalist group “Jeunesses Nationalistes Revolutionnaires”, founded by Serge Ayoub, who is seen in the center of the picture. The basis of the painting is a still image from a documentary about French skinheads, who had the film crew meet up in a suburb, west of Paris.

A group like the Jeunesses Nationalistes Revolutionnaires patrolled in the Parisian nightlife, but rarely - as the documentary otherwise suggests - in the suburbs. Here, they use the film crew to stage themselves as a kind of paramilitary group, guarding white people's rights in residential areas which are otherwise dominated by residents of the former French colonies.

In his book *Le Ghetto Urbain* the French sociologist Didier Lapeyronnie writes that the relationship France has built with its suburbs is a direct reflection of the relationship they had with the French colonies. He emphasizes that in both cases the population is perceived as a passive group that must be dominated and civilized from the outside in order to be kept under control.