



From Ancestral Traces
to Contemporary Visions

THE ART OF MÉNÉ

PROJECT • SPACE

FROM ANCESTRAL TRACES



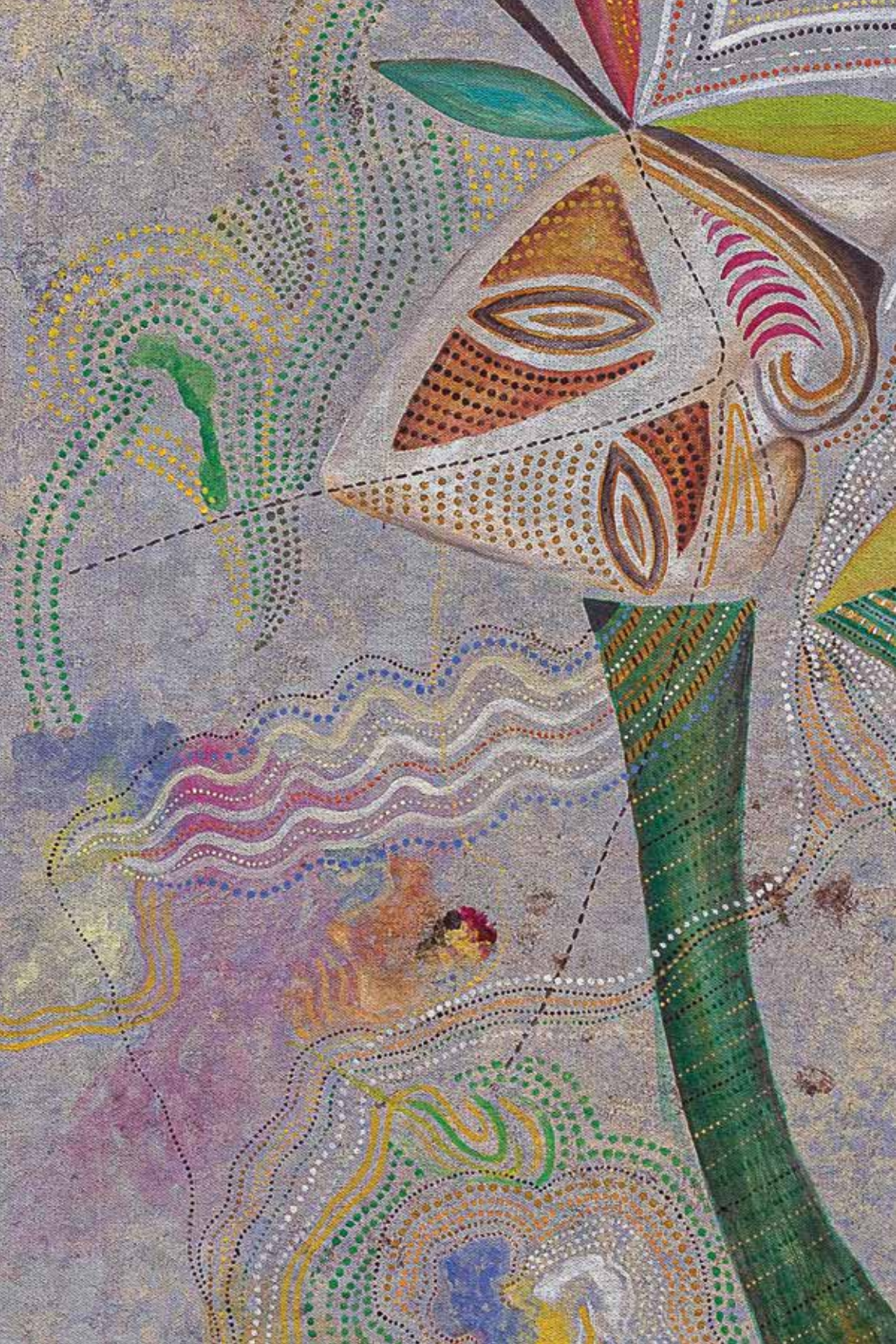
THE ART OF MÉNÉ

TO CONTEMPORARY VISIONS



Anne-Béatrix Keller Semadeni, Curator
September 6 – December 7, 2025

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM PROJECT SPACE







From left: Jack Rasmussen and Méné (in front of *Mémoire du Futur*, 2022) at African Art Beats.

Foreword

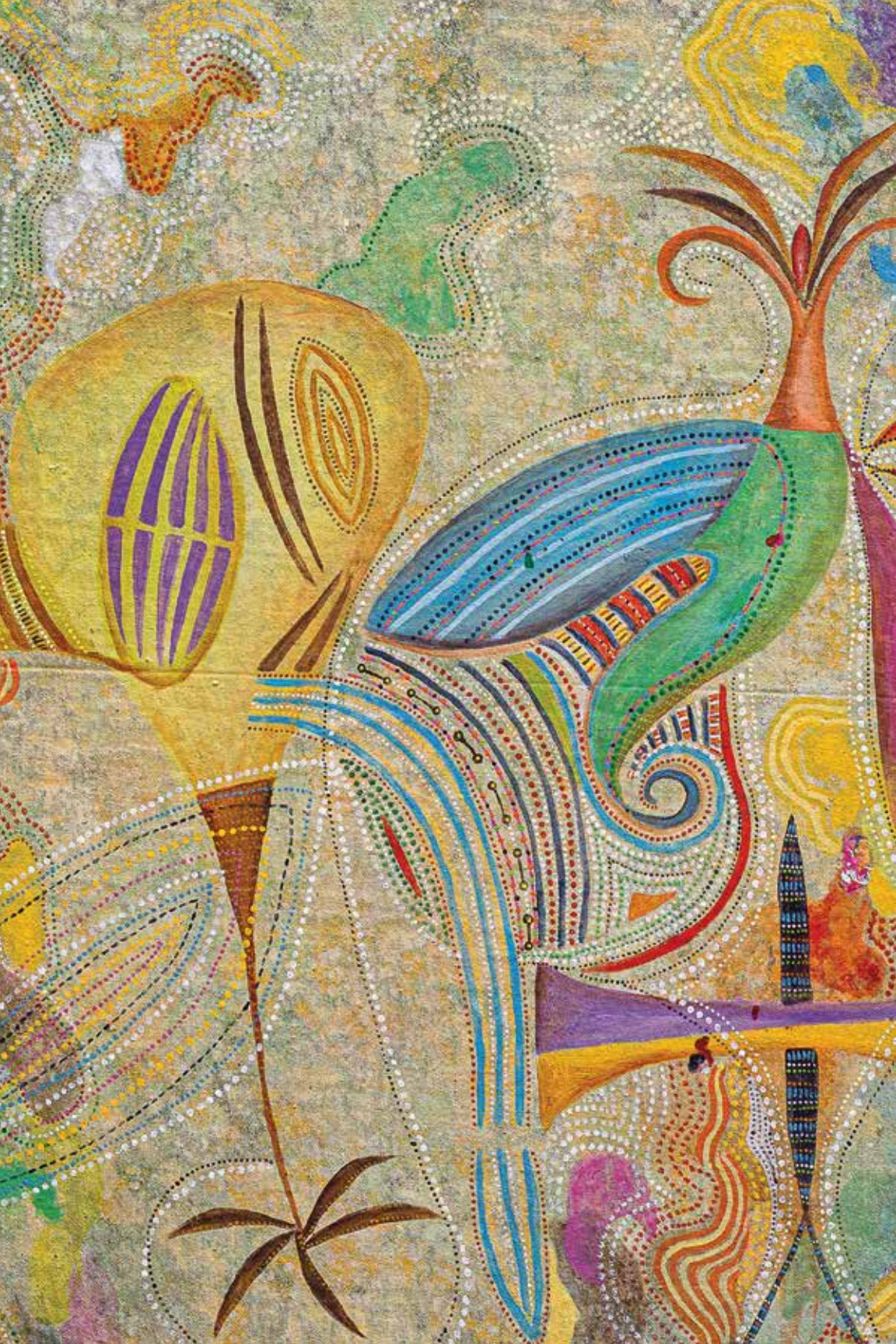
By Jack Rasmussen

C. Nicholas Keating and Carleen B. Keating Director
American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

On behalf of the students, faculty, staff, and friends of American University, I thank the curator Anne-Béatrix Keller Semadeni for her efforts to introduce the art of Ange Martial Méné to American audiences. Méné was born in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in 1977. His art has gained acclaim wherever in the world it has been shown, from Abidjan to Paris, and Luxembourg to Dakar. The present exhibition in the American University Museum is Méné's first solo museum show in the United States. It comes about because Anne-Béatrix opened her contemporary art gallery, African Art Beats, less than a mile from our museum, and her excitement at representing Méné in our neighborhood was infectious. Once we saw these paintings "in the flesh," we knew this artist was something very special.

Anne-Beatrix and Méné himself have contributed written texts to this catalog that place the artwork in the context of prehistoric rock art and the artist's own very personal memories and dreams. We must also thank the art critic Sylvain Sankalé for his most poetic exegesis of Méné's contributions. Sylvain encourages us to "...release our grip, let's not try to rationalize things or beings. The enchanter will lead us safely to the end of his dreams and we will take great pleasure in it." Good advice!

For my part, I can picture Méné, Max Ernst, and Joan Miró in a Paris café at the dawn of Surrealism sharing images from their subconscious while reciting their poetry. But even as I try to situate Méné in art history, I know his art is very much of our time. Méné's art is the antidote to whatever is ailing us today, just as Max Ernst and Joan Miró provided antidotes to the disaster of World War I. They are improvisations, they are beautiful, and they are free.



From Ancestral Traces to Contemporary Visions— The Art of Méné

By Anne-Béatrix Keller Semadeni
Curator
Founder of African Art Beats

“I always move toward the dream, but to enter the dream, you must know where you’re coming from and what you’re seeking. So inevitably, origins come into play—they cannot be separated from the quest for self, nor can nature be excluded, for it is our shared cradle.”

Through his art, Méné invites us on a journey—one fed by dreams and stretching from the beginning of time to the distant future, with pauses for reflection along the way. Lost in contemplation, we find ourselves in spaces where we are free to wander, linger, and return to something both intimate and universal.

Deeply rooted in the symbolic power of rock art, Méné’s practice is animated by questions of identity, spirituality, memory, and the invisible energies that bind all living beings. It offers both a visual exploration and a metaphysical quest—a walk across the thresholds of dream, time, and existence.

From a young age, Méné expressed himself through drawing, but he found his unique voice after a transformative encounter with rock art. While conducting research for his diploma at the École nationale des Beaux-Arts in Abidjan, he came across prehistoric cave paintings for the first time. He was awe-struck by their earthy hues, texture, and the minimalism of the shapes. What captivated him most was its authenticity—the primal urge to communicate, to leave a mark, to make sense of existence. From that moment on, there was no turning back. Drawn to materiality and the unusual since childhood, he later reflected: “Rock art felt like a part of my personality. It gave me the freedom to create my own visual language.”

Opposite: Méné, *Réminiscence* (Reminiscence) (detail), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in.

Choosing to work on rock art was daring, as it strayed far from academic conventions. Méné found a supporter, however, among his professors: the late Yacouba Touré (“Yak”), one of the most promising artists of his generation and a leading figure of the Daro-Daro movement, which championed creation without limits.

For Méné, rock art is not a subject of representation; it is the beginning of creation itself, a living vocabulary. The early cave artists, he notes, did not create to please; they created as an extension of their being. Their images were mystical, ritualistic, grounded in lived experience and spiritual need. This purity of expression, unconstrained by aesthetic conventions, is what Méné seeks to channel.

When he begins his journey across the canvas, Méné does so without knowing what the outcome will be. His inspiration can be triggered by anything...an emotion, a sound, a sight, a memory. These impressions open the door to a deeper state. As he paints, the conscious mind gradually recedes. He is both present and elsewhere, attuned to a movement that seems to unfold on its own. In this in-between, symbols emerge and forms take shape. He has entered the realm of the dream—a space of vision, a way of drifting into oneself, opening up to what lies beneath conscious thought. This dream-state is both a starting point and a creative method, which allows him to access a deeper interior world.

During this voyage, Méné questions our strengths and frailties, our purpose, our place in the universe, our connection with the past, and the traces we leave behind. He calls himself “an explorer of the cosmos.” He describes his creative process as a kind of meditation, sometimes fruitful, sometimes still; a spiritual and deeply personal work that is not understood by simply looking at the images. Creation, for him, is not a controlled act but an experience to inhabit. “People may think the artist has created easily,” he says, “in fact, it is a deep work of the spirit. Everything I produce comes from what I store in my subconscious.”

His paintings are the materialization of the immaterial, the translation of internal impressions into visual language. If there is a theme, it is just a thread that helps him focus. Only after a painting is complete does he discover it. Standing before the canvas, he “communicates” with it. This exchange



Méné, *Genesis* (detail), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 47 x 71 in.

between artwork and artist allows him to listen—to the colors, the shapes, the composition—so that he can decipher it. The title will then come to him instinctively.

Take *Genesis*, for instance—one of the paintings in this exhibit. When Méné stepped back from the canvas, he noticed the dominance of green and the emergence of hybrid, imaginary forms—echoes of the marine world, of earth's flora and fauna, of the human figure who appears as both guardian and master of these realms. The work evoked a sense of origins, conjuring the essential role of nature in the birth of the universe. While contemplating it, the title came naturally to him.

Sometimes, while in dialogue with his work, a short poem will surface. Méné does not call himself a poet, but rather an artist who writes—just as he paints—channeling, responding, guided by feeling more than form.



Examples of Méné's work from the phases *Genesis*, *La Traversée du Désert*, and *Boribana* (clockwise from top left).

Opposite: Méné, *La Cité Radieuse* (The Radiant City) (detail), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 47 x 39 in.

Méné has known loss, adversity, and the weight of responsibility—experiences that shaped not only his inner life but also the evolution of his art. Over time, his work has moved through distinct phases, each one bearing the imprint of what he was living. He named them *Genesis*, *La Traversée du Désert* (Desert Crossing), and *Boribana* (End of the Race, in Malinké). *Genesis* designated a time of beginnings, of raw discovery. *La Traversée du Désert* was a time of trial, sacrifice, and resilience. *Boribana* marked a turning point—the close of one cycle and the opening of another, guided by love and renewal. Today, *La Cité Radieuse* offers a vision of harmony, light, and possibility.

Méné's art reflects joy, peace, positivity. It exudes an optimistic energy. The colors are bright and the compositions airy. Gentle figures—part human, part animal, part vegetal—float on richly layered backgrounds. Dots, lines, and signs create paths like ancient traces. Although inspired by body adornments—beads, body painting, scarifications—they become metaphors for thought, connection, and passage through time.



Jena



“People may think the artist has created easily” he says, “in fact, it is a deep work of the spirit. Everything I produce comes from what I store in my subconscious.”

This vision of lightness and harmony is carried not only in subject and form, but also in the materials and gestures that shape Méné’s work. After discovering rock art, Méné began working with natural pigments—clay, sand, coal powder, bark, and kola nut juice—alongside kaolin, a fine white clay traditionally used in African rituals and artistic practices. With kaolin, he could invoke light, texture, and spirituality all at once. However, practical challenges—such as fragility during transport—eventually led him to pause its use. Still, the “kaolin effect” remains. Even in the works presented in this exhibition, where acrylic paint is used on the canvas, he simulates the luminosity and tactile depth of kaolin through texture and muted vibrancy. The result is a softness that radiates emotional depth. To achieve his unique surface effects, Méné uses not only brushes but also tools he fashions himself—bristles from brooms, carved twigs, his own fingers.

Méné’s work offers the viewer more than an image; it offers an experience. Rooted in ancestral traces and shaped by a contemporary vision, his paintings create a space for reflection, calm, and quiet connection. Their softness and gentle energy invite us to slow down, to feel rather than interpret, and to bring forth the best in ourselves. In this encounter, we are reminded of what endures—and we leave enriched and uplifted.

Genesis

By Sylvain Sankalé

Art Critic

Former President of the Dakar Biennale

Méné returns to us with a very coherent collection of medium to large canvases, painted in acrylic with vibrant colors and protozoan shapes.

The years go by—he continues his path, without unnecessary noise, but with determination and talent.

He has showcased his works around the world for twenty-five years, from Abidjan to Paris, Luxembourg to Dakar, including *Isle sur la Sorgue*, and his success has never affected his composure.

His emotions are reserved for painting, which embodies the full expression of his personality, much more troubled than it appears.

The painted work constitutes the essence, if not the exclusivity, of his production, and he has managed to renew his style without ever losing his identity or signature.

While his technique is continually renewed through exploration, it leans increasingly toward a streamlined treatment of support and paint.

The peculiarity of his work is that it is autonomous, in that it does not follow any of the currents of contemporary painting, whether from Africa or elsewhere.

One can evoke Miró or Hieronymus Bosch because one experiences a kind of dizziness at the sight of his work with these forms that are neither human nor animal, but which, nonetheless, are clearly endowed with a certain autonomy and identity.

The human figure tends to disappear from his canvases or at least has ceased to be the main subject.

Besides, is there a subject at all in these highly meticulous, highly detailed works, where the brush engages in technical feats that clearly reflect the mastery of the artist?

The composition of the works is surprising; indeed they give the

impression of no composition at all.

A strong feeling of freedom that is nonetheless neither chaotic nor disorganized.

The palpable fantasy of the artist who expresses his spontaneity and wanderings.

And yet, each work, taken individually or collectively, tells his story, even if it is not easy to decipher.

The titles of the works do not help much, as the link between the title and the artist's colorful vision is tenuous.

Méné appeals to our sensitivity, to our ability to enter his work as if it were some magical machine that fascinates children, those corridors where funhouse mirrors and bold, psychedelic lights create the illusion of having changed planets, changed universes, and changed dimensions.

The titles of the paintings, while not particularly helpful in understanding their meaning, play with our imagination and our capacity for transposition.

Beauty of the Soul, Duality, The Radiant City, The Sibyl of the Times—many titles that increase our perplexity by further soliciting our capacities for imagination and vision.

For the artist, hiding behind his canvases, plays with us and plays us against our constant need for references and safe havens.

We must let go, cross to the other side of the mirror, and no longer feel the slightest surprise at finding ourselves facing a phoenix or a “traveling” bird.

It is the great strength of the painter to confront us with the world he has created, far from everything and everyone, without giving us any indications or user manuals.

Make sense of that if you can!

Let us go with the flow, let us be carried by this seaweed that dances to the rhythm of marine currents, graceful and colorful, let us release our grip, let's not try to rationalize things or beings.

The enchanter will lead us safely to the end of his dreams and we will take great pleasure in it.



THE ART



OF MÉNÉ

Méné





Dualité

Je suis l'éclair et le silence,
l'instinct brut, la résistance.
Lumière en lutte avec la nuit,
paix et chaos mêlés aussi.
Entre deux pôles je vacille,
mais c'est là que mon être scintille.

Duality

*I am lightning and silence,
raw instinct, resistance.
Light wrestling with night,
peace and chaos within.
Between two poles I sway,
but there, my being shines.*

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Méné, *Dualité* (Duality), 2025. Acrylic on canvas,
43 x 43 in.

La Saison des Amours

Un frisson court sur les jardins en fleurs,
les cœurs s'éveillent, ivres de douceur.
Chaque regard devient un détour
vers l'éternelle saison des amours.

The Season of Love

*A shiver runs through flowering gardens,
hearts awaken, drunk with sweetness.
Every glance becomes a detour
toward the eternal season of love.*



Méné, *La Saison des Amours* (The Season of Love), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 in.





Genesis

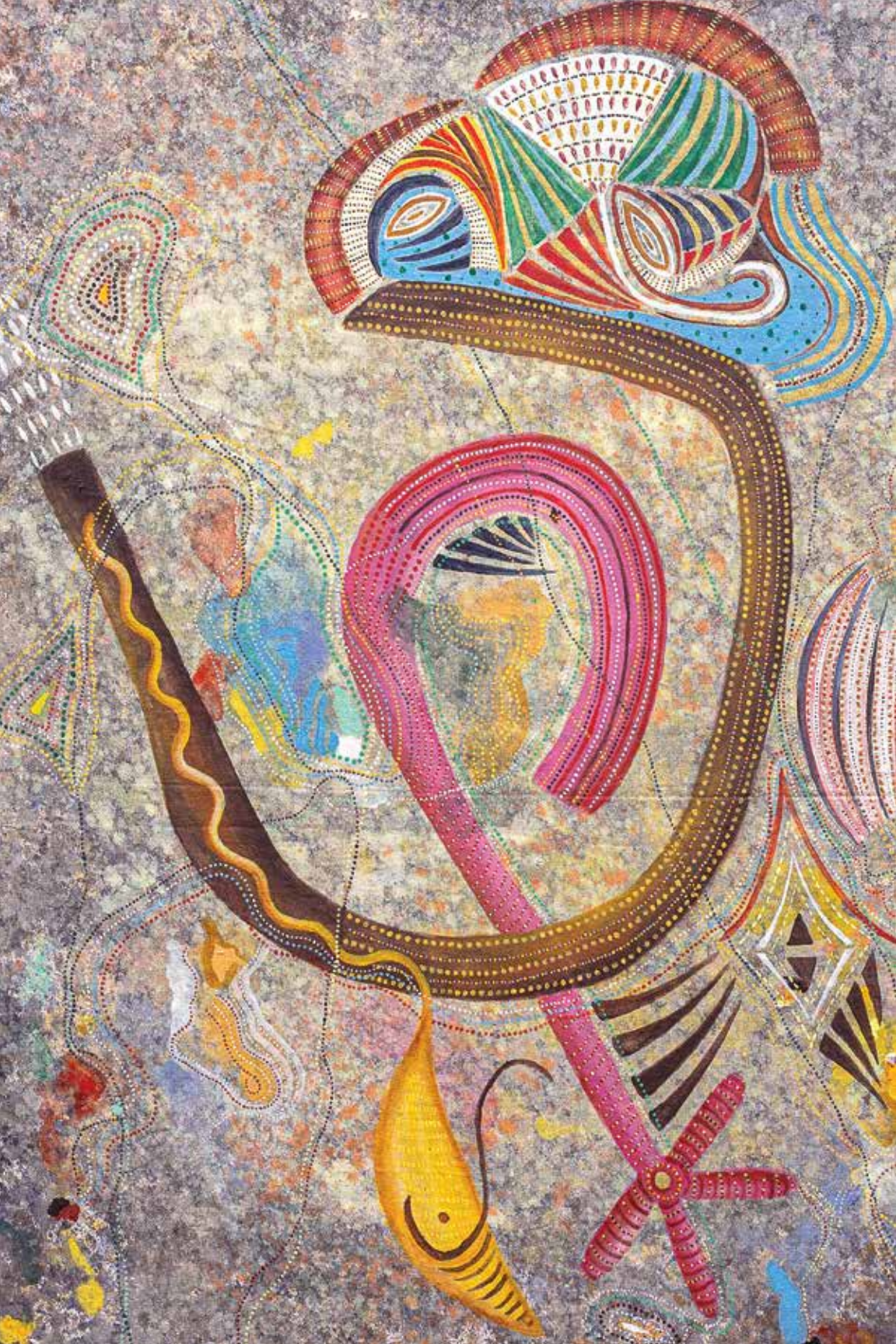
D'un vide ancien jaillit un souffle premier,
invisible flamme guidant les êtres épars.
Il unit l'homme, la bête et la terre vivante,
au cœur d'un monde où chantent astres, vents et lumière,
tissant l'espoir d'une harmonie nouvelle.

Genesis

*From an ancient void bursts forth a primal breath,
an invisible flame guiding scattered beings.
It unites man, beast, and living earth
at the heart of a world where stars, winds, and light sing,
weaving the hope of a new harmony.*



Méné, *Regards Croisés 1* (Crossed Perspectives 1), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 26 x 26 in.





Évasion Nuptiale

Le ciel s'ouvre en silence,
portant nos coeurs avec aisance,
dépouillés de tout serment.
Loin du monde et de la chair,
l'amour devient lumière et prière.

Nuptial Escape

*The sky opens in silence,
gently lifting our hearts,
stripped of every oath.
Far from earth and flesh
love becomes light and prayer.*

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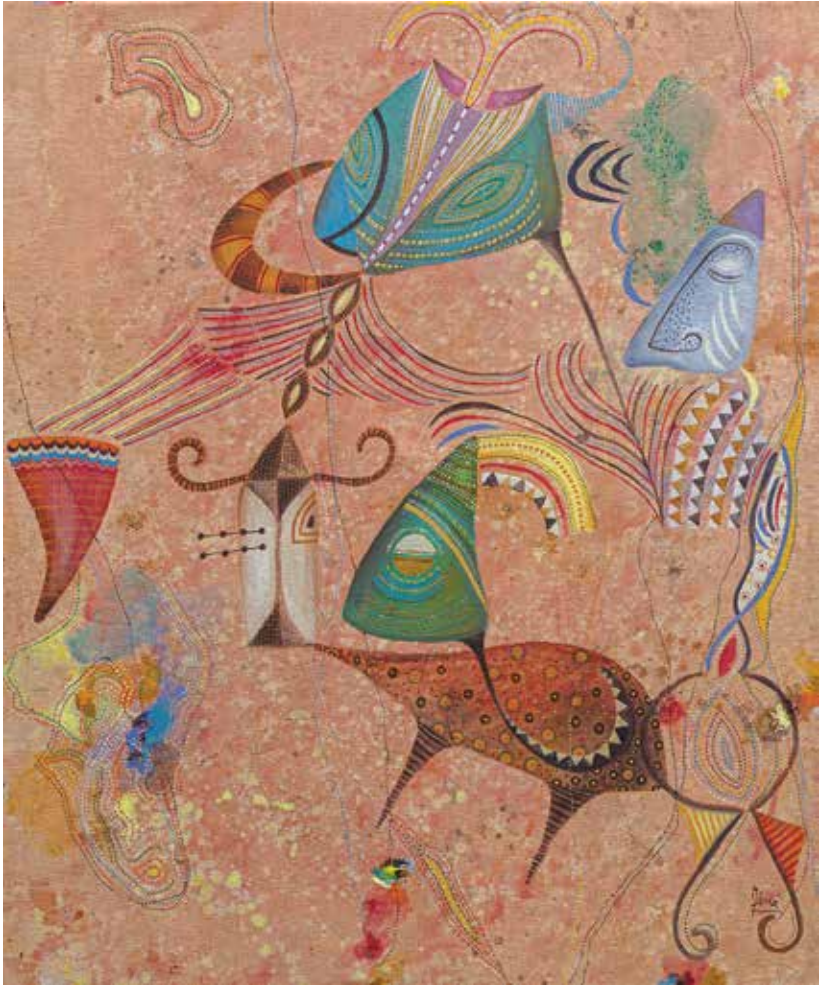
La Cité Radieuse

Dans le creux d'un rêve, elle s'élève,
clarté sculptée entre terre et ciel.
Chaque mur murmure un espoir,
chaque fenêtre regarde l'infini.
C'est une ville née d'une vision,
où l'homme marche dans la lumière,
porté par le désir simple
de vivre en paix.

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The Radiant City

*In the depth of a dream, it rises,
light sculpted between earth and sky.
Each wall whispers a hope,
each window gazes the infinite.
It is a city born of a vision,
where man walks in light,
carried by the simple desire
to live in peace.*



Méné, *La Cité Radieuse* (The Radiant City), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 47 x 39 in.





Flora

La Beauté de l'Âme

Elle ne brille pas comme l'or ou la flamme,
mais dans le silence, éclaire une âme.
Douce lueur au cœur des jours sans nom,
la beauté de l'âme est pure intention.

The Beauty of the Soul

*It doesn't glow like gold or fire, but
in silence lights a soul.
A gentle glimmer in nameless days,
the beauty of the soul is pure intent.*



Méné, *Étoile Solaire* (Solar Star), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 26 x 26 in.



Méné, *Le Chant du Phénix* (Song of the Phoenix), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 43 in.

Le Chant du Phénix

Je tombe en cendres,
mais jamais ne meurs.
Du feu naît ma splendeur.
Un cri fend l'obscur.
Aux rythmiques battements de mes ailes,
je suis l'éternel recommencement.

Song of the Phoenix

*I fall to ashes,
but never die.
From fire, my splendor is born.
A cry echoes through the dark.
To the rhythmic beating of my wings,
I am eternal renewal.*

La Sybille des Temps

Elle marche entre les secondes,
porteuse d'un feu ancien.
Ses mots sont graines d'éternité,
semés dans l'ombre des lendemains.
Elle ne prédit pas,
elle rappelle
ce que l'âme sait déjà.

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The Sibyl of Times

*She walks between the seconds,
bearer of ancient fire.
Her words, seeds of eternity,
sown in the shadow of tomorrows.
She does not predict,
she reminds
what the soul already knows.*



Méné, *La Sybille des Temps* (The Sibyl of Times), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 47 x 39 in.





Réminiscence

Un écho flotte au creux du soir,
souvenir pâle, souffle de mémoire.
Un rire, un pas, un parfum qui revient—
le passé chuchote...il n'est jamais loin.

Reminiscence

*An echo drifts in the hush of dusk,
pale memory, breath of the past.
A laugh, a step, a scent returns—
yesterday whispers...it is never far.*





Surnaturel

La clef flotte entre deux silences,
un œil s'ouvre dans la pierre.
Le vent écrit sur l'eau qui danse,
un cercle brille sur la terre.
Rien ne parle, tout répond,
au langage que nul ne nomme.
L'ombre est graine,
et le temps accouche l'infini.

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Supernatural

*The key floats between two silences,
an eye opens in the stone.
The wind writes on dancing water,
a circle shines on the earth.
Nothing speaks, all responds,
to the language no one names.
Shadow is seed,
and time births the infinite.*



Méné, *L'Autre Dimension* (The Other Dimension), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 26 x 26 in.



Méné, *Générations (Generations)*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 43 x 43 in.

Générations

Un souffle ancien dans mes pensées,
des voix d'hier à réinventer.
Je suis l'écho de ceux d'avant,
et la promesse de mes descendants.

Generations

*An ancient breath in my thoughts,
voices of yesterday to reinvent.
I am the echo of those before,
and the promise of those to come.*

Regards Croisés

Je suis Toi en Moi,
différent, mais tous deux miroir de notre histoire.
Arrivent les temps où chantent à l'unisson
ces regards opposés de divers horizons.
Tends-moi donc la main,
car d'ici demain
nous suivrons tous le même chemin

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Crossed Perspectives

*I am You in Me,
different, yet both mirrors of our story.
The times are coming when in unison will sing
these opposing views from horizons distinct.
Give me your hand,
for come tomorrow
the same path we will follow.*



Méné, *Regards Croisés 2 (Crossed Perspectives 2)*, 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 26 x 26 in.





Méné, *The Traveling Bird*, 2025.
Acrylic on canvas, 26 x 26 in.

ARTIST STATEMENT

My art navigates between gentleness and dream, between spirituality, memory, and modernity. Painting is where I channel my emotions—it holds the full expression of who I am.

Inspired by cave art, my creative process is a continual exploration of the mysteries of human nature, into what is seen and what lies concealed. I draw from the traces of the past to illuminate and nourish the present, following an inner quest that leads me toward a sense of deep, absolute peace.



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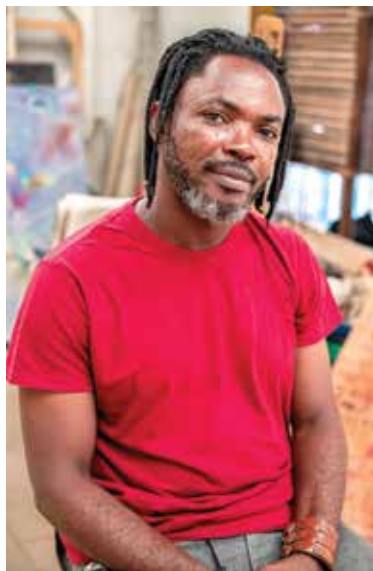
The figures that emerge in my work—often appearing as if sketched by a child's untrained hand—carry the freshness of organic forms and markings borrowed from nature: dots, lines, scarification patterns, and other traces left by life itself. At the same time, they reflect an adult's gaze, shaped by the experience of the world.



Through painting, I seek to express emotion in its rawest form. It's what grounds me, what makes me feel alive, and what allows me to imagine the future. This intimate relationship with emotion has naturally led me to experiment with hybrid forms—part human, part animal or plant—and with a color palette that balances vibrancy and restraint.



ABOUT THE ARTIST



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MÉNÉ (born Ange Martial Méné, 1977) is an established visual artist whose work holds a prominent place on the contemporary art scene in his native Côte d'Ivoire and beyond. Inspired early on by rock art, he has developed a deeply personal, intuitive, and symbolic visual language to explore themes of origins, identity, nature, and the interconnectedness of all living things. Blending ancestral memory with a contemporary vision, his practice has found immediate recognition among collectors and curators.

Méné graduated in 2002 from the École nationale des Beaux-Arts (INSAAC) in Abidjan with a Diploma of Higher Education in the Arts (*Diplôme d'Études Supérieures Artistiques – DESA*) and in 2009 with a Certification of Aptitude for Teaching Visual Arts (*Certificat d'Aptitude Pédagogique pour l'Enseignement des Arts Plastiques – CAPEAS*).

He has exhibited internationally, including in Dakar, Barcelona, Paris, and Washington, DC, and has been featured in major art fairs such as AKAA (Also Known as Africa) in Paris, 1-54 Marrakech, Luxembourg Art Fair, and Investec Cape Town Art Fair. His work is represented in significant public and private collections worldwide.

Méné lives and works in Côte d'Ivoire.





ABOUT THE CURATOR

ANNE-BÉATRIX KELLER SEMADENI is the founder of African Art Beats, a gallery dedicated to showcasing the depth, richness, and resonance of contemporary African art. Having spent a large part of her life in Tunisia, Togo, and Cameroon, she approaches her curatorial work with a cross-cultural sensitivity and a sustained commitment to dialogue with artists and communities across the African continent and its diaspora.

Launched in Washington, DC, in 2019, African Art Beats presents the work of emerging and established artists, drawing attention to their inventiveness, strength, and the relevance of their voices. The gallery supports the artists it works with through mentorship, financial assistance, and residency placements. Several of them are actively engaged in community initiatives in their countries, from youth education to environmental awareness, these collaborations reflecting a shared belief that artistic practice is not only cultural, but also social and fundamentally human.

Since its founding, the gallery has organized solo and group exhibitions —introducing most artists to audiences in the United States for the first time —and participated in the “Off” of the Dakar Biennale. It has developed partnerships with institutions, foundations, and cultural organizations; reached out to schools, universities, and museums; and lent works to exhibitions and for events in public and private spaces. Several artists associated with the gallery are now included in collections such as the World Bank Collection, the CCH Pounder Collection, and the Margaux & Raphaël Blavy Collection.


African Art Beats has been featured by *Voice of America* and reviewed multiple times in *The Washington Post*. It is recognized for its continued commitment to contemporary African art and to the visionary artists shaping its future.



I am deeply grateful to Jack Rasmussen for his vision, trust, and enthusiasm. His appreciation for Méné's work made this exhibition come true. It is an honor to be welcomed into the museum and to see Méné's art embraced not only for its beauty, but also for its resonance across time, borders, and hearts. —Anne-Béatrix Keller Semadeni

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Cover: Méné, *Le Chant du Phénix* (Song of the Phoenix) (detail), 2025.
Acrylic on canvas, 55 x 43 in.

Pages 2-3: Méné, *La Sybille des Temps* (The Sibyl of Times) (detail), 2025.
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Pages 16-17: Méné, *Génération* (Generations) (detail), 2025. Acrylic on canvas, 43 x 43 in.



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY MUSEUM
AT THE KATZEN ARTS CENTER

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The AU Museum Project Space, launched in Summer 2019, is dedicated to working with academics and non-traditional curators to create exhibitions addressing special topics of interest across the university and the greater Washington community.

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