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Julien Sinzogan, Egun 1, 2007,  
 Mixed Media on Canvas, 130.7x 90 cm

**VOYAGES**

17<sup>th</sup> May- 16<sup>th</sup> June 2007

The global movement of people has always been a source of fertility, growth and creativity; the vital pulse of humanity. But if a voyage is inflicted on others as an act of violence, how should it be remembered? In the final stage of a major project to mark the 2007 bicentenary of the abolition of Britain's slave trade, the October Gallery presents works by four artists reflecting on the notion of the 'Voyage', in particular that most laden of historical journeys, the movement of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic 'Middle Passage'.

**Julien Sinzogan's** fine pen and ink works refer to the 'Gates of No Return' – the ports of the West African coast through which millions of enslaved Africans passed. By picturing these ports not as a site of loss, but as the arrival point for the homeward return of lost spirits, Sinzogan's work offers a message of potential redemption and healing. The ships in his images are not the gruesome carriers of the Middle Passage, but otherworldly vessels, bedecked with Egungun masquerade costumes, and peopled with spirits, diviners and ancestral ghosts. His works explore the relationship between the visible human world and the invisible spirit world, and the voyage between these realms that lies at the heart of religious practice across much of the Atlantic world. He explains: "there are voyages which should never have been... the Middle Passage for example... there are spiritual voyages, such as a meeting with a Babalawo, well known for travelling between visible and invisible worlds... and there are imaginary voyages, through Gates of Return, and Gates of No-Return..." Sinzogan was born in the Republic of Benin and currently lives and works in France.

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**Tapfuma Gutsa's** work as an artist and workshop leader transformed artistic practice in Zimbabwe and beyond. In a different way, his sculptures also narrate voyages, migrations, life cycles and battles in both the physical and spiritual worlds, often exploring the shamanistic possibilities of natural materials. His recent clay and mixed media installation depicts water spirits accompanying funerary boats on their voyage to the infinite, ultramarine depths of the spirit world. Behind them, branches trail, effacing their footprints in the sand and rendering their journey silent and invisible. By contrast, in a new sound-installation he considers the volatile nature of life's journeys; in particular that moment at which "certain things that happen in life, boil over... people stop making instruments and start making bombs and grenades". Gutsa was born in Zimbabwe and currently lives and works in Austria.

**Pierrot Barra** (1942-99) worked with his wife Marie Cassaise, from Port-au-Prince's Iron Market, Haiti, creating *Vodou* repositories from toys, fabric, glass, sequins, goats' horns, rosaries, costume jewellery, compact mirrors, Christmas ornaments, crucifixes, and other discarded materials.

His works were inspired by dreams sent by his divine mentor, the *Iwa* or spirit Ogou, and were primarily intended to serve as 'little altars' for the diverse members of the *Vodou* pantheon. Syncretizing West African spirit religions, with Catholicism and freemasonry, *Vodou* was covertly developed by slaves in Haiti, and was said to be a cohesive factor behind the revolution that secured independence for the world's first 'Black Republic'. Of all the *Iwas*, Lasiren, water manifestation of Ezili, holds the deepest affection for *Vodou* practitioners. Like Mami Wata in West Africa, and Iemanjá, her Brazilian and Cuban counterpart, she is associated with the Virgin Mary, as well as with mermaids and sirens. As explored in Barra's work, her offerings often take the form of boats laden with flowers, perfumes and Barbie dolls, in recognition of the Atlantic Ocean's duality as a site of both burial and death, and of fertility and rebirth. Barra lived and worked in Haiti.

The work of **Gérard Quenum**, like that of Barra, makes powerful use of discarded children's dolls, and like Sinzogan, often draws on the *Fá* and *vodun* traditions of the Republic of Benin which have resonated across the Atlantic in varied guises. His new work, 'Femmes Peul', evokes not only these oceanic migrations, but also the historic movement of people and ideas within Africa, referring in particular to the Peul or Fulani, nomadic pastoralists of West Africa and the Sahel, and founders of the mighty Sokoto Empire. The trans-Saharan voyages of merchants and nomads such as the Fulani enabled a constant flow and exchange of knowledge, materials and ideas to take place across Africa, the Mediterranean and the Middle East, many centuries before the Atlantic slave trade began. The technological and cultural innovations, which grew from these journeys, would later be down-played by European historians who pictured African societies as isolated and undeveloped in attempts to validate the exploitation and colonisation of the continent. Quenum's work reclaims this history, asserting the long and vital role played by voyages in African history, and prompting a reminder that it was in Africa, of course, that mankind's first journey began. Quenum lives and works in the Republic of Benin.

*October Gallery is a registered charity, which since 1979 has exhibited and promoted the art of the Transvanguard-the transcultural avant-garde. As well as exhibitions by individual artists, the gallery also mounts group exhibitions that concentrate on the art produced in one particular area or culturally continuous region.*

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**24 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3AL**  
[www.octobergallery.co.uk](http://www.octobergallery.co.uk)  
**Open: Tues-Sat 12.30-5.30**