



November 25-December 1, 2004

Art | Listings

Ouattara Watts

Tracy Williams Ltd., through Dec 23 (see Chelsea).

For many painters who negotiate African and Western traditions, as Cote D'Ivoire-born Ouattara Watts has done for decades, formalism is not inimical to spirituality. Taking his core motifs from ways of ordering the universe--Kabbalah and numerology, lines of binary code--Watts vamps with a lexicon that combines modern sign and archaic symbol.

The eight large mixed-media paintings on view here (all 2004) level ideogram and postulate, Einstein and voodoo. In *Matrix 10-I*, gnomic elements such as feet endowed with eyes mix with the symbol for atomic energy. A recurring band of the letters *A* and *Z* acts as Watts's sacred shorthand, a spiritual tautology that cuts across the raw canvas in *Matrix IV*. The big black footprint and French text in *Botanique* wittingly invoke both African ladder sculpture and Adolph Gottlieb, engulfing art historical concepts of negritude and authenticity in one lyrical sweep. Even when the canvases veer closer to pure abstraction, as in *Matrix VI*, Watts's thick impasto surface, in which paint is mixed with soil, lends a humanistic tinge. By using velvet cutouts and silk-screened deities among other mixed media, the artist lends his paintings the aura of cultural artifacts.



Ouattara Watts, *Botanique*, 2004.

The paintings do not always work; some in the show are garishly literal, others too mawkish. But then Watts has a lot to work against, most notably the legacy of the Neo-Expressionists to whom he's been anecdotally linked (Basquiat was an early supporter). What keeps even his coarser paintings from becoming inert bagatelles is their effusion of Watts's relentless mixing of forms.

--João Ribas