

BAMAKO.

In September 2008, with my colleague Vincent Barré, we took a group of our students from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris to Mali. We met up with the students in Bamako where the French Cultural Centre had generously made available the Quartiers Orange, an enormous empty warehouse and showroom – formerly a Toyota main dealership, now a multi-purpose cultural centre – to the students to work in and mount an exhibition of the result. Thanks to their energy and commitment, that exhibition was a great success and I was invited to lead a repeat project in May of the following year – this time with three French and three Malian artists as participants. On that first visit, prior to our rendezvous in Bamako, Vincent and I had travelled together around Mali. Whilst in Mopti, some distance from Bamako but also on the Niger River, I had watched with considerable interest boat builders constructing traditional pirogues for river navigation. I felt that I understood what they were doing and wondered if I could find a way to work with them – I’ve long wanted to work with African timber, but in a responsible way. I was thus delighted to be asked to return to Bamako and imagined that, having set things going, I would be able to travel back to Mopti to pursue my own project. However, on my return to Bamako with the new participants it quickly became clear to me that I needed to stay around and attend to the workshop. It wasn’t that I needed to be at the Quartiers Orange all the time, but just that it was good for me to be there at the beginning or end of the day. I thus found myself with quite a lot of free time and I began walking all over the city – which, though large, is not inhospitable. It’s also a city, the maps of which are mostly approximate, having no real function for the inhabitants. Instead certain key landmarks – the Niger River and its two bridges, the central mosque and the tower of the Central African Bank building for example, provide key references. I began building up mental maps of my own, using city monuments as key location points. Of course at certain times it was

just too hot to be out and I spent these hours in my shaded room. It was here that I started doing the drawings that guide the shape of the group of blocks from which the Bamako monoprints are combined – sixteen in total. There is probably some overlap between my peregrinations and their abstract trace in these drawings, overlaid with ideas about African patterning, building sites and piles of goods in street displays. To make the blocks for the monoprints, the drawings were first enlarged (by a factor of 3) and the line thickened. These then became the templates from which the blocks themselves were cut. I also had a set of the drawings transferred onto transparent acetate and have used these to overlap two or three together to generate the combinations used in the monoprints. The blocks are cut from a semi-rigid, PVC-like plastic that has enough tooth to hold ink but has no grain. The inked blocks are laid individually onto the paper before passing through the press, then the second and so on.

I didn't get back to Mopti and haven't built a boat, but one day I might.