

# QUICK MILLIONS

Evariste Maïga  
*You can go up, you can go down*  
October, 2015

Conversation between Evariste Maïga and Katrina Schwarz.

A conversation on the occasion of 'You can go up, you can go down', an exhibition by Evariste Maïga and the inauguration of Quick Millions, a new exhibition space located in Deptford, South London.

**Katrina Schwarz:** At the beginning of the interview let's talk about endings. The exhibition at Quick Millions brings to an end - well provides a deadline - for a series of works that you have been developing for some time.

**Evariste Maïga:** Yes, I am showing new work that I have had a hard time finishing, because I had no reason to finish. The exhibition is a deadline, after which I can focus on other things that I have been developing. At the same time it is a beginning, with Caitlin [Yardley], of a new project, Quick Millions. I am very happy to see the progress on her side together with mine.

**KS:** So for Quick Millions, Caitlin has transformed her studio space into a generous proposition - a flexible space for exhibitions, screenings, discussion ...

**EM:** I like the attitude Caitlin has about the space. It's very simple. It gives an opportunity to artists who need it - not necessarily because they don't have the chance to make shows but because at that precise moment it is a way to give an end to a project and to see how it works. It is a space for conclusion.

**KS:** And you are showing works, as is a feature of your practice, in a variety of media...

**EM:** I am showing screen prints, a wooden sculpture and drawings. I like the idea of not being attached to a specific medium. I haven't been trained as a painter or in drawing, or whatever, so it comes naturally that I work with whatever medium I feel like working with. It is perhaps also due to the fact that I studied visual communication in Geneva before I did my Masters at Goldsmiths, perhaps that is where that flexibility comes from. I don't have any craft, except maybe the craft of using several mediums. In one way I am very limited and at the same time not. I take the opportunity from each project to improve the way I do something, to learn something and to discover a new way to make the work exist. That is the most important thing. An example, for Zeal in a glass container (2011), I found a company to make the glass vessel. It was a process of meeting with them, showing them my sketches and working with their technician. I like the idea that I'm not in control of everything.

**KS:** Zeal?

**EM:** Zeal, as in exaggerated commitment. It was a way of making something tangible that is not tangible, or an attempt at any rate. I would also describe it as an attempt to challenge things and to imagine things displaced into different contexts and performing different functions. I like the idea of contingency, of things not standing still; things shouldn't be fixed or set. Playing with that is fun and allows me some kind of freedom.

**KS:** That also sounds like you are describing your embrace of multiple mediums ... Is that choice also about 'play'?

**EM:** I don't really have a choice but to do things the way I do. Because my practice is not based on any particular medium, the project I want to develop comes first, then comes the medium that I need to use to translate my idea into reality. Sometimes they come together very quickly. I also get bored very easily; I cannot see myself working with the same medium over and over again. I just can't - even if I had the skills.

**KS:** And the name of the exhibition, 'You can go up, you can go down', what does that refer to?

**EM:** It is the name of the wooden sculpture I am creating for the exhibition. A flight of stairs. For months I have been collecting found wood on the street - collecting it and storing it in my studio; I will build the structure in the exhibition space, cutting down the panels and creating stairs that go up on one side and down on the other. It is a simple gesture, it is a comment on life, you can be up, you can be down - no matter what you try to do, no matter how much you try to control things, things are always in motion.

**KS:** You are also showing works on paper ...

**EM:** I made drawings on carbon paper, but for the exhibition I am printing the scans of the drawings on plaster-board. I first thought of showing the drawings on the carbon paper, but because of issues of conservation and so on, I found this alternative. Initially I liked the idea of using the carbon paper as the final material for the drawing, which is not its normal function. It's supposed to be a step toward something, not an end in its own right. I liked this displacement, which keeps the project mobile and gives the idea that it's not finished. This idea of permanent movement in the work is interesting to me. Now that it is not presented on carbon paper any more I'm not sure if that meaning holds, but the drawings themselves also have a discourse: I have drawn the faces of movie characters at a moment of being surprised. I stopped the image at the precise moment of their surprise encounter and have illustrated their encounter with the unknown. I have also been making drawings of plumbing tools.

**KS:** What is the significance of isolating these particular cinematic moments, and what was your source material?

**EM:** The images are from movies that I like. The first moments I captured are from the 1952 movie *Singing in the Rain*, directed by Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen. Drawn to these moments of surprise, I decided to find more in other movies. I started selecting movies that potentially had such scenes and Science-Fiction movies are good for that. I like the idea of science fiction in its proposal of the possibility of something that goes further than what already exists or / a different reality - it goes with my proposition about displacing things and making them do something different.

Isolating these moments is an attempt to materialise a concept or a feeling that has been part of my practice for a while now. The encounter with the unknown defines a moment of fragility that can take over your senses and leave you without a response, or it can be seen as an opportunity to surpass oneself and create something out of the moment.

**KS:** Are you a movie fan? What is your favourite film?

**EM:** I can watch movies endlessly. I am a real fan of stories. I cannot really tell you what my favourite movie is; movies such as *The Violin* (2005) by Francisco Vargas; *Stalker* (1979) by Andrei Tarkovsky and *La Strada* (1954) by Federico Fellini are amongst my favourites but my list is just too long!

**KS:** And why were you looking at plumbing tools?

**EM:** Because we don't care about them; because they don't have any importance to most people and I am interested in interrogating that. Are they really meaningless or not? I like the idea of challenging the importance of this object, knowing that no one cares about them, but trying to get attention on them anyway. That is why I am pushing it.

**KS:** Do the plumbing tools have any relationship to the movie stars?

**EM:** I don't know. I am not sure... I don't mean for all the works in the show to be related to each other in a logical or rational way. Movie stars need attention in order to exist and they are important only when they are in the light. I am very interested in that particular characteristic of actors in general. They have to pretend, they have to seduce. I would love to be a moviemaker. I wish to make a movie one day.

**KS:** The fact that you have brought numerous, and disparate elements together for this exhibition is also evident in your screen prints. Perhaps it exposes my fondness for snacking, but I recognised the imagery straight away: plantain chip packets!

**EM:** Yes, there are three images: Slightly salted, No salt and Mild chilli flavour, and I have removed all the text and symbols - related to the actual product. I kept only minimal detail of the original packaging.

**KS:** The package designs also bring to mind flags...

**EM:** They are the cliché colours of African countries. It is about taking something out of context - an industrial product that is not meant to be presented as a form of art and trying to question that and present it as something more powerful than it is. It is also a cultural thing [Evariste was born in Togo, West Africa], but I prefer speaking through abstraction. I think speaking too passionately - too directly - is not for me that efficient or interesting. Abstraction is a way to address different things I observe in society and in contemplation of cultural identity. The work is sited somewhere between art and design and it also questions that position.

**KS:** The direct graphic power of this screen print series leads me to think a wonderful work of yours from 2012, *Tape Entirely Unrolled*, in which black and yellow hazard tape extends across the gallery space.

**EM:** Yes, the hazard tape usually functions to stop you looking at something, it now becomes the object you have to look at!

**KS:** Were you tempted to do live performance in the space?

**EM:** No, I don't think I will ever do live performance. The two videos I made [Not standing still and Improvisation, pain and joy, both 2012] have been quite successful and people are expecting me to do it again, and while I might make more videos, I don't think I'll perform or put myself in front of the camera again. The fact that the two videos are so loaded in terms of origins, culture, clichés... I really don't want the work to always be that. It's not the path I want to take.

**KS:** Hence your preference for abstraction and concern for speaking too directly to a subject ...

**EM:** I guess it was a kind of therapy as well - to see if I could put myself in that position and get out safe. This exhibition I am doing now is for me a sign that my practice can escape that and can do something different. Gaining some distance from that work is very important.

**KS:** How do you know when a work is finished?

**EM:** When you decide it is finished. For me, you go through different processes when you make the work and at some point the work does what you expect it to do. Then it is about details - how do you present it and so on. And most of the time the way I present it plays an important role; so it's about when the work starts doing its job and when I decide it's over.

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