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**Author(s)**

Michael Richardson

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**About the author(s)**

is Visiting Fellow at Goldsmiths University of London and has published widely, especially on Surrealism.

Cover image: **Fig. 2** Installation view of *Hervé Télémaque: A Hopscotch of the Mind* at Serpentine, London, 2021. (Courtesy Serpentine, London; photograph Hugo Glendinning).

# Hervé Télémaque: A Hopscotch of the Mind

by Michael Richardson • 02.12.2021

*A Hopscotch of the Mind* at Serpentine, London, is the first retrospective of the Haitian-French painter Hervé Télémaque (b.1937) to be held in Britain **FIG. 1 FIG. 2.**<sup>1</sup> It has been a long time coming, as Télémaque has been recognised internationally as a major artist for the past sixty years. When approaching his works, the viewer may at first be disconcerted by the array of images and the personal and social references that they contain. However, be assured: Télémaque is the most undogmatic of artists, giving viewers ample space to find a point of entry and establish their own interpretations; one does not need to search for hidden meanings. Indeed, the works are so rich and complex that to do so would likely only lead to frustration.

The artist has, however, given us some pointers that provide a starting point for our exploration – one of which is the exhibition's title. Hopscotch is a game with strict rules of inclusion and exclusion: one must step on this square and not that one and, above all, not encroach on the cracks between them, while pursuing the trajectory of a stone. The idea of a 'hopscotch of the mind' might also be a reference to the novel *Rayuela (Hopscotch)*; 1963) by the Argentinean author Julio Cortázar, which similarly utilises the child's game for a psychological exploration. Like Cortázar, Télémaque utilises jazz rhythms and a fragmentary narrative structure that turns back on itself. In so doing, his work sets unanswerable questions and leaves viewers to find their own pathways through it.

Télémaque travelled to New York in 1957 to study at the Art Students League, but in 1961, due to the discrimination he encountered, he chose to move to Paris, where he has remained since and has also taken French nationality. Although he was initially inspired by Abstract Expressionism, he soon turned against it and began to establish a personal style utilising some of the techniques of Pop art – inspired especially by the comic book art and '*ligne claire*' ('clean line') of the Belgian cartoonist Hergé, the creator of *The Adventures of Tintin*. If Télémaque's work may appear to the viewer to belong to the lineage of Pop art, however, this association is superficial, since it is informed by a quite

different critical sensibility, one that is marked by his awareness of ethnocentric Western sociopolitical attitudes, as well as the ways that those attitudes are inscribed within art traditions.

He seems, indeed, to have taken to heart Groucho Marx's quip about not belonging to any club that would have him as a member, as he appears to have sought to defy any attempt to pin him down either as an artist or a person. For instance, even though the Haitian experience permeates his images in subtle ways, Télémaque's work confounds stereotypical ideas: evocations of Vodou scenes or rituals are singularly absent and anything 'exotic' is eschewed. His strongest intellectual affinities lie with Surrealism, whereas artistically, they lie with the Narrative Figuration movement, which he helped to establish in the early 1960s and that flourished until the 1970s.

Narrative Figuration drew upon Pop art but, as the name implies, it introduced a narrative element. This characterises Télémaque's approach, along with an informed critical attitude that foregrounds the everyday as the arena of artistic endeavour. It should, however, be said that although he helped to initiate this movement, he stands apart from it in so far as the narrative elements of his work are fragmented and opaque, refusing any symbolic or other interpretation – again, in many ways, like the stories of Cortázar. The artist's connection to Surrealism is more complex. Télémaque was welcomed into the Surrealist circle when he arrived in Paris and his work is very much in tune with that of others associated with the movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, notably Alberto Gironella (1929–99), Jorge Camacho (1934–2011), Jean-Claude Silbermann (b.1935) and Jean Terrossian (b.1931), all of whom explored, in very different ways, the uses of narrative in artistic creation. The fact that three of these artists came from countries outside of Europe – Gironella from Mexico, Camacho from Cuba and Terrossian from Armenia – and brought with them a critical approach to Western art, no doubt also contributed to a certain feeling of complicity between them. Even so, Télémaque was careful to keep a distance and retain a critical attitude towards Surrealism itself.

Unusually for a retrospective, the exhibition at Serpentine ignores chronology, perhaps in a deliberate strategy to disrupt the narrative flow of the exhibition itself – there is no obvious pathway through it, no beginning or end. The majority of the works were made in the 1960s **FIG. 3 FIG. 4**, when Télémaque was still in his twenties, but they reveal an artist already fully formed and in control of his medium.

Notwithstanding his lack of dogmatism, Télémaque remains a highly political artist, and in order to appreciate the significance of his work it is essential to foreground it against certain political events that occurred during his formative years. 1957, the year he left his homeland, was a momentous one in the country's history. Following a campaign manipulated by the army and the United States, the notorious François Duvalier (Papa Doc) was elected President of Haiti. Twenty years of brutal dictatorship followed and Télémaque did not return to the island until the fall of the Duvalier dynasty in 1986.

In 1961 an invasion of Cuba, covertly financed and directed by the United States government, failed, and in 1962 the discovery of nuclear missiles on Cuba led to a military stand-off, leaving the world on the brink of nuclear war. In 1965 the United States invaded the Dominican Republic after popular protests threatened to bring about the restoration of the democratically elected government that had been overthrown two years earlier in a US-backed military coup. Télémaque directly addresses this latter event in *One of the 36,000 Marines over our Antilles* [FIG. 5](#), a painting in three parts. In the centre of the work, an American soldier races unthinkingly into a landscape that is demarcated by what appears to be a telephone wire. As he crosses this boundary he becomes reduced to a shadow disappearing into the distance, leaving behind only his footprints and a pair of underpants (a ubiquitous Télémaque accoutrement). Birds that cross the same barrier fall from the sky, suggesting that the marine's presence devastates the land itself. The painting is littered with a host of references, beginning with '1789', the date of the French Revolution, which seemingly implicates the whole history of Western civilization in the invasion of a Caribbean island.

Other political events of this turbulent era – such as the Civil Rights Movement, concomitant race riots and colonial wars in Algeria and Vietnam – are also present in Télémaque's work. However, even if we are left in no doubt as to where Télémaque's sympathies lie, his references are included in complex and ambivalent ways that eschew any didactic intention. The treatment is not dispassionate but is folded into and intermingled with a personal history that is coterminous with these events. Although these political reference points may seem far in the past, the issues their evocation raise sadly remain as present for us today as they were in the 1960s: the United States continues to hold Latin America and much of the Caribbean in the tentacles of a political and cultural imperialism that has not relaxed its grip; racism is as strongly ingrained as ever; and the threat of nuclear annihilation remains a constant threat, however

much it may have slipped down the table of our immediate anxieties.

The latter issue resonantly permeates Télémaque's œuvre. In several of the works on show, one might feel they are looking at a world that has been blown to pieces, of which only fragments remain. For instance, *My Darling Clementine* FIG. 6 takes its title from John Ford's iconic Western film, representing the period leading up to the gunfight at the OK Corral, when American civilisation is said to have finally triumphed over the frontier mentality of the Old West. This is combined with an atmosphere evoking some of the then-contemporary movies of nuclear destruction as we see Télémaque inserting himself into the picture as the lone man, a horribly distorted and maimed, Black cowboy. He is surrounded by racist depictions, suggesting that civilisation has destroyed itself through its dual psychosis of racial prejudice and militaristic need for control.

The situation in Haiti is invoked in a painting from 2000, *The Voyage of Hector Hyppolite in Africa* FIG. 7, which is a homage to the great Vodou artist, depicted here as a zombie in the guise of Baron Samedi, the Master of the Dead, returning to Africa to confront a continent fallen under the spell of tyranny (the names of the dictators Bokassa and Mobutu are explicitly referenced). The most recent piece in the exhibition, *Al l'en Guinée* FIG. 8 is a vast panorama evoking death, or a passage through life into death, as the artist tells us in the exhibition handout: 'it's death, but also paradise'. Télémaque has constructed an incredibly rich world and this exhibition provides a perfect introduction to it.



Fig. 7 *The Voyage of Hector Hyppolite in Africa*, by Hervé Télémaque.

2000. Acrylic on canvas, 162 by 243 cm. (Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris; photograph Hugo Glendinning; exh. Serpentine, London).



Fig. 8 Installation view of *Hervé Télémaque: A Hopscotch of the Mind* at Serpentine, London, 2021, showing *Al l'en Guinee (Going to Guinea)*, by Hervé Télémaque. 2019. Acrylic on canvas, 200 by 960 cm. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Hugo Glendinning).

### Exhibition details

### Hervé Télémaque: A Hopscotch of the Mind

Serpentine Gallery, London

7th October 2021-10th January 2022

## Footnotes

- 1 A catalogue of the exhibition is forthcoming.

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