



Axel Gouala  
Portfolio  
2024



## **Introduction**

Hidden behind the three thick roots of the Aristotelian poetic genres' family tree; the tragedy, comedy and the epic, one finds their often-forgotten sibling, the parody. Scarcely addressed by Aristotle himself, at least in the surviving literature, the French literary critic Gérard Genette sat out to reclaim the parody into the literary fold with his 1982 seminal work *Palimpsests: La Littérature au second degré*. Genette presupposes two modes of production that engenders parody, namely imitation and transformation, and it is the latter which seems to best describe the process behind Axel Gouala's metamorphic sculptural objects. Where Ulysses recalls the Odyssey, or plaster copies their marble originals, Gouala humorously transforms materials much more familiar to the denizens of the 21st century: Plungers playing palms, palms playing coatracks, a mop turned snake slithering away from its bucket. It is precisely the intimacy with which we greet these familiar materials and made-to-be-held design objects that makes the viewing of Gouala's works an almost haptic affair.

Extrait de *Metamorphic Parody*, Gustav Elgin paru dans BE Magazine #28, traduit de l'anglais

## **Bio**

Axel Gouala (b. 1987 Paris) is a French artist based in Rome. He graduated with a MFA from the Haute École des Arts du Rhin in Strasbourg in 2014 and lives between France and Italy. His work has been recognized with several Prizes in France, Switzerland and Italy, including recently the *Kunst Preis Riehen* (City of Riehen Art Prize, Switzerland 2022) and the prize *Premio Fondazione Cultura e Arte, Sezione Internazionale* (Italy, 2023), Special Prize of the InsideArt Talent Prize 2023.

He has received support from recognized cultural institutions such as the French Ministry of Culture, the Goethe Institut, the Institut Français and has exhibited in several Biennales and Art centers in Europe including Selest'art 2019, the Cité Internationale des Arts de Paris (Paris - FR), the CEAAC (Strasbourg - FR), the Kunsthalle Basel (Bâle - CH), the Kunst-Raum Riehen (Riehen - CH) the Kunsthalle Palazzo (Liestal - CH), the Casino Luxembourg (Luxembourg ville - LU) the Kunstverein Freiburg (Freiburg - DE), the Künstlerhaus Bethanien Galerie (Berlin - DE), the Meetfactory (Prague - CZ), and the Mattatoio Roma (Rome).



## **Axel Gouala**

**Finalist & Fondazione Cultura e Arte Special AWARD / Internazionale**

*Visual interference and hybrid correspondence:*

*objects transform and yet remain the same through the artist's irony*

Sculptor, designer, and engraver, Axel Gouala loves to use heterogeneous materials and techniques in his practice, giving life to creations that trigger a profound empathy in the viewer. Gouala's art starts from everyday life to lead us into a world made of possibilities, rarefied and full of symbols. The result is pieces that challenge conventions, inviting the audience to reflect on their essence; creations that convey messages full of meaning without putting aside irony and lightness. "An important component that runs through my work," says the artist, "is the desire to share ideas through mockery". Having graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Strasbourg, Gouala's education was imbued with a deep bond with artisanal traditions. "I do not hesitate to refer to crafting but I have no intention of creating a dichotomy between artisanal and industrial practice". Indeed, these two souls coexist in his work which is often guided by the materials themselves, by their shapes and peculiarities, transforming both the aesthetic aspect and the practical function of the objects. The artist's creative process is divided into different phases. "I am moved by a creative gaze that contaminates the objects that surround me; I let myself be inspired by them as if they were my lifelong companions." Gouala tries to extract the object from its specific context, focusing on the most generic and often standardized characteristics, those which, as he states, "the observer keeps in his mind" as the most relevant peculiarities from an aesthetic point of view. Gouala's work immerses us in an ephemeral and fantastic universe in which every element is reinterpreted and decontextualized. The wave is no longer in the sea just like the mountain is no longer in the range: through apparently simple interventions, the objects are profoundly modified while remaining completely recognizable. In Totem-Voyage, in a process similar to that of collage, a vacuum cleaner is transformed into a palm tree and the visual interferences between the two objects lead the audience's minds in very different directions, away from the objects' physicality if not for their location in space. "I enjoy exacerbating these links by applying them in hybrid drawings and sculptures in which worlds mix and where integrity merges." The artist emphasizes that his reference to everyday life does not simply aim to highlight its dramatic nature but rather to dismantle its predefined conventions and transform appearances through a playful artistic gesture. In his intent there is no pretense of outlining an exhaustive representation of human life: rather, Gouala directs his art to mirror everyday life, the anxieties and stress that permeate us all. From Michel Gondry to Spike Jonze, from Roman Signer to Francis Alÿs: Gouala's artistic references are not casual. "I consider myself close to these artists," he explains, "precisely because of their ability to communicate the meaning of their work with marked irony."

## **Axel Gouala**

**Finalist & Fondazione Cultura e Arte Special AWARD / Internazionale**

*Interferenze visive e corrispondenze ibride:*

*gli oggetti si trasformano pur rimanendo se stessi grazie al gesto ironico dell'artista*

Al tempo stesso scultore, disegnatore e incisore, Axel Gouala ama utilizzare, nella sua pratica, materiali e tecniche eterogenei dando vita a creazioni che innescano una profonda empatia con il pubblico. L'arte di Gouala prende le mosse dal reale e dal quotidiano per condurci in un mondo fatto di possibilità, rarefatto e denso di simboli. Il risultato sono opere che sfidano le convenzioni, invitando il pubblico a riflettere sulla loro essenza, creazioni che veicolano messaggi densi di significato senza mettere per questo da parte ironia e leggerezza. «Una componente importante che attraversa il mio lavoro – racconta l'artista – è il desiderio di condividere idee attraverso la derisione». Diplomatosi all'Accademia delle Belle Arti di Strasbourg, Gouala ha avuto un percorso formativo, intriso di un profondo legame con le tradizioni artigianali: «Non esito – precisa l'artista – a riferirmi alle arti artigianali ma non ho l'intenzione di creare una dicotomia tra pratica artigianale e industriale».

Le due anime coesistono nei suoi lavori e questa caratteristica si riflette chiaramente nelle sue opere. L'artista spesso si lascia guidare dai materiali stessi, dalle loro forme e peculiarità, per trasformarne sia l'aspetto estetico sia la funzione pratica degli oggetti. Il processo creativo dell'artista si articola in diverse fasi: «Sono mosso da uno sguardo creativo che contamina gli oggetti che mi circondano; mi lascio ispirare da essi come se fossero compagni di vita». Gouala cerca di estrarre l'oggetto dal suo contesto specifico, concentrandosi sulle caratteristiche più generiche e spesso standardizzate, quelle che, come afferma, «l'osservatore conserva nella propria mente» come le peculiarità più rilevanti dal punto di vista estetico. Le opere di Gouala ci immergono in un universo effimero e fantastico, in cui ogni elemento viene reinterpretato e decontestualizzato. L'onda non è più nel mare, la montagna non è più nella catena, attraverso interventi all'apparenza piuttosto semplici gli oggetti vengono profondamente modificati, pur rimanendo del tutto riconoscibili. In un processo simile a quello di un vero e proprio collage un'aspirapolvere si trasforma in una palma, come avviene nell'opera Totem-Voyage. Le interferenze visive tra i due oggetti conducono la mente degli spettatori in direzioni molto diverse, verso suggestioni che si allontanano dalla fisicità degli stessi se non per la loro collocazione nello spazio: «Mi diverto a esacerbare questi legami applicandoli in disegni e sculture ibridi in cui i mondi si mescolano e dove l'integrità si fonde». L'artista sottolinea nella sua ricerca che il suo riferimento alla quotidianità non mira semplicemente a mettere in luce la sua drammaticità, ma piuttosto a smantellare le sue convenzioni predefinite e a trasformare le apparenze attraverso un giocoso gesto artistico. Nel suo intento non c'è pretesa di delineare una rappresentazione esaustiva della vita umana, Gouala indirizza la sua arte a farsi specchio della quotidianità, delle ansie e dello stress che permeano la vita di tutti i giorni. Da Michel Gondry a Spike Jonze, da Roman Signer a Francis Alÿs: i riferimenti artistici di Gouala non sono casuali: «A questi artisti – spiega – mi ritengo vicino proprio per la capacità che hanno di comunicare il senso delle loro opere con un'ironia molto marcata».

**Sofia Di Gravio**

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October 2023





*MIS, Extrait d'un Paysage-Écriture*, acier inox, 350 × 246 × 177 cm, 2023





*Falaise (4) - Cathédrale*, briques, 225 × 301 × 138 cm, 2022



## *Falaise*

Falaise è un'opera site-specific che cattura l'immagine di pareti rocciose plasmate da mattoni scolpiti. Questa fusione di costruzione e decostruzione enfatizza le qualità plastiche del materiale, creando un fluire armonioso con il soggetto. Il mattone, originando dalla terra stessa, diventa protagonista. Falaise si configura sia come paesaggio che come rovina ma è anche una visione di viaggio, un intreccio di paesaggi mediterranei, coste bretoni e montagne del Sichuan. L'idea nasce dalla materia stessa, il mattone alveolare, osservato durante i suoi viaggi in America, Asia, Cina e Africa. Questo materiale estratto dalla terra crea un ciclo creativo: dall'estrazione nasce un negativo, che io trasformo in positivo e poi nuovamente in negativo. Inizialmente concepito come un modello, è poi stato realizzato su larga scala. Falaise è un'ode alla connessione tra materia e terra, un viaggio ciclico che prende forma attraverso l'arte.

Falaise is a site-specific piece that captures the image of rock walls shaped by sculpted bricks. This fusion of construction and deconstruction emphasizes the plastic qualities of the material, creating a harmonious flow with the subject. Brick, originating from the Earth itself, thus become the protagonists of the piece, making it appear both as a landscape and as a ruin but also a travel vision, a mix of Mediterranean landscapes, Breton coasts, and Sichuan mountains. The idea comes from the material itself - the honeycomb brick - observed during his travels to America, Asia, China, and Africa. This material, extracted from the earth, creates a creative cycle: from the extraction a negative is born, which I transform into positive and then back into negative. Initially conceived as a model, it was then realized on a large scale. Falaise is an ode to the connection between matter and earth, a cyclical journey that takes shape through art.

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## *Falaise (5)*

briques  
245 × 307 × 91 cm  
Inside Art Talent Prize 2023  
Mattatoio Roma, 2023



***Mostro***

polystyrène, plâtre, acrylique, nacre, et acier  
162,5 × 83 × 174 cm  
2014



***P.V.C.33***

polystyrène, plâtre, acrylique, nacre, et acier  
118,8 × 33 × 33 cm  
2023





***Palmer (1)***

c ramique  maill e  
23,5 × 27 × 21,3 cm  
2023



***Palmer (2)***

c ramique  maill e  
49,6 × 24 × 23,6 cm  
2023





**Clic**

céramique émaillée  
6,7 × 10,9 × 22,5 cm  
2023

avec le soutien de la Région Grand Est et de la DRAC Grand Est



**Langage**, détail

céramique émaillée, clavier, acrylique et acier  
13,4 × 46,5 × 16 cm  
2023

avec le soutien de la Région Grand Est et de la DRAC Grand Est



### ***Metamorphic Parody***

Hidden behind the three thick roots of the Aristotelian poetic genres' family tree; the tragedy, comedy and the epic, one finds their often-forgotten sibling, the parody.

Scarcely addressed by Aristotle himself, at least in the surviving literature, the French literary critic Gérard Genette sat out to reclaim the parody into the literary fold with his 1982 seminal work *Palimpsests: La Littérature au second degré*. Genette presupposes two modes of production that engenders parody, namely imitation and transformation, and it is the latter which seems to best describe the process behind Axel Gouala's metamorphic sculptural objects. Where Ulysses recalls the Odyssey, or plaster copies their marble originals, Gouala humorously transforms materials much more familiar to the denizens of the 21st century: Plungers playing palms, palms playing coatracks, a mop turned snake slithering away from its bucket. It is precisely the intimacy with which we greet these familiar materials and made-to-be-held design objects that makes the viewing of Gouala's works an almost haptic affair.

Here, one may paraphrase Walter Benjamin's *Einbahnstraße* (1928), that reading a text compared to copying it, is what flying over a landscape is to walking its streets. Gouala's transformative copying not only echoes the metaphor, but seemingly translates it into the literal in his exhibit *Skulpturatlas*, *Temple et collection personnelle*. For the polystyrene onto which Gouala has carved details from classical cast copies found in the Bode Museum and the Neues Museum, was collected from the streets by the artist, and subsequently returned to them in the window-display on Künstlerhaus Bethanien's ground floor. Since one must only have unpacked a television or stereo set to judge the weight and feel of the polystyrene replica, or what it would take to snap it in half for that matter, curious passersby walking down Kottbusser Straße during the latter months of 2020 were themselves invited to tactilely take part in an unfolding copying and transformation of classical sculpture and philistine design – freed from the vantage of the museum.

### **Gustav Elgin**

Curator at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin  
Be Magazin, Yearly Catalog  
Berlin  
October 2021



### ***Copyshop, Atlas Mnemosyne***

emballages polystyrène sculptés  
165,5 × 140 × 140 cm  
2020



## ***Jungle Quotidienne***

Palmier gantés, à roulette, parsemés de fourrure... Les drôles de créatures végétales d'Axel Gouala (né en 1987), à mi-chemin entre la sculpture, le totem protecteur, et aux accents farceurs sont nés en 2018, autour d'une réflexion commune sur la notion de voyage, avec d'autres artistes, s'inscrivant dans une actualité mouvementée sur la crise migratoire. Ce corpus de palmiers sculptés, détournés, ou dessinés par Axel Gouala, s'inscrit dans une recherche sur l'ailleurs, les vacances, l'exotisme, par opposition au travail et aux tâches du quotidien. Symbole d'un imaginaire collectif, des îles désertes, de l'Orient rêvé et d'un Hollywood glamour le palmier se transforme, posé sur ces socles inhabituels, de chaises à roulettes ou d'aspirateur. L'artiste opère une confrontation entre deux réalités, l'une véridique, fonctionnelle, la seconde plus onirique et fantasmée : le labeur quotidien vs la détente sous un cocotier. Dans sa structure même, ce mat planté et érigé, tel les fétiches aux abords de villages de multiples continents évoque une certaine puissance, le patriarcat et des formes de domination. Domination du colon, domination de l'homme sur la femme qui assume le travail ménager retrouvé dans les objets détournés par l'artiste. Avec les totems d'A. Gouala, nous voyageons dans nos esprits et sommes transportés vers différentes préoccupations du monde actuel.

Axel Gouala est diplômé de la HEAR en 2014, il travaille en volume, dessin et peinture, revisite les motifs végétaux ou décoratifs et introduit de plus en plus la couleur dans son œuvre.

**Marie Terrieux**

Director and head curator of Fondation François Schneider  
March 2022



***Totem-Voyage 10, Palmo***

technique mixte  
123 × 99 × 89,7 cm  
2020





***The Snake***  
***a.k.a. the\_geat\_escape***

technique mixte  
71 × 45 × 245 cm  
2020



***Banana Gloves***

céramique  
gant 2 (haut sur l'image) : 6,3 × 10,4 × 26,3 cm  
gant 1 (bas sur l'image) : 7 × 15 × 26,6 cm  
2023

avec le soutien de la Région Grand Est et de la DRAC Grand Est



**O.D.N.I. / U.D.O.**

**(Objet Domestique Non Identifié) (Unidentified Domestic Object)**

FR

Axel Gouala est issu d'une double culture qui le pousse à porter un double regard sur les choses. Les objets anodins qu'il présente dans l'exposition sont extirpés non seulement de leur contexte d'utilisation mais aussi de leur décor. On réalise dans ces installations combien notre esprit associe un objet à un univers et à quel point cette détermination est fragile et superficielle. En isolant les objets, les détournant légèrement ou les associant différemment, Axel Gouala ouvre de nouvelles pages, entrevoit de nouveaux mondes dans lesquels travail et voyage se côtoient, clichés bourgeois et exotiques s'assemblent, motifs ethniques et objets impersonnels se confondent.

Pour ODNI, il associe la figure du palmier ou la chaise de bureau à des matériaux ou des matières qui leur sont à priori étrangers et suggère ainsi de nouveaux récits.

DE

Axel Gouala ist in zwei Kulturen aufgewachsen, was ihn veranlasst, die Dinge aus zwei verschiedenen Blickwinkeln zu betrachten. Die harmlosen Gegenstände, die er in der Ausstellung zeigt, werden sowohl aus ihrem Anwendungskontext herausgelöst als auch aus ihrem üblichen Rahmen. Bei diesen Objektinstallationen wird dem Betrachter klar, inwieweit unser Verstand einen Gegenstand mit einer bestimmten Welt verbindet und inwiefern diese Zuordnung brüchig und oberflächlich ist. Indem er die Gegenstände isoliert, leicht umfunktioniert oder anders assoziiert, öffnet Axel Gouala neue Perspektiven, lässt neue Welten erahnen, in denen Arbeit und Reise sich verbinden, bürgerliche und exotische Klischees miteinander verfließen, ethnische Motive und unpersönliche Gegenstände austauschbar werden. Für die UHO bringt er eine Palme oder einen Bürostuhl in Zusammenhang mit Materialien, die ihnen a priori fremd sind, und regt dadurch neue Erzählweisen an.

**Sandrine Wymann**

Director and head curator of La Kunsthalle, CAC

Mulhouse

November 2018



**Totem-Voyage 12, Aspiration Vacances**

technique mixte  
267 × 63,5 × 120 cm  
2020

**Totem-Voyage 07**

technique mixte  
207 × 103 × 110 cm  
2018





***A Tooth for an Eye***

commissariat Elena Filipovic, Renate Wagner and Claudio Vogt  
Kunsthalle Basel  
Basel - CH  
2018



## Crédits photos

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