

Ludovic Nkoth

Ludovic Nkoth (Cameroon, 1994) is a contemporary artist whose practice reflects on diasporic experiences, African identity, and cultural memory. Having moved to the United States at a young age, his figurative paintings combine autobiographical elements, references to colonial history, and traditional African symbols. Through an intense use of color and painterly texture, his works convey strength, pride, and a sense of belonging. He has exhibited in galleries and institutions, and in September, he will present his first solo exhibition in Milan, hosted by MASSIMODECARLO. With a vibrant and deeply personal language, Nkoth explores the complexity of Black identity and the experience of cultural rootedness.



Photography Annie Powers
Interview Jérôme Sans



Ludovic Nkoth in conversazione
con Jérôme Sans

Come descriveresti il tuo lavoro?

Ludovic Questo corpo di opere è una forma di testimonianza, radicata nel presente, nel mio modo di elaborare il tempo e nel significato dell'essere un uomo che ha vissuto in molte parti del mondo. Allo stesso tempo, tengo viva l'attenzione verso le storie che mi hanno permesso di essere dove sono e chi sono oggi. Il mio lavoro è un accumulo di storia e di esperienze vissute.

In che modo la tua esperienza di migrazione dal Camerun agli Stati Uniti influenza il linguaggio emotivo e visivo del tuo lavoro?

Ludovic La bellezza del viaggiare è sempre stata la possibilità di vivere molte culture. Ogni terra è unica, così come le sue persone. Venendo dal Camerun negli Stati Uniti, porto con me una prospettiva che mi aiuta a cogliere meglio le sfumature dell'esperienza umana. È una delle cose più significative che conservo dal mio vissuto tra Camerun e altri luoghi. Mi permette di addentrarmi un po' di più nella psicologia delle persone, nel momento presente.

Dove vivevi esattamente in Camerun?

Ludovic Sono stato a Yaoundé fino a 13 anni.

Hai studiato all'Università della Carolina del Sud e hai conseguito un MFA all'Hunter College di New York. In che modo questo percorso accademico ha contribuito a plasmare la tua pratica artistica?

Ludovic Quello che mi è piaciuto dell'Università South Carolina Upstate è stato che era una scuola molto piccola, senza un vero e proprio programma formale di arte. Potevo seguire qualsiasi corso ed ero circondato da persone provenienti da discipline molto diverse. Questa cosa mi ha stimolato ed esposto a modi diversi di pensare. Penso che questo si riflette anche nel mio lavoro. Ma quando mi sono trasferito a New York e ho iniziato all'Hunter College, è stata la prima volta che mi sono immerso in un approccio più accademico. È stata anche la prima volta in cui le mie idee sono state messe in discussione. Questo mi ha spinto a riflettere più profondamente sul perché faccio ciò che faccio e sulla sua importanza.

Ci sono stati insegnanti che sono stati importanti per te e che ti hanno cambiato la vita?

Ludovic Oh sì, ce n'è stato uno. Il programma MFA all'Hunter dura tre anni, e nel mio secondo anno ho avuto un professore, un pittore astratto basato qui a New York, di nome Colin Washington. Un giorno è venuto nel mio studio e mi ha detto: "Non ti vedo nel tuo lavoro." Mi voleva dire che cercavo troppo di adattarmi a un'idea di artista, invece di guardare a fondo dentro me stesso, nella mia storia e nel mio background. Dopo quella visita sono rimasto lì per un'ora, quasi paralizzato, a ripensare a ciò che era appena successo. Quell'incontro è diventato un punto di svolta nella mia pratica, e ho iniziato a essere molto più intenzionale nel processo, nella ricerca e in tutto ciò che entrava nel lavoro.

Sul tuo sito web c'è una tua citazione che dice: "Il mio lavoro tenta di riconquistare le cose che sono state tolte al mio popolo—il potere, la cultura, l'idea di sé e l'idea di essere neri e orgogliosi". Cosa significa per te l'empowerment in termini visivi? Come traduci questa idea sulla tela?

Ludovic Direi che l'empowerment nasce semplicemente dal vedere sé stessi. Ogni volta che entri in uno spazio

e vedi qualcuno che ti somiglia o che parla come te, inizi immediatamente a sentirti parte di quel luogo. Questo porta un senso di identità e potere. Il mio lavoro, nella sua essenza, cerca di bilanciare queste idee di rappresentazione—mettendo le persone che mi somigliano, o che vengono da dove vengo io, allo stesso livello di tutti gli altri. Perché, come sappiamo, la storia non ha sempre favorito alcune parti del mondo, e a molte persone è stato tolto tanto. Attraverso il mio lavoro cerco di rivisitare alcuni di quei linguaggi o motivi visivi e di inserirci una parte di me, per restituire potere a ciò che a lungo è stato negato o sottratto.

La tua iconografia sembra ruotare attorno al ritratto. Perché il ritratto? Cosa significa per te realizzare ritratti oggi?

Ludovic Tutto torna alla psicologia del semplice vedersi. Se pensi all'imprinting negli animali, la prima persona o il primo volto che vedono spesso diventa una sorta di guida per loro. E lo stesso vale per gli esseri umani. Cerchiamo di trovare volti in ogni cosa. Ritrovare nei miei dipinti può influenzare il modo in cui interpreti quegli spazi e sentirti parte di essi. Per me, usare il ritratto è un modo per inserirsi nella lunga storia della pittura, ma è anche un modo per confrontarmi con le cose con cui lotto: come pittore, come essere umano, come uomo, come figlio, come fratello maggiore, come fidanzato—come tutti i ruoli che portiamo come persone. Il ritratto mi aiuta a elaborare queste cose.

Le tue opere spesso trasmettono sia forza che vulnerabilità.

Ludovic Sì, è un equilibrio. C'è forza nella vulnerabilità, ma non è sempre riconosciuta, soprattutto quando si parla di uomini, in particolare degli uomini del luogo da cui provengo. Fin dall'infanzia ti viene detto di essere forte. Ti viene detto di non piangere, di non mostrare a nessuno le tue ferite. Costruiamo questo grande muro ogni volta che siamo feriti. Ma tutti abbiamo bisogno di aiuto. Quando sei ferito, hai bisogno di essere curato. Penso che la vulnerabilità sia la capacità di lasciar entrare le persone proprio quando sei più debole. Ho dovuto impararlo, perché, ancora una volta, non sono cresciuto in un ambiente che lo permettesse, e da bambino vedevo raramente uomini mostrare vulnerabilità. Imparare a essere vulnerabile e lasciare che gli altri vedano che sono umano, questa è la vera forza. Queste opere esplorano questo aspetto.

Ci porta alla tua serie di dipinti intitolata *Francophone/Anglophone*, che fa riferimento sia all'istruzione—attraverso la rappresentazione di bambini in uniforme scolastica—sia alla storia del Camerun, plasmata dalle sue due lingue ufficiali, francese e inglese. Il tuo lavoro esplora l'esperienza di vivere tra due mondi, due lingue e due culture.

Ludovic Come sai, il Camerun è un paese bilingue. Abbiamo l'inglese e il francese, ma chi parla inglese è solo circa il 20% della popolazione, e non sempre è favorito dai poteri politici. Tra il 2014 e il 2019 circa, c'è stato un conflitto nella regione anglofona—quella che a volte viene chiamata "Amazonia". Questa parte del paese voleva maggiore autonomia, perché non riceveva alcun sostegno politico. Il governo ha risposto con violenza militare contro le comunità anglofone. Questo lavoro è stato sia una critica che una domanda: se il mio paese è bilingue, perché devo scegliere da che parte stare per sopravvivere? Parla anche della corruzione che esiste da tempo nel paese, soprattutto nell'istruzione e nei settori collegati. Qui



As the world burns, the job of an artist is to put more beauty into the world to combat the atrocities that we're going through. That's why I try to capture these moments of joy, of peace and community. The most political or radical thing an artist can do is go against the grain. So, whenever there's war, paint flowers. Put beauty into the world. Make people smile. Make people hope for better things.



There is a strength in vulnerability, but that's not always recognized, especially when it comes to men, particularly men from where I come from. From childhood, you're told to be strong. You're told not to cry. You're told not to show anyone your wounds. We build this big wall whenever we're hurt. But when you really think about it you need help. When you're hurt, you need to be healed. I think vulnerability is the ability to let people in when you're at your weakest.





Ludovic Nkoth in conversation with Jérôme Sans

How would you describe or define your work?

Ludovic This body of work is a way of witnessing. My work has always been about the now, capturing how I process time and what it means to be a human who's lived in many parts of the world, while also paying attention to the histories that have allowed me to be where I am and who I am today. My work is an accumulation of so much history and life experience.

How does your experience of migration from Cameroon to the United States shape the emotional and visual language of your work?

Ludovic The beauty of traveling has always been the opportunity to experience many different cultures. Each land is unique, and so are its people. Coming from Cameroon to the United States, I bring a particular lens with me. That perspective helps me better understand the nuances within the broader human experience. It's one of the most meaningful things I carry with me, having lived in Cameroon and other places. It allows me to dive a bit deeper into the psychology of just the people in the moment.

Where were you exactly in Cameroon?

Ludovic I was in Yaoundé until I was 13.

You studied at the University of South Carolina and earned an MFA from Hunter College in New York. How has this academic background helped shape your artistic practice?

Ludovic What I enjoyed about the University of South Carolina Upstate was that it was such a small school, we didn't really have a formal art program. I could take any class and was surrounded by people from all kinds of disciplines, which made me curious and exposed me to many different ways of thinking. I feel that this directly translates into my work. But when I moved to New York and started at Hunter College, it was the first time I was immersed in a more scholarly approach to art-making. It was also the first time my ideas were being challenged. That shift pushed me to think more deeply about why I do what I do, and why it matters.

Were there teachers who were important to you and who changed your life?

Ludovic Oh yes, there was one. Hunter is a three-year MFA program, and in my second year, I had a professor, an abstract painter based here in New York, named Colin Washington. He came to my studio for what was supposed to be a one-hour critique, but he only stayed for 30 minutes and completely tore everything apart. He said, "I don't see you in your work." He was basically saying that I had been too focused on fitting into a certain mold of what I thought an artist should be, rather than looking deeper into myself, into my history and background. After that studio visit, I stayed in the studio for about an hour, almost paralyzed, rethinking what had just happened. That meeting became a turning point in my practice, and I started being very much intentional into the process, but also the research and everything that went into the work.

On your website, there's a quote from you that says: "My work attempts to regain the things that were taken away from my people—power, culture, the idea of self, and the idea of being Black and proud." What does empowerment mean to you in visual terms? How do you translate that idea onto the canvas?

Ludovic I would say empowerment comes from simply seeing yourself. Whenever you walk into a space and see someone who looks like you or even speaks like you, you immediately begin to feel like you belong. That alone brings a sense of identity and power. My work, at its core, tries to balance these ideas of representation—placing people who look like me, or who come from where I come from, on the same level as everyone else. Because, as we know, history hasn't always favored certain parts of the world, and so much has been taken from so many people. Through my work, I try to revisit some of those visual languages or motifs and insert a part of myself into them, to give power back to what's long been denied or taken.

Your iconography seems to center around portraiture. Why portraiture? What does it mean to you to make portraits today?

Ludovic It comes back to the psychology of simply seeing yourself. If you think about imprinting in animals, the first person or face they see often becomes their leader in a way. And it's similar for humans. We try to find faces in everything. Seeing yourself in my paintings can shape how you interpret those spaces and feel a sense of belonging. For me, using portraiture is a way to insert myself into the long history of painting, but it's also a way to negotiate the things I wrestle with: as a painter, as a human, as a man, as a son, as an older brother, as a fiancé—as all the roles we carry as people. Portraiture helps me process these things.

Your portraits often convey both strengths and vulnerability.

Ludovic Yes, it is a balance. There is a strength in vulnerability, but that's not always recognized, especially when it comes to men, particularly men from where I come from. From childhood, you're told to be strong. You're told not to cry. You're told not to show anyone your wounds. We build this big wall whenever we're hurt. But when you really think about it you need help. When you're hurt, you need to be healed. I think vulnerability is the ability to let people in when you're at your weakest. I've had to learn this because, again, I wasn't raised that way, and I rarely saw men showing vulnerability growing up. Learning to be vulnerable and let people see I'm human—that's the strength. This body of work examines a lot of that.

It leads us to your series of paintings titled *Francophone/Anglophone*, which reference both education—through depictions of children in school uniforms—and Cameroon's history, shaped by its two official languages, French and English. Your work explores the experience of living between two worlds, two languages, and two cultures.

Ludovic As you know, Cameroon is a bilingual country. We have English and French, but English speakers make up only about 20% of the population, and they're not always favored by the political powers. Between around 2014 and 2019, there was a conflict in the Anglophone region — what is sometimes referred to as 'Amazonia.' This part of the country wanted autonomy, since it wasn't being politically supported. The government responded with military violence against English-speaking communities. This work was both a critique and a question: if my country is bilingual, why must I pick a side to survive? It also speaks to the corruption that has long existed in the country, especially in education and related areas. There aren't enough resources being invested in education, and as we know, education builds the future. That's why many of the figures in the *Francophone/Anglophone* series are



Works from *Physical Proof*, Ludovic Nkoth's first solo exhibition in Milan, opening September 2025

shown wearing school uniforms: to stress that tomorrow is the children. The blue uniform is worn in schools across Cameroon and parts of West Africa.

Your paintings often capture moments of connection, tenderness, shared joy, and communal presence as well. Are those moments drawn from personal memory, observation, or imagined futures?

Ludovic As the world burns, the job of an artist is to put more beauty into the world to combat the atrocities that we’re going through. That’s why I try to capture these moments of joy, of peace and community. The most political or radical thing an artist can do is go against the grain. So, whenever there’s war, paint flowers. Put beauty into the world. Make people smile. Make people hope for better things.

Sometimes you also reference other art forms in your work, like dance and music in your paintings. What do you hope to convey to your viewers by incorporating these elements into your practice?

Ludovic I think that just comes from my personal life, because I love music. I’ve always liked to believe that I was a musician in another life. I turn to specific musicians when I’m working or want to be in a certain headspace. Dance, rooted in my cultural background, is part of ceremony, celebration, and expression. I love to dance and to capture these ceremonies through my painting practice.

Your painting *High Noon* resembles Van Gogh’s *La Méridienne*, while *Plié* evokes Degas’s ballerina paintings. Is referring to art history your way of introducing new protagonists —Black people—into this traditional narrative, where they have often been completely invisibilized?

Ludovic Yes, I think that’s very important. Again, if we go back to the idea I mentioned earlier, that you have to be able to see yourself in these spaces in order to dream of a bigger tomorrow. Understanding art history is also a strength because you need to understand the game before you can change it. For me, putting Black figures within Degas’s dancers not only brings me joy, but also shows that people like me belong in high art. It’s meaningful and beautiful because we’ve always danced. Being excluded because of class feels absurd. So, in my work, this fits into the idea of reclaiming powers that have been taken or stripped away from people. It’s about putting these figures dancing, doing ballet, or doing things that you don’t commonly see people like them doing. For me, it’s very important to fold this into the conversation about art history as well.

It also reminds me of the famous painting *La Danse* by Matisse (1910), where people hold hands and dance together.

Ludovic Yes, for me it brings me back to the notion of community. Dance isn’t just for yourself—you share it with others. It brings people together.

Speaking of art history, the paintings *System (Yellow)* (2022) and *System (Green)* seem to reference Andy Warhol’s representations of Marilyn Monroe. Except this time, the duplication isn’t done through silkscreen but through pixels, which you paint by hand. By manually painting the pixelated repetition, are you reintroducing the artist’s hand into a system originally designed to erase it?

Ludovic That is such a beautiful comparison because I love *Marilyn Monroe (Golden)*. It’s one of my favorite Warhols, and it was in my mind as I began this series. And yes, in a way, it’s about bringing the artist’s hand back into a

process that had become a bit too technical. Also, it’s a way for me not only to have fun with the process but also to challenge myself. How can I capture the same portrait 30 times? What does repetition mean? What does it mean to paint automatically, without overthinking? Because when you use processes like silkscreen and things of that nature, everything has to be calculated. It doesn’t have to be exact, but it must be precise. But with a brush in hand, it’s like having six fingers. I don’t have to think too much; I just go. I figure out how I can make the pigment, this material, dance on the canvas, and how far I can push it.

Which artists from Cameroon and America do you feel close to?

Ludovic I would go outside of Cameroon to Nigeria, but this is more music-related. One of my heroes has always been Fela Kuti. He is not only a musical legend but also an activist both within his music and beyond. I see very strong parallels between the work he does and where I want to go with my own practice. When it comes to the United States or the rest of the world, I love art history, but I’m also a big fan of London-based painters like Michael Armitage and Peter Doig. I’m very much into artists who focus on the practice and the material, who aren’t trying to be overly precise. They experiment and explore; they’re not married to one way of making art—they’re married to making art itself and accept failures as part of the achievement.

Color plays an important role in your work, often appearing vibrant and saturated. The red, in particular, is very intense and strong. How do you consider its psychological and cultural meanings within your practice?

Ludovic I love that question because color is such a close friend to me. I love how James Turrell makes color a visceral experience. Painting and pigment can do something similar. I enjoy the way color has always been used throughout history. For example, in Cameroon, different tribes wear specific fabrics with distinct colors. Whenever you see someone or a group of women coming from a meeting wearing a specific color, you know which tribe they belong to. I love how color naturally classifies things. In the animal or plant kingdom, a snake’s color might signal it’s poisonous, while another might mean it’s harmless. I’m interested in how color operates in the world. But then, when you consider the psychological aspect, I love how color can influence the way you feel about things and how you process them. In my work, I’m always playing around with color theory and thinking: How can I make you face difficult things by drawing you in with color? And once you’re inside the painting, you can begin to digest what it’s really about.

Your early paintings were especially political. I’m thinking here of *The Gates of No Return*, which depicts migrants drowning while in search of reparations. The figures in the boat look directly at us. Do you feel a responsibility to represent stories of migration and historical trauma?

Ludovic That’s a good question. I don’t feel it as a responsibility, but I think it would be a disservice to my own experience if I didn’t speak about those things, because I am an immigrant myself. My parents were immigrants, and we’re only here having this conversation because of immigrants. And I think these stories need to be told.

You’ve said that you depict displacement, even forms of immobile displacement, like the feeling of not belong-

ing. Is that why so many of your figures appear lost in thought? What are they thinking about? Another place, old memories?

Ludovic Yes, to all of the above. When I moved to the United States, I had the feeling of not belonging for the longest time. I barely spoke English. I was in the South. One day, I was in Cameroon, the next in South Carolina, trying to fit in. There was a lot of isolation. With these figures, they’re always trying to figure out where they fit in the world. They’re wrestling with identity and inner weight. I love it when the work goes deeper than just the visual aspect, when you can sit with it and wonder: Who is this figure? You can tell they’re thinking, pondering something, lost in their own space. I feel like it’s the same with us humans walking around, everyone has their own universe, galaxies in their head, constantly wrestling and pulling in different directions.

Your paintings frequently reference colonial histories and diasporic experiences. How do you approach history as a subject in your work?

Ludovic History is such a beautiful thing. I think it’s important to know what has happened so that we don’t repeat it. It’s ‘funny’ because we’re repeating history so many times, just look at the world we’re living in right now. We often fail to learn from history, but it’s essential to understand it. It’s important to draw from it, because it helps you understand where you fit. Art history is important, too—to understand what has happened, why it happened, and how I can contribute to that conversation and locate myself within it.

Your recent works depict bodies in motion—boxing, fencing, dancing—a coded interplay between freedom and constraint. How do you see the relationship between physical discipline and personal or collective resilience in your practice?

Ludovic As humans, we all have to perform to receive a certain level of reward, in a sense. You perform a certain way at work, in relationships. In my paintings, many of the figures happen to be Black. And in America, Black people have historically had to perform at a certain level just to fit in, just to have the right to exist. The work touches on that in a layered way, because it’s about performance. Take fencing, for example—a sport associated with a certain social class. Not everyone even knows about fencing, let alone has access to fencing lessons. So, having fencing lessons means your parents or providers have a certain level of abundance. To show a Black figure fencing in the painting means that some things had to happen for that to be possible. But also, that figure or person must perform a certain level of code-switching and experience a certain degree of displacement just to belong in that space.

Depicting Black men as ballerinas, or showing yourself lying on the floor or on the sofa, introduces new representations of masculinity. Do you see your work as questioning gender stereotypes and imagining new, positive ways that gender might be represented in the future?

Ludovic Yes. I was just having a conversation with a close friend about this. I keep questioning gender because I was taught it one way, but then you move to the West, and as time passes, it’s always been questioned and pulled from one side to another. Within my work, it’s important to show the idea of men as more rounded beings rather than just two-sided, where you’re supposed to perform or act a certain way. No, as a man, you can also just lie down, sit

by a pool, read a book, or enjoy things not linked to traditional masculinity. So, challenging the idea of gender roles is important for all of us. And just because something is historical or cultural doesn’t mean it’s right. It’s important to be critical of these things and understand why you’re doing them, not just follow them because everyone else does.

What stories, voices, or geographies do you feel are still missing from the global art conversation, and how does your work attempt to address or fill those gaps?

Ludovic I think one idea that just came to my mind is Africa as a leading power. Africa has often been portrayed as a continent that needs help. And we do need help, but at the same time, we provide so much for the rest of the world. So, who is really helping whom? If Africans recognize their power and shift the narrative, we’ll see who truly needs whom. But all of that requires a moment of reflection and understanding how to allocate your resources to your people first before sending them out to others. One of the conversations would be to portray Africa as a leader rather than as a foundation or a nonprofit.

The way I see things evolving is similar to how I see myself ageing every day. Every day, every week, every year, I become a new version of myself because I’m understanding things better, becoming more patient, and remaining very curious. My practice will evolve in the same way, as I always give myself room for growth and understanding. I know that as I change, and as the world changes, my work will also follow closely. If I had to put everything into one word, it would be growth.

How do you see your practice evolving in relation to our current discourse around Blackness, post-colonial identity, and the politics of representation in art?

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