



The
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Six years on from *137 Avenue Kaniama*, **Baloji** has returned with a cinematic debut that caused a stir at Cannes, backed by four disparately characterful albums. *Jane Cornwell* finds out about a new project that unites fashion, fables, fantasy, and finding a space to create

“I challenged myself,” says Baloji, the Congolese-Belgian multi-hyphenate – rapper, actor, stylist, photographer, sampler, poet and filmmaker – known for giving boundaries a push. “I thought it would be interesting to write an album from the point of view of each of the movie’s four main characters.”

“To make a soundtrack that isn’t actually in the film, but that accompanies it,” he continues, referencing *Omen* (Augure), a magical realist directorial debut which premiered at last year’s Cannes Film Festival and won the New Vision Award. Subsequently chosen to represent Belgium (and by extension, Congo) at the Oscars, it’s a work about displacement, belonging and attitudes to sorcery, set in the DRC and told in four loosely linked chapters driven by separate individuals.

Omen boasts the arresting visual language that Baloji deployed in short films such as 2019’s *Zombies* and his videos for singles including 2018’s ‘Peau de Chagrin – Bleu de Nuit’ (a title that alludes to magic skin, a novel by Honoré de Balzac, and a French term to describe a lovebite, literally a night-bruise). Various influences include filmmakers such as Pedro

Almodovar and Michel Gondry, as well as the Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte, Baloji’s colour palette is vivid: neon yellow smoke. Lurid green foliage. Dazzling azure feathers.

Baloji also co-designed (with Elke Hoste) the costumes for *Omen*, blending elements from different cultures; an accompanying exhibition, *Baloji Augurism*, runs until mid-June at MoMu, Antwerp’s fashion museum. “I have been very busy,” says the Ghent-based creative, anticipating questions on why he hasn’t released a studio

album since 2018’s *137 Avenue Kaniama*. “We are building toward the international release of the film and the four albums, which has collaborations with different artists like [American soul-jazz singer] José James, [UK-based drummer] Yussef Dayes and [Cape Verdean *chanteuse*] Mayra Andrade. It took me two years to make the film and the music a reality.”

In November he and Andrade performed ‘Matrone’, an eerie, urgent track with French and Cape Verdean Creole lyrics, on the *COLORS* music channel, Baloji kitted out in a green dress and turban, a string of pearls around his neck, diamantés in his ears. Baloji’s penchant for mashing genres extends to his own outfits: the four forthcoming albums’ covers will feature him in scenes and ensembles representing each main character’s essence.

There is the album for Koffi (played by Marc Zinga), a Congolese man living in France with his white fiancée, Alice (Lucie Debay), who is pregnant. When the two visit Koffi’s family, who’ve damned him as a ‘sorcerer’ due to a facial birthmark, the trip goes south after his nosebleed drips onto his sister’s baby, causing chaos. “Koffi has the most European sound, with the most soul, jazz and hip-hop influence,” says Baloji, whose five-track taster of the forthcoming albums includes a tune for Koffi, ‘La Tâche’, a dark synthscape inhabited by Baloji’s furious bars and the voice of South African soul singer Bongeziwe Mabandla.

There is the character Paco (Marcel Otete Kabeya), a street kid gang leader whose magic tricks – bodies sawn in half, acrobat-infused wrestling matches – find him subverting and exploiting his label as a sorcerer. His tune, ‘Arcade’, is a fast-paced track ▶

“There was a culture clash... Me and Congo had a tough time until I gave up trying to fit in”

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