

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Mixing it Up at “Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of Africa”

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It is the “schizophrenic reality” of Africa that Simon Njami (2005: 13), curator of “Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of Africa”, tries to capture in this diverse and rich exhibition, featuring the work of over 60 artists from across Africa. Held at the Hayward Gallery, London (10th February-17th April 2005), the “Africa Remix” exhibition is part of a wider initiative by London’s South Bank to highlight contemporary African culture through a fusion of music, dance and literature as well as art (indeed the essential interplay of these different media in the creation of African culture is well acknowledged, with a specific soundtrack, *Ah-Freak-Iya*, commissioned to accompany the exhibition). Originally curated at the museum kunst palast in Düsseldorf, the exhibition at the Hayward is part of an international touring programme, and also coincides with the London-wide *Africa '05* events supported by the South Bank, the British Museum and the Arts Council of England.

Although reduced in size from the Düsseldorf exhibition, “Africa Remix” nevertheless incorporates the work of over 60 contributors, sourced from all over Africa and transcending many of the traditional social, cultural and geographical boundaries that divide the continent (e.g. Francophone/Anglophone; Mediterranean north Africa/sub-Saharan Africa). Perhaps more interestingly (or controversially), this exhibition also includes work from African artists who do not actually live in Africa, but who are firmly located within the Euro-American art scene. Multiple media are employed with the expected painting, sculpture and photography augmented by a new influx of installation and video work. Within this great diversity of contributors there are some who are well known, such as the 2004 Turner Prize nominee Yinka Shonibare, and those who are barely known outside their countries, like the traditional Ethiopian doctor Gera (Martin 2005: 37). The result is a varied, surprising and complex collation of works.

By bringing these disparate works together, the curator explicitly seeks to exemplify the dynamism and diversity of modern African art and, crucially, to deconstruct pervading stereotypes of the ‘primitive’ and ‘tribal’ art of the African ‘other’. Such traditional perceptions of African art are typically dominated by the ethnographic imagination, which presents artefacts that are steeped in socio-ritual context, but are also prone to presentation as timeless and static. The last major exhibition of African art in the UK, “Africa: Art of a Continent”, held at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1995 (catalogue Phillips 1996), exemplified this perception. The exhibition shunned modern artistic endeavour in favour of the ‘traditional’ arts of Africa, amassing an impressive collection of ethnographic material, most of which pre-dated the 20th century. Moreover, explicitly archaeological artefacts, from Early Stone Age handaxes to the 10th century Igbo Ukwu hoard from Nigeria were displayed alongside the more recent pieces, with no sense of temporal or cultural distinction. The implication was clear: the long history of Africa could be subsumed into a liminal ethnographic present.

A more recent attempt to present the past riches of Africa can be seen in the British Museum's permanent display in the Sainsbury Africa Gallery, opened in 2002. In an attempt to break away from popular notions of Africa as culturally stagnant and backward, the exhibition incorporates a changing display of modern contemporary African art, including work by a number of the artists exhibited in "Africa Remix". Laudable as this endeavour is, there remains a slightly uncomfortable feeling of timelessness as modern objects such as a Kenyan cricket shirt are displayed with archaeological treasures such as the Benin bronzes.

"Africa Remix", meanwhile, has shunned the 'traditional' arts, and is intended as a celebration and exultation of the modern, sophisticated, critically aware artists of Africa. The curator, Njami, identifies three distinct phases of African art that have led to the current florescence (Njami 2005: 21). Early postcolonial attitudes embraced the Afrocentric ideal and explicitly 'Africanised' art, rejoicing in historical roots and identity. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was widespread and aggressive rejection of such overt statements of cultural identity, and the period saw the emergence of the artist as an individual, distanced from their context. The final, current phase represents a maturation of African art into a critically self-reflexive discipline, conceptually sophisticated and in touch with its social identity, yet not overwhelmed by it. It is this latter phase that "Africa Remix" seeks to present, showing how African artists are no longer peripheral to the Euro-American core, but are positively engaged with it and integrated into mainstream thought.

The exhibition is loosely divided into three sections: "Identity & History", "Body & Soul" and "City & Land", showing how the process of development and transition in the postcolonial era has engendered new awareness and more nuanced approaches. Thus, there is a strong current of historiography and socio-political consciousness through the "Identity & History" section, as Fernando Alvim's tapestries reveal the stripes of the Belgian flag divided between Congo, Flanders and Wallonie, whilst Samuel Fosso's photographs show images of him dressed up as different characters, including a role as "Le chef: celui qui a vendu L'Afrique aux colons" (The Chief: The One Who Sold Africa to the Colonisers) (the same image was used for the exhibition poster). As such, it is not overt Afrocentric politicism that dictates, but reaction on multiple levels, with the complex tableau of Jane Alexander, for example, exploring notions of hybridity and fusion.

In contrast to the 1970s attitude that decontextualised the artist, "Body & Soul" still firmly places the individual within society, with the coconut fibre jacket and underpants of Ernest Weangai, or the toppling shrines – replete with bottles of Fanta, pictures of Che Guevara and Catholic imagery – of Paulo Capela. The third theme of "City & Land" perhaps best exemplifies the modern spirit of African art, discoursing around situation and place, juxtaposing post-colonial urban migration and settlement with more traditional pre-colonial rural landscapes. The idealism and squalor of the city emerges, with huge models of utopian, futuristic African cities from Bodys Isek Kingelez and Dilomprizulike's life-size models of a bus queue, made from Nigerian rubbish and found objects. Even here, in the discussion of place, the preceding themes of history

and soul re-emerge, with El Anatsui's imposing Kente cloth-inspired bottle-top tapestry, Gonçalo Mabunda's furniture from decommissioned weapons, and Rui Assubuji's photographs of religious sect rituals.

Overall, this collation successfully shocks the viewer into rethinking perceptions of contemporary African art, just as the curator intends. However, in some ways it also seems to demand a reformulation that casts contemporary art in Africa in a pseudo Euro-American mould. A highly self-conscious, critical and ironic approach, powerful in Euro-American contemporary art, is very evident, and somehow there are points where a sense of something distinctly African, or of Africa, is missing. In some ways this omission is also part of the exhibition rhetoric, as it aims to demonstrate how Africa, and African artists, are players on the world art stage. However, I was struck by a slightly sad feeling that African art is still having to conform to core values of the West to be appreciated or widely recognised. There is a sense that this exhibition has made contemporariness its primary criterion over Africa or Africanness, resulting in diverse works that are tied together by geographical or historical association, but which lack a definable sense of, or statement on, African-derived approaches to visual culture and expression.

The conflict between these two themes is inevitable in an exhibition of this type and scale, and it must be recognised that it is geared towards a wide audience, where multiple messages of contemporariness and sophistication as well as Africanness need to be communicated and 'mixed up' simultaneously. Moreover, it would also be wrong to subsume all the work into either 'African' or 'contemporary' categories, as there are important and exciting contributions that bridge the gaps. Nonetheless, whilst the overall effect is striking and thought-provoking, there is the suspicion that perhaps this exhibition has sacrificed coherence to diversity, and the African to the contemporary.

References

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