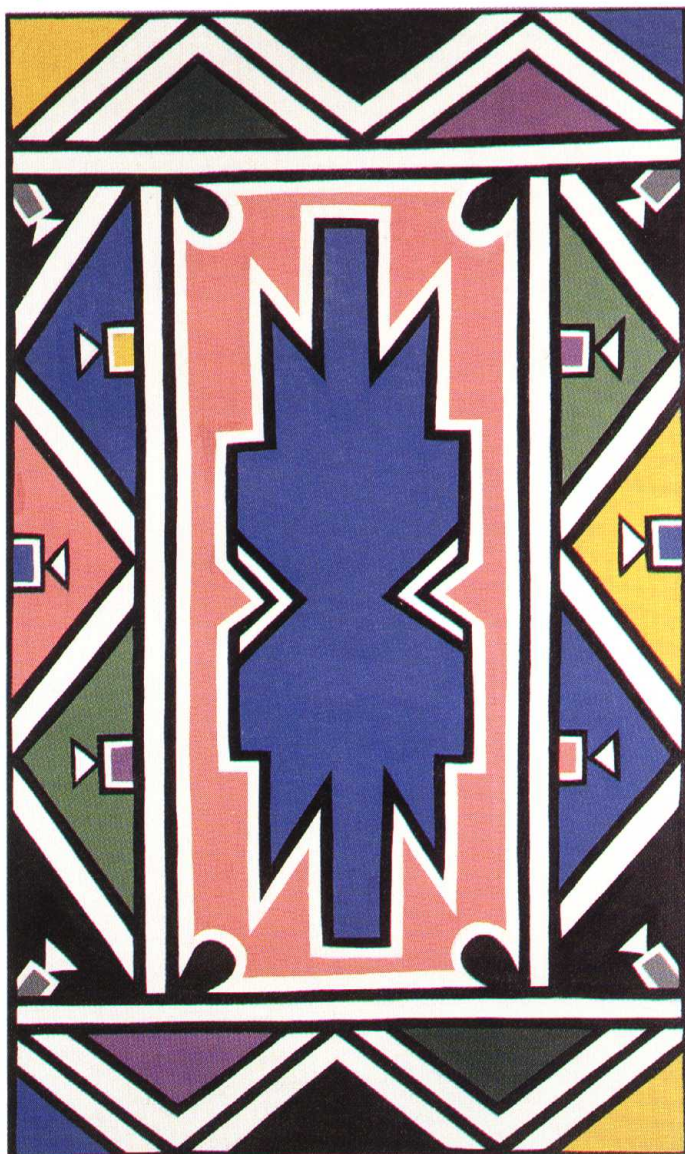


Out of Africa

Richard Dyer

Esther Mahlangu *Untitled*, 1992.
Acrylic on canvas, 190 x 120 cm.



The eleven artists selected by André Magnin for the exhibition at the Saatchi Collection were drawn from the Jean Pigozzi Contemporary African Art Collection in Paris. Unlike the controversial *Magiciens de la terre* exhibition held in Paris in 1989, *Out of Africa* (30 October — 19 December, 1992) makes no theoretical claims to a critical stance vis-à-vis modernism. It specifically side-steps this issue implying that Modernist art practice, and its offspring, postmodernism, are inherently the products of the hyper-capitalist Western metropolis. Their influence has, of course, reached non-Western countries through the migration of artists from both spheres in both directions, and through its dissemination by the media. However, this highly selective exhibition is not concerned with African art which engages in the modernist debate, but with work which reinforces the concept of contemporary African art as a continuous development of traditional means of conception and production; in order to be 'authentic' to the Western gaze, it is necessary for African art to display perceived qualities of 'primitivism' and exoticism. Many of the artists are self-taught and have developed outside of the academic art school system, and most of the work represents what is in fact l'Art Brut africain.

There are two exceptions to this curatorial tourniquet, Bodys Isek Kingelez and Romuald Hazoumé. Kingelez fabricates fantastic utopian architecture from scraps of discarded packaging. The detritus of Zaire's encounter with Western consumer culture is used to fashion an architecture of optimism, a futuristic vision of Africa as being integrated into a quasi postmodern world picture. Here, placed in pristine glass cases, lined up in regimented rows, there is a worrying reference to the usual ethnographic museumification, the work becomes artifacted by its isolation, presented as a trophy of the discovery of an exoticised other.

Hazoumé, whose remarkable display (display not installation) of ritual masks takes up one long wall of the main gallery, is probably the most interesting artist in the exhibition. Assembling sculptural collages from the exhausted shells of late twentieth century technological icons — televisions, computers, calculators — and the discarded remnants of the products of mega-corporate production — steel, oil, plastic — Hazoumé re-invests these profoundly declass  materials with the intensity of focus and symbolic power found in the voodoo masks of the Bambara and the Yoruba. Egg whisks, plastic petrol cans and kitchen utensils — the humble products of high technologies — are conflated in the sediment at the bottom of a lake of over-production and mass consumption, to produce icons which are simultaneously atavistic and futuristic.

Federic Bruly Bouabre, a self proclaimed mystic and prophet, shows hundreds of small occult drawings with borders of arcane text relating to cosmology and philosophy; they constitute an ever developing African Tarot of mystic investigation. But this work along with that of Efiambelo, John Goba, Emile Yebo Guebehi, Georges Lilanga di Nyama (who's warped enamel on hardboard paintings were roughly tacked up on the wall in another reinforcement of the idea of a 'pure' and unrefined 'primitivism') and Cyprien Tokoudagba, sits uneasily in the hyper-conceptual white-temple to the 'avant-garde' of the Saatchi gallery.

Cheik Ledy and Moke paint realist cartoon-like narratives of political and social conflict in a manner which one can not help feeling the collector found endearing or touching in its seeming naivety. Esther Mahlangu, the only woman artist in the show, makes 'abstract paintings' on large stretched canvases, with their hand-painted geometry and pure chromatic colours originating from her own tradition of Ndebele mural painting in South Africa. However, the content of the work is not clear, except that the work bears a resemblance to the kind of geometric abstractions common in modern art.

Although *Out of Africa* sits awkwardly between Saatchi's Young British Artists parts one and two, it does indicate a hopeful direction for the gallery, one of showing art outside of the mainly white/male/thirtysomething and very trendy Brits. Let us hope that the next look at African artists will redress the imbalance caused by *Out of Africa* and show some of the continent's truly contemporary artists.

But we have to remember that although the Saatchi gallery is one of the largest exhibition

spaces in the UK, and that its curatorial policy has a powerful effect on the market, both financially and critically, it is nevertheless a private gallery and as such is not under the same obligations as a public gallery (such as the Whitechapel or Barbican) to show a broad and balanced view of contemporary art; it is finally an expression of the personal taste of a particular collector.