Holding unto Own Space
Eight African Women Artists
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An exhibition of work by eight African artists ran throughout the month of March at the Savannah Gallery of Modern African Art in London, offering British art audiences a different perspective on the nature of recent art by African women. One issue with such an exhibition, of course, is the slippery nature of gender-as-criterion in presentation and display of cultural production. Some years ago this in itself would be cause for discomfiture not only for the curator, who is male, but also for his audience. Viewers would enquire into the appropriateness and acceptability of cross-gender curatorial sanction, and the validity of gender-specific representation. It would be right to observe, however, that the nature of contemporary gender discourse, though it does not necessarily ignore the foregoing, makes it acceptable for artists to be presented within the space of their gender just as well as shared descent as a way of acknowledging not only the opportunities of focus which such presentation offers, but also as a way of recognising the right to own space which is often ignored in a still male dominated business.

The intent of the exhibition at the Savannah, also, was to use the opportunity of the International Women's Month to direct attention to African women's creative activities, alongside those of women from other continents and cultures, and in so doing not only offer viewers opportunities to network visually but also to discover the weaknesses of lingering stereotypes of Otherness even within the women's movement. In this regard it was important to undermine orthodox referents and mental associations, and to show that the inclination automatically to associate African women with straw handbags, decorative pottery, and beads is as bigoted as the fossilisation of the continent itself in a constructed and benevolent antiquity. In the end, the exhibition showed that there is indeed less, rather than more difference, between female artists from Africa and their contemporaries from other cultures, and undercut the non-governmental constructs which sustain outsider interventionism in Africa whether material or cultural.

South African painter Helen Sebidi trained with her grandmother in the tradition of mural painting, that preserve which defines great women artists in several African cultures just as it defines great male artists in Western art history. For financial reasons, she relocated to the township where she worked with her mother as a domestic and came in contact with new materials through her German employer. She later made the acquaintance of other artists and gained considerable experience in new media and techniques, eventually showing with the 'Artists under the Sun' at Joubert Park in 1977.

Sebidi has been compared with some of the most impressive and powerful female artists of the century including the Austrian Kathé Kollwitz and the Mexican Frieda Kahlo. Her studious and painfully engaging pictures of mass images and intertwined figures represent, in the agony and yet strength in the faces which people them, portraits of the Black experience in South Africa. While in some of her work an overbearing sense of anguish and collective privation holds sway, the figures heaving alive almost and their anguish kicking the viewer in the face, in others it is the communion of souls, the massing together of a people united not just by the pain of history but more so by a common descent and ancestry, a common culture and destiny, that comes across. If on one hand her distorted figures and quartered parts recall the physical and psychological violence which has...
characterised the history of her people for over a century, or with more freshness in our minds scenes like Soweto and Boapiteng and the Great Train Massacre, or indeed the slaughter of Mozambique’s children, or perhaps the systematic breaking of souls in the mines and the single men’s hostels in Johannesburg, on the other the bonding of these souls comes through as well, defining a rousing, defiant spirit, that uncompromising will to survive and triumph which will redeem South Africa yet.

Her compatriot Zuleika Bladsczyck-Radziwill was taken from South Africa at an early age and grew up in Europe where she studied the social sciences before taking to a profession in the arts. A painter of remarkable power, not only do her images hold attention with uncompromising and brutal force, her use of the painterly medium reflects both a free-wheeling abandon and a careful understanding of the pigment. Her portraits are unflattering, going below the skin to reveal not only that truth which we all bear on our faces as we wake up from sleep before the make-up session, but also a certain lurking darkness, a brooding melancholy bordering on that savage cynicism which, also, we all carry.

It is not entirely surprising that some of Zuleika’s works seem like self-portraits, even when she insists they are not. In her most seemingly innocent work there is a play on the personal, like an exhumation of the private. In one of her usually untitled paintings she presents the colourful figure of a little girl. Simultaneously the image plays on the figure of a doll. The figure stands jauntily, as if in a child’s play or dance, yet one is unavoidably aware of something of a falling act, like of an object tossed away, flung outside and into the wind, sent flying with that tragic chill for an unwanted child, an uprooted child. The temptation is to seek a conscious comment here, an unconscious revelation. The girl’s/doll’s head is heavy, almost swollen, not with happiness or perhaps so. The eyes pop out of the head, bulging and conceivably blind. Of course criticism sees what it wishes, and the recent case of the ‘child abuse’ reading into one of Afro British singer Tasmin Archer’s new songs, which I consider forced and false, is only an example of what reaches of enthusiasm interpretation is capable of. But is it thrill and wonderment we see here in Zuleika’s painting? Or is it bewilderment and terror? Is the little figure’s open mouth agape in horror? Is it a song or The Scream? Do we see here a child uprooted and thrown into the dazzling and often scarring wild winds of a different culture, perhaps tossed between parents and the state like an object or a statistic, or is she spreading out her little arms to take in the world? Is there something of the artist closed off behind this little painting?

Perhaps it is pertinent that another of Zuleika’s untitled oils in this exhibition is mentioned, if only to elicit equally her power of multi-signification and dramatic irony. In the painting in question the artist portrays a languid crowd behind bars, lean, emaciated, and worn. The bars are tall and high, running from the ground up and indicating a location outdoors, a camp perhaps. Before the group, on the outside, on a special table that stands like a show-piece, sits a glowing can of American

Caroline Sebunya Untitled 1992, monoprint.
Jocelyne Santos *Untitled* 1992, mixed media on canvas.
Coca-Cola. There is, incidentally, no struggle for the Coke. Ironically the figures, prisoners, perhaps, admire the can with cynical amusement. There is little anguish on their faces. Instead there is resignation, a certain reconciliation with fate. Nothing else is revealed.

Yet, a quick glance at this powerful work immediately places the figures and their setting, even if without historical specificity. The faces recall Ben Shahn and his images of the Jewish Holocaust. This is perhaps a concentration camp. What magnifies the significance of the painting even more, is the glowing can of Coke which unites the prisoners in bemused languor. Quickly we are brought back to the present, to the highly publicised images of prisoners in Bosnia or in a South African jail. The coke, that enduring image of American imperialism and vulgarity, Big Uncle's gift to the world, begins to make sense. Is the artist summarising here, in images stronger and far more cutting than the blitz of a thousand broadsheets across a cynical West, or articles and photo-stories that show more career opportunism and voyeurism than any genuine empathy, the interesting but bloody dialogue between a beleaguered people and an uncaring world? In answer to the pleas of a dying crowd of prisoners, America flies in a glowing can of Coke and sets it down on a gleaming table before them. Forget this terrible war, it says, Have a Coke and a Smile. The prisoners apprehend this great gesture with genuine distraction, but ignore it with dignity. The artist leaves it to our imagination. There is no scream, no howl, no harangue. Here the images engage us and speak for themselves.

In all, this young artist finds the courage, and the language, to take on an aesthetic position which hardly any of her contemporaries in the West finds the guts to engage. She proves in her work that it is not the Weight of the subject that compromises art; it is the fear of the Subject.

Beninois painter Jocelyn Santos has a slightly different preoccupation: she engages the residues of culture and history, and the play of the image and the text. Born in Paris of African and European parentage, Santos studied textile design in Paris and has practised as a designer for over nearly two decades, working with reputable names in the business of fashion. Her definitive work is as a painter, though; her work is informed not only by the acute sense of colour and the decorative which her training grants but also by her interest in the centrality of text and the symbol not only in the triumph of cultures but also in the basic definition of identities.

In her paintings Santos plays on the gender and symbolism of colour just as she strips it of innocence. She arranges her shapes and colours into fields of simultaneous contrast and cohesion, as if alluding to the parallel interplay of cultures in the metropolis. Shapes coexist without crisp delineations, yet their almost incompatible spaces are clearly delineated. In most of the paintings an incision is made in the centre, almost erotic in its anatomical allusion yet evocative of irrevocable definition, like a ‘tribal’ mark or the brand of the slave-owner’s stamp, like the damnable scar of an infibulator’s knife or the mental scar of exile. Attraction plays with repulsion, sweetness with
trauma. It is interesting how close, compositionally as well as by way of erotic allusion, some of these paintings are to Asian artist Anish Kapoor’s void sculptures. The thing is, one might venture, that where the ‘mark in the centre’ defines an absence, a yawn, in Kapoor, in Santos it seems to symbolise the imprint of unavoidable presence, almost like a sentence of condemnation. The object is marked for life.

Santos’ engagement with text as the repository of history and memory is not deterministic or discriminatory. She incorporates Arabic scripts with the same ease and focus as snatches of poems and passages in European scripts. Her work in this area recalls that of the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui whose use of scripts go beyond the decorative to recollect and to acknowledge. For her, writing is not given. It is not a mere mark. Writing, text, the sign are reliquaries of the soul of a civilisation and thus carry the weight of each people’s experiences. Like Anatsui, Santos seems to acknowledge the place of the written word in the fateful encounters between cultures which defined our century and its innumerable upheavals and scars. To read between the lines is the imperative of all modern encounters, and this places text at the centre of history. In a different sense, her combination of text and image somehow seems to represent the coming together of African and outside civilisations, the unification of the mask and the treaty. She too is a product of that unifying encounter.

The two youngest artists in this show produce work of a slightly different form. Still in her twenties, Neo Matome is one of Botswana’s best known modern artists. Born in Johannesburg, she trained in England before returning to her country where she soon became an assistant curator at the National Museum in Gaborone, and later the Acting Head of Department of her nation’s National Gallery. A participant in the Thapong art workshops in Botswana, her work has been considerably influenced by the workshop environment and the heavy European influences on these workshops. Colour and the possibilities of pigment are her major interests, not in the same philosophical sense as Santos, but in the modernist, intellectualist sense that the workshops encourage. Her works are very impressive and arresting, though, restive in some cases, and agitated in others. The play on relief and the metaphor of rust or blemish pushes her art unconsciously beyond a mere play with colour. It is interesting that Matome’s work recalls that of her countryman and contemporary Stephen Mogotsi, but in some of her work there is a visible turbulence quite distinct from the ‘bleached’ art for its own sake which champions of colour seem to preach in the region. Somehow the controversy sparked by South African lawyer and writer Albie Sachs in his internal document of the African National Congress on culture in a new South Africa, becomes relevant in contemplating Matome’s work. Is it possible for the Black artist in Southern Africa to share the apoliticism of his or her white contemporary, to extrapolate on the innocence of colour? Or do we see, unavoidably, something of the agitations and disjunctures of that region in each artist’s work, no matter how much colour is laid on? Matome’s works deserve to be admired for their most impressive use of colour and application of pigment, even if these recall a necromantic expressionist revivalism and a group stylistism which strongly questions the role of neo-ethnographic philanthropists in the art of Southern Africa and disturbingly recalls mid-century workshops in Central, East and West Africa.

Black British printmaker Caroline Sebunya, whose parents come from Uganda, the increasingly significant Nigerian sculptor Ndidi Dike, Sierra Leonian painter and printmaker Louise Metzger, and Zimbabwean painter Helen Leiros, are the others in this significant exhibition. Perhaps the first of its kind, the show must be seen as part of a new development in the networking of women of African descent taking place around the globe. These women collectively reiterate a presence which mainstream art history either ignores, or characteristically patronises. Their experiences may be tempered by their heritage, but their dispositions are as individual as they are noble.

Their works defy colonialist stereotypes. They are, for one, not gender-determined. They exist in the present and reflect current thematic and stylistic preoccupations in each artist’s environment. Those who visit this exhibition expecting it to be deterministically marked with the burden of ‘the long-suffering or sweet-and-colourful African woman’ will be deservedly disappointed. These artists are proud of their cultures, but they are not scarred by them. They draw on them but are not slaves. By taking their places within contemporary traditions, they perpetuate the centrality of women in African culture and remind the establishment of their importance as contributors to the cultures of their societies and of our time.