series during the last years of his life and was indeed embarking on it when he gave his interview with Rasheed Araeen where he most vociferously voiced his predictions of a pending apocalypse. As we descend towards the millennium in a world where technology is taking us over, Williams’ last artistic endeavour was to look outwards to the primordial forces of the sky for a possible answer. As with the Maya, masters of astrology and cosmology, who centred their world around the stars and believed in a series of universes spread out across time, in which the past and the future were inextricably linked, Williams’ work suggests that perhaps the answer to chaos lay in the most basic elements of the heavens — in the timeless fields of energy of outer space.

4 Araeen, op cit.
5 Araeen, op cit.

Aubrey Williams’ The Cosmos Series was shown at The October Gallery, London, from 14 December, 1995 to 27 January, 1996.

### Three Contemporary African Artists

**Sean Cubitt**

Though for a western tradition from Nietzsche to acid house, trance is a coat you can put on and take off, in other cultures it inhabits consciousness as solidly, as intimately and as unavoidably as technology inhabits our daily lives. The three artists working in the Tate’s contribution to ‘Africa 95’ live in that world, breathe its air. Ferid Belkahia’s first break with the Apollonian is to paint the walls of the gallery black, a black against which the flesh tones of his leather paintings extrude themselves from the walls as proto-sculptures. It is an act which, like the remaking of traditional leather-work, is entirely modern, entirely within a tradition of art-making that is comprehensible in terms of the western canon, yet one which points up, at every turn, the necessity for an understanding of the West’s local and partial understanding of modernity.

More than this, Belkahia’s paintings, cured hides shaped and stained with natural pigments of ochres, earths and blacks, work with a very particular negotiation between the precision of his mark-making and the porous surface that drinks his brushmarks: a dialogue with his materials which juxtaposes, in a single effect, the intelligence of making with the mysteries of what is made. Like Cyprien Tokoudagba, whose wall paintings were seen in London’s Serpentine Gallery, but who showed acrylics on understretched and underprimed canvas in Liverpool, he allows the surface a kind of autonomy rare in western art. Even Pollock’s raw canvases have an acute presence as conceptually worked which these have avoided.

Unlike Tokoudagba, whose motifs are drawn from the voudun traditions of Benin, however, Belkahia operates within the Islamic tradition of disdain for the representational. In the most recent of his works on show, Jerusalem, five large panels each composed of four square hides, arrives at a composition evoking the heavenly city as pattern and expression which evokes Leger’s cityscapes of the 1930s. But the route by which he arrives at this almost humanist, almost purist formal account has little to do with the engineering aesthetic of abstraction as a process of whittling away the material of representation, and everything to do with the manifestation of hope, surely the matter of Leger’s art, as an approximation of the already abstract materials of his art to the actualities of a divinity which, like Leger’s revolution, is always just around the corner.

Tokoudagba shares with Belkahia a sense of the human scale of the divine. And there is even a reminiscence of Leger’s monumental figure paintings to be found in Tokoudagba’s modelling, an intimation of Brazilian anthropophagia too. But again, the route by which the Beninois artist has arrived at these solutions is profoundly different, most of all because his iconography, as rich and as worthy of study as Poussin’s, speaks of the immanence of an entirely affable spirit world indistinguishable from the material. If Belkahia seems to derive a great deal of his pictorial language from Islamic and pre-Islamic — Kufic, Coptic, cuneiform and Phoenician — calligraphies
of the Arab world, Tokoudagba adopts his from a system of meanings as prevalent and available as Biblical and Greek legends were in the High Renaissance. He uses paints with a very low opacity: the weave of the fabric shows through, and the tones are matt, almost like pastels, the images and their support thoroughly indistinguishable, spirits moving in a material world. The sense of the dissolution of representation into pattern and geometry derives its energies from the passion of representing the unrepresentable. Like Frédéric Bouabré from the Ivory Coast, he seems to be in pursuit of a grammar of images. But unlike the European abstractionists, this does not entail a universal language, but a specific and grounded repertoire of shapes and colours for which late Kandinsky, for example, yearns without achieving. In the two Emblem paintings on the end wall, this becomes clear: in their minimal palette and restricted repertoire of forms, circles and grains, they can be deciphered as visions experienced in the very moment of mark-making, a gestural possession by their guardian spirits.

Some at least of the yard-square black and white photographs that Touhami Ennadre, another Moroccan, shows here are quite the opposite to his co-exhibitors, concerned with the divine dimensions of the human, rather than the human scale of the divine. The triptych The Exhumed Dead of Vesuvius, for example, captures both the moment of death and, a major facet of this as formal photography, the indices death leaves behind of itself; if the first image is instantly arresting — both rows of teeth in a flayed and fossilised head seeming to point downwards, an alien maw — the second is almost sentimental, the minuscule relief of a child pitch-black in its pumice crypt, and the third, a skeleton splayed out as meticulously as a boned duck in a restaurant kitchen or archeopteryx in the Burgess Shale, an image as relentless as Fox Talbot’s Pencil of Nature. The indicial returns in the best of the ‘80s work: in a triptych of hands, back and feet in which the contrast, pushed to the limit,
This print and the one with which it is paired, an amazingly evocative, moist, cold image of cave paintings at Lascaux, each have a single hair left on the negative, blemished unparalleled elsewhere in Ennadre's immaculate darkroom technique, so that they take on the significance of the blemish the greatest Islamic artists would put deliberately into their most perfect work as an act of submission before the perfection of the godhead. For these too are divine and fundamentally non-representational annihilating the whole greyscale, powers into the foreground the traces that life scores across old skin, in the glistening fact of a splayed ribcage from a series called The Slaughterhouses, and in the 1992 print Auschwitz, in which the history of the unspeakable is conjured out of the scarred enamel on an abandoned mug.

works, less concerned to report the existence of their objects than to participate in the processes by which time's changes are etched on mortality. Only in the triptych Trances, where possessed faces and bodies emerge from velvet blacks, has the lusciousness of carnal ecstasy impinged on the development of the images, the slippery bubbles of saliva across the slack breasts of an old woman, the transient evidence of a visceral and holy miracle. One only wonders, of all three artists, whether the sentences of interpretation are enactable against such unsecular arts.