



'africa remix': contemporary art of a continent

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Let me begin with an apology.

An unrelenting work schedule, the sudden death of my father-in-law (who I mentioned in my first column: <http://www.patsymoore.com/bohemians/CL1.html>), and personal health issues have kept me away for too long. When I first told Patsy that I'd be reviewing "Africa Remix" for TBA, it was immediately after having the pleasure of visiting the exhibition in Paris. That was a while ago, but I'd like to tell you all about it, just the same.

It's good to be back.

"Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent" was, arguably, the most ambitious—and, certainly, the largest—exhibition of contemporary African art ever staged in Europe. And its scope was global.

Simon Njami is a Cameroonian writer and founder/editor of the Paris-based journal, *La Revue Noire*, who also served as head of the curatorial team for "Remix", which grew from an international collaboration between four major galleries: Museum Kunst Palast in Düsseldorf, where it opened in July; the Hayward Gallery, London; the Centre Pompidou, Paris; and the Mori Museum, Tokyo. The idea was this: to raise consciousness of the imaginativeness and diversity of the African contemporary art scene.

According to Njami: "The aim of 'Africa Remix' was to put together an exhibition that highlighted the deep motivation behind African creativity, and to put a stop to a series of misconceptions and myths about the continent."

200 exhibits displayed over 7200 square feet of floor. 85 contributing artists. In a word: impressive.

It's true that 'Remix' was brought right into my backyard, at the start of this year. As I wrote, earlier, The Hayward Gallery, there on the lovely south bank of the Thames, hosted the show (from February-April), but I was crushed by work and never made it round. My husband did, however, and came home from the experience teeming with enthusiasm. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to discover what all the excitement was about, during a business trip to Paris, almost four months later. At that time, I traveled with a colleague to Centre Pompidou, where I witnessed a slew of inspired works by modern African artists—the greater number of whom live in Africa, as well as a few who make their homes in Europe and North America.

These are the real faces and voices of the birthplace of civilization and what is now, undoubtedly,

the world's most persistently plagued continent. No spears or wooden masks, here. Instead, I found Nigerian artist Dilomprizulike (known in Lagos as "the junk man of Africa"), whose pieces are created from items discarded by others. Instead, I encountered Sudanese artist, Hassan Musa, long known for stinging political commentary, whose "Great American Nude" depicted a naked Osama Bin Laden sprawled over an American flag, and graced the wall leading to the showcase. Instead, there was Angolan Antonio Ole's motley mural, "Township Wall Number 10", which he assembled from cast off items such as road signs, doors, and windows, symbolizing solidarity in his homeland. Instead, a 13-foot model of the Eiffel Tower by Gonçalo Mabunda (a longtime favorite of mine; see his whimsical "Dancer", "": <http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/news/swords/swords2.htm>), welded from what was left of weapons from Mozambique's civil war.

As we strolled through the rooms, we were serenaded by seductive melodies and rhythms, streaming non-stop from a jukebox. The eclectic soundtrack offered everything from traditional Malian kora music to hip hop from Algeria.¹

"Africa Remix" was a mass of painting, sculpture, photography, literature, and film grouped into three broad yet express themes: **History and Identity**, which addressed "matters of power and authority, modernity, and tradition and collective identities", and contained the work of Central African Samuel Fosso, one of the most prodigious, renowned African photographers on the art scene since the '70s; an installation by this year's Turner prize nominee, Nigerian Yinka Shonibare, who resides in London; and brilliant South African sculptor Jane Alexander, who positively *blew me away* (Her tableau, "African Adventure", combined human and animal forms² and was nothing short of eerie...in the best possible sense.); **City and Land**, which focused on the "contrasting experiences of urban and rural life and the distinctive dynamism of African cities", and featured new work by another personal favorite, impactful South African photographer David Goldblatt, as well as an awe-inspiring 'cloth of gold', 26 feet high, and constructed from thousands of bottle tops by El Anatsui, a Ghanian; and **Body and Soul**, which considered "issues of individual identity, religion, spirituality and emotion, sexuality, the body, the portrait, and the gaze". It was here that New York-based Egyptian, Ghada Amer, showed off her exquisite images woven from threads of cotton.³

But while it was a decidedly contemporary undertaking, nods to a rich and beleaguered history did abound. As Centre Pompidou's literature, regarding the exhibit, accurately assessed:

From Algeria to Zimbabwe, similar preoccupations arise: national identity, Africa's relations with the developed world, the tensions and the reality of a rapidly evolving post-colonial continent.

Jonathan Jones wrote a mixed review of "A.R." for *The Guardian Unlimited*. Overall, he was less impressed than I was, but he touched on a feeling—and left with a conclusion—that I certainly share.

"Africa is a scandal," writes curator Simon Njami in the catalogue for "Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent". Not many people would disagree. Africa, the poorest continent, with the most terrible problems of war and disease...But Njami doesn't mean that. His catalogue essay is written in another language—that of curators: he means "scandal" in a theoretical way. Africa is a scandal because it is "hybrid", because it is inherently transgressive, because...no, let us leave it there. Suffice it to say that "Africa Remix" flails around to find an Africa that can claim its place in the world of biennales,

glossy art magazines, and proliferating theory. That it ends up discovering the same old realities of injustice and poverty probably says more for the honesty of African artists than for the thinking behind the show.

The good news is that more exhibition stop-overs are being seriously discussed—including venues in Africa and North America. That translates into a chance for *you* to see this amazing array and for a breathtakingly diverse and compelling exposition to make its way home.

¹ A CD, showcasing tracks from some of Africa's best known and on-the-rise music acts, was released to coincide with "Africa Remix". It's fantastic. Buy it:
<http://www.cduniverse.com/search/xx/music/pid/6847435/a/Africa%2BRemix.htm>.

² Alexander's contribution was originally conceived for the British Officers' Mess in Cape Town.

³ Amer's fellow Egyptians, Amal and Abd El Ghany Kenawy, produced a moving, moody video installation examining the depths of hope and memory, for the exhibit, and her fellow 'New Yorker', Kenyan Wangechi Mutu, has recently received wide attention with often bizzaro mixed media collages.

see also: contemporary art from the Islamic world (<http://www.universes-in-universe.de/islam/eng/2004/04/africa-remix/index2.html>)

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