

April 4, 2008

ART REVIEW | 'FLOW'

Out of Africa, Whatever Africa May Be

By [HOLLAND COTTER](#)

Afropolitanism is the modish tag for new work made by young African artists both in and outside Africa. What unites the artists is a shared view of Africa, less as a place than as a concept; a cultural force, one that runs through the world the way a gulf stream runs through an ocean: part of the whole, but with its own tides and temperatures.

This idea, or something like it, lies behind “Flow” at the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#), a fine-textured survey of 20 artists who, with a few exceptions, were born in Africa after 1970 but who now live in Europe or the United States.

Before the 1980s contemporary African artists had virtually no presence in the mainstream Euro-American art world. And on the rare occasions they were admitted to its precincts, they were required to show clear evidence of Africanness — Africanness as gauged by Western standards, that is — in their work, like a visa prominently displayed.

Multiculturalism, whatever its deficiencies, began to change this situation. It exposed art-world apartheid for what it was and forced open some long-locked gates. Not only did artists once excluded by color and class gain entry, they were also granted certain options as to how they might appear there. They could wrap themselves in evidence of their origins, or wear that evidence lightly, or not at all, the first option being preferred by the market.

The artists in “Flow” choose among these options, which means the show has no essential look, though there are broad patches of formal common ground. A lot of what’s here is based on an aesthetic of assemblage and fragmentation, the piecing together or taking apart of materials and ideas, including art-historical precedents.

Latifa Echakhch, born in Morocco and now living in France and Switzerland, has created her own version of [Richard Serra](#)’s “Splash” pieces from the 1960s. Rather than throw molten lead against a wall as Mr. Serra did, she throws Moroccan tea glasses. Their smashed remains lie on a gallery floor like the aftermath of an explosion. The piece neatly pinpoints the aggression of the original, an aggression with many metaphorical and political ramifications. But is Ms. Echakhch’s work topical? Polemical? Whimsical? Personal? It shifts from one to the other of these possibilities, which is, generally speaking, the “Flow” dynamic.

A second North African, Adel Abdessemed, Algerian by birth and now living in Paris, starts with

many fragments and builds something from them. In this case the result is a toy-size model of the luxury liner Queen Mary II pieced together from cut-up bits of commercial packaging for olives and pepper, products exported from a continent that helped produce the immense wealth the ship represents.

Modou Dieng, a Senegalese artist now in the United States, evokes the exhilaration and misplaced optimism of 1960s Africa in his trio of wall ensembles made from secondhand vinyl records adorned with neckties and glitter. The names on the record labels range from Nat King Cole to [Jimi Hendrix](#) to [Mos Def](#), suggesting that the high cultural moment, which also saw the ballooning of a market economy, extends into the present.

It does. It's there in the photographs of Nontsikelelo Veleko, known as Lolo, of fiercely chic young Johannesburgians, and in the heroically scaled portraits, culled from fashion magazines but resembling passport photos and mug shots, by Mustafa Maluka, a fine painter who was also one of the creators of [africanhiphop.com](#), a music Web site and pop-cultural gold mine now a decade old.

The evidence of material richness continues where crafts traditions and modernist abstraction meet: in moss-green yarn reliefs by the Ethiopian artist Elias Sime; in Nicholas Hlobo's suturelike stitched pieces based on Zulu needlework; and in enigmatic collages by Moshekwa Langa, one of several artists in the show who were also in "Africa Remix," the grand contemporary survey in 2005 that never made it from Europe to the United States.

A few artists revisit and revise primitivist myths of Africa. Thierry Fontaine does this in photographs of his own body transformed by layers of natural materials — clay, sand, grass — into a series of freakish sculptures. So does Joël Andrianomearisoa in a video called "The Stranger" (2007), in which a naked man evolves from prowling the forest to settling down in a nice, neat house. It's worth noting that the "native" in this civilizing process appears to be white.

The show, organized by Christine Y. Kim, associate curator at the Studio Museum, has a fair amount of video. A short piece called "Back to Me 1" by the South African artist Thando Mama gives a sense of what it's like to be plugged into the world when the world isn't plugged into you. A young man (the artist) sits transfixed in front of a television that is broadcasting inaccurate accounts from abroad of the Africa he knows.

Grace Ndiritu, born in London of African parents, and Michèle Magma, from Congo and now living in Paris, both address liabilities of Afropolitanism, past and present. In a striking film called "Au Bord de la Loire," one of a small number of pieces in the show to address race directly, Ms. Magma reminds us that a few centuries ago her relationship to France might have been as a West Indies slave. Ms. Ndiritu acknowledges her conflicted connection to Africa now: despite her heritage, she's a tourist there.

For tourists and transplants, can any place be real? Ananias Léki Dago, born in Ivory Coast, photographs the slums of Paris as if through the haze of dreams. Mounir Fatmi turns the

immigrant's life into an obstacle course of bright-colored horse-jumping poles. In a mural by Dawit L. Petros views of Tanzania, California and Canada — all places where the artist has lived — merge. Monrovia, the strife-wracked capital of Liberia, becomes the heavenly city in Trokon Nagbe's gilded painting of it. And in studio photographs by Otobong Nkanga, Africa's grand landscape is reduced to a tabletop diorama, a Lilliputian thing.

So Africa is unreal. Or maybe it's super-real: a place, or state, where present and future coexist. Ms. Veleko's street dandies look futuristic enough. So do Olalekan B. Jeyifous's marvelous architectural models, like materializations of cyberspace; and the imaginary faces, half human, half something else, that peer out of darkness in Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's fictional portraits.

Some of the eight portraits in the show are more interesting than others. Some are almost too dark to see; put them in an art fair and they'd vanish in the visual noise. Yet as a group they work; they wrap you in a substantial if elusive sensibility. To some degree the same can be said of "Flow."

Whether, or how, that sensibility can be defined as "African" is a question. There is no single Africa, and the continent's multiple elements change all the time, art included. No wonder artists are resisting the idea of Africanness as a fixed identity, or are trying to tailor it to something they can pick up or lay aside at will, and layer under and over other identities.

At the same time they understand, it would seem, that their choices have weight. Postcolonial African art, wherever it is produced, is all but inseparable from politics. In Africa art has always played a social role, assumed moral status, a status that even physical distance — almost none of the work in "Flow" has been shown in Africa — can't erase.

And so Afropolitanism, young and cool, comes with responsibilities. Maybe it is the awareness of this that gives a light-touch show heft and focus, a sense of thereness, geography-free but concrete, without which flow becomes drift.

"Flow" continues through June 29 at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street; (212) 864-4500, studiomuseum.org.

[Copyright 2008 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
