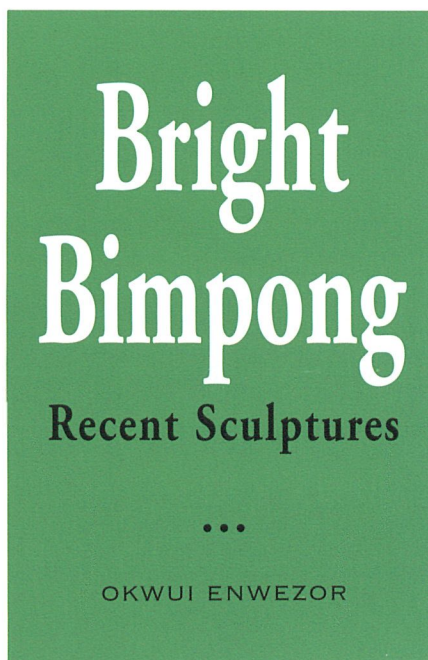


REVIEWS

As contemporary African artists continue to make rightful demands on the international art scene, a kind of problematic programming appears to pervade the terms of their entrance into exhibition spaces. It seems there are two conditions that incessantly underwrite the terms of this entrance and that of discourse on contemporary African cultural production in the international art scene. One demand is that its articulation be lodged in a terrain that imagines Africa as farce: as a black comedy, a playground where the imagination of an exoticising project comes unmoored and runs amok like wild horses. The other inclination, more pervasive, at least in the last decade, pushes a recipe that imagines and images Africa as the eternal land of tragedy, a distant, sub-normative location incapable of producing art, a location bereft of rigor, originality and power. In other words, for contemporary artists from the continent, there is a prescribed narrative that hinges upon their art operating within a boundary marked by what the critic and artist Olu Oguibe has analyzed as the “narrative of crises.” And when their art transcends and transgresses this epistemological category which brings into conflict the circumscribed notion of an “authentic” Africanity, it is simply charged with mimicry, with appearing Western yet not being quite like the West. That



contemporary cultural production by Africans must continually be mediated and allowed passage by a gaze that can recognize it by invoking and privileging only those aspects of its exterior temporality while denying its deep rooted intellectual and conceptual manifestation is the deeper problem of all 20th century cultural history.

Still, despite its lack of solid ties to any functional institutional structure in the West, contemporary African art, more than any other area of art production, clearly stands at a juncture which severely tests and frustrates the constitution of the millennial institution, for the simple reason that it can no longer be summarily dismissed or ignored as a cheap reflection of the bogus global contemporaneity represented by the work of white artists.

The manifestation of new exhibiting opportunities wherein the work of African artists has not only held its own ground but has also challenged the borders of its exclusion from serious international art discourse, makes this very clear. Of course, ethnography, that bastard child of a pseudo-science of cultural dissection was, before this era of “new opportunities” the main tool of critical practice, with respect to contemporary African art. However, today, it is a burgeoning post-modern industry that can truly lay claim to the new change in attitude in the exhibiting of work by contemporary African artists. It is post-modernism’s implicit acknowledgment of multiculturalism and “difference”, that has made a few of the exhibitions we have seen so far possible. As a signifier of great import in the discourse of alterity, “difference” is perceived as that instance of the most visible transformation of the homogeneous into the plural, the indeterminate, the contingent, the shifting. Difference read in this manner - which Western post-modernism proposes as more encompassingly articulative of the desire for multiplicity of representation and signification - is obviously not without its burdens. For example, “difference” as defined by the West makes it possible to draw and justify a binary line that divides and isolates a broad spectrum of cultural

practices in “separate but equal” ethnic categories. Out of this ethnographic distancing, exhibitions are thus produced, that sequester artists –who otherwise might not be related in practice or temperament– in little policed territories under the rubric of shared ancestry or race.

As we have witnessed, such race-determined exhibitions have not only produced the disasters audiences have been subjected to over the past few years in the name of contemporary African art, they also continue to perpetuate ideas of Africa in a manner whereby its assumed inconsequence almost always precedes its historical meaning. This can also be seen in the kinds of hostility which contemporary African art manages to raise within the high walls of the critical and institutional academies of the West, or in the very patronizing moments when it is conscripted to mediate certain anxieties that are clearly figments of the occidental imagination. This illogical basis for producing exhibitions (unthinkable in the West) built from an apriori constraint that seeks not to taint the modernist white grid by erecting sanitized outposts for the “dif/fer/ent”, troublingly mars the dialectical nature of art as a practice of freedom. The election of “difference” as an ineluctable register for the margin, is thus a locality of the Western post-modern desire for a reflexive grotesqueness (what Frederic Jameson refers to as a “play of surfaces to dazzle the dominant eye”): the carnivalesque;

the kitschy, the cheap copy, all of which are implicit in Western post-modernism’s adoption of the excluded as “exotic” and “dif/fer/ent.”

But as the squalls of discontent towards this practice of an apriori election of an irrelevant margin harden into disdain and resistance from artists



Bright Bimpong. *Efo II*, 1994. Bronze.
Photo: Spencer Richards. Collection Michael Brenson. Courtesy Skoto Gallery, N.Y.C.

who no longer wish to see the epochs they represent narrated on the periphery, curators and institutions have begun to interrogate their complicity in constructing these overdetermined perceptions of contemporary cultural production from Africa. Where this interrogation has resulted in a thoughtfully planned exhibition, some interesting results have occurred. A good example that comes to mind is the recent dual exhibition of Frederic Bruly

Bouabre from the Ivory Coast and Alighiero e Boetti from Italy at New York’s, Dia Center for the Arts. This brilliant exhibition, dispensing with the ridiculous tropes of the ethnographic project, made immanent in baroque and minimal fashion, that the exotic “other”, much situated in African representation, might in fact, be mostly resident in the wilds of the Western contemporary art industry than in the lurking gloom of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Bruly Bouabre’s work, in concert with the surroundings in which it was shown, pointedly revealed that institutional quarrels with work by African artists are of a kind that is rooted not just in prejudice, but in a form of anxiety over the possibility of contact eroding the invested authority of a “centre” to narrate the rest of the world.

In the wake of this successful pairing at Dia, Skoto Aghahowa, using his exhibition space, Skoto Gallery in the SoHo district of New York, initiated a similarly congruent and successful exhibition which brought together the sculptures of Bright Bimpong, a Ghanaian artist living in New York and Tom Otterness, an American artist.

As anyone who is familiar with modern art knows, Africa remains the most visible link through which modernism can be adequately historicised and theorized. For centuries, sculpture has remained the foundation upon which Africa’s great artistic genius and mastery made its most fierce presence felt and experienced. As a



Bright Bimpong.
Sustainers, 1994.
 Photo: Becket Logan.
 The Studio Museum in
 Harlem: Artists in
 Residence, 1993-1994.

presence in the cultural text of 20th century art, it is incessantly written and re-inscribed on the body of a history which seeks to elide its instrumentality as a signified cultural dynamic. Today Africa continues to produce outstanding sculptors, visionary artists working with languages and forms that are at once formal, unorthodox and persistently innovative. Artists such as El Anatsui of Ghana, Obiora Anidi of Nigeria, Moustapha Dime of Senegal, and Tapfuma Gutsa of Zimbabwe have shown such an invigorating inclination and facility with various materials and methods that it becomes clear that those who see nothing but puerile mimesis of the West by contemporary African artists are not only mistaken, but have also abdicated the responsibility which a critical and sustained look brings to the discourse of art. Ironically, as African artists continue to be characterized as less innovative than the rest of the

contemporary art world, many are abandoning the strategy of contesting such charges of mimesis in favor of a counter discourse aimed at disrupting entrenched Western structures of domination, as well as radically reformulating and subverting them. Placing stringent emphasis on new and innovative modes of representation, while still contesting the meanings of the post-modern encounter between tradition and modernity, the quest of many of these artists obtains less from the facile avant-gardism of New York school self-consciousness, but in simply applying rigorous intelligence to their means of production.

Born and raised in Ghana, Bright Bimpong represents this strain of artists who no longer view colonialism as a constant source of trauma. Bimpong, who recently completed a residency in the highly coveted artist-in-residence program at The Studio Museum in

Harlem, has emerged with a visual elocution all his own. That an artist such as he, whose work like those of his contemporaries unfortunately has not circulated much within the larger art world, is able to hit his stride in so short a time, attests to the significant strength of work being done by artists who continue to operate outside what has been designated the "mainstream".

Bimpong basically works in two media: soft material (clay, terra-cotta,) and hard material (bronze, mild steel, etc.) out of which he fashions whimsical figures, that parody modernist purity of form as content. Just as easily his work is situated outside the ambivalent context of trendy Western post-modernist pastiche and theoretical posturing that is unredeemed, because their hermetic structures elude meaning even with the most arduous audience. Highly conscious of this fact, Bimpong has attempted to make his work more

accessible to his audience, without pandering to the demand for the literal, the obvious and exhausted one-liner, which leaves the work of many young artists interesting-looking, yet bereft of content and energy. In an exhibition statement, he matter-of-factly states his basic intent in the kind of work he does: “perhaps my sculpture highlights the grotesque side of life. It is reality, unfortunately, what mankind refuses to reckon with. I do not think it is avant-garde. It is what is around us - nothing-remote.” In an age when many artists either scream at you or else remain obsessively self-referential, this statement also helps to contextualize his half-formed, bloated and decapitated figures, which are meant less to shock our jaded submissiveness to violence, than to challenge our present cultural obsolescence, a late-century malady that deforms reason.

What for instance do we make of a work like “Odaa-Aya” a headless and limbless bronze torso with only a string of beads fastened round its hips? It is obvious that the figure is that of a woman, but do we attach to this work a reading that situates its representation as a critique of cultural or gender violence? With the recent emphasis by many contemporary artists on the body as a site of political activity and as the most accessible location of social deconstruction, the proposition of this sculpture, made by a male artist becomes quite fascinating. It seems so visibly placed in the interstices of two current

debates that always seem to collapse the categories of gender and racial violence. Though one could argue that they end up most of the time, not only prioritizing but also privileging the grievances of Euro-American women. For viewers, however, Bimpong’s work in the end might not have anything to do with the issues of politics of identity rampant in much contemporary art today. But one doubts very much that his torso is a mere act of figuration gone awry.

However, we must also not view Bimpong’s work as being singularly engaged in the existential excavation of the fallen man. A sculpture like “Efo II,” fashioned out of mild steel, attests to this fact. This sculpture of a rotund male figure astride what appears to be a mound of earth or perhaps a globe, hands behind his back, with a besmirked confidence on his face, facing out into the world, shows Bimpong as an artist not entirely without a sense of humour, imbuing his subjects with a great sense of grace and wit. As if not entirely convinced that viewers will accept this facet of his practice, he presents us with the ridiculous and surreal image of another figure, “Balance,” (all works 1994) who futilely balances several pots on her nose.

Apart from making formal bronze sculptures, Bimpong has introduced installation as another dimension to his practice. His recent installation at The Studio Museum shows him operating at a very charged pitch. Apart from the smallish formal bronze busts shown in

the exhibition at the Studio, the cognitive and psychological potential of his work lies in the sprawling installation of about 200 broken clay pots that Bimpong says represent the boisterous activity of the market place in his native Ghana. Still, one does not require a special insight to read pots as vessels for storage and retainment. This, one sees to be Bimpong’s most resonant metaphor. While the tragic appearance of the broken shards gives one the feeling of utilitarian dissolution and stasis, the shards demand to be read as fragments of memory. It is the sense of memory that reveals the ultimate layer of meaning embedded in the shards - the optimism invested in them.

African potters, for generations have used broken pots to make grog, which when added to new pots strengthens their resilience. New pots not only portend the future, they also carry powerful memories, albeit coded, from the past. They carry signs of rejuvenation rather than atrophy. This hopefulness, ultimately, is what Bimpong brings to his enterprise as an artist: the idea that no matter how commodified, art still remains in the words of the sculptor Moustapha Dime, “a human gift, not just something for commerce.” Which is precisely the most meaningful way to engage the work of Bright Bimpong: as a gift.

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