

REVIEWS

WESTERN ARTISTS AFRICAN ART

In “Western Artists/ African Art”, on view at the Museum for African Art in New York from May 6 to August 7, 1994, guest curator Daniel Shapiro asked 28 contemporary artists to talk about their relationship to African art. Their written responses -revealing and provocative- have become wall texts; and the objects they live with and collect (or refuse to collect) the visual focus of the show.

The installation presents the African objects with 14 large format photos showing them *in situ*, in artists’ studios and homes. While artists’ own art is not displayed, each contributed a small photo of a representative piece to accompany the installation. The wall text further contextualizes these objects, as artists “speak” about the significance of African Art, addressing questions of influence, spiritual connection, personal identity, the politics of collecting, the relationship between art, the artist and society, and their cultural ties and aesthetic discoveries. Interwoven with these contemporary voices are those of previous generations, like Picasso, Braque, Derain, Lipchitz and John Graham.

The artist-lenders participating in the show are Terry Adkins, Arman, Mel Bochner and Lizbeth Marano, Francesco Clemente, Elaine Lusting Cohen, Kurt Delbanco, Mel Edwards, Eric Fischl, Helen Frankenthaler, Nancy Graves, Jasper Johns, Ellsworth Kelly, Brice Marden, Quattara, Philip Pearlstein, Howardena Pindell, Martin Puryear, Beatrice Riese, Franyo Schindler, Richard Serra, Lorna Simpson, Merton Simpson, Frank Stella, Renee Stout, Richard Tuttle, Fred Wilson, Terry Winters and Faith-Dorian Wright.

“Western Artists/ African Art” not only offers us a rare opportunity to see what artists collect but also presents an important historical “snapshot” -the latest installment in a century- long discussion about the influence of African art on contemporary artists.

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

Born 1952, Naples, Italy; Lives and works in New York City, Rome and Madras, India.

“My Djenne figures remind me of the Mediterranean sky that stretches deep into Africa, across the Sahara, maybe all the way to Niger and Mali... The terra-cotta figures have great humanity, a sense of humor, a classical spirit, a lineage that goes back to the Mediterranean.”

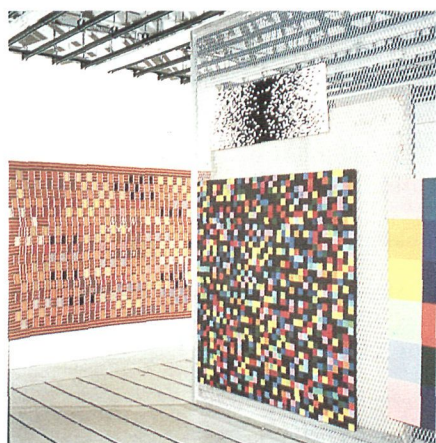
Terra-cotta figures, Djenne people, Mali.
Coll. Francesco Clemente.



ELLSWORTH KELLY

Born 1923, Newburgh, New York; lives and works in Columbia County, New York.

“In 1970 I saw the exhibition “Die Kunst von Schwarz-Afrika” at the Zurich Kunsthau. It was the first time I had experienced such a comprehensive exhibition of nearly 1,200 works from the best collections in Europe. I spent two days with the works... I realized I was at a “source”, and at that moment I felt that twentieth-century painting only “depicted” what African art “presented”.



Men's cloth of woven and dyed cotton, Ewe people, Ghana. Coll. Ellsworth Kelly.

BRICE MARDEN

Born 1938, Bronxville, New York; lives and works in New York City.

“We seek African art to inform our lives, with the same expectations we have for all art. Many of the works we collect are involved with transforming a spirit into a presence, or inform us of the mysteries of that spirit. These ideas are central to my own work and most of the work done by other artists that we have around to be seen.”

Illustration page 177: Mask (Kono) of wood with accumulation, Bamana people, Mali.
Coll. Brice Marden.



MARTIN PURYEAR

Born 1941, Washington, D.C.; lives and works in New York State.

"I acknowledge and revere the power of ceremonial objects from Africa, but what I mostly own are objects of use -things not deliberately charged for ritual or magical purpose, yet nevertheless transcending function to achieve enormous visual power in their own right."



Figures of wood, Lobi people, Burkina Faso. Coll. Richard Serra and Clara Weyergraf-Serra.

RICHARD SERRA

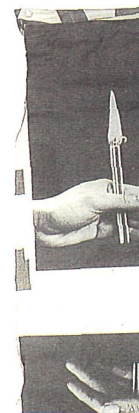
Born 1939, San Francisco; lives and works in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada.

"These works do not lead me to an analysis of form but rather to an activity, i.e., to rethink the potential of sculpture day after day... To expose the tension between my misuse and the original function constitutes a possibility for me to learn something not implied by the original purpose."

LORNA SIMPSON

Born 1960, Brooklyn, New York; lives and works in New York City.

"I first became interested in using the masks, funny enough, because of an exhibition I saw at the Center for African Art, at its old space uptown. It struck me as a peculiar exhibition, which incorporated devices such as lenses to view particular objects from specific angles, and text that informed the viewer how to interpret the gestures displayed as well as the intent of these objects' makers. The impression I left with was not of the actual objects but of the same old difficulty of presenting such objects outside their context, while also ignoring the problematic of gallery /museum spaces and their relationship historically to these objects. I then wondered about an exhibition that would focus on an individual's relationship to these objects, which are based in ritual participatory performance. So the idea of photographing the backs of the masks became a way of getting at the idea of how one constructs oneself, how one does or does not have access to a particular cultural past, or for that matter by what means does one construct oneself."



Mask of wood, Senufo people, Mali. Coll. Lorna Simpson.

FRED WILSON

Born 1954, Bronx, New York; lives and works in New York City.

"In a variety of conversations I've had over the years with students, collectors, and curators about African art, the words "real" and "fake" are used to describe objects made below the Sahara. To me the terms "real" and "fake" are nebulous terms speaking of African art. Real what? Fake what? These simplistic terms are used to understand very complex subject. Saying an African object is not "real" presumably means "never having been used or intended for use in a spiritual way", i.e., made for the trade. As more and more objects from decades past are slipping into this category, a rethinking of this term "real" is in order. How "real" is a so-called "real" mask or shrine figure when not in spiritual/ceremonial use? When it's on a bedroom wall or in a Plexiglass display case...? I never use African objects in my

work that have a specific spiritual history or that have a value for their visual power or beauty. My intention is not to destroy an object that has real meaning in terms of either an African context or a Western context. I am, however, aware and concerned with their symbolic meaning—in relation to their African past or their American/European present.”



Mask of wood and cowrie shells from Dan people, Gabon, with cloth attachment by Wilson. Coll. Fred Wilson.



Mask, Kuba, Zaire, wood, cowrie shells, pigment and hair. H. 14 1/2 in. Coll. Eric Fischl.

PHOTOS COURTESY PAULA WEBSTER PUBLIC RELATIONS, NEW YORK.

ERIC FISCHL

Born New York City, 1948. Lives and works New York City and Sag Harbor, N.Y.

I have always felt a little uncomfortable with artists who borrow from other cultures to solve formal problems in art. I don't believe in the practice or the value of separating form from content, which is exactly what happens when you take from other cultures. And though this has been an essential strategy of modernism I don't think that it has ultimately worked to our advantage. I mean, after 100 years you have now an art world in which the larger culture does not participate, and you have many more artists than audience members, and many more art objects with almost impenetrable private meanings or tedious academic formalisms. So much contemporary art leaves one with a feeling of estrangement, and this technique of appropriation has a lot to do with that.