

## POWER PLAY

GOODMAN GALLERY,  
CAPE TOWN,  
SOUTH AFRICA

JUNE 5–28, 2008

A nasty, chilling sense of serendipity here. We arrive at the opening of the exhibition. We are all on edge and so are all the other patrons, cognoscenti, and freeloaders, and indeed the street itself. A horrific cycle of xenophobic atrocity is peaking in the Cape, imported from the badlands of Gauteng, and the cops have not yet got a handle on it. Somewhere, at this very moment as twilight turns to dark, as we park the car, in one or another of the shack settlements, somebody is being brutally murdered, people are being driven from their homes, unspeakable brutalities are being committed, probably not more than four or five miles away from the inner-city industrial/cultural ghetto in which Goodman Gallery Cape is housed. Here, the man directing us to our parking bay and assuring us that all will be well on his watch is a refugee from the Congo, almost certainly at risk when he gets home, wherever he lives, under threat from marauding bands of South African xenophobes.

You do not really have to look much farther to begin to talk about the subject matter of the show we have come to see. Power Play. It is the kind of curatorial idea that can all too easily descend into a tentative academic “hypotheticalism” (to coin a word) and self-referentiality, but this time around, by chance on one level, but probably also through some indefinable connectedness with the zeitgeist, it has an edgily arresting connectedness with the bloody transactions of real life.

A little later in the evening, I find myself standing on the exterior catwalk of the building, looking down with the other patrons on the paved roof of the building adjacent. A scraggly troupe of Cape minstrels bearing Goodman Gallery umbrellas is doing its characteristically “goema” thing, the troupe members blaring and twirling in procession.<sup>1</sup>

I remember something I once read about the roots of the euphemistically named Cape Minstrels in the Coon Carnival of the days of slavery, or maybe



**Moshekwa Langa**, *Untitled III*, from a portfolio of ten prints, 2004. Photolitho on Fabriano Rosaspina paper, 70.5 x 100 cm. Edition of twenty + two artist's proofs, two printer's proofs, and one archive proof. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Cape.

more accurately, indentured labor, in Cape Town. Over what today we call the festive season—Christmas until New Year—the burghers and baases and madams of the Cape Colony celebrated and made merry, and were attended hand and foot by the underclass. Then, on the second day in January—still celebrated in Cape Town today—the slaves were given the day off to engage in their own festivities. From these beginnings the Coon Carnival was born, with the slaves of prominent landowners or other masters forming themselves into competing troupes, costumed in the cheap tat handed down by masters and mistresses. It developed out of traditional musical forms mixed up with the religious music of the Christian communities the slaves were drafted into, and well seasoned with the currencies of the dop system,<sup>2</sup> the harsh banging melodies of goema.

For that one day, Tweede Nuwe Jaar, the slaves, the lowest in the society, lorded it over all the others. The usual order of things was stood on its head, and—symbolically, if not actually—the fractured, compromised identity of the slave class was celebrated, given a space in which to assert and express itself. In this anomalous concession, the society of the Cape, though it may not have known it, was merely reproducing an anthropologically familiar institution of culture found throughout the world—that of the single day in which there is a radical inversion of the dy-

namics of power. The same pattern and relationship, the same symbolic hygiene—in which the society satirizes and deconstructs itself from the underbelly—can be perceived in Halloween and Walpurgisnacht, as well as the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, the Gelede masking tradition among the Yoruba in Nigeria, and the Mexican Day of the Dead.

What is important in all of these is that the play of power across the society is temporarily suspended and an alternative discourse is permitted—admittedly in jest or as a brief liberation of normally suppressed libido—according to the rules and authority structures of the society in question. The world is remade, symbolically at least, in negative. The margins are pushed to the center, and, as enacted through the masking that inevitably accompanies such institutions of culture, license is given to the kings or queens for a day to assert what is normally suppressed. The society thereby performs an institutionalized act of self-hygiene that shifts and begins at least to deconstruct the dominant discourse of power, and to engender a kind of self-awareness in the society—one that persists in Cape Town through the institution of drunken extortion on January 2 and 3, an institution that has venerable precedents, but has intersected with gang culture in the Cape Town Carnival as revived after 1994.

Power play. Reality contests perspec-

tives, essentially unstable, held in place and reinforced by the institutions of control in society, institutions that underwrite the experiencing consciousness as much as they underwrite the manufacture of history. Within this frame, historically art has served and continues to serve an ambiguous role: on one hand, it naturalizes power through the presentation of experience in terms of dominant discourse; on the other hand, art has evolved into a social institution challenging and second-guessing the order of things, making, by representing, the world in different ways.

The initial version of Anthea Moys's collaborative performance on the opening night of the exhibition was anything but resolved. It was of the order of a series of real-time notes toward a developed scenario—notes that were subsequently worked up to the final performance presented on June 7. Nonetheless, the crucial elements of the contestation more fully realized in the final performance were sketched out in the simple and startling counterpoint of the Goodman Gallery-sponsored minstrel troupe's rude and vibrant noise, with a haunting and penetrating song performed by a Congolese singer—two radically different expressions of soul competing for suzerainty of the evening air.

Such exuberant challenging or subversion of discourse also determines the conceptual shapes of Anthea Moys's other work in the Power Play exhibition. In a cycle of photographs made from a performance titled *It's What You Want at the Johannesburg Art Fair* earlier this year, Moys uses the environment of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange to mock that august institution's pretensions and assert a hormonally laden playfulness—power-dressed participants showing buttocks, tugging one another's ties, and the like.

Moshekwa Langa's archetypes are more deeply embedded in the medium and language of his aesthetic explorations. In what is essentially a quiet and meditative cycle of work, he pursues a series of artistic strategies to draw the integrity of the root image into a discursive jeopardy. The images in question are culled from the media—or at least have that look—and moreover are rendered, large scale (gallery scale), in a style that makes the virtual pixels generated in the photolithographic medium a part of the immedi-

ate presence of the image. In some pieces, Langa lets the quiet inwardness of the image itself speak to the viewer from behind the virtual veil of the print technique. In others, he plays an almost Cubist game, isolating details of the composition, blowing them up, and displacing them in frames within the composition as a whole. In this gesture he alienates the subject from itself and, simultaneously, enjoins the viewer to engage with the image as a moment within a discourse of power, and as a picture of what it records.

It is not necessarily significant, but certainly suggestive at the level of duality metaphor, that there are two sets of twins among the participants in the Power Play show. The twin brothers Jean and Zinaid Meeran have for some time pursued an intriguingly eccentric and multifaceted program of highlighting and exploring the paradoxical identities and self-presentations of third-world elites in the postcolonial era. In a deceptively complex image of the ambiguities of cultural reality, one of the works in the Power Play exhibition shows two pretty girls of the hip-hop generation with iPods as attributes, similar to the iconographic and culturally subscribed way that John the Baptist's staff once would have communicated his status as the forerunner of Jesus Christ. Here however, the assertion of the image is compromised by the fact that neither girl relates to the camera—despite the fact that one of them does in fact make eye contact. The iPods and their earphones lead the viewer into an indeterminacy, a layered inwardness and ambivalence in what the picture communicates.

It is perhaps more than merely coincidental that in one of the works of the Power Play exhibition, Dan Halter uses a mealie kernel as his canvas. The work, presented as an almost forensic specimen under a standard lamp/ magnifying glass, has inscribed on the seed kernel the following legend: “When the belly is full the brain starts to think.” The message from a Zimbabwean national is clear enough, but it gains extra poignancy and ambivalence from the fact that one of the World Bank's crucial interventions in the economy of Zimbabwe was to redefine large tracts of Zimbabwe's arable land to produce tobacco rather than foodstuffs. Against this historical backdrop, Halter's enlarged vanity vehicle registration plate,

reading “Yes Boss—WP,” becomes almost tragically evocative of sour ironies in the globalizing discourses of power in the lives of people.

The second set of twins is that semantically troublesome duo, Hasan and Husain Essop. On a personal level, let me say that I have been intrigued by the oddly shocking, melodramatic, in-your-face tableaux produced by these two for some time, but still have not found a way of taming the viscosity of my spontaneous responses. This is good. The archetypal terrible twins do get your attention. They evoke a response. They force you to engage with the issues and the stereotypes with which they confront you.

In a word—and in spades—they succeed in offending expectations, in a semantically wise and postmodern version of what, in late-nineteenth-century Paris, used to be characterized as “baiting the bourgeoisie.” The specifically postmodern strategy in the Essops' work resides, in many of the tableaux they produce, precisely in the way they force contesting versions of reality, dangerously, to confront each other. One of their images, for instance, shows a bunch of seemingly unruly Islamic vigilantes posed around a street sign that says Thornton Road (in Athlone)—one of the epicenters of Pagad mob-vigilantism in the late 1990s,<sup>3</sup> but also in the earlier history of the struggle for democracy in South Africa, the scene of the notorious “Trojan Horse” incident,<sup>4</sup> in which concealed security forces drove into the area, emerging to mow down protesting youths. Some of the vigilante youths are dressed in Muslim whites, others in military camouflage; all radiate testosterone. But over all can be seen the ultimate symbol of American cultural imperialism—a Coca-Cola sign—and the foregrounded youths themselves are sucking energetically on bottles of the stuff.

*Five Pillars* conjures one of those video records of suicide bombers at prayer in the mosque before going to their date with infinity; but it depicts in fact a somewhat less dramatic scenario—of a blindfolded youth demonstrating his proficiency in reciting the Quran by heart before witnesses. Between the two images, the virtual and the actual, is a mental space electric with ironies.

Many of the Essops' images operate antagonistically. In *Off to the North*



they ironize the manufactured stereotypes of Afrikaner nationalism in an exuberantly bizarre fashion by posing as a group of likely lads—who would have been nonwhites in the old South Africa—on a playground ox wagon, cutting a mocking swathe into the hinterland of history and consciousness.

In *Pit Bull Training* they generate an extraordinarily steroidal violence of posed Cape Flats gangster types gesticulating as pit bulls strain at leashes to tear each other to shreds—with mauler or assassin figures leaping with intent over the wall behind.

The Essop twins scramble languages of imagery by inserting traditional Indian

musical instruments alternately into a Signal Hill scene and into a constructed Cape Carnival procession, posing questions about the easy assumptions of cultural stereotypes. Perhaps, most tellingly in the context of the present essay, they dress their cast up as Coons, or Minstrels, moving in festival mode through the Bo-Kaap, on their way to wherever.

In mockery. In challenge. In a power play.

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#### Notes

Power Play was exhibited at Goodman Gallery Cape from June 5–30, 2008, and curated by Emma Bedford.

<sup>1</sup> Goema is the style of music associated

with the carnival—an upbeat mix of early-American jazz and Christian brass-band music with an African backbeat. It is unique to the former slave classes of the Cape.

<sup>2</sup> The tot system is a legacy of slave labor on the Cape's wine farms whereby workers were paid in measures of alcohol instead of wages.

<sup>3</sup> People Against Gangsterism and Drugs (Pagad) was formed in 1996 as a militant group in the Cape Flats area of Cape Town that claimed to fight drugs and gangsterism, but its members have been implicated in several criminal acts.

<sup>4</sup> The incident took place in Athlone in October 1985, eleven days after the declaration of the first State of Emergency, when non-uniformed police officers jumped out of crates in the back of an unmarked truck, opening fire on children coming home from school. Three youths were killed in this incident, and many others were injured.

◀ **Anthea Moys**, *Deur Mekaar* in Cape Town, playing with the District Six Hanover Minstrels and Street Band and Everton Nsumbu, 2008. Orchestrated situation. Courtesy of the artist and Goodman Gallery Cape. Photo: Paul Grose.

**Hasan and Husain Essop**, *Pit Bull Training*, 2008. Lightjet C-Print on Fuji Crystal Archive Paper, 70 x 123 cm. Edition of eight + two artists' proofs. Courtesy of the artists and Goodman Gallery Cape.



**ROMUALD HAZOUMÉ**  
**LA BOUCHE DU ROI**

**HORNIMAN MUSEUM,**  
**LONDON**  
DECEMBER 5, 2008–MARCH 1,  
2009 AND TOURING

In 1786, the antislavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson published his influential “Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of Human Species.” A man ahead of his time in more ways than one, Clarkson realized that images both greatly increased his audience and gave graphic weight to his argument. In 1789, he duly had a woodcut produced entitled *Description of a Slave Ship*. In its directness and graphic simplicity, the image—a schematic of the infamous slave ship *Brookes*—did indeed have an effect, portraying as it did the inhuman and abject conditions in which slaves were transported from Africa to the Americas during the so-called Middle Passage. The image has since taken on an iconic life of its own and is regularly used in historical discussions of slavery and its iniquities. It also forms the basis of Benin-born artist Romuald Hazoumé’s *La Bouche du Roi*, a project realized between 1997 and 2005.

Referring to the mouth of a river that was once a portal for the extensive slave trade in Benin, *La Bouche du Roi* has a number of interrelated components, including a landscape photograph of the area (“La Bouche du Roi” is derived from the Portuguese “A Boca do Rio” meaning “mouth of the river”), a video depicting motorcyclists illegally transporting oil in precariously overfilled plastic canisters, an installation employing these canisters, and some further photographs of various ritual-based dances common in modern-day Benin. The canisters in the installation are key here, forming as they do a link between the elements outlined above and providing something of a mainstay in the artist’s oeuvre. Culled from the discarded canisters we see in the video, Hazoumé uses the topmost parts of these containers to symbolize “masks” and thereafter as a synecdochic form of reference for the slaves who did and did not make the crossing to the Americas.

Drawing on the claustrophobic conditions depicted aboard the *Brookes*, 304



Romuald Hazoumé, *La Bouche du Roi*, 1997–2005. © Romuald Hazoumé. Photo: Benedict Johnson.

of these “masks” are arranged side by side to represent the schematic described in the 1789 woodcut. Packed in dense rows, they symbolize not only the conditions on board but also the systematic (indeed, systemic) cruelty involved in the transportation of slaves. However, and unlike the depersonalized depiction of the slaves aboard the *Brookes*, each of Hazoumé’s masks has been personalized with various objects including blue and white beads (worn by the followers of the water goddess Mammy Wata) and red feathers (showing allegiance to Xevioso, the maker of thunderstorms). In other variations, some of the masks are splintered and broken (symbolizing those who died en route), whereas smaller masks represent women and children. Elsewhere, there is a yellow mask that signifies the white ruler imposed upon Benin by the French in the 1700s and a black mask beside it depicting the then king of Benin who colluded in the slave trade.

The material, as opposed to symbolic, function of the “masks” is seen in the accompanying video, which shows the used plastic petrol canisters being treated with fire (to expand their size and capacity) by motorcyclists who in turn use them to illegally transport oil between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Filled beyond capacity, they often explode with fatal consequences and are to be found littering the streets of villages and towns, their use value long since finished. In the overall schema of this admittedly complex

work, the actual canisters come to signify enslavement and the subsequent exhaustion and unceremonious discarding of spent individuals by European and African traders alike. In recovering these discarded remnants and personalizing them, Hazoumé would appear to be involved in a process of historical recuperation that seeks to give an identity to the individuals who were subjected to slavery.

Hazoumé is not alone in using Clarkson’s woodcut as a starting point for a work of art; both Willie Cole and Hank Willis Thomas have used it, in 1997 and 2003 respectively. However, and unlike both Cole and Thomas, Hazoumé’s use of it would appear to be serving an ameliorative if not instrumentalist function. In regard to the latter, such usage would be certainly in keeping with Clarkson’s original purpose; that is, the illustration of the inhuman conditions brought about by the slave trade. However, the continued use of the woodcut as a recurrent image—nowhere more so than in events last year surrounding the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British Parliament—has given rise to criticism in some quarters for its depiction of slaves as passive victims. While not necessarily subscribing to such a view (Clarkson’s and subsequent uses of the image were suitably blunt given the dire necessities of the time), it is worth asking whether Hazoumé’s use of it as a schema recuperates identities per se or reinscribes a different form of passivity in the viewer.



This is to observe that the work seems to be solely concerned with ameliorating past injustices—in itself something of a Pyrrhic undertaking if we do not relate the legacy of those injustices to the present. I raise this issue here because it gives us further purchase on a perennial subject: any art form that takes the politics of identity and justice—or the lack thereof—as its aesthetic starting point could be seen to implicate a form of instrumentalism within the moment of representation. Or, to put it another way, can artistic engagement with dispossession, enslavement, and injustice recuperate (or even ameliorate) the suspension and revocation of political, ethical, economic, and legal forms of representation—the very forms of representation that were denied to slaves?

Again, this is not necessarily a criticism of *Le Bouche de Roi*; rather, it is to highlight the degree to which it could be argued that the abolitionist use of the woodcut spoke to the present of the late eighteenth century, whereas Hazoum  s use of it, however well intended, would appear to speak to the

past. And that would indeed present us with something of a conundrum if it were not for the fact that the video included here depicts what can only be described as a form of modern-day indentured labor. This latter reading, I should note, goes against the one promoted in the literature accompanying the work—which, bearing in mind its museum-based installation, tends to be a tad prescriptive—but it makes more sense of the project than to suggest that those trading in illegal oil are somehow reclaiming some of Africa’s natural resources. On the contrary, they appear as a symptom of a system that is largely defined by the sinuous channels of neocolonial power structures that continue to exploit Africa’s natural resources. Moreover, Benin today is still blighted by the specters of child labor and forced labor—or, to be blunt, modern forms of slavery.

The bacillus of slavery is still present in any discourse on the inequities of globalized forms of capital investment and its international distribution. Many of the commemorative events in and around the bicentenary of the abolition

of the slave trade in 2007 seemed to emphasize, imply at least, the pastness of such events as opposed to the fact that there are more people in bonded and indentured labor today than there ever were in Clarkson’s time. Again, this is neither to relativize or hierarchize suffering; rather, it is to note a continuity of suffering that continues to underwrite the logic of capital in our neoliberal, globalized world order. The past is not so much another country, so to speak, as it is the harbinger of modern and still extant practices. And to the extent that *La Bouche du Roi* highlights the durability of such practices, then it works as an intervention into the still sensitive issue of slavery.

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**CONTINENTAL RIFTS:  
CONTEMPORARY  
TIME-BASED WORKS  
OF AFRICA**

**FOWLER MUSEUM  
AT UCLA**  
FEBRUARY 22–JUNE 14, 2009

Geography is not defined by physical topography alone. Territories bear the marks of their histories, the struggles that have distinguished one place from another, and the social and psychological dynamics that inform the ways we relate to one another. The recent exhibition at UCLA’s Fowler Museum, *Continental Rifts: Contemporary Time-Based Works of Africa*, presented video, film, and related photography by five celebrated contemporary artists who engage these complex dimensions of geography and the ways they are mediated aesthetically.

Specifically, the show focused on the African continent but from various global perspectives, including works by artists who live in Africa, a European artist with roots on the continent, and a New York-based South American artist who frequently works in Rawanda and Angola. As captured in the somewhat awkward phrasing of the title, it was not a show of works *about* or *from* Africa, but rather *of* Africa, holding open the possibility of more diverse ways of relating to the continent and, at times, explicitly pressing the question of the nature of belonging implied by the genitive, “of.” In this way, the show specifically accommodated the legacies of both colonialism and the African diaspora; and the works in it consistently presented the continent not as a static landmass, but as changing in light of the shifts in perspective produced by movements to and from it, under the force of history.

South African artist Berni Searle’s two-channel video installation, *Home and Away* (2003), for example, is above all about direction. One screen features an image shot from a small boat with an outboard motor, leaving behind itself a foaming wake as it pulls away from a coastline in the distance; on the other screen, a woman floats on her back in the ocean, wearing a tank top and loose skirt with layers of white,

pink, and red. Accompanying the sound of the lapping water and the roar of the boat’s engine, an overdubbed voice conjugates the verbs, “to love,” “to fear,” and “to leave.” The two juxtaposed images were shot off the coasts of Spain and Morocco respectively, bringing into dialogue these two physical borders and evoking the history of migration between them. But nothing in either image identifies the location of the piece as such, and ultimately each work addresses more formal, phenomenological issues of orientation. The boat racing over the ocean moves *from* and *toward*, while the woman on her back floats in a space suspended *between*. Flanked by the two opposing images of the installation, the viewer similarly is suspended in an always-intermediary situation, deprived of any vantage from which to view the piece as a whole, and required to turn his or her attention one way or another. While initially I found the mantra of conjugating verbs somewhat ponderous, ultimately it enriches these phenomenological dynamics, by presenting them not merely as formal intentional struc-

tures, but furthermore as affectively loaded and informed by anxiety and desire.

For her single-channel video projection, *Africa Rifting: Lines of Fire: Namibia/Brazil* (2001) the South African artist Georgia Papageorge employs long swatches of deep red fabric to engage, accentuate, and juxtapose the aesthetic wealth of the coasts of Western Africa and South America. In one series of closely shot images, Papageorge’s camera moves across the surface of the rich red cloth as it extends from green foliage into the sand, finally to be washed over by sea foam. In a second sequence the fabric is shown from a distant, wide angle, hanging off a high, steep rock cliff, and extending over grass, sand, and other rock formations, out to the beach. A third series of images presents shorter cuts from the cloth, mounted as banners on T-bar poles—first three and then as many as seven or ten—and blowing in the wind against backdrops of dunes and crashing surf. In diverse ways, the cloth highlights the dynamics of the landscape. Its folds and shadows mirror the

*La Bouche du Roi* at Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle. Photo: Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums.



**Yto Barrada**, *Oxalis Crown–Perdicaris Forest–Rmilet, Tangier*, 2007, from *Iris Tingitana* series. C-print, 125 x 125 cm. Courtesy of Galerie Polaris, Paris.







Georgia Papageorge, *Africa Rifting: Lines of Fire, Namibia/Brazil*, 2001. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

curves and crevasses of the rocks and sand. Its movement articulates the currents of wind and water. Its rich red contrasts with the green of the shrubs and beach grass, the gray of the stone, and the deep blue, white, and tan of the sand and ocean.

The piece was shot both on the barren Skeleton Coast of Namibia and on the beaches of the coastal Brazilian city of Torres. Accompanying text in the exhibition brochure explains it as “a portrayal and re-imagining of the Gondwanaland Split—commencing 135 million years ago and producing two land masses that would become South America and Africa.” In this light, the cloth reads like a tear or scar—evoking the blood of a wound—that divides and conjoins the land it intersects. The piece takes on a decidedly psychological tone as a meditation on separation, loss, and reconciliation. In another, closely related project (not presented as part of this show), Papageorge uses the red cloth again as what accompanying text describes as “a moveable artery in processions and performances aimed at transforming wounds of separation.” However, Papageorge’s projection is decidedly abstract. Despite its site specificity, the piece includes no concrete historical references. If it evokes themes of traumatic division, it does so from a vantage that remains untroubled by the ordeals it means to address—as if reassuring its viewers that the wounds in question have been healed

before allowing the viewers to suffer them.

In contrast, Chilean-born artist Alfredo Jaar’s digital film *Muxima* registers the difficulty of representing history and its traumas through a critically self-conscious engagement with the limits of its media. The film, which was shot in Angola, is organized like a poem, in a series of ten cantos. Each one is a meditation on a sequence of images, which sometimes coalesces into a loose narrative. But the significance of each canto and the work as a whole remain decidedly underdetermined, leaving the viewer to reflect on what exactly he or she has seen and what it might have meant; and, despite the film’s many documentary elements, its force ultimately lies in this poetic resonance.

One canto features only a single still image of six boys, posing together with their hands across their chests in a kind of impromptu and markedly informal salute. Another canto juxtaposes images of a shantytown, the ruins of a World War II-era jet fighter, and crumbling white marble statues of colonial Europeans. In a third, close-ups depict a man walking through green foliage: his boots step on and over plants, his hands reach down to pull weeds and cut them with a scythe. These images are then intercut with elegant pictures of a yellow microphone against the background of red stained wood. Back in the foliage, the close-ups continue, now

presenting a metal detector, whining like a theremin as it moves over the ground. The man is shown with a transparent safety mask over his face. We cut back to the microphone: a man now stands behind it with a beard and a hat. And *boom!* Something explodes. The camera momentarily withdraws far enough from the foliage to reveal a small red Danger sign planted in its midst: a minefield. And the man behind the microphone begins to sing.

How are we to understand these images and their juxtaposition? The film clearly speaks about Angola’s history and the struggles of its people. But what are we supposed to think about them? Among other ways, the piece presses these questions—as a set of formal problems integral to its composition—through its soundtrack. Its title, *Muxima*, is also the title of a popular Kimbundu folk song with a simple, descending melody that is repeated throughout the film. When juxtaposed with distinct images in each canto, the song resonates differently, revealing its intrinsic complexity and the underdetermined significance of both the pictures and the music. However, Jaar’s film does not thereby degenerate into mere relativism. On the contrary, Jaar clearly works to articulate truths even as they prove elusive, complicated, and approachable only through indirection. His film exhibits a formal self-consciousness about how to represent its subject matter, which accompanying text explains as motivated in particular by the mass media and the numbing sensationalism of its purported immediacy. At the same time, Jaar’s repetition of the song “Muxima” also avoids becoming a merely formal exercise. The song is performed differently each time—with mournful soul by the man singing behind the yellow microphone, with an upbeat tempo on Afro-pop guitars, with urban syncopation on solo jazz piano, and so on. And these diverse renditions combine with the images in the various cantos to give the film a rich, poetic sophistication.

In her seven-channel video installation *Fata Morgana*, Claudia Cristovao approaches Angola with still greater indirection. Cristovao was born in Angola to Portuguese parents who immigrated to Portugal when she was still a child. For *Fata Morgana*, she interviewed other people with similar personal histories, who express strong identifications as

Africans and powerful associations with the continent, despite the fact that they only have faint memories of it. Rather, they know Africa through their families’ mythologies, the stories they recount, the customs they have brought back with them, and the community they share with other Portuguese people who previously lived there. These interviews were shown on several small screens hanging from the ceiling, and were accompanied by two larger projections that featured images of abandoned buildings and other structures in a colonial African ghost town from the early twentieth century, which slowly were disappearing beneath desert sands. “Fata Morgana” means “mirage” and Cristovao’s piece is above all about memory and the ways in which fantasy serves to fill the voids produced by loss and longing. In her installation, Angola appears largely as a mythical country of origins, a stand-in for the remote land of childhood that lingers in the back of each of our minds and plays a key role in our sense of who we are, despite its elusive distance. At the same time, Cristovao’s interlocutors attest to the actual history of colonialism and its wake. They present how personal fantasies frequently are intertwined with broader social-historical conditions and vice versa; and they show how modern

identities frequently are formed across international and even intercontinental borders.

If, among other things, Cristovao’s work addresses nostalgia, Paris-born Moroccan artist Yto Barrada mobilizes similar feelings for political ends in her film *The Botanist* and related photography. The film features an informal tour of a botanist’s garden, shot almost exclusively with the camera aimed at the legs and feet of people passing through its flowers and greenery. On the sound track, a guide can be faintly heard identifying the many varieties of indigenous and endangered plants growing in the garden and making occasional references to the threat presented to them by commercial developments in the area. These commercial developments are also featured in Barrada’s photographs, and accompanying text explains the work as a protest against them. The flowers stand in as figures for “old Morocco,” apparently compromised by the burgeoning tourist industry. But the injustices at issue in Barrada’s film remain decidedly undefined. The piece relies on a romantic juxtaposition of the native earth with sinister forces of civilization that obscure any appreciation of the social conflicts currently taking place in Tangier beyond a broad and ultimately apolitical concern for the envi-

ronment—which paradoxically might have been shared just as easily by the tourists she apparently deplors.

If one were to have confused Continental Rifts with an exhibition of time-based works *about* Africa, clearly it would have left something wanting. And one can imagine how the exhibition’s subtle curatorial premise of approaching Africa from diverse global perspectives risked supplanting the claims of artists from Africa. However, taken on its own terms, as a study of the complex dynamics at play in the constitution of geography, the show provided a rich survey of works whose media combined visual, musical, and poetic art forms to address the complicated affective and ideological aspects of the sense of place. The strongest pieces in it registered a deep sense of history—not only in content but also in form.

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Alfredo Jaar, *Muxima*, 2005. Still from digital film. © Alfredo Jaar, courtesy of Galerie Lelong, New York.





**SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP  
STRENGTH OF FEELING**
**NEW ART EXCHANGE,  
NOTTINGHAM**  
NOVEMBER 10, 2008–  
JANUARY 19, 2009

In December 2006, the UK newspaper *The Independent* listed Sokari Douglas Camp as one of the “50 best African artists,” situating her name amid a prominent group of individuals including Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe.<sup>1</sup> *Utne Reader* reprinted this article for U.S. audiences in September 2007.<sup>2</sup> Over the past two decades, Sokari has earned a position of note in the world of contemporary art. She is well known for expressive, steel figurative sculptures, which engage ideas of West African culture, such as masquerade and performance, and how these concepts relate to international, cross-cultural identities. Sokari’s early sculptural work will continue to captivate audiences, but can more recent, thematic developments in the artist’s work even further raise consciousness about the relationship between West Africa and the West?

From November 2008 through January 2009, Nottingham’s New Art Exchange featured a retrospective of Sokari Douglas Camp’s sculptural work from 1995 to 2008. Curated by Michael Forbes, *Strength of Feeling* presented critical changes in the development of Sokari’s work. The fifteen sculptures displayed the artist’s response to the global politics affecting West Africans worldwide. Though the exhibition highlighted the artist’s concern with the rise in international violence, it concluded with more recent pieces illustrative of the artist’s decision to abandon violent imagery.

The exhibition was grouped thematically with a nod to the chronology of Sokari’s work. Two sculptures from 1995 represented the artist’s famed early engagements with ideas of West African masquerade. However, the artist’s 1998 self-portrait *Assessment* presented a turning point in her career. Here, Sokari depicts her own figure in steel with welding goggles perched on her brow. Her knees are bent and her arms heave up an image of an oil refinery transferred onto glass. Through her self-portrait, the artist depicts her trepidation about industrial oil interests and their impact on the people of West Africa with whom she passionately identifies. As an expatriate Nigerian living in the United Kingdom, Sokari evidences her own sense of responsibility to call attention to these difficult international relationships.

With this social accountability in mind, the artist’s more recent figurative works continue to capture movement, light, and color through burnished, painted, and welded steel. However, Sokari makes the physical weight of the steel even more apparent. Works such as the 2006 *Accessories Worn in the Delta* and the 2004 *Teasing Suicide* display figures wielding machine guns, rifles, and belts of bullets. The bodies still wear Dutch-wax printed cloth that the artist inventively fashions out of metal, but even the fabrics appear to make note of political rivalries with faces and years etched into the patterns.

In Sokari’s 2002 *Bin Laden Pieta* she takes up the issue of modern-day terrorism. A steel burka covering the female figure’s entire body strongly contrasts what should have been the traditionally light fabric of orthodox Islamic women’s dress. The figure’s arms cradle a glass-transferred image of the World Trade Center. The artist includes a woven background with two glass images of Bin Laden on either side of the figure. These references to multiple cul-

tures, especially with the unidentified woman engaged with Middle Eastern traditions crouched in front of the West African woven screen, identify the tensions of living within diversity.

The inclusion of smaller preliminary sculptures in the exhibition was compelling as they showed the artist’s process. The small maquettes of the group of figures in *Family Teasing Suicide* and *The Living Memorial to Ken Saro-Wiwa* were impressive examples of Sokari’s modeling techniques. The small-scale models offered audiences the ability to examine the artist’s original decisions about thematic concerns and the shape of the work. The preliminary models also permitted audiences to see how the artist’s plans changed over the course of construction of the larger-scale works. In particular, Sokari’s artistic ability to test the spontaneity of steel, as a brittle medium, became more apparent in the contrast between the smoother maquettes and

the final renditions of the design with rough metal edges and expressive cracks throughout the body of the work.

The maquette for the Saro-Wiwa memorial makes reference to the larger sculptural work, finished in 2006, which the New Art Exchange installed in front of the museum. The tremendous size of the oversize sculpted van next to Nottingham’s own streets, with precarious oil drums appearing to clatter about the top, converted the urban thoroughfare in the chaotic streets of West Africa. The Saro-Wiwa memorial underscored the final resounding theme of the exhibition. Whereas the memorial easily could have exploited Saro-Wiwa’s violent assassination, the artist has chosen to highlight the cause for which Saro-Wiwa struggled. The memorial sculpture served as a frame for the artist’s declaration, “I accuse the Oil Companies of Genocide against the Ogoni.” Notably, this accusation did not resonate in a violent manner. The van’s

position on Nottingham’s streets suggested that audiences should be aware of the larger impact of oil, and that genocide can be avoided if audiences begin to act responsibly on a local level.

Four recent sculptures from 2008 concluded the exhibition. These works hung on the museum’s walls; some incorporate color through bright cutouts of acrylic glass. These high-relief works signal a technique of sculptural representation from the artist that will appeal to international museums in the years to come. Overall, the 2008 works *Colour Paisley King and Queen*, *Paisley King and Queen*, and *Red Paisley* are extremely compelling. The large-scale steel busts of a king and queen surrounded with decorative paisley print make stylistic references to the celebrated Benin bronzes. As in the sixteenth-century bronzes, the repetition of figures in high-relief panels present questions about the precise identities



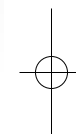
Sokari Douglas Camp, *Red Paisley*, 2008. Photo: Kristine Juncker.

*Accessories worn in the Delta*, 2006. Photo: Kristine Juncker.





*The Living Memorial to Ken Saro-Wiwa, 2006. Photo: Kristine Juncker.*



<http://www.nkajournal.org>

of the individuals. However, neither the colorful paisley print nor the generalized manner of the sculpted portraits reveals the identities of these kings and queens. Ultimately, these works relate to the cultural property issues that surround the Benin bronzes as institutions routinely ponder where the bronzes belong. Sokari's audiences are likely candidates for the debate surrounding the Benin bronzes, especially as some of her own collectors stand at the heart of this issue.

Strength of Feeling documented changes in Sokari Douglas Camp's perspectives as she explores the changing political climate and what it means for her own role as an activist and a well-recognized artist. Like many of the individuals noted among the "50 best African artists," Sokari's work calls attention to current events, not as a distant observer, but as an individual to whom these issues are monumentally personal. Now, through Strength of

Feeling, Sokari has convinced audiences that these issues of cross-cultural identity, violence, and social responsibility are also their concern.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "The Top 50 African Artists," *The Independent*, December 1, 2006. Available:

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/art-of-africa-the-50-best-african-artists-426441.html>.

<sup>2</sup> "The Top 50 African Artists," *Utne* no. 143, September/October 2007, p. 45.