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MAD Styles: The Global Africa Project

Posted by Caroline Hirsch
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Ike Ude, Sartorial Anarchy Untitled 1, 2010, Pigment on Satin paper, 40 x 36 inches (102 x 91 cm)

Ike Ude, Sartorial Anarchy Untitled 2, 2010, Pigment on Satin paper, 40 x 36 inches (102 x 91 cm)

On a recent visit to the Museum of Arts and Design's "*Global Africa Project*," which explores a very eclectic spectrum of contemporary African art, design, and craft, it struck me that the importance of being seen, and how one is seen, is at the heart of many of the photographic works on display. Whether these portraits were created in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, or Congo, a distinct sense of dignity and celebration comes through. These images in particular caught my eye.

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VISUAL CULTURE OUT OF AFRICA

By Roberta Smith

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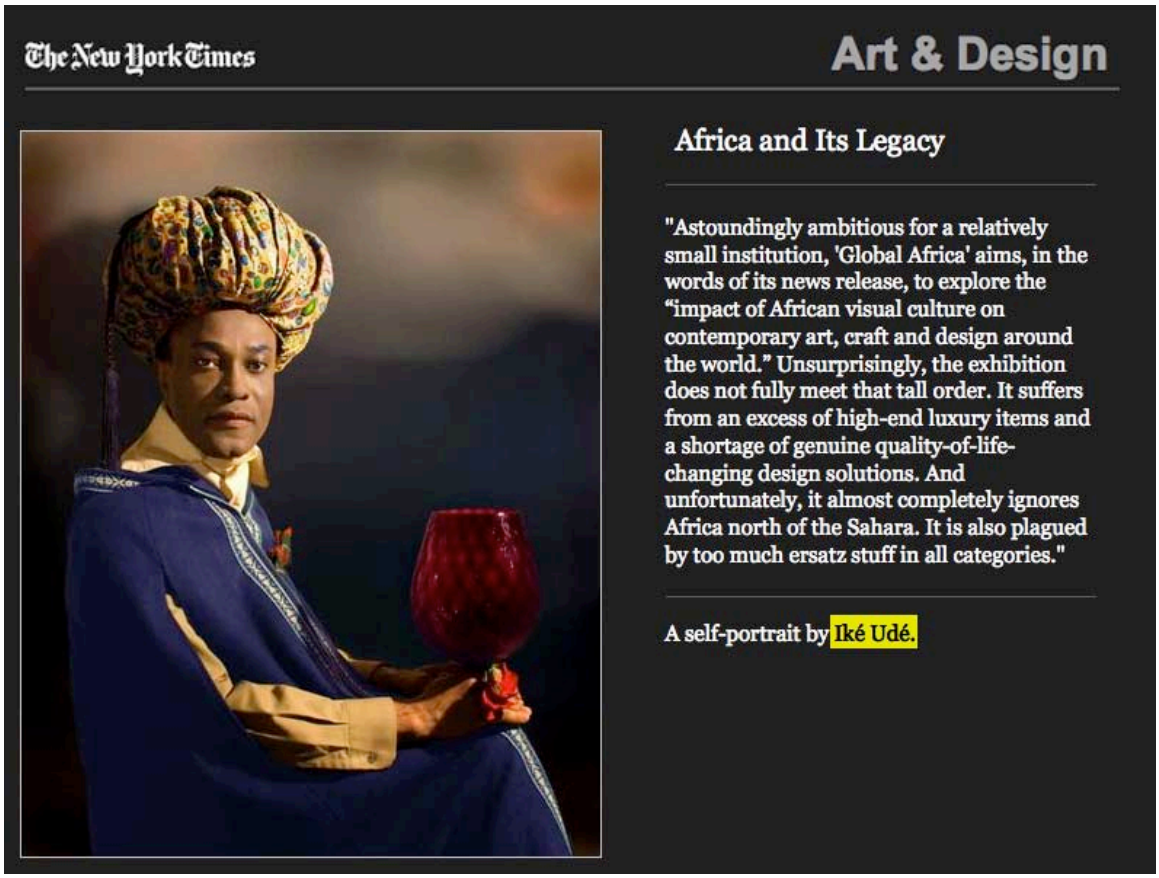

Africa is everywhere, so pervasive in our lives that we barely see it. Since it is in all likelihood the continent where human evolution began, it is literally in the bloodstream of everyone. DNA aside, huge portions of everyday life and cultural achievement are unthinkable without Africa.

What would Modern art be like if Matisse had never gone to Morocco or if he, Picasso and the German Expressionists had never set eyes on the sculptural innovations of sub-Saharan Africa? Very hard to say. And popular music? Around the world, it incorporates sounds and rhythms that originated in Africa. More locally, jazz — not Abstract Expressionism — was the first American art form of international stature.

"The Global Africa Project" at the Museum of Arts & Design tries to survey this pervasiveness, in terms of contemporary visual endeavors of all kinds: jewelry, fashion, architecture, basketry, ceramics, painting, utilitarian design. This sprawling cornucopia has been wrested into existence by Lowery Stokes Sims, former director of the Studio Museum in Harlem and, since 2007, international curator at the Museum of Arts & Design; and Leslie King-Hammond, former dean of graduate studies at the Maryland Institute College of Art and, since 2006, founding director of the institute's Center for Race and Culture.

This show presents 200 works by nearly 120 people, teams and collectives. It represents artists, designers, artisans, D.I.Y. improvisers and people engaged in various combinations of those already fuzzy job descriptions, toiling in ways that blur aesthetics, sociology and philosophy.

Astoundingly ambitious for a relatively small institution, "Global Africa" aims, in the words of its news release, to explore the "impact of African visual culture on contemporary art, craft and design around the world." Unsurprisingly, the exhibition does not fully meet that tall order. It suffers from an excess of high-end luxury items and a shortage of genuine quality-of-life-changing design solutions. And unfortunately, it almost completely ignores Africa north of the Sahara. It is also plagued by too much ersatz stuff in all categories.

But ultimately this show's strengths surpass its weaknesses, or maybe merge with them. If it lacks coherence, that is because there is none to be revealed. While there are individual references to distinctly African traditions and formal vocabularies, no single look or style emerges, and that's the point. The show's massing of information and accomplishment is often incredibly moving.

As you make your way through the crowded displays, you can almost hear the seams of the building creak under the strain. Though that sound may sometimes be simply your brain, boggled by the inundation of insights and attitudes, or even the fresh juxtaposition of familiar entities.

I loved seeing the work of Joyce Scott, the Baltimore bead sculptor extraordinaire, in the same vitrine as the beaded and sequined voudon flags, or drapos, of the Haitian artist George Valris. Likewise, the nearby grouping of J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere's photographs of the ostentatiously sculptural headdresses and hairdos of African women, with the majestic hats of Evetta Perry, owner of Harlem's Heaven Hat Boutique, and the softer, nonetheless crownlike, crocheted hats of the artist Xenobia Bailey.

Most but not all of the participants are of African descent. One exception is the Italian photographer Daniele Tamagni, who is represented by photographs of proudly stylish Congolese dandies — mostly men — known as the Society for the Advancement of People of Elegance. His images are among the exhibition's several photographic high points — along with the irreverent, cultural polyglot self-portraits

of the Nigerian-born Iké Udé, and the real-life style mixings captured in Nontsikelelo Veleko's street photographs of imaginatively dressed South Africans.

And most but not all of the participants work in the United States, Europe, the Caribbean or Africa. The exceptions are Ramijabi Madarsahib and Kairumbi Karimsahib, members of the Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative in Karnataka, India, descended from East Africans who started coming to India as early as the seventh century as sailors, slaves, servants and merchants. Each woman is represented by a small, bright, gemlike quilt made from discarded saris. The loose geometric patterns are a result of a process of all-over stitching (back and front) that is different from traditional American piecework.

Call them art, crafts or textiles, these quilts are among the most extraordinary aesthetic objects to be seen in any New York museum right now. If everything else here measured up to them, this show would be great beyond belief.

Despite its ups and downs, the exhibition delivers overreaching insights with inarguable immediacy. One of these is that categorical neatness is an exaggerated curatorial value. All museums should periodically assemble shows that ignore the distinctions among contemporary art, design and craft. The resulting friction between nonfunctional and functional, spiritual and practical, handmade and machine-made, and professional and self-taught is music to the eyes. What's more, it is closer to the way visual culture really happens.

Other insights relate more directly to life. Foremost is the do-it-yourself ethic. Nothing happens if you do nothing. Taking action is a way to take responsibility, but also a way to inspire others to act. And often something can be made out of almost nothing.

Equally important is the role of well-made and/or beautiful things, functional and not, as life-sustaining nourishment. The visual vitality of objects foments human vitality.

One example argues both points: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project, documented here in photographs and a video. It began one day in the late 1980s when Mr. Guyton, with help from his family, began to clean out an abandoned house on their drug-dealer-infested block in Detroit. Mr. Guyton arranged the gathered debris in colorful assemblages and reliefs in vacant lots and went on to clean out and decorate other houses and lots in the neighborhood. Heart-warming, yes, and it also began a process that helped rid the neighborhood of drugs.

Another pertinent concept at large in the show is recycling trash and, related, the repurposing of existing materials. This occurs in the cosmopolitan dresses made from several patterned fabrics by the Nigerian-born fashion designer Duro Olowu, who lives in London; a sturdy cabinet made from recycled metal oil drums by the Senegalese furniture designer Ousmane M'Baye; and a marvelously evocative columnar sculpture, "Tchin-Tchin, BP!," that Romuald Hazoumé, born in Benin, fashioned from plastic oil canisters. Inspired by the BP oil spill this year, it transcends the artist's description of it as a kind of "ironic" Champagne flute to merge suggestions of human, tree and anthill.

Recycling is also apparent in the industrial design team of Birsel & Seck's low, curving stools, made in Dakar from one of the country's most plentiful byproducts:

discarded plastic bottles and bags. Wahala Temi's "Afrikea" chair — made from Ikea stools — puts a conceptual spin on it.

There are seemingly stark contrasts of intention and effect. Among the more opulent inclusions are the handsome hammered silver vessels of Ndidi Ekubia, a British-born daughter of African immigrants, and the BMW hand-painted with geometric patterns by the South African muralist Esther Mahlangu (surely the best result of the company's self-serving art-car campaign).

Among the least opulent displays is a book set in a Plexiglas sleeve on the wall. "The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind: Creating Currents of Electricity and Hope" tells the inspiring story of William Kamkwamba of the landlocked Republic of Malawi. Forced to forgo school as a teenager to help his family survive, Mr. Kamkwamba scavenged materials to build a windmill that took electricity and clean water to his village for the first time.

But again and again, simplistic oppositions don't hold up. It helps to see each item on display as a marker for a larger story, like Mr. Kamkwamba's book, to be extracted from labels or the show's catalog. The glass-bead necklaces of Nomoda Ebenezer Djaba, also known as Mr. Cedi, have an attractive luminosity. The label reveals that they are made of recycled bottles, a process, the catalog elaborates, that has helped Mr. Cedi make his craft, handed down through several generations, more viable. This exhibition is full of such local success stories, in which craft traditions, recycling and human ingenuity coalesce, and lives are changed and even saved.

"The Global Africa Project" has a brilliant, concept-compressing name. The glowing alloy of its first two words — "Global Africa" — invokes a large continent and its worldwide influence, while "Project" paradoxically signals open-endedness: work in progress, loose ends, an interim report rather than a finished exhibition.

It is the kind of show that had to be done, that deserves to be done better and that may take a few attempts to get right. The Museum of Arts & Design should consider making it a recurring, truly continuing project, like the Whitney Museum's biennial or the New Museum's triennial. Every four or five years, take a trans-medium look at Africa and its global legacy; they will never become less important.