

MAGAZINE MAR. 07, 2011

TSUNAMI AFRICA

by Glenn Adamson



Hank Willis Thomas:
Scarred Chest, 2003,
Lambda print, 40 by 30
inches. Courtesy Jack
Shainman Gallery,
New York.

WHEN YOU WALK INTO “The Global Africa Project,” your first impression is one of profusion—not only in regard to objects (though there are certainly plenty of those), but ideas, materials and voices. The exhibition gathers more than 100 artists from all over the world, from every part of Africa itself as well as Los Angeles and New York, Cuba and Germany, London and Paris. There are performance-art props and masquerade costumes; high-end fashion and millinery; snappy batch-produced furniture and lighting; bricolage constructions of trash, industrial materials, and weaponry; photographs; handmade baskets and pottery; architectural models; installation art; documentary videos; sportswear branded by hip-hop crews; and finally, sculpture and paintings by a roster of international art stars like Chakaia Booker, Fred Wilson and Yinka Shonibare.

What’s odd, given the riches on offer, is that the exhibition itself doesn’t seem to amount to much. To understand why, it’s helpful to know a bit of recent history about the sponsoring institution. When the American Craft Museum changed its name to the Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) in 2002, it was unclear what future its board of trustees had in mind. The new name seemed to have been chosen mainly for its vagueness—all the arts, and design too? Isn’t design one of the arts anyway? Obviously the real objective, beyond erasing the word “craft,” was to eliminate all the baggage the term brought along with it. Yet once this focus was abandoned, what was left for this relatively small museum to do? It’s a quandary that has stayed with the institution ever since, partly because the timing of the



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decision to leave craft behind could not have been worse. In the past decade, manual skills have become red-hot intellectual property, drawing unprecedented attention from artists, designers, activists, environmentalists and scholars. Who knows what benefits might have come to the museum, had it continued to stand proudly for the complex, contradictory values of the handmade.

We'll never know, because MAD has pursued a different and arguably more difficult course. In 2008, the museum moved from its old home on 53rd Street to Edward Durrell Stone's historic if unloved "lollipop building" at 2 Columbus Circle. The new design by architect Brad Cloepfil, which dismantled nearly all but the structural outline, includes four floors of exhibition space, each one a tight shoebox with an L-shaped return. These galleries are unforgiving in their proportions—too narrow for comfort—but that has not stopped the curators from packing them to the rafters in headline exhibitions such as "Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary" (2008) and "Slash: Paper Under the Knife" (2009). Have these shows been any good? Yes and no.

On the one hand, the museum has followed through on its claim to be a post-disciplinary institution, in which familiar categories (including the crafts) disappear in an oceanic flow of creativity. Every visitor will find something new on a visit to MAD; it is like going to the home of an exuberant, disorganized friend. But the institution's definition of its own territory has not become any clearer with time. Having abandoned its former *raison d'être*, the museum has little more than indiscrimination to call its own.

THIS COMBINATION OF GOOD intentions and incoherent execution has never been more evident than in "The Global Africa Project." As soon as you hear the title, you know trouble is coming. A museum with no real track record in exhibiting African material, with a total gallery space of only 14,000 square feet (shared between temporary and permanent exhibitions), is laying claim to the entire art production of a whole continent and its diaspora: it is the very definition of institutional overreach. Why take on so much at once? Many other museums would be better equipped to assume the task—not least the Museum for African Art, which has been without a permanent home in the past but is set to open in fall 2011 at the opposite end of Central Park. And whether the job should have been done at all is an open question. Do we really want to see Africa treated as a single place anymore? Are all people of black descent, in the U.S. and elsewhere, meaningfully connected by a single diaspora? Without really setting a distinctive course, MAD has sailed

blithely into waters much charted by postcolonial theorists and contemporary art curators alike. The exhibition's first text panel asks, somewhat plaintively, "Given the nomadic, even migratory nature of artistic careers today, where is Africa?" It's too simple a question, unanswerable when posed in this blunt fashion, and it hangs over the project like a self-inflicted curse. We all know where Africa is, but we also know that geography is not a sufficient basis for dealing with the complexities of creative production.

Still, you can't fault a museum for initiative, and in Lowery Stokes Sims and Leslie King-Hammond, MAD found curators who might have been expected to deliver a terrific show. The two are longtime colleagues—they collaborated in 1988 on "Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum," an important survey of African-American art at the Maryland Institute College of Art—and could fairly be said to have been preparing their whole careers for this global survey. Their knowledge is wide, and they have quite evidently committed serious time to the project.

Though the exhibition could not (or should not) be described as comprehensive, given the enormous terrain it covers, you certainly don't feel a shortage of anything while walking through it. MAD's cut-paper show "Slash" also had twice as much work as the galleries could reasonably hold, but at least it benefited from visual consistency. "The Global Africa Project," by contrast, is sheer cacophony. Nominally the show is organized according to six themes: Branding Content, Intersecting Cultures, Competing Globally, Sourcing Locally, Transforming Traditions and Building Communities. These correspond only loosely to what we find. The themes are vague to begin with, so that one could reshuffle the works more or less at will within the subheadings. Compounding this organizational arbitrariness is the puzzling and unexplained inclusion of a few historical works from the 1970s and '80s. Among these are photographs documenting Keith Haring's collaborations with the performers Bill T. Jones and Grace Jones (by Tseng Kwong Chi and Robert Mapplethorpe, respectively) and early portraits by the self-taught Nigerian photographer J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere (the only artist in the show to be represented both by recent and early work, from the 1970s). These are powerful images to be sure, but the abrupt shifts in chronology make the show's loose structure seem positively shapeless.

There are some good moments in "The Global Africa Project," notably the material on branding—witty reflections on the fate of corporate identity in informal economies. Hank Willis Thomas brings new meaning to the phrase "just do it" with his digitally altered

photograph of a bare torso scarified with Nike swooshes, an image that nicely balances Kehinde Wiley's more style-conscious portraits of the Cameroonian soccer star Samuel Eto'o, who also bears a corporate logo on his chest. In a nice closing of this symbolic circle, the exhibition also includes Wiley's own designs for Puma brand sportswear. The curators should also be congratulated for the accompanying publication, a handsome volume packed with images, biographical information, and thoughtful essays by writers such as Christopher Cozier, Julie Lasky and Keith Recker. And, as usual at MAD, there are many discoveries to be made. I was especially taken with a video about the organization Maker Faire Africa, an entrepreneurial project led by Emeka Okafor (who lives in New York). Like the better-known mobile laboratories, or "Fab Labs," originated by MIT, Maker Faire Africa engages communities all over Africa through open-source fabrication technology. As Okafor explains in the video, he assembles do-it-yourself groups in the spirit of a pickup game in a schoolyard; the teams might be composed of anyone "from the roadside artisan to someone with three PhDs from an Ivy League University," and are meant to produce what he calls "Afrigadget-type innovations" (a phrase that remains tantalizingly unexplained, though it has something to do with optimization for local use).

Also admirable, for completely different reasons, are the U.S. designer Sheila Bridges's adaptations of the rococo French textiles known as *toiles de Jouy*. In the show were Bridges's matching wallpaper, plates and glasses with 18th-century-type vignettes such as one might find in those historical textiles—except that the characters are all black. The artist is quoted to disarming effect on the accompanying label: "After searching for many years for the perfect toile for my home, I decided it didn't exist, and I created *Harlem Toile de Jouy*." The incident-rich patterns come across as an ideal combination of Kara Walker and the British wallpaper designers Timorous Beasties. The photographer Iké Udé, similarly, has concocted a winning combination of wit and historicism with a series of portraits, some titled "Sartorial Anarchy." These works possess a contemporary haute-couture vibe but are cobbled together from colonial and traditional motifs. (Again, the artist's words are adroit: "What sartorial examples can we quote or recover from our predecessors, over the centuries and across the globe? With such an inexhaustible, timeless array of men's clothes at one's disposal, who needs drag?")

The curators made an outstanding selection of Duchampian found-object sculptures by Romuald Hazoumè of Benin. Hazoumè transmutes the flotsam and jetsam of African material culture into

sculptural form. In *TCHIN-TCHIN, BP!* (2010), he has shaped oil canisters into a 7½-foot-tall sculpture shaped like a champagne flute. The exhibition label explains the work's sardonic intention. In a context where "oil disasters are almost a way of life," the title "represents a cynical salute to the 'oligarchs'—your very good health!"

SO WHAT TO MAKE OF "The Global Africa Project?" Any curator can sympathize with the imperative that drove Sims and King-Hammond to overextend themselves. The diversity of production in a global, post-disciplinary environment, in which makers flit from place to place and medium to medium at will, plays havoc with institutional mandates and secure critical frameworks alike. And this is where the museum's past has caught up with it. Craft's fitful presence in the exhibition is absolutely representative of the museum's uncertain relations with its erstwhile purpose. Most of the objects are unique and made by hand, and occasionally, fine workmanship is singled out for praise; fashion ensembles or furniture might be described in the accompanying wall texts as "organic," "time-consuming" or "polished." However, the exhibition also showcases assemblage sculptures and installation artworks that are made very quickly and without much in the way of evident skill.

In assembling their exhibition, Sims and King-Hammond did not accept any of the easy caricatures associated with "craft" or "Africa." But neither did they seriously endeavor to understand the relation between those two terms—which is just the area in which a museum that specializes in craft could have made a unique contribution. That project, equally ambitious in its way but much more doable, would have to leave unexplored many of the numerous fragmentary storylines they pursued. It would instead, for example, limit its scope to the reality of African production. Who actually fabricated the many elegant, traditionally informed fashion ensembles on display? Do expatriate couturiers in London and Paris, such as Duro Olowu and Anggy Haif, retain links to makers in Cape Town or Lagos, or is the garment industry in Africa entirely separated from the catwalk? How should development projects like Ardmore Ceramic Art, run by white entrepreneurs to benefit AIDS-ravaged black communities in South Africa, be assessed in light of the long, troubled history of asymmetrical white/black ethnic relations? What is the workshop structure employed by the Kwei family, who fashion sculptural "fantasy" coffins for a community in Ghana, in the shape of fish, tigers, or (in the astounding example on view) entire architectural complexes? "The Global Africa Project" could have answered such questions. It also could have explored in greater depth issues of

production that are only tacitly raised by works included in the exhibition, such as skill-sourcing (as in Botswana-based furniture maker Peter Mabeo’s practice of matchmaking international designers and local producers), and the way that competitive craft thrives in a cash-poor environment (as in the fascinating “Hair Wars” competitions staged by stylists in Detroit, Los Angeles and other cities, represented in the show by photographs of over-the-top ’dos by leading contestants). Other themes, such as the role of craft in economic development and the tourist industry, could also have been introduced. Would such an exhibition draw the attention of the art and design world? Would it get a review in the pages of *Art in America*? It’s hard to say. But it would definitely be a show worth making.

There is little doubt that Sims and King-Hammond set their sights both high and wide, and MAD deserves credit for backing their breadth of vision, and for taking on the forbidding logistics of the project. Even in a creative world as fluid as our own, though, breadth isn’t everything. As any craftsman can tell you, when you really want to understand a problem, you have to focus. It’s a lesson that MAD has yet to learn.

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