

NEW AFRICA BUSINESS

It's Hard To Say What African Design Is, But It Sure Is Stunning

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(Omar Victor Diop)

For a glimpse of what's happening in Africa, [Guggenheim Bilbao](#) curator Petra Joos recommends watching a film called "The End of Eating Everything."

The eight-minute work by Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu introduces viewers to a snake-haired character. This figure floats through bleak scenery, encounters a flock of birds and devours them all. "At the end, she explodes," Joos says. "After that explosion, we can start again."

Joos sees this as an apt metaphor for the current direction of continent, which is poised for a rebirth thanks to a new generation eager to make their mark on the world. It's this youthful energy that is fueling the museum's exhibit "[Making Africa — A Continent of Contemporary Design](#)" (through February 21, 2016), which showcases 120 artists and designers.

Although there's no way to fully capture the essence of all 54 countries, Joos says, she considers this a "starting point to discuss the continent in another perspective." Or rather, many perspectives — for two years leading up to the exhibit, the museum conducted meetings in cities all over Africa to ask questions like, "What is African design?"



Idumota Market, Lagos 2081 A.D. by Ikire Jones

Olalekan Jeyfous [vigilism.com] & Wale Oyejide/Courtesy of Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

Americans or Europeans may think of Africa as all the same, Joos says: “It’s not all the same. It’s like comparing a Spanish person with a Swedish one — they’re not even talking the same language.” So the responses revealed very different points of view, including some opposing ones, she adds.

But one common theme that emerged was the idea of looking to the future.

“Of course there are people thinking about hunger and war. But there’s much more. It’s important to think about the 650 million mobile phones there — they’re connected. They don’t just want to absorb and copy. There are a lot of artists who want to show themselves and their difference to the world,” Joos says.

There were hints of this movement as far back as the mid-20th century, which is why the exhibit includes Malik Sidibe’s “Nuit de Noel,” a photograph of a joyous young couple dancing from 1963.



Nuit de Noël (Happy Club), 1963 by Malick Sidibe

Malick Sidibe/Courtesy CAAC and Magnin-A Gallery, Paris

“In this period at the end of colonization, that same spirit was there, looking to the future,” Joos says.

Even as contemporary artists offer their new spin on things, many still reference the past. Joos points out Senegalese portrait photographer [Omar Victor Diop](#), who takes inspiration from Africa’s grand tradition of studio photography. He has today’s trendsetters sit in old-fashioned poses. Then, he tacks on vivid backgrounds.

There’s also Cyrus Kabiru, who fashions glasses out of found elements like screws and spoons. Joos says his pieces are a fitting way of altering perceptions of Africa. Developed countries often send materials there to be reused. Through Kabiru’s creative process, they’re also being rethought.



Kenyan artist Cyrus Kabiru poses with an artwork resembling sunglasses on February 1, 2012 in Nairobi. Kabiru has created a range of artworks called “c-stunners” that resemble sunglasses but have been made with objects found on the street on his way to his studio.

Carl de Souza/AFP/Getty Images/Courtesy of Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

How different will African design look in 40 years? “I don’t know,” Joos says. “We know something is starting now, and it’s continuing from the ’50s.” The only thing she’s certain of is that anyone who comes to the “Making Africa” exhibit should be prepared to have expectations challenged: “They’re not going to see what they already know about Africa.”



The Kingdom of Taali M, 2013, by Pierre-Christophe Gam

Courtesy of Guggenheim Museum Bilbao

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