

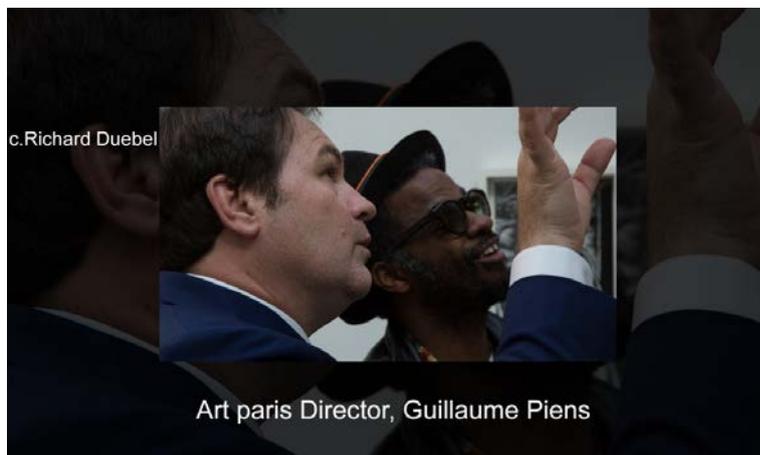
Africa Heats Up The French Capital

By Sylvia Smith

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Perhaps it is the number of mainstream venues that have devoted their spring shows to the subject; or perhaps again it is the extraordinary quality of inventiveness whether it be sculpture, painting, video or design – but it is the exuberance of African imagination that is lifting the spirits of Parisians and instilling a sense of renewal into a city still in its winter wraps.

Africa is setting the cultural pace this spring in Paris and as French Vogue puts it “la creativite Africaine est en plein boom”, whether it the art is on display at la Fondation Louis Vuitton, 100% Afrique at La Villette (curated by Simon Njami), Galleries Lafayette or Art Paris Art Fair at the Grand Palais just off the Champs Elysée.

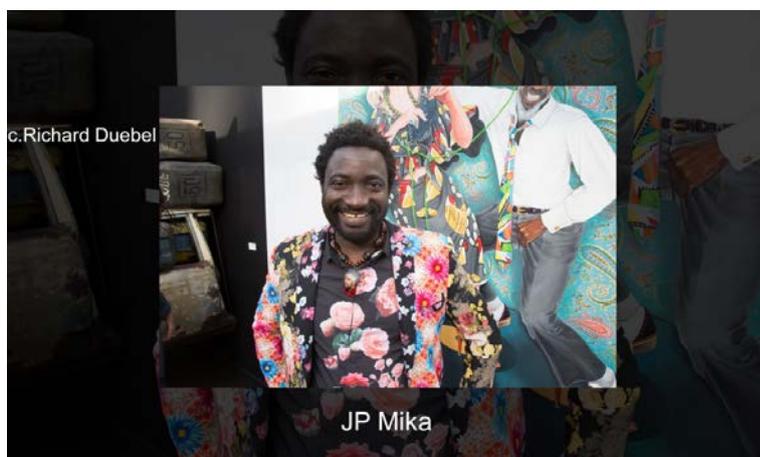


In the case of the latter venue Guillaume Piens the art fair’s director feels that Paris is coming to African contemporary art somewhat belatedly and has lagged behind London and New York in recognising the continent’s contribution. “There are new biennales, galleries and art centres on the continent and now is the time to put Africa on show,” he says. “The new generation of African artists, who grew up with the internet and the prospect of artists residences in Europe or the USA is very different from the older generation. They remain more firmly rooted in their own country’s traditions.”



The difference in the two generations is starkly on display at the Magnin-A stand where one painting by Cheri Samba and one by his former student studio assistant JP Mika illustrate the difference a formal education at the Academie de Beaux Arts makes. “I am very influenced by Cheri Samba,” JP Mika agrees. “I draw on him but add my own touches.”

Congo Kinshasa-born JP Mika a sapeur at heart, even if not always in outfit, is barely visible in his floral shirt and jacket against the colourful fabric background of his painting. A couple past the first flush of youth are dancing on an LP. The overall effect is dashing and exiting. “There are lots of details and movement. I have added to Congolese popular art by painting on textiles and coloured materials,” says JP Mika.



Mika is one of 100 African artists with works in 20 galleries from the continent and 15 Western galleries which specialise in African art and have set up in the early 20th century glass and steel edifice. Magnin-A is long established but Guillaume Piens’s initiative ‘Promesses’ aims to encourage relatively new galleries to spread their wings. ‘Promesses’ pay all the overheads for galleries that have been up and running for less than six years so they can get a foot in the art market door.

And the market is what it is all about according to Illa Ginette Donwahi who set up a foundation in Abidjan along with two other Africans prominent in the artworld. “Our art is still affordable and Europeans think they are discovering something,” Illa says. “However we know the value of our art.” The divide between the older and younger artists is again distinct on the Donwahi stand.



Franck Fanny from Abidjan shows three black and white photographs on the stand. Another Day Without You, a very personal recollection of feeling lonely without his son while in New York is pure self-indulgence. “The lift was a long time coming and so I decided to take the stairs,” Fanny explains. “The empty, blank space of the stairwell made me feel melancholic so I started taking pictures and spent three hours in the bleak space.” On the same stand Boris Nzebo, a brilliant painter sold his two very vibrant and unmistakably African works within minutes.



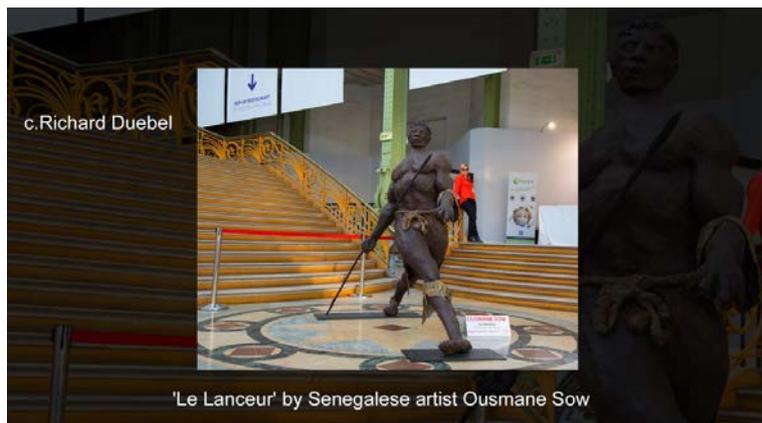
Bubbly and exuberant Billie Zangewa from South Africa makes “selfies” out of silk that reveal the details of her daily life. Skilful in design and execution the five works on the Afronova stand sold out in 20 minutes. The work is painstaking and each one takes weeks to complete capturing post-apartheid freedom such as her predilection for white men. “Working with silk is very sensuous,” she mentions. “silk is also a fabric of transformation which reflects my life.”



Nearby Attukwei Clottey from Ghana also with a solo show plays with the notion of immigration by re-exporting to Europe yellow plastic gerry cans that he cuts up and transforms into wall hangings. “This work gives me the chance to educate people about the dangers of drinking water stored in plastic under the hot sun,” Clottey says. “They are a part of everyday African life nowadays, but the old clay pots are much better for the health.”



Several galleries showed works that appeared at first sight to be African in origin, but were in fact simply inspired by buzz around Africa at the moment. Being flavour of the month dovetailed with the pop up by Dieuveil Malonga, a gourmet chef from Congolese Brazzaville. ” I do a lot of exhibitions throughout the world so as to promote futuristic African cooking,” Malonga explains. “The exhibitions inspire me more because I draw ideas from modern contemporary African artists and designers.”



The African element in Art Paris Art Fair undermines the statement by Nicolas Sarkozy, “L’homme Africain n’est pas assez entre dans l’histoire! It seems that the time of Africa has well and truly come. Watch out for Paris Photograph later this year (9th-12th November) which will be energised and enriched by the ever-inventive African continent.

<http://www.themiddleeastmagazine.com/wp-mideastmag-live/2017/04/africa-heats-up-the-french-capital/>