

From Porto-Novo to ParisAfrica, contemporary art's new hot-spot

Artists from the continent display a bright streak of edgy and playful work in the French capital

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Calixte Dakpogan/CAAC-The Pigozzi Collection

BEFORE the first world war the most exciting artists were French; in the 1990s they were Chinese. Now the hot new place for contemporary art is Africa. Visitors to the opening of the Venice Biennale on May 13th can go to a Nigerian pavilion for the first time; three days later Sotheby's will inaugurate its first auction of African contemporary art. At the end of September Jochen Zeitz, a German businessman, will open the long-awaited Zeitz MOCAA, which Thomas Heatherwick, a British designer, has been creating for him in a disused grain silo on the waterfront in Cape Town. Those too impatient to wait should make haste, meanwhile, to Paris, where the Fondation Louis Vuitton (FLV) in the Bois de Boulogne has unveiled two of the most vivid exhibitions of African artists that the city has ever seen.

For the first exhibition, "Être Là" ("Being There"), Suzanne Pagé, FLV's artistic director, has selected 16 artists from South Africa. Much of what they have made for the show is creepy, frightening and aggressive. That is not unexpected given that this is the work of a generation grown increasingly frustrated at the country's inability to live up to its post-apartheid promise.

Les Initiés" ("The Insiders"), is more surprising. Drawn from a collection built up by Jean Pigozzi, heir to the Simca motoring fortune, it starts in 1989, when the communist proxy wars in Africa were coming to an end and technology, in the form of mobile phones and internet banking, was but a step away from giving Africans greater control over their daily lives. It

blends humour and inventiveness, in the form of witty masks made from randomly collected domestic objects by Romuald Hazoumé from Benin, an artist whose work David Bowie collected; sculptures of bright, idealised cities by Bodys Isek Kingelez of the Democratic Republic of Congo; magical works made with porcupine quills by John Goba from Sierra Leone; and hilarious face masks, such as “Oba 2007” (pictured), made by Calixte Dakpogan, also from Benin, out of beads, pens, nail-clippers and synthetic coloured hair which he has found on his walks through his hometown of Porto-Novo. Here, energy and adventurousness are matched only by imagination, belying any notion that Africa is a dark continent.

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