

Fantastical Cityscapes of Cardboard and Glue at MoMA

The visionary Congolese artist speaks of both beauty and the harsh realities of life in his Jetsonian cardboard cityscapes.

The Audacious Architectural Models of Bodys Isek Kingelez

By ROBERTA SMITH, MAY 31, 2018

The Congolese polymath Bodys Isek Kingelez (1948-2015) wasn't shy about his greatness. Describing himself as "a small god," and an "enlightened artist of new horizons," he claimed of his work that "since time immemorial, no one has had a vision like this." However immodestly, he spoke the truth, based on the evidence of the stunning "Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams," a euphoric exhibition-as-utopian-wonderland at the Museum of Modern Art.



Detail of "Ville de Sète 3009," a work from 2000 that was an homage to the French port city where he stayed. Buildings glow with translucent hues and glitter — a city traversed with canals abutting a blue "sea." Credit Cole Wilson for The New York Times

The first comprehensive Kingelez retrospective in the United States, it introduces the artist's fantasy architectural models: strong in color, eccentric in shape, loaded with enthralling details and glowing with futuristic visions for Congo's transition after its independence from Belgian rule in 1960. Beginning in the late 1970s, after arriving in the capital, Kinshasa, from his home village, Kingelez made his primarily civic structures from a lexicon of cut paper, cardboard, cigarette packaging, translucent sheets of tinted plastic, and glue. The consistency

of style and rigor is impressive and, astoundingly, Kingelez made up these fascinators as he went along, without studies — or formal art training. Less astounding, he frequently worked his name or initials into their facades or signs.



Detail of “Ville Fantôme” (1996), Kingelez’s masterwork, took two years to create and combines about 50 structures, including a bridge and an airport. Credit Cole Wilson for The New York Times

The ornate objects that Kingelez came up with snap the eye and mind to attention and push your personal image bank into high gear. It’s hard to keep track of the multitude of references they can stir up. Chinese pagodas? Romanesque vaulted ceilings? Las Vegas casino signs? Eastern-bloc architecture? Empire mantle clocks? American megachurches? Jetsonian design? That’s only the beginning, yet every suggestion is fastidiously integrated, nothing so crude as postmodernism’s heavy-handed appropriation of Classical forms.

The MoMA show presents 33 of Kingelez’s creations, including single buildings, town squares and mad little urban centers, some drawing on Kinshasa’s grand boulevards and buildings in a Belgian Art Deco style. They date from 1980 to 2007, eight years before his death from cancer. His reputation was established, almost instantaneously in 1989, when six models were included in “Magiciens de la Terre,” at the Pompidou Center in Paris, a landmark exhibition that attempted a global view of contemporary art. Kingelez spent six months in the French capital — his first trip out of Congo — and came to know a new world of materials, which he also began to be able to afford. He became a fixture in international biennials and surveys.

The MoMA installation was designed by the German artist Carsten Höller with distinctive white pedestals and platforms that add their own glamour. The centerpiece is Kingelez’s masterwork, “Ville Fantôme” of 1996, which took two years to create, covers an expanse of 7 feet by 18 feet and combines about 50 structures, including a bridge and an airport. An overhead mirror facilitates viewing; the town can be further explored by virtual reality, which is attracting long lines.



“U.N.,” from 1995. The show presents 33 of Kingelez’s creations: single buildings, town squares and utopian metropolises. Credit Cole Wilson for The New York Times

The base of “Ville Fantôme” epitomizes Kingelez’s enthusiasm for beautifying his models and cities with painted lawns, gardens, pathways and roads; they seem to sit on richly patterned carpets.

Kingelez favored setbacks, “glass” curtain walls (mostly plastic) and scallops that defined his buildings’ shapes, as throughout “Etoile Rouge Congolaise.” Housing what he called the “High Multicultural Court of Wisdom,” this building centered on a turquoise medallion and the two low pink wings to either side, which together conjure a tricked-out army tank. Inverted pyramids were also frequent, most strikingly with the turquoise, red and cream “Stars Palme Bouygues,” which resembles the expanding chest of a superhero, or a figure by the Chicago Imagist Karl Wirsum.

Kingelez has a bit of the outsider artist in his boastfulness, including suggestions of communicating with God, and in his belief that his work would result in “lasting peace, justice and universal freedom.”



Visitors study various Kingelez works at the show. On the upper pedestal, from left, “Aéromode (Aéroport Moderne),” 1991; “Étoile Rouge Congolaise,” 1990; and “Reveillon Fédéral,” 1992.

Credit Cole Wilson for The New York Times

In addition his talent seemed to emerge fully formed. He was born in 1948 in the rural village of Kimbembele-Ihunga — later reimagined in a sculpture with high-speed trains and skyscrapers defined with gold metallic tape — and educated by Catholic priests in the final years of the Belgian Congo: a top student who excelled at calligraphy. (Many times tiny decorative elements of his pieces seem printed but are actually hand drawn, like the little black-on-white plaques beneath 40 windows of “Canada Dry,” a marvelous terra-cotta-colored piece from 1991.)



“Canada Dry,” 1991, a marvelous terra-cotta pseudo-Gothic confection made from paper, paperboard and other various found materials. Credit Cole Wilson for The New York Times

In 1970, Kingelez traveled 370 miles to Kinshasa (formerly Léopoldville), like any kid with inchoate ambition seeking a larger life. He attended college, studying economics and industrial design, and taught in a secondary school for a few years. In 1978, he suddenly quit, dissatisfied but unfocused. After a month he said “I became obsessed with getting my hands on some scissors, a Gillette razor, and some glue and paper.” When he did he built a little house. “And this,” he told an interviewer with typical understatement “is what stopped the fatal hemorrhaging.”

Photo



Bodys Isek Kingelez in Kinshasa, 1990, in an outfit he made himself from a flag. Credit André Magnin, Paris

The first two structures he made helped land him a job as a restorer at the country’s central museum, where he worked for six years, perfecting his skills both on the job and at home, working with materials meticulously scavenged. He took inspiration from the Art Deco buildings left by the Belgian colonials and also from the more bizarre structures ordered up, if not always completed, by the reigning dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, who came to power in 1965, changed the country’s name to Zaire in 1971 and began destroying its economy and infrastructure for the benefit of his family and coterie, eventually resulting in civil war and finally, in 1997, his ouster.

This exhibition has been organized by Sarah Suzuki, curator in the department of drawings and prints, with Hillary Reder, curatorial assistant, and is accompanied by a beautifully designed catalog.

Kingelez referred to his models as “extreme maquettes” while others call them super hybrids for their mixing of media, or propositions — ideas not intended for building. As with most utopian designs, one can imagine that if built, especially into whole cities, they would feel tyrannical.

But as objects they are among the most distinctive and ambiguous creations in the histories of sculpture, architectural model-making and the decorative arts. They celebrate, criticize and satirize. Some make political points right up front; his models include a hospital for people suffering from AIDS, of which Kinshasa was an early epicenter; another is dedicated to Palestinians.



Details of three Kingelez works, all made from paper, paperboard and other various materials; from left, the airplane hangar in “Ville Fantôme,” 1996; “Étoile Rouge Congolaise,” 1990; and “Stars Palme Bouygues,” 1989. Credit Cole Wilson for The New York Times

With skyscrapers becoming an inescapable fact of modern life, miniature ones turned out to be the best way for Kingelez’s imagination to confront reality. They afforded him the greatest complexity of form and commentary without the responsibilities of structural integrity, yet they enabled him to take aim at the lost dreams of independence and the excess, wasteful consumption of society as a whole. They could also send up the dullness of much contemporary architecture. They seem to say, architecture can do more — maybe not *this* much — but more. And certainly they reaffirm visual joy as the sustaining life force that it is.

Bodys Isek Kingelez: City Dreams

Through Jan. 1 at the Museum of Modern Art, Manhattan; 212-708-9400, moma.org.

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