

Africa, Center Stage

BY Sarah Moroz | June 19, 2018



“Xindiro Companhia” by Mauro Pinto.
(Courtesy Mauro Pinto)

EVORAFRICA kicks off an inaugural celebration of African heritage in the Portuguese city of Evora, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A vast program of free concerts and performances, through August 25, is completed with the exhibition “African Passions.” Spread throughout the Cadaval Palace — itself a blend of Mudejar, Gothic, Manueline and Medieval styles — are Omar Victor Diop’s photographs from his series “Diaspora,” Billie Zangewa’s elegant embroidered silks, and Houston Maludi’s Chinese ink-drawn geometries.

The exhibition is curated by Andre Magnin. Formerly the director of the Pigozzi Collection in Geneva, he founded MAGNIN-A in 2009 to promote Contemporary African art within the international art market. He’s also an independent curator who has overseen exhibitions of African art at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the Tate Modern, and many shows at Paris’s Fondation Cartier.

Interviewed at his home in Paris’s 11th arrondissement — which features a meticulously-catalogued record collection, stacks of “Jeune Afrique” magazine, and Alighiero Boetti’s “Map of the World” — Magnin genially discussed, between drags of Benson & Hedges and sips of Zubrowka (a vodka that “doesn’t give you a headache”), his career and his thoughts about African art.

How did you become associated with this new festival in Evora?

There's a character named Alain Webber: We're the same age, we've done the same thing for the same length of time, but he's in music. He created music festivals in Fez, Jaipur, Paris — and in Portugal. With Alexandra de Cadaval, they wanted to do a wider event dedicated to Africa, which gathered Contemporary music as well as art. I said yes right away.

How did you make your selection of artists?

There are about a dozen rooms in the Cadaval Palace. Rather than bringing together 70 artists and seeing one work of each, we preferred to dedicate an entire room to one artist, or have two artists in dialogue within one room, because many of the artists are unknown in Portugal — and throughout the world, in fact. I wanted to show several generations, whose works are profoundly anchored within their culture but, at the same time, resonate with the world at large. Frederic Bruly Bouabre, from the Ivory Coast, is a monument of thinking and writing. He's profoundly Ivorian, but his oeuvre has an international echo. There are historical photos by Malick Sidibe, like the ones shown at the Fondation Cartier earlier this year. Amadou Sanogo from Mali, who uses a lot of local savoir — he has a dedicated room. Anselm Kiefer has said if he wasn't German, his work couldn't have existed. It's the same for Sanogo. If he wasn't from Mali, he would never have created this work. I like to think that all the artists I work with create works totally anchored in their own history, their own culture, their own light. What makes great artists compelling is they invent: Artists in Africa invented themselves outside of art history, without the arrogance of Europe or the United States, and that's what's fascinating. They're writing their own art history. All these artists bring new consciousness and beauty. I chose 16 artists — it could have been 16 others. It's subjective — but not completely. I can explain why I chose one artist over another.

You were part of an iconic Parisian exhibition, “Magiciens de la Terre,” in 1989 as assistant curator — which had a similar mission to that of EVORAFRICA, to reveal other parts of the world to its audience. How did that come about?

During the Biennale de Paris in 1986, people were talking about an exhibition intended for 1987. Jean-Hubert Martin — he was brilliant, he was the curator at Centre Pompidou then moved to the Kunsthalle Bern but then came back to Paris — intended to do the first worldwide exhibition, searching for artists from every continent, looking at art outside of Europe and the US. I did everything to meet this guy, and got a job with him. We divided up the map and I went to Papua New Guinea, Australia, New Zealand, and Africa. There were two camps: “it's extraordinary!” — or they didn't get it. People didn't understand how you could show Aboriginal Australian art alongside Claes Oldenburg or Lawrence Weiner.

Two things happened that overshadowed the exhibition at the time: the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Tiananmen Square. This idea of seeing value in every culture corresponded perfectly with these world events.

The last day of the exhibition, a very rich man came by to see it. He had Basquiats and Warhols, because he knew the artists — but when he saw this exhibition, he didn't know the artists and asked questions; he was redirected to me. Thanks to him, I was able to research art in the entire African continent for 20 years.

This is Jean Pigozzi.

Yes. He financed all my trips to Africa, and I constituted his collections. The Pigozzi collection prolonged the life of the exhibition. Pigozzi didn't care what was popular — he wanted a collection that was unique in the world. It has been exhibited, in parts, everywhere. In France, it was mostly at the Foundation Cartier — I've done 14 exhibitions there, starting with Seydou Keita in 1994 — they were key in the transmission of the work we did. There are 12,000 works in the collection, accumulated over 20 years. The African continent has 54 countries. Africa didn't have museums, galleries, foundations, or art market, except for South Africa. And yet! In every country, there were working artists, because they felt the necessity to work, not for business. We supported these artists and little by little... Touria El Glaoui created the first fair, 1:54, which spread to London and New York. There's AKA here in Paris. International art fairs are opening up to African artists.

But the appreciation you had for African art was unique at the time. Now institutions like the Louis Vuitton Foundation dedicated an exhibition to African artists. Are you worried this newfound reverence is fickle?

It's not a trend. Or I've been on-trend for 35 years. Today, there's a lot of money in Contemporary art; it's extraordinarily popular. A lot of fortunes have happened quickly and there's a lot of consulting about what to invest in. Millions towards a Jeff Koons or Maurizio Cattelan or Murakami, that's easy. However, if you decide to collect something more unique and not like every other rich person, for €10,000 or a €100,000 maximum, you can collect artists who are extraordinary. And they might become as important, in pecuniary terms, relative to American artists. A lot of collectors who went to Frieze then came to 1:54 and said: "we're glad to be here, because we see things that amaze us. Artists don't resemble each other." We were arrogant and closed off — people are starting to open up. There are enthusiasts who invest in things they like; there are nouveaux riches who invest in African or Indian art because it's cheaper. They accompany what's happening in the world. It's no longer just Europe and the US creating history, creating the story. There's no center anymore. For the "Magiciens de la Terre" catalog, we had geographers create maps where the center of the world was where the artist was living. For each artist, there was a map, and the localization of the artist on the map was its center. From our point of view — political too — there's no center. An artist can be the center

In 2009, I decided to try to build a Contemporary African art market, so that the artists weren't just in one person's hands, but could become accessible to everyone. The continent is enormously rich — it's the future of the world. The younger artists understand that. They could invent anything, and add to world art history. It's an extraordinary moment.

I've been interested in art since the mid-'70s, when I was 20 years old. I knew Western art, and I had my truths, but it was through travel... When you meet great artists in Africa, who have other savoirs, it's a joy. I traveled to Africa to remove my verites — to open myself to others, to learn.

So it's more of an awakening than a trend.

We're saying "Africa is a la mode" — but it's not because we're talking about it a lot, it's because it's a gigantic continent that we've always wanted to be mysterious and remote. All of a sudden, it's not so mysterious or remote. And finally, it will play a crucial worldwide

role. It's evident. A billion people! The resources underground, in the forest, in agriculture. It's creative and inventive, it changes swiftly. There are still problems of education and health and transportation. But there are projects. Everyone wants to be in Africa, not for colonizing, but for partnerships. There's too much money to be made. I think Africa could save Europe as it's collapsing. This is a rather extraordinary moment. I didn't see this coming 20 years ago.

So for Evora, at this small scale, it's a first event in Portugal, even though Sindika Dokolo wanted to start a museum here. But I created the first event, a white guy.

Do people get mad about you, as a white man, exporting African art?

Of course. Sindika Dokolo in fact! He's the husband of Isabel dos Santos, one of the richest women in the world. He's Congolese of origin, his father was banker, he grew up in Europe. He has a fortune and is a collector. But his collection is based on that of Hans Bogatzke, whose collection is similar to mine, but mine pre-dates it. Sindika Dokolo has long said that it shouldn't be a white person who decides which artists in Africa are good.

What's your response to that?

That it's stupid! Why would his skin color enable him to have a superior eye to someone who is passionate about art, especially since he grew up in Europe? Does one's skin color confer a superior understanding through the pretext that he's from somewhere? By that logic, an African could never discern whether an American is a good artist? Why would a Qatari buy a van Gogh? Today, the art market is international. I've been to Africa 300 times, and no one can speak about it the way I can — and African artists can attest to this. Romuald Hazoume said as much in the press.

Given this growing openness and curiosity, how do you see the evolution of African art?

The next step needs to be awareness by the African government that African art has the power to federate people. There are still no museums in many countries, or budgets to buy Contemporary African art. The only art initiatives are private — foundations in Morocco, Benin, Cameroon. Artists deserve to be considered in their own countries, because for the most part, they don't have a single work there.

Africa is becoming conscious of its importance. It will change the face of the world. It will take years, it will take money. But art will follow. We have to listen to young artists who are saying: we don't want to take the road that has been indicated for us, but create the paths that we want ourselves. It's no longer about copying the West. That's over!

It's not that Jeff Koons is more interesting than Cheri Samba. It's that there are 30 rich people who want Jeff Koons, so it costs €10 million. But when there will be 50 rich people who want a beautiful Samba, it will cost €10 million. What makes the value of a work — a good work can cost €50,000, not €10 million — is determined by people who buy not only with their ears. So for Evora, a first exhibition dedicated to African art, it's a start.

— *This story appears in the June edition of Modern Painters.*

<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/3101796/africa-center-stage>