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Romuald Hazoumè in Bern: Art from canisters

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He modeled with synthetic hair, plastic waste and scrap: Romuald Hazoumè considered one of the most important artists of Africa. In Bern masks and installations can now be seen by him, which are just as poetic as politically.



With black African art, it almost always goes to clichés: masks and sculptures are in the categories 'primitive', 'archaic' or 'spiritual' art. Painted, printed or woven tends always toward enigmatic, meaningful or simply attractive arts and crafts.

Such ideas take the West African artist Romuald Hazoumè for a ride when he says of himself and his art: 'From an African one expects that he makes masks – so I made masks'. Now showing native of Benin Hazoumè in an exhibition in Bern about 30 works: installations, sculptures, some images with enigmatic symbols. And of course masks.

But his works have nothing to do with the ethno-kitsch sold in airports and markets. Even the material does not fit the idea of traditional tribal art from wood, because Hazoumè's masks approximately consist of old plastic containers, made of metal and scraps of fabric, wire, scrap, cables, artificial hair, brush, wood waste and waste products of civilization as spectacle frames, plastic knives or discs.

Fetish masks Glasses

From such everyday waste makes Hazoumè his art that breaks with habits of seeing, because his spirits or fetish masks and sculptures already by cheap waste material each ritual purposes

by reference. Nevertheless, his works combine the cultural traditions of Africa with the present, and Hazoume tells them old and new stories.

As for example, that in Benin every hairstyle has a meaning and the status of a woman is it read: In the height of growing hairs indicate, for example, 'I am free', a button called the hair in the middle, that the woman is divorced, but would like to return a relationship.

In the Berne exhibition shows Hazoume to some masks for the magnificent hairstyle – design of the canister mask 'Waxomaniaque' he uses the ubiquitous in Africa, produced by means of wax cotton batik prints. So falls 'Miss Nucleaire' with red feathers, black-rimmed eyes and a bright red mouth very mysterious from that mask 'Iroquois', as the name suggests, rather punky – indian.

Even politically to track work Hazoumes read. With the use of waste products of civilization he wants just to point out global economic cycles of export and re-import as on the colonial exploitation of raw materials and manpower

are also impressive the exhibited installations: Bicycles, mopeds and other converted companion about, densely hung with several canisters. For a few euros driver smuggle night those filled with gasoline containers on the border between Nigeria and Benin – and risking their lives: a small leak is sufficient, the gasoline ignited, killing the driver with a violent detonation.' Driving away is to agree with death', Hazoume says, and that he just understands this work, which he calls 'Roulette Beninoise', as a commentary on politics in Africa.

Comparison of refugees and slaves was

Born Hazoume 1962 in Porto Novo in Benin, his family belongs to the tribe of the Yoruba, and even though he brought up Catholic was a French high school and attended, knows and understands the religion and the culture of his ancestors. Him characterizes both European education as well as African tradition.

As a teenager he painted according to own data only in passing – until a German had encouraged him to earn his money with art, so Hazoume in an interview. When he exhibited in 1989 for the first time in the Centre Culturel Français in his Benin Location Cotonou, spotted by a French curator and gave him an exhibition.

Thus began a career whose preliminary climax in 2007 was Hazoumes participation in Documenta 12 in Kassel. There he showed before the photo of a beach a huge ship model from canisters, before the word 'I Have a Dream I Want to Stay at Home'. African refugees were just as devastating as slavery, he said at the time.

No wonder the Hazoumes work with tribal art has hardly anything to do, and no wonder that he still ironic recognition of the western art market commented. For example, if it appears to exhibition openings in flowing African robes – because he wanted to show the whites, 'what an African is'

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