



Portait of Monsengo Shula

Monsengo Shula

Biography

Born in 1959, Nioki, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Lives and works in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo

As the majority of "popular" artists from Kinshasa, his talent for drawing unveiled early. Shula started at the age of 15 as his cousin assistant, the well known Moke, the godfather of the "popular painting" and a colourist master. He is one of those that thinks that their narrative paintings directly stemmed from everyday life must be critical, condemn political unfairness, bring awareness and educate the population. This is the reason why all his paintings suggest the message. " Painters are useful because they say out loud what others think to themselves".

Shula distinguishes himself from the other "popular painters" such as Moke, Chéri Samba, Chéri Chérin. His characteristic combination of colours provides to his paintings an effect of unreal, as if he managed to overcome reality. The theme of his recent paintings brings a new perspective to global problems such as global warming, international policy and the relationship of mankind with technology.

"The artist shows his singularity in 2012 when he chooses to depict the technological mutations of the world and the growing robotization. With a surrealist humor that evokes the Chaplin of Modern Times, he paints the processed man, transformed into a simple wheel of a complex mechanism, dislocated and connected puppets. We are however far from the darkness of the movie Matrix. Shula's characters are consenting slaves of digital communication. "Men think of machines as a friend, but it is a mistake" he regrets. "Do you find it normal that a woman and a man meeting in a restaurant spend their time on their phones without talking to each other? My son is always wearing his earphones. I am also in front of my computer or Euronews. We can't be stuck at the Stone Age nor go back, but we need safeguards. It is very troubling to live in a world in which fiction and reality intertwine."

Perfectly constructed, his paintings can be distinguished by a cold set of colors, accentuated by the prevailing of a cobalt blue color, almost like a television. Shula intends to explore the question of smart houses, managed by computer systems. Future or fantasy? It doesn't matter. His eye is greedy: he knows that he found an inexhaustible source."

Le Monde

Roxana Azimi

Written on September 7, 2015

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2020-2021

Welcome home II, MACAAL, Marrakech, Morocco

2018

Congo Stars, Kunsthaus Graz, Austria (curators: Sammy Baloji, Bambi Ceuppens, Fiston Mwanz Mujila, Günther Holler-Schuster, Barbara Steiner)

2015

Beauté Congo - Congo Kitoko, Cartier Foundation for Contemporary Art, Paris, France (curator: André Magnin)

2013

KIN-BABI, Galerie Cécile Fakhoury, Abidjan, Ivory Coast

2011

JapanCongo, Double regard de Carsten Höller sur la collection de Jean Pigozzi, Le Magasin, Grenoble, France (curator: Yves Aupetitallot)
The Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, Russia

2009

Africa Arte Contemporanea, JZ Art Gallery, Milano, Italy

2007

Le Congo d'aujourd'hui et de demain, Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles, Kinshasa, RDC

2005

Portraits of women from Bible, Paris, France
Peinture Populaire du Congo et Haïti, Museum of Haïtien art, Port-Au-Prince, Haïti

2003

Visage d'Afrique, Galerie Mots et Tableaux, Brussels, Belgium
Kin moto na Bruxelles, Hôtel de Ville, Brussels, Belgium

2001

La cité dans la peinture populaire de Kinshasa
Centre Wallonie-Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium ; Centre Culturel Ku Ntwala, Kinshasa, RDC
AAPPO : L'union fait la force, Galerie Marc Dengis, Brussels, Belgium
Association des Artistes Peintres de style populaire - Ecole du Congo

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain



Exhibition view of Beauté Congo -Congo Kitoko, 2015, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain



Exhibition view of Beauté Congo -Congo Kitoko, 2015, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain

Exploring a Century of Art From Congo

By Rachel Donadio

July 24, 2015

PARIS — The art practically leaps off the walls. A striking painting of President Obama, Nelson Mandela and Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese leader who was assassinated in 1961. Luscious black-and-white photographs of 1950s night life in Léopoldville, now Kinshasa. Whimsical watercolors from the 1930s.



Monsengo Shula's "Sooner or Later the World Will Change" (2014). Florian Kleinfen

These are among 350 works by 41 artists in "Beauté Congo," an electric, eye-opening survey of art from Congo from 1926-2015 at the Cartier Foundation here that offers a window into a dynamic art scene not often showcased in Western museums.

"We wanted to create a narrative that reintroduces these exceptional artists into the history of art," said André Magnin, a boisterous Frenchman who curated the show. He has traveled to Congo for decades, cultivating relationships with some of the artists featured as well as buying work on behalf of a major collector. "We wanted to show the broader public exceptional works from a continent where the television only presents

dark, disastrous images of war and illness,” he added.

Mr. Magnin said the survey was intended as a “political and historical” gesture that sought to disprove the common misconception that art in Africa had skipped several generations from the traditional works of the past to those made after many African countries became independent of their European colonizers. (Belgian colonial rule in Congo ended in 1960.) Although much of this show is dedicated to contemporary artists like Chéri Samba, who painted the image of world leaders, the earliest works here have rarely been shown in such numbers, and the exhibition makes a strong case for the continuity of rich artistic production over the last century.

“Beauté Congo,” which runs through mid-November, begins in the 1920s, when the husband-and-wife painters Albert and Antoinette Lubaki and the artist known as Djilatendo moved from decorating traditional huts to creating works on paper at the request of a Belgian colonial administrator. The Lubakis’ watercolors, often of animals or leaves, fall somewhere between realism and fantasy, while Djilatendo’s geometric patterns hover between traditionalism and modernism. The show fills all of the exhibition space at the foundation, which is housed in a glass box designed by Jean Nouvel.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, work by the Lubakis was shown in important museums and galleries in Europe. Djilatendo was represented in an exhibition in Brussels along with Magritte. But after 1935 and a fight between curators, they stopped producing and were eventually lost to history. Mr. Magnin said he went in search of their work after learning about it in a book he stumbled upon in 1989 in Zaire, as the country was then called. (It is now the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

“Beauté Congo” also showcases the artists who participated between 1946 and 1954 in an academy “for popular indigenous art,” as the catalog puts it, started by a former French navy officer and artist, Pierre Romain-Desfossés. They include vibrant, naturalistic underwater scenes of fish and of birds in trees from the 1950s by the artist known as Bela, who worked as a night guard for Romain-Desfossés before taking up painting, which he did with his fingertips, without a brush.

In the 1950s, the photographer Jean Depara, born in 1928, captured a moment in Léopoldville, where rumba was all the rage and ladies of the night wore cocktail dresses. His images, in rich silver gelatin prints, recall those by the Malian photographers Seydou Keïta and Malick Sidibé, but unlike Mali, Congo isn’t a Muslim country, and its night life is racier.

Various works in the show are dedicated to the “Rumble in the Jungle,” the politically charged 1974 boxing match in Kinshasa in which Muhammad Ali defeated George Foreman, a moment of black pride in a newly liberated country. These include photos and a colorful painting by Moke, who worked in the popular style and died in 2001. Steve Bandoma, born in 1981, revisits the match in his 2014 “Cassius Clay” series, done in papier collé with ink. “I try to go against the stereotypes of African artists,” Mr. Bandoma said at the exhibition opening. “I define myself as an artist, not an African artist.”

Today, Moke’s cousin Monsengo Shula, 55, a self-described autodidact, works in the popular vein, but with an “Afrofuturist” twist. The exhibition features his 2014 painting “Sooner or Later the World Will Change,” of African astronauts in outer space, with an African statue at the center of their satellite.

Also on view are colorful futuristic cityscape sculptures, architectural models gone wild, by the artist Bodys Isek Kingelez, (“Phantom City,” 1996) and Rigobert Nimi (“The City of Stars,” 2006), who uses found material and castoff electronics. Born in 1965, Mr. Nimi lives in Kinshasa without electricity, Mr. Magnin said. At the show’s opening, Mr. Nimi and other artists in the show spoke of the challenges they face. “For an artist to become a celebrity, he has to go to Europe,” Mr. Nimi said.

Congo’s current government has come under fire by human rights groups for its repression of dissent, and most of the works in the exhibition shy from direct political confrontation. Mr. Samba, one of Congo’s best-known artists, veers into the political with a work depicting a child soldier with the words “I am for peace, that is why I like weapons.”

“Beauté Congo” has received positive reviews in France since it opened on July 11, but there has also been some criticism. Pascale Obolo, a filmmaker and the editor of Afrikadaa, a cultural journal, found fault with the “very neocolonial and paternalistic” attitude of Mr. Magnin and others who bring African art into European museums. “We’re in a world of globalization,” she said. “We don’t need France or Belgium in order to show art from Africa.”

Some questioned why the only woman included in the exhibition was Antoinette Lubaki, from the 1930s, and why, for instance, the show did not include the prizewinning artist Michèle Magema, born in 1977, whose work has been shown widely in Europe. “I’m sure they exist,” Mr. Magnin said of female artists. “Unfortunately I haven’t met them.”

Others questioned the possible commercial implications of the show, since Mr. Magnin acquired work by some of the artists featured here in building up the holdings of Jean Pigozzi, a businessman, with what Mr. Magnin said was the largest collection of African contemporary art in the world, with 12,000 works.

Hervé Chandès, the director of the Cartier Foundation, said he wasn't concerned. "If André hadn't been there, I couldn't have done the exhibition," he said. "I needed someone with the knowledge of the artistic life of Congo."

Back at the exhibition opening, some of the artists thanked Mr. Magnin for championing them. "He helped me a lot after he said, 'Find your style,' " said the artist J P Mika, standing by one of his paintings, which also features Mr. Obama and Mr. Mandela. In this one, each man is split in half, depicted simultaneously as his younger and older self. Mr. Shula, who painted the African astronauts, said he hoped being included in the show would drive up prices for his work. "Of course," he said.

Nearby were rich color photographs from the 2011 series "A View," by Kiripi Katembo, born in 1979. They show images of Kinshasa reflected in puddles. A world turned upside down, saturated with grit and color and love.