

## Evora Africa: crossing continents

Maya Jaggi, June 1, 2018

The summer festival in Portugal is a provocative show of art in a globalised age.



'Aminata' (2013) by Omar Victor Diop © Omar Victor Diop/courtesy Magnin-A

Standing before the altar of the 15th-century Cadaval Palace church in Evora, Portugal, Romuald Hazoumè's sculpture of a priestly figure in a crimson mask seems like an alien visitation. The work, "Osa Nla", is modelled on ceremonial costumes worn in sacred Vodun rituals, but it was created in 2015 out of rags and refuse from present-day west Africa. Amid walls tiled in exquisite 18th-century azulejos, its train of plastic jerrycans fans out across the church's marble tombstones.

"Vodun is not so different from Catholicism," Hazoumè tells me in the palace courtyard. Best known for "La Bouche du Roi", a multimedia recreation of a Liverpool slave ship that was bought by the British Museum, he grew up in Benin with a mix of Catholic and Vodun beliefs. This sculpture alludes to "ancestors who return", he says. "In a church the ancestors are all around in tombs."

Hazoumè's sculptural provocation is part of Evora Africa, an inaugural summer festival of contemporary art and music that brings sub-Saharan Africa to Portugal. The South African muralist Esther Mahlangu, 82, has painted the walls of the Moorish-Manueline ducal palace, the main venue, with geometrical designs found on Ndebele houses, while the Malian kora master Ballaké Sissoko has played in newly renovated galleries.

One aim is to renew bonds that stretch back five centuries — a history evident in Evora's Unesco-protected town of whitewashed houses and cobbled lanes. The capital of Alentejo, 110km east of Lisbon, it was a seat of the Portuguese monarchy when Dom Manuel I reigned over the first global

empire from 1495-1521. It was from Evora's royal palace that Vasco da Gama was sent in 1498 to discover the maritime route to India. Two years later, mariners reached Brazil.



Esther Mahlangu painting her palace mural © Bizinha Duque



Romuald Hazoumè's 'Osa Nla' (2015)

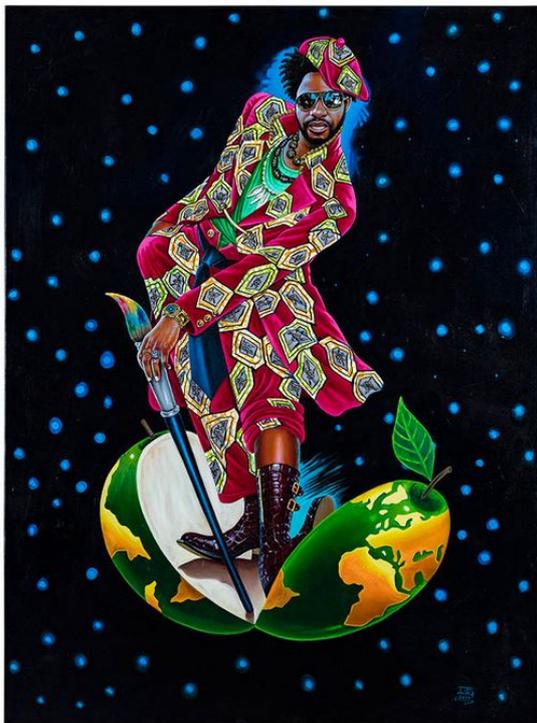
“Portuguese went everywhere — the whole of Africa,” says Alexandra de Cadaval, the festival director and sister of the Duchess of Cadaval. Yet most Portuguese today are “aware only of lusophone Africa” — principally the former colonies of Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau, which gained independence in 1974-75. During the preceding decades of the Salazar-Caetano dictatorship, the country turned inwards. De Cadaval, who spent seven years working in Mozambique “to preserve cultural heritage” and has run festivals in Morocco and Rajasthan, hopes this one will help to “broaden minds”.

“Masks of the Moon”, a sacred ritual of the Bwaba of Burkina Faso, will have a rare showing in the majestic Roman temple beside the palace. The rain-disrupted opening night, though lacking a backdrop of full moon and Corinthian columns, was powerful even in a marquee. Masked performers included a demon on a leash enacting a strikingly modern dance of power and subjugation, with colonial echoes, that called to mind Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*.

“There is no ‘African art’ — I want to show the diversity,” says André Magnin, the French co-curator of the centrepiece exhibition, African Passions. Magnin spent 20 years building the Pigozzi collection of African art before starting his own gallery, which has lent many of the 180 works by 16 artists. The focus on francophone, lusophone and southern Africa reflects a personal selection from the past 60 years.



'Happy Club' (1963) by Malick Sidibé © Malick Sidibé/courtesy Magnin-A



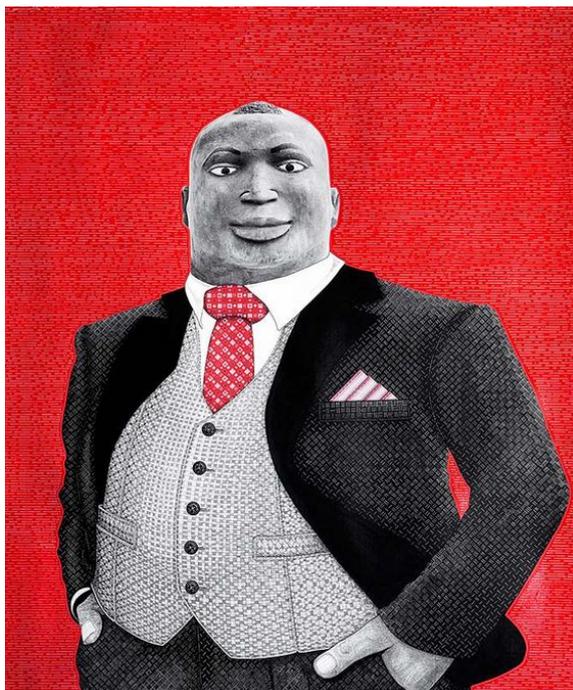
'La Sape' (2014) by JP Mika © JP Mika/courtesy Magnin-A

Black-and-white photographs from the 1960s by Malick Sidibé, the Malian photographer who died in 2016, begin the show. Images of couples dancing, shyly or with abandon, capture the optimistic freedom of the early independence years. Sidibé's sense of style is amplified in oil-and-acrylic paintings by the Congolese sapeur (dandy) JP Mika. In "La Sape" (2014) the swaggering artist in scarlet suit leans on a giant paintbrush like a sapeur's cane while standing on a globe split open like a luscious fruit.

Mika shares a room with his Congolese mentor Chéri Samba, whose satirical paintings often deploy comic-strip text. Yet Samba's "Bouquets de Fleurs au 3ème Age" (2016), an acrylic portrait of an elderly man flanked by flowers and brimming with life, is a wordless tribute to old age. It finds a touching echo in the late Frédéric Bruly Bouabré's 213 tiny drawings of his mother leaning on a cane. The frail Ivorian woman wears a different flag in each, as though travelling to all the countries she will never see.



'Bouquets de Fleurs au 3ème Age'(2016) by Chéri Samba © Chéri Samba/courtesy Magnin-A



'Boss' (2017) by Filipe Branquinho © Filipe Branquinho/courtesy Magnin-A

Houston Maludi, a Kinshasa-based artist, came to Magnin’s attention only after the gallerist’s 2015 Paris exhibition *Beauté Congo*. Breathtakingly detailed Chinese-ink paintings, such as “African Life 2” (2016), evoke whole cities and yield infinite stories, whether viewed from afar or up close. As innovative is the mixed-media “Lipiko” (2017) series by Filipe Branquinho, a Mozambican photographer who trained as an architect. It grew from documenting the wooden masks of the Makonde of northern Mozambique, and painting around untouched photographs. “Boss”, a portly, self-satisfied man in a red tie, has a downbeat counterpart in a man with a contorted face (also based on a real mask) in a bar. The latter’s title, “Happy Holidays” — a phrase deployed by beggars — partly alludes to Mozambique’s debt crisis. For Branquinho, the twin works are “an image of power and its opposite; it’s not an inclusive society”.

Acid political commentary is manifest elsewhere. In “Troubles Emotifs” (2017), a surreal collage by the Congolese-born Steve Bandoma, a decapitated unicycle rider beset by a plague of frogs runs over his own brain. In the painting “L’Amour Se Pend” (2016) by the Malian artist Amadou Sanogo — who paints acrylic block-colour backgrounds in last, sometimes erasing body parts — a headless figure slips a flower into a hangman’s noose. Both artists skewer those who fail to use their heads.

Malawi-born Billie Zangewa and Phumzile Khanyile of South Africa create compelling, though very different, self-portraits: Zangewa through embroidered silk tapestry that viscerally records her diary of an affair on scraps of cloth; and Khanyile through photographs in which she poses as her mother and grandmother in a claustrophobic township home. “Iron Hair” is a blurry, even menacing, evocation of hair-straightening.



'Christmas at the Ritz' (2006) by Billie Zangewa © Billie Zangewa/courtesy Magnin-A



'Untitled' (2015) by Mauro Pinto © Mauro Pinto/courtesy Magnin-A

One theme that emerges is the burgeoning market for African art that brings its own dilemmas and unease. Samba mischievously portrays himself partying frenetically with a collector, money poking out of his pocket. Omar Victor Diop, a Senegalese banker who turned to photography, replicates Old Master paintings in studio self-portraits, replacing religious regalia with footballs and boots. Though he bears the influence of the late Malian photographer Seydou Keïta, in contrast to the joyous innocence of Sidibé's portraiture, the eyes that return the viewer/collector's gaze are utterly knowing.

Another theme is the urgent preservation of heritage and values in the teeth of urbanisation and globalisation. Startling documentary images by Mauro Pinto, the accomplished Mozambican photographer, show masked youths covered in foliage during initiation ceremonies in Burkina Faso. In Pinto's view, "if they lose their culture, they'll lose themselves".

Renowned for his jerrycan masks, Hazoumè proposes to "exchange masks and costumes made from rubbish for the old ones that are sacred and belong in shrines not museums". Though opposed to the restitution of non-sacred art works "because we never trust our politicians", he says: "We need to take care of masks for the next generations, not sell them outside. It would be like the Cadaval Palace selling tiles from the church."



Cadaval Palace

To August 25

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