

Zooming in on Africa



MOHAMED CAMARA, CACTUS DE NOËL 2: WHEN I TAKE THE PLACE OF SANTA CLAUS, YOU WILL SEE, 2001 TO 2002.

BY CAROLINE MACKINNON
The Herald Mexico

Africa has a lot of baggage. Newspapers plaster images of emaciated children, civil war and sprawling shantytowns on their front pages. Tourism posters hone in on the arid savannahs with herds of wild animals, colorfully clad tribesmen and quaint mud huts.

This makes Okwui Enwezor — and a lot of other people — mad, to say the least. The Nigerian-born curator and art historian refers to the popular media as a “vampiric machine” by the way it dehumanizes Africans. He has referred to the photographer’s lens in the service of the 24-hour news cycle as an “evil eye.”

And so, Enwezor has organized Juicios Instantáneos (Snap Judgments), an exhibit currently at Mexico City’s Rufino Tamayo Museum that includes 160 pieces of photography, video and installation that are meant to offer a more complete look at the continent.

And indeed, the work gives visitors something quite different to gnaw on. South African artist Nontsikelelo “Lolo” Veleko presents photos of hip young Johannesburg residents in her 2004 series “Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder.” One young woman in a canary yellow T-shirt, camouflage short pants and red tights stares down the camera’s gaze clutching a purse made from Coca-Cola labels. While Veleko’s shots provide a glimpse at edgy urban street fashion, they also provide a face to today’s Africa.

Of course, many bleak images in the

A fresh look at the continent from behind the camera lens



NONTSIKELELO “LOLO” VELEKO, CINDY & NONKULULEKO. FROM THE SERIES “BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER,” 2004.

media ring of truth (and Enwezor acknowledges the importance of photojournalism), but any continent is made up of more than merely what we see in National Geographic or The New York Times.

Enwezor wants to get away from the disheartening images he describes as perpetrating the “Afro-pessimism” that exists today. Instead he hopes to provide a “counterbalance” that will shed a different light on some of this region.

Not that the exhibit merely swaps depressing images for something more cheerful — there are plenty of photographs that examine urban blight, prison life and the setbacks of racism. South African artist Guy Tillim’s se-



MICHAEL TSEGAYE, UNTITLED. FROM THE SERIES “IN AND OUT,” 2005.



LUIS BASTO, BUS STOP, OLD HARARE, 2001.

ries “Jo’Burg” (2004) shows views of the neighborhood of Hillbrow. What was a white middle-class residential area in the 1970s, gradually became interracial until the 1990s in the final days of apartheid when there was a mass exodus of white people from this area, who took their jobs and wealth with them as they left, contributing to a quickened pace of urban decay. Tillam’s photographs show the day-to-day lives of squatters in apartment buildings, some facing eviction and others drinking at humble bars with friends.

Photos taken by Randa Shaath show the lives of people living in former laundry rooms in “Rooftops of Cairo.” Residents, forced to share their washrooms and common space, also throw parties and revel in the open air.

Sada Tangara was born in Mali in 1984, but emigrated to neighboring Senegal when he was a child where he lived on the streets. When he was 13 years old, he attended an art school for homeless kids where he was given a disposable camera and began taking photos of his environment and the people that inhabit it. His sensitive series “The Big Sleep” (1998 to 2003) depicts children huddled under blankets and in doorways that, like the artist, had no choice but to sleep on the streets of Dakar.

Just a year older than Tangara, Mohamed Camara was also born in Mali and is something of a rising art star, having al-

ready had a solo exhibit at the Tate Modern in London in 2004. His recent work depicts a young African man dressed in just a pair of shorts enveloped by different environments — gazing at a snowy landscape or sitting amongst garish neon Christmas décor — a fantasy-like view of the West.

Yto Barrada photographs a different African outlook on the West in “A Life Full of Holes: The Strait Project” (1998 to 2004). She examines the effects migration has on the border city of Tangier on the Strait of Gibraltar where each year thousands of Moroccans, as well as people coming from other parts of the continent, try to make the perilous journey across the narrow channel that divides Europe from Africa. The photos depict people waiting in a cafeteria, children playing in the street and ghostly marks left by a dirty soccer ball kicked on a wall. Barrada’s photos particularly resonate in Mexico, where illegally attempting a risky border crossing is a reality for people disaffected by a lack of opportunities in their home country.

“Snap Judgments,” which was at the International Center of Photography in New York last year, brings together the work of 35 artists from 12 different countries. It sprawls through several of the museum’s halls and is staggeringly varied. Much like Africa itself.

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Retrospective honors expat artist’s career

BY CYNTHIA HAWES
The Herald Mexico

CUERNAVACA — Joseph Lofton’s 50-year retrospective on exhibit through March 11 at the Jardín Borda is reason enough to visit this city of eternal spring which has been the African-American artist’s home since 1991.

The show, which was inaugurated on Feb. 2 by Martha Ketchum, director of the Morelos Cultural Institute, brings together some 80 paintings that span a period from 1956 to 2006 and are divided into four collections: “Abstractions,” “Toda esa música,” “Con México en el corazón,” and “Medio ambiente.”

While each collection represents a different period in the artist’s life, there is a definite style and composition that connects all of his paintings. His work is defined by the use of brilliant color and bold, angular strokes, as well as the tendency to draw subjects in a flat, frontal manner with little attention to perspective. This naïve-like style has become one of his trademarks and he has developed it in his own particular way.

VISUAL RHYTHM

Rhythm is another constant in his work, especially noticeable in his dancers at the Savoy dance hall which Lofton frequented years ago in Harlem. His figures bend and move in perfect harmony as they flow across the canvas. His love of music is captured by one of his favorite subjects: jazz musicians playing in New York’s famous jazz bars. Trumpet, piano and sax players converge in these small clubs and jam into the wee hours of the night.

Lofton’s innovative technique consists of his own version of collage. He cuts pieces of painted canvas and glues them on top of his original painting. He also piles up streaks of acrylic paint, giving added texture to his work.

The more recent pieces in his collection “Medio Ambiente” address worldly issues, such as religious intolerance, war, racism and inequality. “The artist must inevitably reflect his time... this is my time,” the artist says.

In one painting, he makes his anti-war position clear with the quote, “I prefer the most unfair peace to the most righteous war” written clearly for the viewer to see.

Lofton was born in Orlando, Florida, but moved to New York



CYNTHIA HAWES/THE HERALD MEXICO
A HALF-CENTURY OF WORK: Cuernavaca-based artist Joseph Lofton attends the opening of his recent retrospective.



ARTESANAS: Lofton’s paintings such as this one often feature many colored blocks.



MONA LÓPEZ: This homage to the Mona Lisa blends rich hues with rhythmic shapes.

with his parents at an early age. He developed his style at the Art Student’s League (1948-1954) and the New York School of Visual Arts (1971-72). His early work was influenced by the abstract expressionist movement in New York in the 50s and 60s.

Although he lived and painted in New York for most of his life, he traveled to Mexico often during 30 of those years. He finally decided to move to Cuen-

EXHIBIT INFO

“Exposición Retrospectiva, 50 años en el arte” featuring the work of Joseph Lofton is taking place through March 11 at the Instituto de Cultura de Morelos’ Jardín Borda located on Ave. Morelos 271, Col. Centro, in Cuernavaca. For more info call (777) 318-1050. Free admission.

navaca permanently in 1991. “I have my studio and paint every day,” he said. “It’s like I’m on vacation.”

Much of Lofton’s later work is influenced by Mexico, with themes like *quinceañeras*, artisans selling their wares, immigrants leaving their homes and making their way to the United States, and Mona López, a Mexican take on Leonardo da Vinci’s Mona Lisa.

MEXICO AND AFRICA

But while the designs, ornaments and figures are decidedly Mexican, there is also a similarity with African motifs. It’s as though Mexican and African themes come together in his work, making it even more universal.

Lofton’s retrospective is his first since 2003 when he exhibited his collection “Of Mythology, Legends and Other Things” at Cuernavaca’s Taller Siqueiros. Some of those paintings are included in his current show.

The 83-year-old artist says he feels quite at home in Mexico and has no intention of returning to the States to live. He loves the people, the climate in Cuernavaca, and is inspired by the nearby mountains. “I’ll probably die here and will have my ashes spread across these mountains,” he said.

But Lofton is far too busy painting and creating to be thinking about his mortality. Perhaps that is his secret to living such a long and productive life.