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This Exhibit Will Permanently Redefine Your Idea of Art From Africa

By Rob Scher



Chike Obeagu – Private Viewing, 2015 (Credit: Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery)

In Nigerian artist Chike Obeagu’s “Private Viewing,” a white couple wearing comical expressions look at art with bulging eyes. The painting, one of the first things you see when you enter Richard Taittinger Gallery on the Lower East Side, serves as a mirror to those perusing the latest exhibit there, titled “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?”

“This is the art market,” explained curator Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, gesturing towards Obeagu’s pop-eyed figures. “They’re saying, let’s find Africa.”

With this image in mind, Nzewi has put together the work of 12 contemporary artists from Africa for this exhibit. As interest in contemporary African art within the global art market grows, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” is as much a statement of fact as it is a question.

“We wanted to come up with an exhibition that is about Africa but at the same time not about Africa,” said Nigerian-born Nzewi, who recently co-curated the 11th Dak’ Art

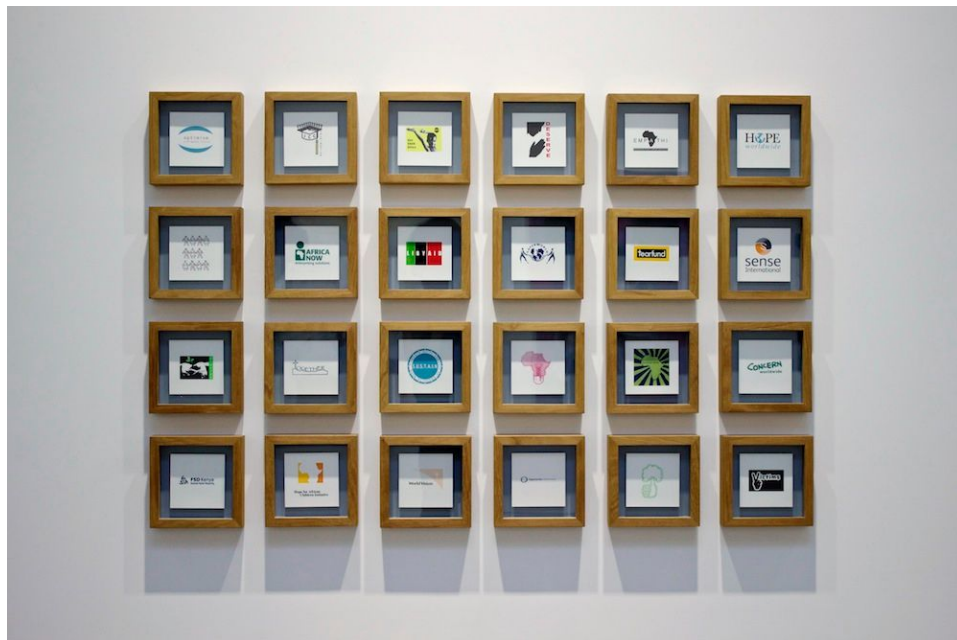
Biennale, “a foremost platform for contemporary art in Africa.” “When one thinks of the works of contemporary African artists, there’s always a certain kind of value attached to these works, what I call ‘the burden of Africanism.’”

For Nzewi, while “the art market’s constant desire for the next big thing” lasts, it’s vital to challenge this perception of contemporary art from Africa and, as he says, “problematize the values attached.”

“It’s not about disavowing [the artists] connection to the continent. Africa holds great significance to them, but there’s more to their art and to limit their work to vectors of specific cultural experience one can call Africa is wrong.”

Exemplifying this idea of art transcending geography is Kenyan artist Sam Hopkins, whose work and life extends far beyond that of his African heritage. Hopkins grew up between Kenya, England and in later years Cuba and Germany, before returning to Nairobi. Reflected in this life experience are his 24 framed images, “Logos of Non Profit Organizations working in Kenya (some of which are imaginary).” In this work, Hopkins is commenting on the “burgeoning NGO industry” in Kenya, recreating and inventing his own logos as a way of addressing the “notion of the NGO industrial complex.”

While it deals directly with NGOs present in Kenya, Hopkins’ work speaks more broadly to an experience and economy that exists within much of the developing world. And as Nzewi argues, to think of the art as solely addressing Africa is to pigeonhole the scope of its commentary.



Sam Hopkins – Logos of Non Profit Organizations working in Kenya (some of which are imaginary), 2010 – ongoing (Credit: Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery)

“With a Jeff Koons exhibit you could say it’s universal, but in reality his work addresses the American experience,” said Nzewi. In contrasting Koons with Hopkins, Nzewi

comments on the ubiquity of Western art, which remains unburdened by “cultural identifications,” allowing the experience of Western artists to be universalized. “Jeff Koons’s work may address pop culture without qualification, but Sam Hopkins’s work addresses pop culture in Nigeria.”

Nzewi realizes these labels are unavoidable, representing how “power is constructed within the global art market.” Which is precisely why, in curating art prefixed “African,” he is finding a way to draw attention to this power dynamic, highlighting the inherent flaw in its logic.

“I think about how [the artists] respond to reality, not African reality, but reality in its global sense... These works reflect cultural experiences that reflect personal, psychological, and intellectual experiences of these artists who all hold different kinds of connections to Africa.”



Beatrice Wanjiku – The Sentiment of the Flesh III, 2015 (Credit: Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery)

As to how this all connects to the artists’ work in relation to their “universality”? By featuring artists who have lived in various parts of the world and have reflected this

experience in their work, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” shatters the notion that contemporary art from Africa is confined to the experience of the continent.

Like Hopkins, Ethiopian-born Aidia Muluneh spent much of her youth between various countries (including Saudi Arabia, Cyprus, Canada and the US) before returning to Addis Ababa, where she currently lives, and founding the Addis Photo Festival. Her photography, “part social, part existential experience” embodies precisely this international “cosmopolitanism.”

“I often say the most cosmopolitan people in the world are those with post-colonial or colonial legacies, Nzewi said. “What drives cosmopolitanism is the ability for one to perceive and take on, rather than to give.”

That is to say, the colonized were “beat into shape” and stripped of their agency, to the point that generations later, the “inferiority complex of postcolonial subjects” has manifested in the global power dynamic in which the colonized have absorbed and willingly taken on Western culture.



Aidia Muluneh – The Wolf You Feed I, 2014 (Credit: Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery)

It’s with this notion firmly in mind that Nzewi displays Muluneh’s “The Wolf You Feed.” Depicting a woman painted black and holding a banana, Muluneh’s “point of departure” is the experience of black soccer players such as Dani Alves and Mario Balliotelli, both of whom have had bananas thrown at them during matches. While Alves stormed off the pitch, Balliotelli in his self-assured way picked his up and ate it, as does the figure in Muluneh’s work.

Not unlike these players' experience, the prominence recently granted to contemporary artists from Africa such as Muluneh still remains rooted in "the pervasive quality of racism" through which it's recognized. By acknowledging the position that the global art market has recently granted contemporary African art – and by "problematizing its value" – just as Muluneh's subject takes a bite from her banana, so too is Nzewi taking his.

"Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" runs through August 23 at the Richard Taittinger Gallery, 154 Ludlow St.



Aida Muluneh – The Wolf You Feed 3, 2014 (Credit: Courtesy of Richard Taittinger Gallery)