

Interview

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Finding A Seat At The Table

By Emily McDermott



Upon walking into Richard Taittinger Gallery on the Lower East Side, more than 50 two-dimensional works, by 12 artists who have African lineages, greet visitors in an exhibition titled "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" The group show, curated by Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, immediately evokes notions of Judy Chicago's radical installation *Dinner Party* (1979), but with its feminist message subverted to address the expanse of African culture and the continent's place within the global art scene.

"I want to think deeply about the force of change in contemporary art today, where the art market, the global art world, is forced to recognize the creative output of African artists," says Smooth, who is also a curator at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College and curated the 11th Dak'Art Biennale. "Output is increasing, is being recognized, [but] there is a tendency to view that output through a very narrow lens. This exhibition allows us to question that lens."

One of the first works viewers encounter (a photograph by Halida Boughreit), embodies multiple narratives seen throughout the exhibition. It appears like a still life, filled with a grandiose wooden table that's set with a basket of green and red apples, candelabra, and miscellaneous glassware, yet also has three living subjects: a Caucasian woman in a red dress standing to the left of the table, and two young African boys in red shirts, one sitting at the head of the table and one crouched underneath. When considered in light of Boughreit's French-Algerian heritage, the subject matter and color associations speak to issues of identity, immigration, and acceptance.

"This is the center piece because it captures the weight of the exhibition," Smooth explains, when standing in front of Boughreit's image. "I want to see people push the boundaries conceptually, visually, and intellectually in photography, and all the photographs in the exhibition do that for me in different ways. It takes you somewhere."

Other photographs include Amina Menia's architectural images that depict the deterioration of concrete structures in Algeria; Aida Muluneh's series of three self-portraits, in which she painted herself charcoal black with a thin straight line of white dots, and held, peeled, and ate, a banana to comment on the banana thrown from a racist fan at soccer player Dani Alves; and Amalia Ramanakarihina's archival family portraits that she covered with black ink to obscure precise identities.

Also on display in the show are traditional figurative oil paintings, such as Beatrice Wanjuku's image of two genderless black people trapped in straightjackets (*The Sentiment of the Flesh IV*, 2015), as well as paper and acrylic collages, and conceptual works, like Onyeka Ibe's steel mesh and acrylic on wood, which he uses to contemplate indigenous Nigerian art forms and architecture. Similarly, Nigerian artist Chika Modum creates garments out of fabrics printed with various skin patterns that she collected from images of people in differing ethnic, racial, and social realms.

As a whole, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?" (which actually takes its name from the 1967 Sidney Poitier film), amounts to exactly what Smooth wanted: "a show that addresses and recognizes the great attention that is being focused on work by contemporary artists from Africa, but also problematizes the values associated with the mediation of the works."

"GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?" IS ON VIEW AT RICHARD TAITTINGER GALLERY THROUGH AUGUST 23, 2015.