

Providing a space of freedom. Women artists from Africa | N'Goné Fall

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In the 1960s, after the achievement of independence by many African states, when attention focused on building a modern Africa, the mission of women was clearly codified. Guardians and vehicles of African identity, they had to have their "feet in tradition and their mind in modernity" (in the words of Félix Houphouët Boigny, first president of the Ivory Coast). That is to say, women had to give birth, to ensure the survival of humankind; they had to raise children to become the next generation of leaders; they had to be good housewives, giving their children a nurturing environment in which to develop; and they had to submit to their husbands, the providers for bodily needs and guardians of the holy little tribe. Women's destiny in Africa? A long life of responsibilities. Did they have any rights? Certainly: the right to be seen as a model mother and wife. And, yes, they could have ambitions: to find a good husband and see their children succeed in life. Of course, women could pursue professional careers, so long as this did not interfere with their duties as mothers and wives. The unspoken pact between women and society was the guarantee of a sustainable stability, a society in which every person knew his or her role and place. Maintaining this status quo was women's responsibility.

Apparently, the waves of Western feminist demands in the 1960s and 1970s had little impact on Africa. The social balance continued for the most part unchanged and feminist theories remained faraway whispers. Women had too much to do in modern Africa to listen to their Western "sisters". There was little time to step back and take a critical look at their situation. When I ask my mother and others of her age group where they were in those stirring days when Western women were throwing away their rolling pins and their bras, they stare at me strangely and shrug their shoulders. From Cairo to Cape Town, Dakar to Djibouti, women lived in a male-dominated society and learned how to deal with it. A lion does not need to roar to keep the crowd in awe. This proverb has been transmitted by word of mouth by generations of African women who did not march in the streets but gained their freedom bit by bit, in a largely invisible struggle.

It is not always easy to identify feminist movements in Africa, but this does not mean there have been none. Quietness does not mean submission, silence does not mean approval. In the mid-1970s and 1980s, some African female intellectuals did recognize the restricted roles of women and decided it was time to change the social rules. Their first victories came in the area of economic independence. Becoming financially autonomous was the best way for women to gain control of their destiny and prove their importance to the local economy. Pioneers in this regard were the "Mama Benz" from West and Central Africa, prosperous female fabric traders who controlled the markets and characteristically drove Mercedes-Benz autos. Persuading governments to change family laws was the next step. But if novelists like Mariama Bâ, with her masterpiece *Une si longue lettre* (Such a Long Letter) of 1979, did shake up society and draw attention to women's condition in Africa, in the visual arts nearly everybody was apparently still asleep.



Until the late 1980s, being a female artist was supposed to be a part-time diversion. Women were allowed to be involved in such areas as craft, home décor, fashion, and hairstyle. And when they did paint, they were supposed to produce pretty canvases to be hung in the homes of the local bourgeoisie. No questions, no provocations. They were expected to create decorative beauty, not deal with intellectual theories. By confining them in that narrow role, African societies were in effect denying that a woman could be a full-time artist challenging conceptual issues.

In the mid-1990s, however, some female African artists did sporadically achieve recognition. But except for Sue Williamson, Sokari Douglas Camp, Jane Alexander, Ghada Amer, and Marlene Dumas, how many of them could one name? Wasn't there more to see?

Fortunately, the new generation that emerged in the late 1990s radically changed the landscape. Its members entered the scene creating an art of remarkable intensity, whether aesthetic, thematic, or conceptual. Exploring issues of race, gender, domestic or psychological violence, power, territory, postcolonialism, or democracy, their works ranged widely over an array of contemporary subjects and concerns. This committed generation raised questions about male versus female, submission versus power control, tradition versus modernity, and the local versus the global. They took on the challenge of questioning their society - how they fit into it as women, and how they relate to the world as Africans.



Being born female in Africa is a disadvantage, and all the voluntarist measures toward gender parity still do not make a significant difference. Women are still like merchandises moving from father's to husband's tutelage and their voice does not always count. So how do they get what they want from their husband or end a domestic quarrel? Sometimes through the power of seduction; their body will seal peace on the pillow. Using flesh as a weapon, the woman attains a few hours of dominance, while the male lowers his guard and sign his remission. In Africa, everything is negotiable. Women know that their body is a perpetual object of desire, fantasy, and submission. A body like a parcel of land that men feel free to own and explore, sometimes without permission. Using violence to conquer a land or to possess a body, war and rape share a long history. The act of rape leaves a mark on the mind, as, in olden days, a warrior might plant a flag in the land to mark it as his own (an image that harks back to an animal pissing to mark its territory). A woman will always be a good war trophy.

It is such acts of debasement that Bill Kouelani makes visible when she displays bloodstained vaginas as so many stifled voices of the forgotten ones of a civil war. Some of her paintings were removed from a group exhibition in 1997 in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, because local politicians and the French president were attending the opening. Some felt that it was time to leave the war behind and avoid peaking about an accursed story. The artworks were censored because they exposed the apathy of a society that no longer respects women, the ones giving birth. Kouelani gave horror a face, voiceless.

Growing up female can become a malediction in a country where a rape was estimated to take place every eighty-three seconds. South Africa was sick and perhaps only a deep electroshock could save

it. Provocation was therefore the option Tracey Rose chose in her early works, in which she used her body as the genuine symbol of oppression, taking the body itself as both subject and medium. She shaves herself naked in the video *Ongetiteld*, and is naked again, in a glass case, knitting lengths of her hair, in *Span II*. With nudity, intimacy, and voyeurism, Rose staged her body to address the inequitable status of women in her society, their precarious standing, their physical and mental isolation. In *TKO*, vulnerable but determined, she fights an invisible adversary and the fact that the evil one cannot be seen adds to the terror. An allegory of alienation is played out in *Love Me, Fuck Me*, with its explicit reference to extreme forms of persecution. With lucidity and humor, Rose becomes an iconoclast with *The Kiss* and with *Venus Baartman* in which she sublimates stereotypes and treats symbols with derision. At the turn of the millennium, the conceptual work of Tracey Rose was a radical political and social statement, a revelation of the hideous face of sexism and racism - a scream of rage against the condition of women of color in South Africa.



Women are without a voice in many societies. Denied the power of the word, they are rendered invisible by their silence. Yet a mysterious, hidden female universe is made tangible in the creative process of Ghada Amer, when she reveals parts of hidden reveries. It is the privilege of acceding to a secret garden as long as one is ready to take time. There is what you have been told, what you perceive and what you see. Some female North African artists invite us beyond the decorum to watch the scene. *CairoScapes* by Maha Maamoun captures cross-sections of city life that convey a fresh feeling of independence and self-determination in the sprawling urban scene. With these photographs, Maamoun contradicts the familiar imagery depicting the unenviable fate of Arab women and makes us wonder what their lives are really like. What if the Islamic woman's veil, stigmatized by the West, was not the emblem of submission but rather a tenuous wall protecting women's freedom? A protection against male's shameful temptations. A flowing envelope holding women's dreams. And what if the veil, accused of being a modern evil, was first and foremost a symbol of cultural resistance, a barrier against Western hegemony? These thoughts can be found between the lines in the work of Zineb Sedira, when she uses women's memory to address injuries to her Algerian culture and its colonial history.

The colonial legacy is like a thorn in the flesh for both sides. Colonialism brought in its wake a host of other "isms": primitivism, exoticism, racism, imperialism, totalitarianism, traumatism. Moving beyond the isms is the challenge that the new generation of female artists is taking up. What happens when two cultures meet? Love at first sight or a duel? In *Dansons* (Let's dance) by Zoulikha Bouabdellah, the cultural encounter takes the form of a female body belly dancing to the French national anthem. What is being subverted here: the French flag, the "Marseillaise" or the Arab dance? Perhaps neither: brought together, these symbols are simply another instance of the unlikely cohabitation of different values, highlighting the failure of integration policies in France. *Dansons* makes us wonder: can a culture remain "pure"? Can a country celebrate its diversity and at the same time ask new citizens to leave their culture at the gates? For which is more absurd, belly dancing to a revolutionary anthem, or denying the consequences of colonial history? With a flag hallowed by the grace of a curved hip, Bouabdellah translates the indigestion of collective legacy: instead of "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," the motto of the French Republic, she gives us Liberty, Equality, Sensuality.

Themes related to issues of nationalism pervade the work of other artists as well. In *Oyé Oyé*, Michèle Magma deals with the memory of her father and of an entire generation of men and women who were eager to achieve a modern Africa. *Oyé Oyé* is about nation-building, a stop on the journey to a supposed Utopialand. It is the raving story of a man who seized power and perverted history: Mobutu Sese Seko who ruled Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo) from 1965 to 1997. Mobutu pursued a phantasmagorical vision of an "authentic"¹ Africa. Magma's *Oyé Oyé* is a two-channel video installation; on one side the artist, shown without a head, mimes a military march; on the other are public images from the Mobutu era, such as parades. In both, the African female body is shown as an instrument of propaganda. By parodying the political concept of identity, Magma forces us to reconsider a country's past. The idea of reinterpreting history is also seen in *Les hommes d'état*, life-size photographs in which Magma re-creates the bearing, dress, codes and attitudes of African dignitaries, as if to summon up her father's memory blurred by exile.



Exile can produce a sense of dislocation, attenuating the notion of belonging and exacerbating the self-definition of cultural values. The individual becomes multiple, a mosaic of possibilities. In her videos and performances, Ingrid Mwangi projects this fractured perception, in which we see ourselves through the eyes of others. In such a case, our own sense of identity defines the borders of a continually shifting process of self-protection responding, for instance, to globalization. Mwangi's *Wild Life* is about the impossibility of getting rid of racial preconceptions. A reference to exclusion is also obvious in *Neger*. *Neger*, *Negro*, *Savage* or *Wild*. Different words for the same concept: bestiality or when the African, not so long ago, was a threat because black referred to dirty, dark, devil, and it scared white children. Mwangi transforms her art into an armed response in *Dressed like Queens* (2003), in which she uses female bodies and voices to articulate African experiences and stories. The body contains the concepts of both selfhood and otherness. She, woman, women, are the thread connecting ideas and misunderstandings. The impossibility of anonymity transforms the body into a receptacle of codified gestures, the voice becomes an avalanche of metaphorical concepts.

In another approach to the meanings of the body is in *Surgical Hits (The Needle)* by the performance artist Otobong Nkanga when she plays with exhibitionism and voyeurism, immersing us in an intimate world of freedom. In *Awaiting Pleasures* she moves in a space dedicated to the worship of her own body, tirelessly repeating the same simple movements in a story without beginning or end, transforming herself to control her image. A pretty woman has to be strong. Acting as narcissist and focus of devotion, Nkanga converts her body into a machine propelling both perfection and desire. With artists such as Mwangi and Nkanga, the body is no longer a proof of racial or social discrimination; it is an armor that carries memory and transcends history.

Recalling history is what Berni Searle does when she evokes the outline of a dream. If the body is often a core element in her work, *Vapour*, however, built on subjectivity, appeals to our imagination

¹ Implemented in 1970 by President Mobutu Sese Seko, authenticity was a political, social, economic and cultural ideology. The goal was to shake off all colonial influence to the point of banning Western products and prohibiting Christian names.

and our senses, like an invitation to meditation and communion. In it, the meaning of rituals identifying and cementing together the members of a group is made tangible.

A similar concept is obvious in the work of Berry Bickle, who uses salt and ashes, two fundamental elements of Zimbabwean culture (life: the salt that preserves, death: ashes of the deceased), to suggest that in a nation, the people, no matter their color or gender, all inherit the same history. In *Writtenonskin* images and data of the slave trade are projected onto a body, in part as a reference to body painting and scarification, but also as a way to register how the past and its traumas remain, in a sense, inscribed on the flesh forever, their memory conditioning social behavior. *Booklostopages* looks back to the era of Portuguese seafaring and reuses the imagery of colonial kitsch to construct an ambiguous narrative about modern African societies. Searle and Bickle both address the soul and spirit of their societies, transforming social codes into allegories of a shared memory, as if this process were a way to beseech a fading history.



Each of them the product of a society and of a history, female African artists are not, however, the prisoners of a collective destiny or limited to a seducing global discourse about gender balance. Despite difficult circumstances, African women have been able, throughout the ages, to maintain a space of freedom for themselves. Today, art is the new weapon for preserving and enlarging that free zone. Female African artists explore the challenges of the world without complaisance. Vigilant, they exhume demons, hunt down preconceptions, scatter taboos, and are unafraid to reveal our darker fears. Their art is a metaphor, an ongoing transgression of all that is forbidden. And even when lyrical or delicate, it marks a radical rupture with the idea of an African “feminine” art supposed to be “pretty” and never disturbing or challenging.

We can no longer underestimate the impact of these female African artists as they masterly contribute to bring the debate about contemporary art production from Africa to a higher level. In this way, they pay tribute to the memory of the lost battles and miscarried dreams of generations of African women sacrificed, in the name of social stability, on the altar of national priorities.