

Romauld Hazoumé at London's October Gallery with his photographs *Roulette Béninoise* (left), 2004, and *La Roulette*, 2004, and the found objects installation *Made in Porto-Novo*.





art of africa

Vibrant and eclectic, contemporary forms of African art are now taking centre stage. For the intrepid art lover, there is a feast of highly original work to explore, reports Pernilla Holmes. Portrait by Steve Double.

A car journey through Johannesburg can feel like visiting several very different cities: from the glossy, manicured shopping streets where the city's art fair was held last spring, through the once abandoned streets of downtown now thronging with grass-roots commerce, to the warily quiet street in which my car pulls up. Despite constant reassurances that Jo'burg is no longer nearly as dangerous as people say, my driver doesn't consider letting me cross the street alone to the building in which artist Nicholas Hlobo has his studio.

"It's a transitional neighbourhood," says Hlobo, backdropped by his airy studio filled with table after table of the black rubber, ribbons, chiffons, threads and other multifarious objects that make up his ever more internationally renowned work. "There are quite a few hijacked buildings around here and you wouldn't want to walk alone at night, but it's changing." Change is the expression I hear from the majority of artists and art professionals I speak to, not only in South Africa but across the continent. African art is increasingly taking centre stage in the international art world, bringing issues of identity, politics and day-to-day life in Africa to light with it.

A look around the art world's major events and museums in recent years demonstrates the upward mobility of contemporary African art. Within the past couple of years Tate Modern has hosted a show of Hlobo's work and also shown pieces by artists such as the Malian Seydou Keita. Contemporary African survey shows appeared at the Guggenheim Bilbao and The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas. In 2007 Malian photographer Malick Sidibé

won the Golden Lion lifetime achievement award at the Venice Biennale and Romuald Hazoumé (pictured left, and an example of his work below), from the Republic of Benin, won the prestigious Arnold Bode prize at Documenta.

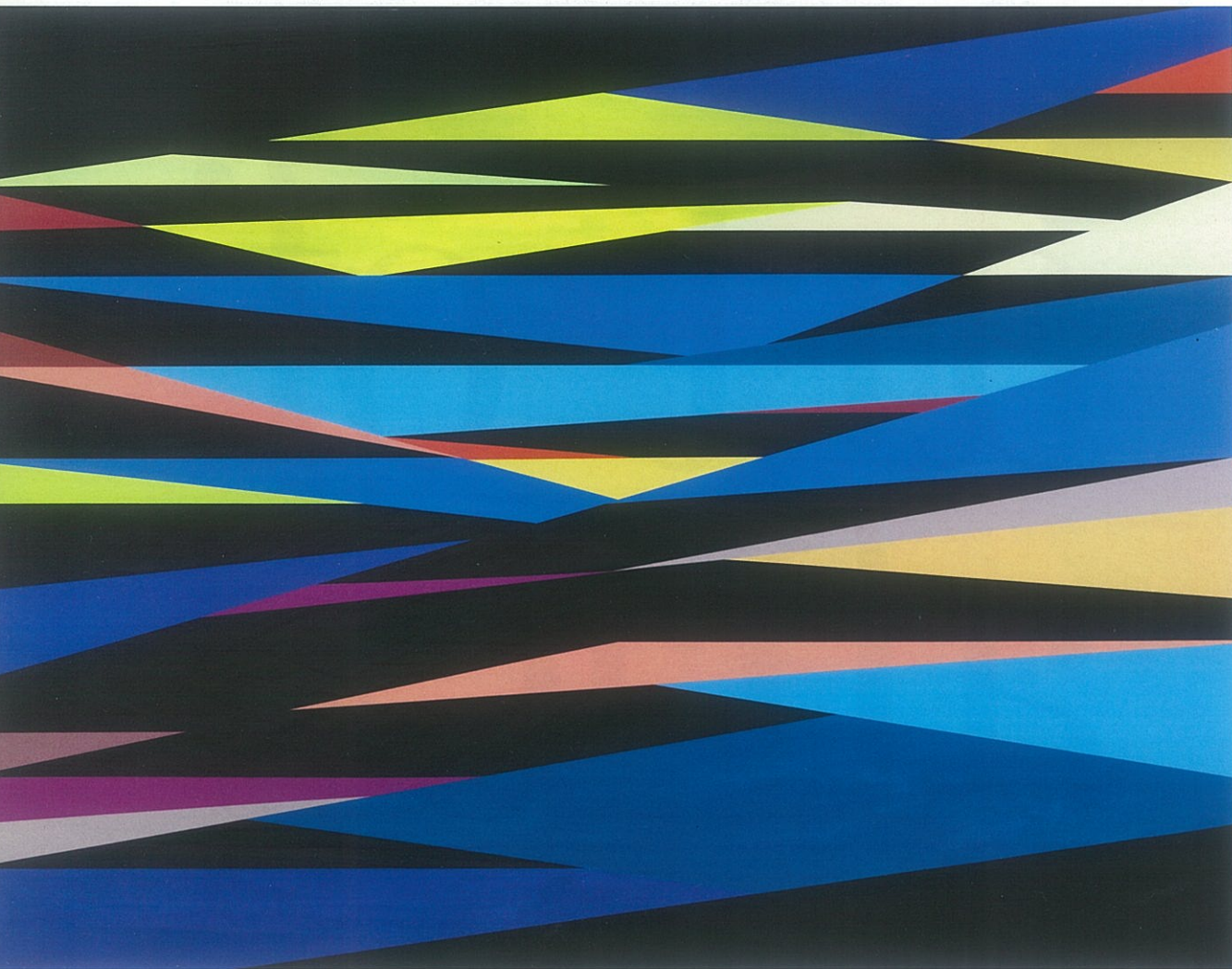
But it was really *Africa Remix*, which toured museums from 2004 to 2007 (including London's Hayward Gallery), that garnered most attention. Curated by one of the world's leading authorities on African contemporary art, Simon Njami, it showed vibrant, eclectic, intellectual work by Chéri Samba (Democratic Republic of Congo), whose brightly coloured, figurative canvases often deal with the effect of international events on African societies, the installations of Paulo Kapela (Angola), and political pop paintings by Moshekwa Langa (South Africa) alongside highly successful "diaspora" artists such as Yinka Shonibare and Marlene Dumas. Most of these artists had shown internationally before but *Africa Remix* brought them together as a powerful overview of voices from the continent.

"Interest in African art has been increasing since about 1993," says Elisabeth Lalouschek, artistic director of London's October Gallery, an early representative of now big-name African artists such as Hazoumé and Ghana's El Anatsui, "but we've really noticed

a surge in the past three or four years, both in curatorial interest and in prices." Prices for El Anatsui's large tapestries made of liquor bottle caps (pictured on final page), full of meaning but resonating with abstract art, have increased "more than 20-fold" over the past three years and now fetch up to \$900,000 for a major work (according to his



Above: *Wax Lolo*, 2009, by Romuald Hazoumé is an example of the artist's use of disposed materials.



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New York Gallery Jack Shainman), while Hazoumé’s major works reach into the “several-hundred thousands”.

However, most artists still sell for considerably less and there’s a whole younger generation, perhaps spurred by the success of artists such as El Anatsui, making their way. According to both Lalouschek and Njami, the kind of work being made has changed significantly in the past 10 years, largely because of globalisation. “I remember when it could take weeks to get in touch with an artist,” says Lalouschek, “now I just send an e-mail. And likewise, they have more access to what’s happening in art around the world.”

What “contemporary African art” actually means is a prickly concept to navigate. According to Njami, “Everyone has an idea of what Africa is. People come and go to markets, or whatever, and believe they know it – but this is not Africa. Africa, the way people think of it, does not exist.” Indeed, with 53 countries, numerous religions, tribes and languages, African art is not readily categorised in homogenous movements. The same could be said for many regions regularly discussed in broad strokes, such as Latin America. But in Africa, where for centuries foreigners have been descending, reorganising and labelling things, the issue is especially delicate. Put bluntly by South African artist Tracey Rose at the Joburg Art Fair: “I don’t need some white academic to tell me what African art is – again.”

Nonetheless, for the intrepid art lover, there is a feast of highly original art to explore, from works made out of found and appropriated objects, through those incorporating textiles to photography, installation and video work. Hlobo’s show at Tate Modern last year, for example, featured a



Top: *Splinter*, 2009, by Odili Donald Odita. Above: recycled weapons in *New Man*, 2007, by Gonçalo Mabunda. Right: *Fortune Teller*, 2008, by Lawrence Lemaana.

massive sculpture that resembled some sort of deep-sea monster, made out of pieces of black inner-tube rubber sewn together with ribbons and fabrics. It seduces visually and then offers a host of possible interpretations and associations. Hlobo is a member of the Xhosa tribe who grew up in Cape Town but now lives in Johannesburg, travelling often to museums around the world exhibiting his work. “I like that people bring their own associations to the materials I use,” says Hlobo, “but for me they are about being a contemporary African, a Xhosa tribesman, a gay man and an artist rolled into one – it’s about identity to me, but it can mean many other things too.”

South Africa has an especially sophisticated art scene, focused on galleries such as Michael Stevenson, Brodie/Stevenson, What if the World and the Goodman Gallery. The established stars such as Marlene Dumas, Kendell Geers and David Goldblatt are now giving way to a younger generation of edgy artists including Michael McGarry, Avant Car Guard (work pictured overleaf), Georgina Gratrix, Lawrence Lemaana (work pictured right), Pieter Hugo and Mikhael Subotzky. The latter is a painterly photographer whose subjects have included prisoners near Cape Town and inhabitants of the underprivileged town of Beaufort West. In 2007 he became

Magnum’s youngest ever member at 26, and last year won a coveted Infinity Award from the International Centre of Photography and exhibited at MoMA in New York.

Another young South African artist, 27-year-old Lawrence Lemaana was brought up in Soweto and was among the first black students to be allowed into

the semi-private “Model C” schools in 1993, in his case paid for, unusually, by his parents’ boss, who had become a family friend. While many of his childhood friends fell victim to drugs and crime, Lemaana became among the first professional black rugby players at a provincial level, which makes his decision to sew artworks together from swatches of fabrics (often in pink) somewhat surprising. “I’m interested in ideals of masculinity,” says Lemaana, “and in exploring them through these kind of feminine means.”

In his recent work, *Newsmaker of the Year*, he sewed together the silhouetted image of President Jacob Zuma. “I feel that the character of Zuma – he’s often shown as an idiot or buffoon – has been built by the media,” says Lemaana. “There are at least three headlines on him every day, so much of it insignificant. These works are about the media character versus the reality of the man himself.”

Political discontent underpins many African artists’ work. Born in 1975, Mozambican artist Gonçalo Mabunda grew up amid a violent civil war and now makes sculptures out of the deactivated guns once so prevalent in his country (one pictured below left). “After the civil war every household had at least a couple of guns,” explains Mabunda, “and church groups would exchange things like seeds and tools for weapons, which now lie in piles around the country.” Speaking of both past disasters and rebuilding, Mabunda welds AK-47s together into functional objects such as chairs which, according to his gallery Afronova, sell for €10,000 to €15,000.

Born in 1962, Benin artist Romuald Hazoumé is one of many African artists to make sculptures out of disposed



objects, onto which he transfers ritualistic meaning. In 2007 he showed *La Bouche du Roi* at the British Museum, a sculpture made from used petrol cans laid out to recall the shape of *Brookes*, an 18th-century slave ship. The title refers to a specific place in Benin from where thousands of slaves were transported to the Americas and the Caribbean, and each petrol can resembles a mask. The installation is shown next to a video of black-market petrol runners in modern Benin, drawing connections between past and present.

Causing a sensation at this year’s Venice Biennale was Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine Tayou, who created a small, makeshift African village in a work titled *Human Being*. The accompanying snippets of video footage document life from around the world, including Japan, Italy and Taiwan, thus considering the idea of home and community within the larger context of globalisation.

Despite all the international exposure, many artists still struggle to get recognition within their home countries. “In the Middle East you have the princes, in China you have the

nouveaux riches,” says Njami, “but apart from the Sindika Dokolo collection there are almost no real African art collectors. So there are few galleries, and most governments are not supporting art.” Auction houses, which tend to follow money, have almost no presence in Africa at all. According to Oliver Barker, senior director of Contemporary Art at Sotheby’s, “the market in Africa is still very much embryonic”.

A few non-profit spaces are starting to emerge, such as the Foundation Zinsou in Cotonou, Benin, and the Centre for Contemporary Art in Lagos, which also has a burgeoning gallery scene. But for now at least, very few curators, collectors or other art world professionals are actually making their way to Africa – a marked difference from the circus of art world travellers that regularly traipse through studios in other emerging markets such as China or India. According to Njami, few of the major museums even have a contemporary African art curator on staff. Perhaps the only positive thing about this is that while the once feverish emerging markets of China or India now face something of a correction, by most accounts African art remains on the up. “Because we hadn’t really had a boom,” explains Elisabeth Lalouschek, “even in the current economy, we haven’t seen any deflation of the market. In fact, it’s still growing very healthily.”

With over 12,000 pieces and growing, the largest and most influential collection of sub-Saharan contemporary African art is owned by Jean Pigozzi. “I have three basic criteria – the artist must be black, live in Africa and they must be alive. After that, it’s just whether I like it.” An Italian businessman with no prior interests in Africa, Pigozzi first fell in love



with African contemporary art 20 years ago when he caught the highly influential 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition – which was among the first in the West to show African contemporary art as a living force alongside Western artists – on its last day at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. The next day he phoned to try and buy work and ended up hiring one of the exhibition curators, André Magnin, to work for him.

“Before then I had a collection that included artists such as Francesco Clemente and Sol Lewitt,” recalls Pigozzi. “It was very typical and so, for me, uninteresting.” Now the better-known artists in his collection include Hazoumé, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré (born 1923, Ivory Coast), who made many of his drawings of folklore and his own visions while working as a clerk in government offices, and Georges Adeagbo (born 1942, Benin), whose multimedia installations address intercultural exchange by combining newspapers, tourist paraphernalia, paintings, texts and more.

“When I started collecting African art, nobody else was doing it. In fact, everyone thought I was crazy.” These days curators from places such as Tate Modern, Documenta and

Above left: *The African Diaspora Artist Knows Best*, 2009, by Avant Car Guard. Top: liquor bottle caps in *Dusasa II* by El Anatsui.



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the Guggenheim Bilbao have borrowed heavily from his collection. As such, because of its uniquely broad scope, Pigozzi’s collection has taken on an influential role in the perception of African art: a role that can be controversial. “It represents a foreigner’s idea of what African art is or should be,” says Njami. “It wouldn’t be a problem if it was identified as one collector’s taste, but all of these African artists who paint with bright colours or make crafty works get held up as examples of what African art is. Many of the works I wouldn’t consider as contemporary art.”

Magiciens de la Terre co-curator Jean-Hubert Martin, who borrowed from the Pigozzi collection for this year’s Moscow Biennale – which he curated with the title *Against Exclusion* and which included coffins from Ghana normally made for ceremonial purposes – sees it differently. “This accusation of exoticism is really a problem,” he says. “If you only take artists who have learned to conform to the Western idea of contemporary art, that seems to me to be even more of a foreigner’s view of what art should be. We’ve been so brainwashed by political correctness that we are scared to really look at other kinds of art.”

Whether a reflection of personal taste or genuine trends, the collection of the most prominent major collector of African contemporary art living in Africa, 37-year-old Sindika Dokolo, differs radically from Pigozzi’s in its inclusion of more video and conceptual art. Born in Zaire, educated in Europe, Dokolo runs businesses in Congo but lives in Luanda, Angola, where he plans to open a Centre of Contemporary Art in 2012. Advised by Njami and Angolan artist/curator Fernando Alvim, artists in the collection include Angola’s Yonamine, who makes both paintings and video installations that riff on contemporary pop culture, and Nigerian site-specific installation artist Odili Donald Odita, who uses hard-edged abstraction to explore space (work pictured on previous page). Dokolo’s collection also includes North African artists such as Moroccan Mounir Fatmi, whose multimedia installations incorporate flags, wires, books and other objects to question viewers’ preconceptions of politics and religion.

But even the broad range of styles and motifs touched on in this article barely begin to speak of the many more

equally intriguing works, all of which vibrate, clash and work together under what for now remains the umbrella term “contemporary African art”. Reflecting on his own work, Nicholas Hlobo sums it up nicely: “You might say it’s about all the contradictions and complexities that come with being a contemporary African who also has so many other influences. But really, it’s also just about me as an individual.” ♦

THE AFRICAN QUEENS (AND KINGS)

ANGOLA: **SOSO**, Rua Rainha Ginga 100, Luanda (+244222-333 243; www.soso-artecontemporaneaaficana.com): for Yonamine. BENIN: **Foundation Zinsou**, Rue du Gouverneur Bayol, Cotonou (+22921-312 051; www.fondationzinsounews.org). CAMEROON: **Galerie Mam**, 40 Douala (+237-3342 2814; www.galeriemam.com). NIGERIA: **CCA Lagos**, 9, McEwen Street, Lagos (+23470-2836 7106; www.ccalagos.org). SOUTH AFRICA: **Afronova**, Market Theatre Precinct, Newtown, Johannesburg (+2783-726 5906; www.afronova.com): for Gonçalo Mabunda. **Brodie/Stevenson**, 373 Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg (+2711-326 0034; www.brodiestevenson.com): for Lawrence Lemaona and Michael McGarry. **Goodman Gallery**, 163 Jan Smuts Avenue, Johannesburg (+2711-788 1113; www.goodman-gallery.com): for Moshekwa Langa, David Goldblatt, Kendel Geers, Mikhael Subotzky. **Joburg Art Fair**, March 26-28 2010 (+2711-482 4459; www.joburgartfair.co.za). **Michael Stevenson**, 160 Sir Lowry Road, Cape Town (+2721-462 1500; www.michaelstevenson.com): for Nicholas Hlobo, Pieter Hugo, Odili Donald Odita. **What If The World Gallery**, 208 Albert Road, Cape Town (+2721-448 1438; www.whatiftheworld.com): for Avant Car Guard, Georgina Gratrix. GERMANY: **Galerie Peter Herrman**, Brunnen Strasse 154, Berlin (+49308-862 5846; www.galerie-herrmann.com): for Chéri Samba. ITALY: **Galleria Continua**, Via del Castello 11, San Gimignano (+390577-943 134; www.galleriacontinua.com): for Pascale Marthine Tayou. UK: **October Gallery**, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1 (020-7242 7367; www.octobergallery.co.uk): for El Anatsui and Romuald Hazoumé. **Paradise Row**, 17 Hereford Street, London E2 (020-7613 3311; www.paradiserow.com): for Mounir Fatmi. US: **Jack Shainman Gallery**, 513 West 20th Street, New York (+1212-645 1701; www.jackshainman.com); for El Anatsui, Malick Sidibe. **The Project**, 37 West 57th Street, New York (+1212-688 1585; www.elproyecto.com): for Tracey Rose. PRIVATE COLLECTIONS: **Jean Pigozzi**, www.caacart.com. **Sindika Dokolo**, www.sindikadokolofondation.org.