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ART

Simon Njami on “The Divine Comedy” at SCAD Museum of Art

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On October 17, “The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists,” a traveling exhibition, opened at the **SCAD Museum of Art**. The exhibition 40 contemporary African artists were chosen by internationally acclaimed curator **Simon Njami** to depict the universal themes of life and the after-life beyond a Western context. The show, which explores thematic sequences of **Dante’s** epic poem, will occupy the museum’s entire 20,000-square-foot space and extend to the courtyard as well as SCAD’s Pei Ling Chan Gallery. *Whitewall* had the opportunity to ask Njami some questions about “Divine Comedy,” on view through January 25, 2015.

WHITEWALL: You have curated shows highlighting contemporary African artists in a wide range of cities such as Paris, London, and Johannesburg. How does your approach differ from city to city?

SIMON NJAMI: Indeed, I have been around the world making exhibitions. The reason why I still enjoy it so much is because it is never the same exhibition, for two main reasons: the audience and the venue. Firstly, an exhibition is never perceived the same way when it travels—particularly when it comes to Africa. Everybody around the world has an idea of Africa, be it taken from the news, from fantasies, or from journeys. It is always interesting to observe how works are given a new meaning. Be it right or wrong, it does not matter. Secondly, a touring exhibition has to adapt to the venues where it is shown. It is the duty of the curator to translate the same meaning in other space’s narrative forms.

WW: Are there any misconceptions on contemporary African art you find are often held by a Western audience?

SN: Yes and no. Big shows regarding Africa are always held, for technical and economical reasons, in the West. The West has always thought that they had an encyclopedic knowledge of the world; hence, there is a lot of misunderstanding about what is Africa, and what could be art made by Africans. However, there are a lot of misunderstandings in Africa, as well—particularly because the notion of contemporary art is still vague for a lot of people.

WW: How did you first decide to use the *Divine Comedy* as the backdrop for this exhibition?

SN: I have read that book many times. What struck me in my last reading was realizing how exclusive Dante's poem was. The humanity was reduced to Europe, and even more, to Italy. The reflections linked with the after-life are not exclusively Western. All around the world (and this is what makes humankind), people have been wondering and guessing, trying to find answers. I wanted to share those questions with artists who were not part of Dante's universe, and give to the notions of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise a larger meaning than that of Christianity.

WW: How does the traditional Western nature of Dante's *Divine Comedy* highlight or complicate aspects of contemporary African art?

SN: It is not about art, or Africa. It is about meanings. Some of the artists in the show are Muslims, some are Christians, and some don't believe in any traditional God. They all live in the third millennium, while Dante's poem was written in the 14th-century. I wanted Dante's work to be deconstructed from new perspectives. The challenge, if there was one, was to make the audience understand that Dante, like any artist, belongs to everyone. It is my conviction that our reflection is always richer when we are confronted to something that doesn't seem to belong to us. That's how Western modern art was created, when Picasso encountered the African masks.

WW: The artists in this show offer a wide range of work constructed out of various media and represent 19 different African countries. How did you choose the artists for this exhibition?

SN: I am always travelling, visiting studios, meeting with artists. I worked with some of the artists in the show previously. What I was interested in was their take on after-life and how they translated it into works of art. About seventy per cent of the works shown are new commissions.

WW: You have worked with SCAD in the past on the show “Le Miroir” in 2012 and as a keynote speaker for the 2010 “Art History Symposium: African on My Mind.” How does this show differ from your two previous collaborations with SCAD?

SN: It is always a different exercise. “Le Miroir,” a solo show, was shown in one gallery and was composed of photographs. The keynote speech was more of scholarly exercise. “The Divine Comedy” is exceptional at many levels. More than 40 artists, the whole museum, plus an extra venue were dedicated to the same exhibition. I had the opportunity to really work with SCAD team, and that experience gave me the desire to come back with some other projects. It was a marvelous experience to work with such dedicated people. They are just as responsible of the result as I am, and I want to thank them once again.