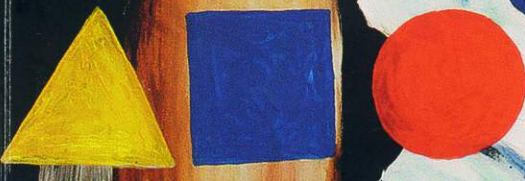


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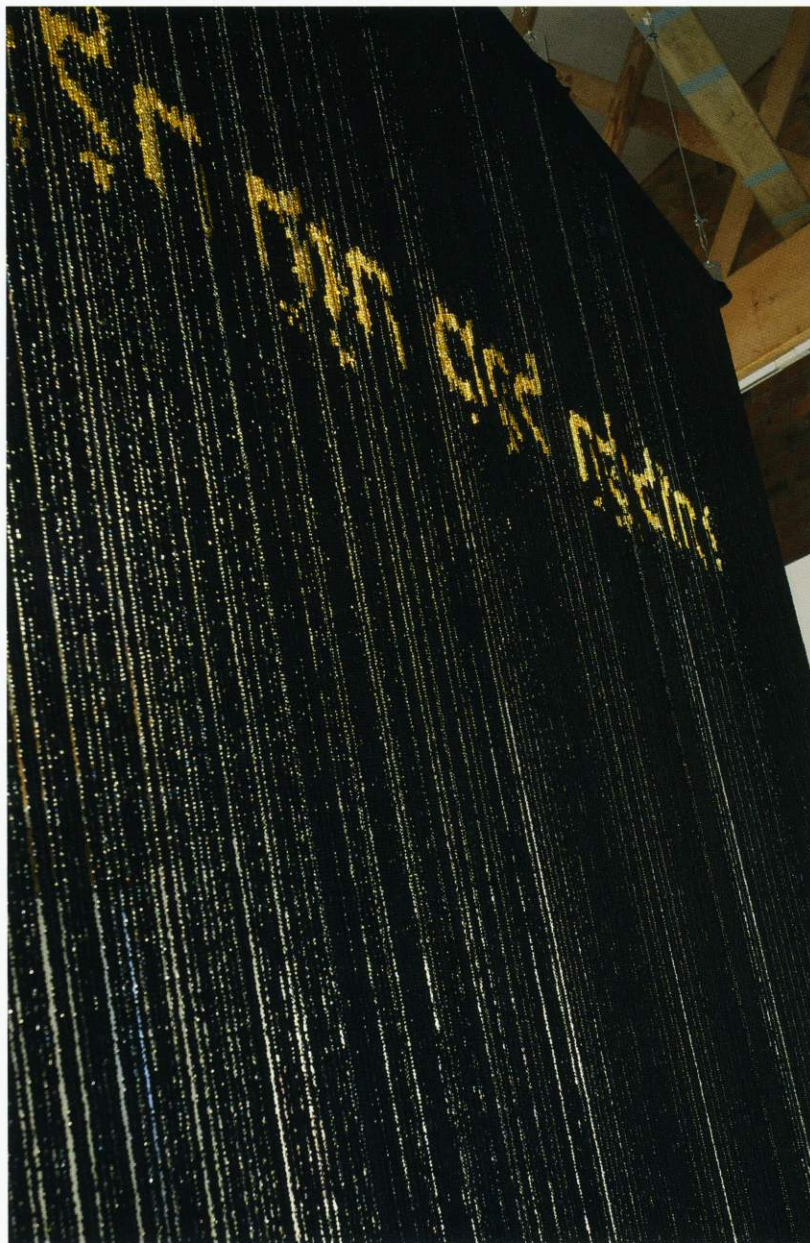


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Bili Bidjocka & Meschac Gaba

GOODMAN GALLERY CAPE & MICHAEL STEVENSON | Cape Town



Writing about Meschac Gaba in 2007, Khwezi Gule suggests that due to a new diasporic evangelism, "very soon we will be able to declare that Europe is that other African country"¹ Europe is Africanising, and mobile African artists, says Gule, are on a new 'civilising' and 're-educating' mission. It seems as if Cape Town is Africanising too – the shows of both Meschac Gaba (based in Cotonou and Rotterdam) and Bili Bidjocka (Paris-based, Cameroon-born) coincide with the Pan-African Space Station (PASS) that brings to Cape Town (and those with broadband) cutting-edge music from global Africa. Cape Town, that once oh-so European city is going African too – or rather, it's going global-African. There's a difference. While more ground-up projects, such as Brett Bailey's

Infecting the City and *Cape Africa Platform*, draw artists and performers from the relatively local southern African region, the heavyweights of Stevenson (Gaba) and Goodman (Bidjocka) prefer to global-Africanise, which, in effect, is to Africanise via Europe and America, via the African diaspora. While this is not illegitimate in and of itself (and should not detract from our engagement with the art), it reflects an artworld framing device that viewers should keep in mind. Frames select, emphasise and tell us *what matters*,² and of course they exclude.

It is this very act of framing, of "select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient"³ that Gaba plays with in his installation *Colours of Cotonou* (2009) that

forms part of his Stevenson exhibition *The Street*. Capturing and framing found colours of Cotonou – colours Gaba said in 2008 “don’t look very African” even though he “did not make them up” – he presents to his fellow Beninese new ways of seeing their own country. By meticulously covering his frames with coin-sized circular cut-outs of West African paper money and box-framing the colours red, green and yellow (colours of the Benin flag and of Pan-Africanism in general), Gaba frame-shifts our perceptions of nation-continent-world. He embeds this frame-shift in the local; though not the local framed necessarily by Benin, but the gritty location of the street.

While at first glance *The Street* appears cleaned-up, sanitised of its bustle, there are visual cues that point to two key aspects of the busy Cotonou street: trade and transport. As an economic hub, Cotonou is a crossroads of West African commerce. A so-called market town, it is a centre for automotive trade, and European brands of cars are sold in open parking lots. Cars and bicycles are assembled there too, and Gaba’s work *Cadre mecanicien* hints at the mechanic’s indispensable role. A beautifully folded shirt smeared with car grease is framed behind glass, perhaps elevating the mechanic’s role from labourer to artisan, for the framed shirt is displayed besides *Cadre peintre* and *Cadre artiste*. Or is it the other way around? Perhaps Gaba mocks the pretensions of the *artiste* through the work *Cadre friperie*, which frames an old pair of jeans. It is very common to wear jeans, and the concept of *friperie* (second-hand clothing or second-hand store) deflates the so-called un-recycled vanguardism of the artist-ego. “I made fun of painting,” Gaba told Stevenson curator Joost Bosland in his 2008 interview, “fun of originality.”

As Gaba points out, the French word *cadre* not only means frame, container, box or framework, but also a political or military cadre, a core group of tightly knit, highly trained people whose role is to train ‘the rest’. Considering Gaba’s reflection on the framed *artiste*, he seems to speak too of the artworld cadre – the small group of experts who inform ‘the rest’. Making light of the venerable artworld, Gaba turns the gallery space into an open parking lot in which he displays his wearable automotive hairpieces made from braided synthetic fibres: *Mercedes, Mitsubishi 4x4, Oil Tanker, Pick-up and Jeep* (all 2008), amongst others.

Although sculpturally appealing on their own, these works come alive in the video *Parade Perruges Voitures a Cotonou* (2009), in which the hairpieces are paraded through the streets amidst the sound and bustle of Cotonou’s motorcycle-taxis and streams of real pollution-belching cars. When the models walk onto a stage in what looks like a school or community centre there is no audience to be seen, but when they walk through the market place the audience not only looks on, but runs alongside them, alluding to the crowd-drawing energy of many African masquerades. During the contemporary *nyau* masquerades of the Chewa people in Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique, new characters are being added to the typical repertoire of people and animals: the car, *galimoto*, and the motorbike, known simply as *Honda*. The large masquerade costumes of *galimoto* and *Honda* that cover the entire body of the performer allude to positive ideas of progress and modernity – signifiers of wealth and success. In Cotonou cars are likewise associated with prosperity, evidenced in the title

It seems as if Cape Town is Africanising too

“Mama Benz” given to the formidable real life female marketer who haggles in the marketplace to such a degree of finesse that she can afford to drive a Mercedes Benz.

The vehicle that stands out from Gaba’s convoy of coiffures is the pink and beige striped army tank that represents a delightful frame-shift of its own. Besides the obvious disjuncture of stereotypical femininity and military bravado, the work *Tank* seems to allude to Prague’s Pink Tank – the World War Two memorial to Soviet tank crews that was ‘vandalised’ in 1991 by art student David Cerny who painted it pink and erected a finger in an obscene gesture on its turret roof.

While Gaba delights in various forms of frame-shifting, Bidjocka’s rather opaque exhibition *FICTION #1: Autobiography without form of Bernardo Soares*, is based on the complex shapeshifting of the Portuguese writer and poet Fernando Pessoa. Coining the term “heteronym” (which goes further than a pseudonym, for it is not just a false name but a character with its own persona, writing style and physique), and writing in the disguise of over 70 heteronyms (Bernardo Soares being one of them, who wrote *The Book of Disquiet*), Pessoa, who referred to himself as “no one” creates an elaborate theatre of

himself. Wandering through the words of Bernardo Soares’s factless autobiography, Bidjocka creates visual interludes that have to be appreciated as prose, for they certainly can’t be conventionally ‘understood’.

Shapeshifting seems to suggest the unpredictability of the diaspora experience, the theatre of self that is often acted out in customs and religions. Bidjocka uses Hebrew and Arabic text (stitched or hung together in the form of beadwork) to explore diasporic and exilic encounters with multiplicity and marginalisation. A large curtain that is made from tiny, black seed beads and hung from the roof, displays, in Hebrew, the key question that must be asked during the Passover Seder: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Seder is about remembering slavery and freedom – the exodus of Jews from Egypt as they escaped the slavery of Pharaoh. Exodus – the departure from a place that involves large numbers of people, parallels diaspora – the dispersion of people, language or culture from one place.

The contemporary concept of the African diaspora, though, is a European construct, suggested Bidjocka in a personal conversation, making it ironic that the African diaspora (as it is defined in the European and American artworld) is Cape Town’s gateway to Africa. However, while the cadres of the artworld parade these artists using typical “first” and “biggest” language, we shouldn’t judge the artwork by its frame.

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NOTES

- 1 Khwezi Gule, ‘europe: that other african country’ in *Meschac Gaba: Tresses + other recent projects* (Cape Town: Michael Stevenson & Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2008), p.13
- 2 Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003) p.6
- 3 Robert M. Entman, ‘Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm’ in *Journal of Communication* 43(4), 1993, p.52

FACING PAGE, LEFT
Billi Bidjocka, *FICTION #1: Autobiography without form of Bernardo Soares* (detail of installation), 2009, glass beads and thread, dimensions variable
FACING PAGE, RIGHT (TOP-BOTTOM)
Meschac Gaba, *Car Tresses* (stills), 2008, video performance, Cotonou, Benin