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Rhonda Cooper, Gallery Director, and Barbara E. Frank, Guest Curator

FODE CAMARA (SENEGAL)

Fodé Camara's work is as remarkable for its brilliant colors and facile brushwork as for the weight of its messages concerning the enduring impact of a heritage of slavery and colonialism. Camara does not paint portraits in the Western sense of creating a likeness of a sitter, nor is he particularly inclined to focus on himself as subject. The artist's presence in much of his early work is marked by the appearance of a hand, a shoe, or a footprint on the canvas. However, while the life-size images of the three recent paintings exhibited here are ostensibly anonymous symbols of the present generation, it is his own image Camara has chosen to carry the message. In “Yala Yana Bey Sa Tol” a man holds a placard before him that reads “Yala Yana,” an expression that appears frequently on local transport busses. The full title is a Wolof proverb that loosely translates as “God is Great, Go Farm your Field!” The artist seems to be saying that while one must accept the will of God, it is prudent also to work hard and respond to opportunities as they present themselves. In “Image Renversée,” the figure holds before him a picture of the double staircase of the infamous Maison des Esclaves (Slave House) on Gorée Island, turned upside down. In the third of the series, titled “Miroir,” the placard the figure holds before his face is blank. Together these paintings suggest that it is perhaps time to reconsider the complexities and complicity of our shared past.

Yala Yana Bey Sa Tol, 1996
front cover: Image Renversée (detail), 1999
Africa has a rich history of portraiture, from emblematic images of kings to memorial tributes of ancestors. Although contemporary artists have contributed to this tradition, most exhibitions to date have tended to emphasize broad cultural themes in these artists’ responses to their heritage. Portraiture, especially self-portraiture, is more commonly identified with Western tradition and is not a genre usually associated with African art. However, much of contemporary African art is about distinguishing identities – national, ethnic, and individual. This exhibition explores how African artists have represented the individual in their work, from conscious presentations of self to more enigmatic representations that reflect the artists’ interactions with and interpretations of others.
BRIGHT BIMPONG (GHANA)

When Bright Bimpong came from Ghana to the United States to study at the Johnson Atelier Technical Institute of Sculpture in New Jersey, he already had a strong background in art, having completed a BA degree at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi. It was at the foundry where he learned Western technology for what has become his signature medium of casting bronze and iron. Whatever their actual size, his figures represent larger than life characters with their bulbous forms and balanced if somewhat dislocated body parts. "Perhaps my sculpture highlights the grotesque side of life. It is reality, unfortunately, . . . what mankind refuses to reckon with. I do not think it is avant-garde. It is what is around us . . . nothing remote. I use the figure in a gestural manner to evoke emotion."

Dancing Mum, 1994

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP (NIGERIA)

Sokari Douglas Camp's work reflects her Nigerian heritage as well as her life in London. She is best known for her kinetic life-size welded steel portraits of Kalabari masquerade performers and audience drawn from return visits to her homeland in Buguma, Nigeria. However, she has also turned a critical eye to portrayals of individuals from her adoptive environment -- British shoppers, women with baby carriages, people at a bus stop, and even Sigmund Freud. Camp's work is perhaps too often read as simply playful when, in fact, it ought to provoke multiple readings, some playful, others quite serious. Her most recent series of portraits clearly fall into the latter category. "Self" is the figure of a steelworker holding up a glass box, partially filled with oil, framing an image of Nigeria’s burning oil fields. It recalls the Nigerian custom of carrying an image of the deceased during funerary processions. According to Camp, she created the piece in the aftermath of the Nigerian government's execution of environmental activist Ken Sarawiai. The recent political turmoil in Nigeria has deeply troubled her. This self-portrait is her way of signaling her concern about the future of her country.

Self, 1998
With his provocative, preferably intrusive and never polite artistic performances, Steven Cohen has repeatedly been dubbed the *enfant terrible* of the South African art world. But under the elaborate drag with make-up and sparklers up the bum is a serious artist who conceives of performance as a strategy for change, an artistic tool with which he aims to disrupt the comfort zones of the South African public. "I’d like to be a catalyst," says Cohen, "that provokes transformation in people’s thinking; to dislodge them from their fixed state." Cohen confronts the prejudices of a straight society by drawing on his own identity of being gay and Jewish, as when he documents on film reactions to his appearances in public wearing little more than a skimpy corset, gas mask, and platform heels that render walking difficult if not impossible. His repeated removal and detention by the police and other authorities and the two times he was beaten by a homophobic mob serve to strengthen his work on a conceptual level: The work of art exists and is produced only in the present, by and through these interventions. He explains, "My form of performance art comes from a place I’ve never been to before - each time. It’s an attempt to understand something in the process of doing it. It’s about letting you see the work as I am making it. That takes a lot of trust from me as an artist."

- Liese van der Watt

In addition to the video and photographic documentation of Cohen’s performances by John Hodgkiss, this exhibition includes two of Brent Stirton’s dramatic photographic portraits of the artist.

Voting, 1999, photo credit: John Hodgkiss
Brent Stirton, Steven Cohen “Horned”, 1999

**BERNI SEARLE (SOUTH AFRICA)**

With these digitally reproduced photographs from the “Discoloured” series, Berni Searle continues her exploration of racial and gender identities in a South African context. As a black South African woman who was classified as “coloured” under apartheid legislation due to mixed ancestry, Searle is insistently critical of static and essential definitions of identity. In a previous series entitled “Colour me,” Searle exhibited photographs of her nude body covered with spices. These works made reference both to the trade in commodities that took place via the Cape Dutch Colony of the 17th century and to her Malaysian ancestry that dates back to the slave trade of the same era. In the present series Searle exhibits her own body once again, but this time she chooses the least often exposed parts which she stains with henna. The resultant bluish marks resemble bruises on the skin, evocative of violence and domestic abuse perhaps, but the series is also a play with skin tones and a comment on the deception of surface appearances.

- Liese Van der Watt.
**GROUPE BOGOLAN KASOBANE (MALI)**

The Groupe Bogolan Kasobane is a group of artists as dedicated to exploring the use of indigenous techniques and materials as to the collaborative nature of their creative enterprise. As fellow students at Mali’s Institut National des Arts, the members of the group shared an interest in the ideograms and signs of traditional Mande culture, especially the complex visual language of bogolanfini (literally, muddled cloth) produced by women of the Beledougou region north of Bamako. They sought out these artists and other traditional practitioners and began learning the complex processes by which cotton cloth is dyed, painted, and transformed into wrappers, tunics, and masquerade costumes. They then adapted these techniques to the notion of a framed canvas, presenting archetypal themes drawn from a repertoire of their shared Mande heritage. The painting representing these artists in this exhibition, “La Mort de la Reine (The Death of the Queen),” is unusual in its focus on a single figure.

*La Mort de la Reine, 1994*

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**ACHA DEBALA (ETHIOPIA)**

Acha Debala’s artistic training in Ethiopia, Nigeria, and later in Maryland was of the traditional sort: drawing, painting, museum studies, and art history. It was when he arrived in Ohio that he discovered the wonders of computer graphics and animation. The seduction of the medium has fueled his aesthetic imagination ever since. Whether Debala begins with a drawing, a painting, or a photograph, the computer has offered new possibilities for integrating the disparate iconographic themes of his Coptic Christian heritage with those of other African traditions. The Africanness of his visual vocabulary is apparent in the intricate matrix of geometry that recalls African textile, woodwork, and ceramic patterning. In most of Debala’s work represented in this exhibition, the individual’s presence is merely suggested by the familiar mask forms that float behind the surface. The directness and audacity of his self-portrait make it, by contrast, all the more striking.

*Self-Portrait, 1971, 1999*
KHALID KODI (SUDAN)

In much of Khalid Kodi’s work, the artist veils the seriousness of his concerns with jewel-like images of beauty and references to the distant Nubian past. However, in “History and Memory. The Silent People Finger Prints” his message is one of confrontation with concerns of the present . . . the oppressive weight of traditional practices such as female excision and scarification, and the human tragedy of civil war in Sudan. Images of human suffering are projected on a broken surface of hand prints and casts, while clothing suspended and caged simultaneously aestheticize the space and make reference to human absence by their empty presence. Kodi has no hesitation in identifying his installation as a self-portrait. It represents his way of speaking for those who have no voice. He asks, “Man-made famine is a very common phenomenon in post-colonial Africa. Should this fact harden our gaze? . . . While looking at the images of the Sudan’s starving, keep in mind the human personality behind each picture. These children, women and men are paying the price of brutal national policies, and the armed struggle to overcome them. In another Sudan . . . the child you see could have aspired to become a doctor, a lawyer, an engineer, a teacher. In a New Sudan, she would not have had to bury her brothers and sisters, mother and father. In the current Sudan, however, her mere existence has been reduced, literally and figuratively, to skin and bones.”

History and Memory. The Silent People Finger Prints (Self-Portrait) (detail), 1999

WILLIAM KENTRIDGE (SOUTH AFRICA)

William Kentridge is primarily a printmaker who has extended the processes of drawing and printmaking into animated film, theatre, and opera. Much of Kentridge’s recent work employs the character Ubu, the anti-hero of Alfred Jarry’s play Ubu Roi, first performed in 1888. Ubu is a seedy despot who commits unspeakable terrors and yet still appears absurd with his cone head and spiral belly. Kentridge says, “I think there is Ubu in all of us. Indeed, since his conception, Ubu has become a familiar historical figure, an agonizingly intimate Everyman. He has been, variously, Nero, Hitler, Idi Amin, Saddam Hussein, and the corporate fat cat.” In this exhibition, Kentridge’s Ubu takes several different forms, one as the monacled, dictatoral “General,” strongly reminiscent of George Grosz’s biting portraits of Weimar personalities. In “Untitled (Man Bending)” the figure drawing with chalk is Ubu, the character that Jarry based on his hated schoolteacher. The bucket is a reminder of the torture of half-drowning victims during interrogations. This figure is also a Kentridge self-portrait, underscoring the artist’s belief that Ubu is present in all of us. His technique reinforces his identification with the image: The figure’s contours consist of the artist’s palm prints and fingerprints pressed into the soft ground on the etching plate. This combination of human poignancy and the critique of both self and other in Kentridge’s work gives it a force that speaks powerfully, meaningfully, and immediately to the universal human condition.

- Gary Van Wyk

© David Krut Publishing
Untitled (Man Bending) (detail), 1998
SEYDOU KEITA (MALI)

Seydou Keita has become one of the best known of an earlier generation of African photographers. His photographic portraits capture an extraordinary slice of life in the capital city of Bamako on the eve of Independence. Keita’s subjects radiate a forceful individuality that makes them seem familiar to anyone who has spent time in this part of Africa. Elder men face the camera in formal but not stiff poses. Children smile. Fashionably dressed young people challenge the viewer with self-confidence in their modernity. Women sit or recline easily and engage their audience with the immediacy of their presence. At the same time, Keita’s images function as complex abstractions of shapes and patterns, dresses and head ties, checkerboard blankets and floral backdrops, all competing to create a push-pull effect on the eye.

*Untitled (Reclining Woman)*, 1956-57, 1998

BABACAR LÔ (SENEGAL)

Babacar Lô is one of the senior generation of glass painters currently working in Dakar. He is proud of being self-taught and of the fact that, unlike his contemporaries, he also paints directly on canvas. The reverse glass painting tradition emerged in late 19th century Senegal with a particular focus on traditional Islamic themes, especially portraits of the leading prophets of the various Muslim brotherhoods and of significant events in their lives. Over the last century, the genre has expanded to include religious narratives from the Old Testament, parables and scenes from village life, colonialism and slavery, as well as images of distinguished men and fashionable women. Babacar Lô has dealt with all of these themes, but he is perhaps best known for his portraits of women. What is striking about these images is the extent to which they echo in formality and posture photographic studio portraits. Indeed the care and attention the artist gives to the details of patterned fabrics, jewelry, and elaborate headdresses parallels the carefully constructed photographs of Seydou Keita from 1950’s Bamako.

*Marabout with Two Wives*, 1995

NKAINFON PEFURA (CAMEROON)

Pefura’s early training as an architect is nowhere in evidence in his paintings. In the absence of structure, his figures emerge from an ambiguous background space. His portraits are unidentified. He explains, “I prefer to give the greatest freedom of interpretation as possible to the public, that is why my canvases are untitled and rarely enclosed in a frame. I always prefer to suggest rather than show.” The profile that undergoes transformation in the “Turbulence” series forces the viewer to reflect on changes in our perception over time and space. “My work as a whole is built around a questioning of our perception . . . on the notion of time with a strong emphasis on duration and instant . . . as well as trace and imprint, the only witnesses of the impalpable reality of this notion of time.”

*Turbulence II*, 1999
IBA NDIAYE (SENEGAL)

In 1967, G. Gomis (Sénégal Carrefour) asked the Senegalese painter Iba Ndiaye whether he considered himself to be a painter “engagé.” He responded that his engagement is with reality. Painting, he said, should not be a means of evading the real world under the pretext of an interior spirituality. For more than thirty years, Ndiaye has remained true to this assertion. Whether the theme is the sahelian landscape of Mali or the sacrifice of lambs for Tabaski, his work is often aggressive and passionate, with an intensity that is anything but interior. His portraits of black musicians capture the closeness and the vitality of performance in small nightclubs in Saint Germaine and Manhattan, but they are also statements of solidarity against the pain of racism and oppression. Others have a more personal resonance. According to the artist, the Fayoum portrait was inspired by an Egyptian artwork on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York that reminded him of particular Senegalese women of his homeland.

Fayoum Portrait, 1996

ZWELETHU MTHETHWA (SOUTH AFRICA)

Zwelethu Mthethwa prefers to describe himself as an “image-maker” rather than an “artist,” foregoing associations of authorship and ownership for a more egalitarian approach to art-making in which he appropriates images from the context around him. Since 1995 he has been involved in a project to record the lives of people living in the townships around Cape Town. He is best known for his huge color photographs that deal with this theme. Mthethwa is a senior lecturer at the Michaelis School of Fine Art of the University of Cape Town and has exhibited widely internationally. Yet despite the academic environment in which he moves, Mthethwa is conscious of the need for art not to be obscure and elitist, but to communicate to all audiences.

- Liese Van der Watt

© David Krut Publishing
Self-portrait, 1998

MARTEL MATALEY (GHANA)

Martel Mataley was born and educated in Ghana. He completed his studies at Kumasi College of Art in 1974. For a while he worked in commercial art and publicity but left Ghana in 1980 in search of adventure. He traveled to Nigeria, Gabon, Togo, Côte d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Gambia, and Senegal, meeting other artists and exhibiting his work, before settling to live in Mali. The titles of the two works in this exhibition – “Minds Eye” and “Watching Things” – suggest interior portraits far removed from the mundane commercial world he seems to have left behind.

Minds Eye, 1999
**dele jegede (NIGERIA)**

dele jegede began his professional career contributing to the Nigerian Sunday Times sometimes humorous, sometimes biting visual commentary in the form of political cartoons. He went from studying fine art at Ahmadu Bello University to newspaper art director, to student and professor of art history. Throughout his career, jegede has not abandoned his critical edge in word or image, as evidenced by his assessments of the contemporary art scene in Nigeria and the tenacity of his critique of the West's (mis)representation of African artistry. Nor has he abandoned his creative drive, continuing to produce cartoons and paintings. In "Transcendentalism," jegede has drawn on the now familiar but often misunderstood imagery of power figures (nkisi) of Central Africa. While their spiritual force is contained within, these figures wear their life history in the accumulation of nails and jagged iron driven into the surface, each one representing an oath taken, a dispute settled, sickness healed. jegede's visage imposed on this aggressive sculptural form is uncomfortable and yet somehow empowering at the same time. It seems to represent both his sense of humor and his willingness to challenge dated and limiting stereotypes.

Transcendentalism, 1996

**ANONYMOUS CHEWA ARTISTS (MALAWI)**

Among the Chewa people of Malawi, men govern the spiritual realm of death and the ancestors through an association known as Nyau, while women control life and regeneration. Nyau performs both wood and basketry masks during initiations, funerals, and at certain other important events. Performances last several days, and definite rules govern when each mask appears and the movements and songs it performs. Masks of old men, ancestors, and spirits represent ideal qualities, such as wisdom, and themes relating to sickness, death, and the ancestral realm. In contrast, undesirable behaviors are caricatured through representations of outsiders. While most Nyau masks represent generic types or Biblical characters, both masks in this exhibition are portraits of known individuals. The Nyau organizer who sold the mask known as "Bwana Evani" (Boss Evan) to a collector in the 1960s identified it with D.C. Evan Pearse-Johnson, a particularly disliked District Commissioner who held office from 1938 to 1954. In the mask known as "Elvisi," the rock-and-roll star is mimicked through the distinctive, slicked-back hairstyle and pronounced sideburns. His thin lips, pointy nose, and large, squared ears contrast with Chewa ideas of facial beauty. Both of these caricature masks hold up a fascinating mirror that reflects how the Chewa viewed foreigners.

- Gary Van Wyk

Elvisi, 20th century
EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Bright Bimpong
Dancing Mum, 1994, cast bronze, 43"
Efo II, 1993, solid cast iron, 17½"
   Courtesy Skoto Gallery, New York

Fodé Camara
Image Renversée, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 50"
Miroir, 1997-1999, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 50"
Yala Yana Bay Sa Tol, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 50"
   Courtesy Tamarin Art Inc., New York

Sokari Douglas Camp
Alagbo and Chief Chief, 1995, films by Jane Thorburn
   Courtesy the Department of Art, University of Stony Brook

Freud study, nd, steel, 10½ x 13 x 8"
   Private Collection, New York

Self, 1998, steel, acetate, oil, and glass, 26"
   Collection of Annette Bachner, New York

Standing Woman, nd, steel, 20"
Woman Shopper with Pram and Two Children, nd, steel, 13½ x 9 x 13"
   Courtesy Jana Cook, New York

Anonymous Chewa Artists
D.C. Bwana Evani, 20th century, wood, mixed media, 26"
Elvis, 20th century, wood, mixed media, 21"
   Collection of Gary Van Wyk and Lisa Brittan, New York

Steven Cohen
Crawling ... Flying, 1999, video documentation of performances
   Collection Gary Van Wyk and Lisa Brittan, New York

Dancing for the Animals, 1999, detail from Crawling ... Flying, 6½ x 9¼"; photo credit: John Hodgkiss
Voting, 1999, photographic work in progress for Crawling ... Flying, 6½ x 9¼"; photo credit: John Hodgkiss
   Courtesy Axis Gallery, New York

Achade Debalo
Children of the Sun, 1999, digital painting, IRIS print, 23½ x 18"  
Self-Portrait, 1971, 1999, digital painting, IRIS print, 40 x 30"  
Song For Africa, 1990, 1999, digital painting, IRIS print, 40 x 30"  
   Courtesy of the artist

Spirit at the Door, 1992, digital image, color photograph, 27 x 19½"  
   Courtesy Contemporary African Art, New York

Groupe Bogolan Kasobane
La Mort de la Reine, 1994, vegetal pigment on canvas, 44½ x 20½"  
   Courtesy Janet Golinder

dele jegede
Transcendentalism, 1996, mixed media on canvas, 42 x 32"
   Courtesy Connoisseur Consignments, Chicago

Seydou Keita
Untitled (A Father and Two Daughters), 1952-55, 1997,
   photograph, gelatin silver print, 24 x 20"  
   Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, New York

Untitled (Big Man with his Daughter), 1949-51, 1998,
   photograph, gelatin silver print, 24 x 20"
Untitled (Reclining Woman), 1956-57, 1998,
   photograph, gelatin silver print, 20 x 24"
Untitled (Three Fashionable Young Men), 1952-55, 1997,
   photograph, gelatin silver print, 24 x 20"
Untitled (Young Man with a Faz), 1957-58, 1998,
   photograph, gelatin silver print, 24 x 20"
   Private Collection, New York

William Kentridge
   Untitled (Man Bending), 1998, etching and drypoint, 6½ x 8½"
   Untitled (Man Sitting), 1998, etching and drypoint with chine collé, 9½ x 9½"
   Untitled (Man Standing), 1998, etching and drypoint, 6½ x 8½"
   Courtesy Axis Gallery, New York

Khalid Koki
History and Memory: The Silent People Finger Prints
   (Self-Portrait), 1999, mixed media installation  
   Courtesy of the artist

Secret Confrontation I, 1999, mixed media on paper, 11 x 15½"
Secret Confrontation VI, 1999, mixed media on paper, 11 x 15½"  
   Courtesy Skoto Gallery, New York

Babacar Lô
Marabout with Two Wives, 1995, enamel on canvas, 48 x 30"  
Senegalese Woman, 1994, enamel on glass, 25 x 18"  
   Courtesy Tamarin Art Inc., New York

Marte Matala
Minds Eye, 1999, mixed media on paper, 16½ x 11½"
Watching Things, 1999, mixed media on paper, 16½ x 11½"  
   Courtesy Janet Goldner, New York

Zwelethu Mthethwa
Lovers 11, 1998, drypoint and hand coloring on paper, 19½ x 14½"  
Self-portrait, 1998, etching, 6½ x 6"  
   Welcome Home, 1998, drypoint with acrylic hand coloring on paper, 29½ x 41½"  
   Courtesy Axis Gallery, New York

Iba Ndiaye
Fayoum Portrait, 1996, ink on paper, 8 x 5"  
Head of a Singer of Blues, 1973, lead pencil on paper, 10½ x 8"  
Jazz Musicians, 1969, sepia on paper, 29 x 43"  
   Private Collection, New York

Jazz Musicians, 1992, lithograph and screen print, 21½ x 29"  
   Courtesy Contemporary African Art, New York

Nkainfon Pefura
Turbulence I, 1999, mixed media on paper, 16½ x 11½"  
Turbulence II, 1999, mixed media on paper, 16½ x 11½"  
Turbulence III, 1999, mixed media on paper, 16½ x 11½"  
Turbulence IV, 1999, mixed media on paper, 16½ x 11½"  
   Untitled, 1994, mixed media on canvas, 46 x 44"  
   Courtesy Skoto Gallery, New York

Berni Searle
Conversing with Pane, 1 (Hands), 1999, From the Discoloured Series digital print, 3' x 12' 9", photo credit: Jean Brundrit
Conversing with Pane, 2 (Feet), 1999, From the Discoloured Series digital print, 3' x 12' 9", photo credit: Jean Brundrit
Lifeline, 1999, From the Discoloured Series selection from 24 digital prints, 10½ x 10½" each, photo credit: Jean Brundrit
   Courtesy Axis Gallery, New York

Brent Stinton
Steven Cohen "Armless", 1999, cibachrome photograph, 7½ x 7½"  
Steven Cohen "Horned", 1999, cibachrome photograph, 7½ x 7½"  
   Courtesy Axis Gallery, New York

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