

Oladele Ajiboye Bamgboye: "The Unmasking Part II and Earlier Photoworks" @THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY, New York

"Strangers & Paradise": O.A. Bamgboye Works 1991-2000 @WITTE DE WITH, Rotterdam

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The structures and systems of museum classifications systems have continuously offered an insightful perspectives of the given epoch's thinking toward low and high art, minor and important works. Historically this system of assignment has often been selectively used to define works by ethnographic and anthropological museums especially in regard artifacts relating to cultures outside the western frame. Such restrictive and often telling museum perspective is evident in the recent uproar at the Louvre after President Chirac open four newly renovated galleries as temporary sites for art from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas to the dismay and criticism of the museum's curatorial staff. Those mounting oppositions at the Louvre notes that the museum's mission is not to be encyclopedic but rather limited to Western art from the Middle ages to 1840, plus the ancient civilizations that are somehow connected to the West. However, despite the liberalism espoused by the Louvre's President Pierre Rosenberg and others regarding this matter, it appears that the argument is directed at the very cultures these works represent and not specifically any real art historical framework. Such a dispute reveals the ongoing opposition of the non-western tradition and the modern canon. It equally reveals mounting reaction to revised ideologies and new globalism that rejects various traditional art structures...institutions and critical discourses.

Oladele Ajiboye Bamgboye, the Nigerian artist presently living in England, first solo U.S. exhibition at Thomas Erben Gallery's new space in Chelsea addresses to a large degree this discourse. Born in Benin, Nigeria in 1963, Bamgboye is the grandson of the legendary Yoruba master sculptor, Bamgboye. Oldadele Bamgboye grew up and studied in Glasgow Scotland. He has since worked in Canada, Germany, and England. Often utilizing new technologies, his works explore new means for criticizing the concept of difference and discourse. His early works probe the context of the black body as a type of cultural tourism. He is equally interested in the complexity of politics of the African continent, and issues related to the negotiations with tradition, autobiography, transnationalism, and postmodernism. Such concerns result in works that often explore concept related to cultural representation and material culture as they address a discourse between ethnic, national, high and "official" culture.

At Thomas Erben Gallery, Bamgboye offers a multifaceted installation that investigates systems of museum classifications, while it equally probes the notion of "authenticity" of the object. The interactive installation: "The Unmasking Part II" consist of a series of computer stations presenting video clips through various channels which reveals the artist's exploration of the museum collecting and classification practices. Bamgboye has described the notion of 'unmasking' as the dissolving of imposed structures whether by museological, historical, anthropological or value systems. Bamgboye's interest lies not only in commenting on the objects but the particularities of the place itself. The work investigates the context in which the sense of time, memory, hierarchy, and cultural significance is established and maintained, as well as a different way of looking at cultural icons and artifacts.

"Unmasking Part II" consists of three computer stations sited within the context of the gallery space. The essential focus is on formerly mysterious objects that the artist aims to move beyond often-antiquated categories. The main station utilizing a iMac computer contains multi-channel project which allow the visitors to view a video clip that documents the British Museum's relocation of its Egyptian collection as well as stored items of the Yoruba art collection at the Glenbow Museum, Calgary. In the video clip of the galleries of African and Egyptian art at the British Museum, the artist presents remaining shadows of the former gallery wall labels still insitu. The second channel move through a series of objects that the artist has selected from the collection of the San Antonio Museum, Texas. The video clip presents a series of objects from the museum's collection that were put away because they fall between clear classifications and are within a kind of hybrid stage such that their subject, provenance or culture is not easily discernible. We observe the artist selecting items, scanning them into the computer and finally creating a secondary series of objects. Bamgboye proposes that these new structures bring into discussion a new stage of "authenticity" such that the new items created on the screen reside in a new "state" they have lost the context of no longer being "pure" or "authentic".

The second station consists of a e-machine (a clone iMac) which closely resemble the original I-Mac, Bamgboye intends to echo the very notion of "authenticity" parallels between the e-machine and the I-Mac. Here, Bamgboye presents a series of selected scanned objects from the museum's archives for the purpose of creating new hybrid objects.

You can view the objects, as they become hybrids, changing color, size, floating freely inspace. The objects become "new" and "authentic". At this station the public is able to manipulate the objects through a series of function keys. Such an approach allows the viewer to consider the contradictions between the different states of the object as they undergo various stages of permutations as well as how such works reflect another way to considered opposite but related realities.

A third computer station has been set-up, which consist of a scanner, computer, and a 3D -modeler. The public is invited to bring in their own objects to scan and ultimately alter through computer manipulations. The installation also consists of a series of lightbox images mounted on the wall of the new hybrid state images drawn from the scanned museum's objects. In "Unmasking Part II", Bamgboye aims to questions the very structure of the hierarchy of museum classification system and by extension the very notion a hierarchy of art objects. By the transformation of these objects whose classification is not clear, he dissolves the hierarchy of the object. Now transformed, the objects take on a new life and can no longer be defined within the context of the existing order which is why many of these objects initially were put away. The object gradually becomes void of any structure that can give it a hierarchy, the critical aural of the museum status is no longer there. While the artist addresses the notion of individual objects, it becomes rather apparent he is equally addressing the very notion of the hierarchy of cultures as expressed through the museum display and its classification systems.

Bamgboye's artwork also investigates issues of identity, technology, the performative, and blackness. Included in the exhibition are a series of large-scale photographs presented directly on the wall. These works are the result of various shots of the human figure on the same negative, each slightly altering the former position. The continuous over shooting suggest a type of sequential processing of the figure presented as a single image. These works are representative of the artist's early works that explore the relations between identity representation and modern technology, especially the perception of the Black body. They are characterized by a subtle erotic undertone, which probe through their ambivalent erotic poses what the artist considers the notion of "Blackness" in the public imagination, in mythology, and the commodification of the Black body in pop mass culture. These early works have been described as investigating the double function of the Black body as object of sexual desire and perversity as well as representation of stereotypes.

Bamgboye is part of the exhibition: "Strangers & Paradise" at the Witte de With, center for contemporary Art, Rotterdam. In Rotterdam, the artist offers an expanded version of the "Unmasking" installation. Also at Witte de With are photographs presented as large-scale duratrans light box images. The artist has also included early photographs and videoworks. Bamgboye's early video works have been described as the artist's attempt to simultaneously reveal and negate the idea of a true Africa. Bamgboye's interests lies in creating a dialogue between various perspectives of traditional Africa and its contemporary history. The early works re-considers the discourse of identity politics and the notion of the African roots of "Blackness". They equally reference the artist early experience as an outsider in Glasgow. Early works such as "Eine Reise"(1991), and "Arise" (1991) questioned the notion of opposition between margin and center, between black and white. Bamgboye has described identity as a state resulting from a complex layering of experiences.

Bamgboye's works has been included in projects at "Documenta X", Kassel (1997), "Johannesburg Biennale", South Africa (1997), "Crossing", Tampa (1997), Guggenheim Museum (1996). His works will soon be included in the "New British Art-Intelligence", Tate Britain, London; "Mirror", Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, and "Mission Finland", Helsinki City Art Museum"



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