

exhibitions

Alternative

curated by Jean Kamba

June 17–July 22, 2023

Mission Impossible Studio (Sis, 158. Bukaka, C/Bandalungwa, Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo)

reviewed by Z.S. Strother

We must first believe in ourselves ... (Il faut d'abord que nous croyons en nous-mêmes ...) (Felwine Sarr, in Douce 2018).

In Kinshasa, in 2023, the topic that kept coming up in discussions on everything from the arts to agriculture was how to build a “nonextractivist” economy. Senator

Didier Mumengi Tshikudi decried a situation in which a renowned artist such as Chéri Samba had become a “resource” akin to copper and cobalt, mined in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and manufactured abroad into a commodity out of reach of most Congolese. In responding to these concerns, the artists’ collective, Mission Impossible, was founded in 2022 by Syntyche Mbembo, Christian Kakesse, and Stanis Mbwanga as a creative “laboratory” to take control of the display of their own works. They identify with Felwine Sarr’s challenge for young Africans to “expand the field of what is possible and to design an African utopia, at once political, cultural, economic, and ecological” (Sarr in Douce 2018, quoted in part in the wall text). As Christian Kakesse explained, Kinshasa has a wealth of artists but few galleries or cultural centers managed by Congolese. Their group decided that instead of continuing to wait for the state to take charge, they would themselves take the responsibility of opening an impeccable exhibition space, which they located in centre ville, in order to help develop a self-sustaining ecosystem for the arts.

After mounting three to four internal shows,¹ the collective decided to invite critic Jean Kamba to curate with them an exhibition that combined their own works with those of other artists: Francis Mampuya,

1 First floor gallery view, *Alternative*.

Photo: Z. S. Strother, 2023

Left to right:

- (1) Magloire Mpaka
Maboko-bank (Les mains bancaires) (2023)
Acrylic on canvas and collage; 195 x 97 cm
- (2–4) Francis Mampuya
Lost Identity (2023)
Series of three, mixed technique; 38 cm x 50 cm each
- (5) Bul’s Bulembi
Bolingo ya Darry (2023)
Glazed terracotta; 75 cm x 35 cm x 30 cm
- (6) Stanis Mbwanga
Self-portrait (2023)
Ceramic paint on porcelain plate; 45 cm x 45 cm
- (7) Iviart Izamba
Fauteuil mobutu no. 2 (2023)
Mixed media; 100 cm x 76 cm x 96 cm





Magloire Mpaka, Maité Botembe, Iviart Izamba, and Bul's Bulembi. The title, *Alternative*, may be in the singular, but the aspiration is to encourage experimentation with a range of different solutions to a given problem. There is also a pun that works in French or English: The drive to “alter” or change artistic practices should ideally be “native” in the sense of emerging from within the local context.² In the exhibition, there was a startling array of different media on display and yet the careful pacing of the works within the airy space as well as the attention to color, tactile contrast, and scale all created an invigorating conversation in which the works play with and against one another, to borrow a musical analogy from Ralph Ellison (O’Meally 2022: 2) (Fig. 1).

The works exhibited all date from 2021–2023, but Kamba wished to acknowledge that several generations coexist already within the world of “contemporary art” and push one another in new directions. Francis Mampuya, for example, was a pioneer in *Librisme*, a shortlived but pivotal transitional movement launched in 1996 by students in Kinshasa who rejected the conservative curriculum of the *Académie de Beaux-Arts* devoted to naturalism and figuration.

Rumba (more commonly called “modern music” by Congolese) was inscribed by UNESCO in 2021 on their list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity and Kinshasa is awash in theater, colloquia, and new books reflecting on the importance of this signature Congolese style. In his series on the “sources” for Rumba, Mampuya honors certain iconic figures such as Papa Wemba (Fig. 2) through photos taken from album covers which he surrounded by marks made with pastels, markers, pens, acrylic paint, watercolors. Kamba and others felt that the centrifugal explosion of color and calligraphic line emanating from the musician conveyed visually the “ambiance,” the joyful sociality for which the music is famous.

Despite the vitality of Congolese creativity communicated in Mampuya’s series, there is a strong awareness of “deculturation” produced during the colonial era, which is continuing apace (Kamba 2019: 148). An exciting new development is the growing frequency of travel in the global South, especially in Asia and (less frequently) within Africa. Many, like Christian Kakesse who studied in China, report being inspired by how proud the Chinese people he encountered seemed to be of their culture, history, art history, even their cuisine.

2 Francis Mampuya
Source Rumba (no. 1) (2023)
Mixed media and collage; 28 cm x 38 cm
Photo: Mardochee Kamuleta

3 Christian Kakesse
Green Colonialism (no. 1) (2023)
Acrylic on canvas; 90 cm x 70 cm
Photo: Mardochee Kamuleta

Kakesse noted the economic impact occasioned by the desire to consume products of discernable Chinese origin. Several interlocutors reported being embarrassed at not being able to answer questions from Asian colleagues who were eager to learn about Congolese culture. This kind of experience has inspired Kakesse and others to engage meaningfully with what he calls “all that is traditional with us.”

According to Kakesse, the series *Green Colonialism* offers “a reflection on the multitude of questions tied to the occidental vision of the environment in Africa and the African vision of their own environment.” In his self-portrait, he stands holding for contemplation a South African protea, a



flower he encountered for the first time in China and expands the concept of environment to encompass the urban and cultural landscape (Fig. 3). He depicts himself twisting away from an architectural backdrop decorated with European classical motifs. On his return from Asia, the artist asked himself why Congolese did not create “our own architectural style which reflects the soul of our society.” Engaging Congolese heritage, he is also a citizen of the world who can adapt Kuba-style textile patterns to new contexts and draw on local design knowledge to juxtapose contrasting textile motifs with multiple origins. A captivating visual effect in the painting is created through the contrast of areas of flat color with the dense application of sculptural bumps on head and hand that recall Bena Luluwa cicatrices, once the marvel of early twentieth century Congolese body modification. Although formed with black acrylic paint, the tiny bumps reflect light and spark an aesthetic contemplation that is also a philosophical meditation on twenty-first-century identity.

Maité Botembe contributed a strong series entitled *Femme du grand Congo* (one of five). The photographer mounted her camera on a tripod and then photographed herself moving as fast as she could as she mimicked various economic activities of women (Fig. 4). The work evokes the frenetic pace of women forced to do whatever they can to survive, moving between home, work, and the gig economy. In contrast to the male figures, sitting, standing, or slowly perambulating, the Congolese woman scurries from one task to the other, without rest, without peace, to the point where she becomes a phantom barely registering in a landscape of stone and wood. Although

the message is biting, the color harmonies and skillful textual transitions make this series an homage to women’s courage and strength.

Designer Iviart Izamba was one of the founders in 2003 of the artists’ collective Eze possibles, which introduced found objects into the repertoire of artists in Kinshasa. In *Fauteuil mobutu*, he transforms a construction wheelbarrow into a witty reflection on power through the exquisite application of (faux) leopard-skin (seen in Fig. 1). President Mobutu Sese Seko was known for wearing a hat styled from a leopard’s pelt. As someone who saw some of the brutality of the Mobutu regime during my doctoral research, I assumed that the work made a critique of Mobutu, but the artists argued for a more allegorical interpretation of the nature of power. Mobutu may have lasted over thirty years in office, but Izamba has transformed his elegant armchair into an ejector seat, reminding us that no matter how long someone lingers in office, the day will come when they are consigned to the dustbin of history.³

The exhibition is innovative in including three ceramicists, Bul’s Bulembi, Syntyche Mbembo, Stanis Mbwanga (Figs. 1, 5, 6). Mbembo and Mbwanga both trained in China, where they were invigorated by the prestige of the medium. They aspire to change how people consume ceramics in Kinshasa and also to grant the medium recognition as a contemporary art form. In *Pensive Architecture*, Mbembo explores the capacity of ceramics to reclaim sculpture in a secular space in DRC (Fig. 5). Mbwanga adapts the technique of overglaze painting on porcelain to raise a searing problem of global relevance: children caught up in war. The artist was haunted by a photo of a little

4 Maité Botembe
Femme du grand Congo (one of five) (2021)
Photographic print on canvas; 90 cm x 60 cm
Photo: Mardochée Kamuleta

5 Syntyche Mbembo
Pensive Architecture (no. 1) (2022–2023)
Glazed terracotta; 51 cm x 31 cm x 5 cm
Photo: Mardochée Kamuleta



girl emerging from a bombed moonscape in Yemen. In the right image of his diptych, he recalls the little girl, surrounded by a swirl of symbols including Christian crosses, Mobutu’s torch symbolizing courage, and the documenting camera. Words expressing her own desires circulate among snatches from conversations in Lingala, Chinese, English, and French, thoughts provoked by the sadness of the situation. On the left, the innocent’s face is abstracted to be filled in by the latest victims in global conflict.

What is contemporary art? Terry Smith considers the answer to be “obvious”—it is the “institutionalized network through which the art of today presents itself to itself and to its interested audiences all over the world” (Smith 2009: 241). He situates its development in the infrastructure of galleries, art fairs, and biennials that have proliferated since the 1980s (2009: 241). Many prominent African critics have preferred to attribute the development of a new cultural infrastructure to political events that make materialist transformations possible or



6 Stanis Mbwanga
Lost (2023)
 Diptych, ceramic painting on procelain; 45
 cm x 45 cm x 2 cm
 Photo: Mardochée Kamuleta

self-sustaining Congolese artworld, one energized by a significant dialogue with China and other centers in the global South.

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Notes

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1 In one interesting initiative, they opened an exhibition in which everything displayed could be purchased for US\$20. The goal was to encourage Kinois to conceive of themselves as arts connoisseurs. Mbwanga reports that the name of the collective was inspired by viewing the film *Mission Impossible* in China. They appreciated the can-do attitude of the protagonists in the face of insurmountable odds.

2 Kamba, personal email communication, Dec. 5, 2023. I thank Yaëlle Biro for catching the pun and for her close reading of this review.

3 Izamba's lesson is not without cultural precedent. In order to discourage political ambition, Eastern Pende chiefs are forced to live with memento mori in order to remind them that they will die one day like everyone else (Strother 2004: 291–92).

References cited

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even necessary. Yacouba Konaté locates the phenomenal growth of biennales around the world in the "ruptures and political readjustments" caused by the end of the Cold War (symbolized by the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) (Konaté 2009: 17–18).

Given this history, one might hypothesize that the fall of Mobutu Sese Seko would prove a salient marker of transition for DRC, given his long hold on power thanks to skillful manipulations of Cold War politics (1965–1997). Indeed, it is striking that Librisme, mentioned above, began to advocate for free expression in 1996, as Mobutu was losing power. Nonetheless, curator Jean Kamba and the artists' collective *Mission Impossible* agree with those critics who see contemporary art as a product of institution building—and do not regard this process as "obvious" in the least, given the political, economic, and professional challenges faced by Congolese artists. In DRC, Kamba emphasizes the importance of "biennialization," beginning with Picha (continuing as the Biennial of Lubumbashi) in 2008, Kinshasa Biennial (Yango) in 2014, and the Young Congo Biennale in 2019 (Kamba 2019: 142). Significantly, these efforts were initiated by artists even as they sought external support. The exhibition *Alternative* demonstrates how the collective *Mission Impossible* is finishing the job—pushing ahead to sediment infrastructure for a

Africa Fashion

curated by Christine Checinska and Elisabeth Murray
 Victoria & Albert Museum
 July 2, 2022–April 16, 2023

curated by Ernestine White-Mifetu and Annissa Malvoisin
 Brooklyn Museum
 June 23–October 22, 2023

reviewed by Christopher Richards

Since its unveiling in 2022, *Africa Fashion* has become more than a museum exhibition; it is a cultural phenomenon, capturing the global zeitgeist of the moment. It is the exhibition that European and American audiences have been craving: an unapologetic and joyful celebration of Black pride, beauty, creativity, and innovation, under the guise of exploring Africa's historical and contemporary fashions. This is not to suggest that both iterations of the exhibition are infallible; instead, it underscores the importance and relevancy of an exhibition devoted exclusively to African fashion.

The original exhibition, curated by Christine Checinska and Elisabeth Murray at the Victoria & Albert Museum, consisted of 254 objects from over twenty African nations. Located in the unconventional, yet dynamic space that is Fashion—Room 40, the exhibition was divided over two floors: the first focused primarily on historical fashions, enhanced by complimentary photography and material culture; the second floor devoted exclusively to contemporary fashions and jewelry, with a similar inclusion of supplementary photography and film.

Perhaps it was my own excitement and anticipation surrounding the exhibition, but I found *Africa Fashion's* entrance to be both dramatic and enticing. Visitors entered through a short passageway that ended in a pyramidal-framed display case featuring Imane Ayissi's shockingly pink, monochromatic ensemble from his Autumn/Winter 2019 collection (Fig. 1). This was a particularly potent garment to serve as the exhibition's preamble: it immediately refuted the expectations and misconceptions that African fashion relies exclusively on colorful, highly graphic prints and immediately identifiable, indigenous materials. Instead, Ayissi's use of raffia, dyed pink to match the garment's silk and linen fabrics, is only recognizable upon