

# NEW ORDER

THE LAST DECADE HAS SEEN A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE WORLD OF AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY ART. A NEW GENERATION OF INNOVATIVE, POLITICALLY AND ETHICALLY AWARE ARTISTS IS – FINALLY – GETTING RECOGNITION FOR ITS WORK

WORDS **CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU**

**I**n the not-too-distant past, African contemporary art was underexposed and undervalued. Nigeria's Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Sokari

Douglas bucked the trend, as did Mali's Abdoulaye Konate and Sudan's Ibrahim El Salahi, but largely speaking, artists from the continent weren't taken as seriously by the global art establishment as their European and American counterparts.

The turn of the millennium heralded a long-overdue change. Specialist US title ARTnews declared art from the continent "the newest avant-garde" and a slew of new galleries and agents, such as Michael Stevenson in South Africa and Arthouse Contemporary in Nigeria, popped up, giving African artists more kudos, a wider critical audience, greater global leverage and higher price tags.

At the same time, artists such as Nigeria's Yinka Shonibare, Kenya's Wangechi Mutu, Ghana's El Anatsui and South Africa's William Kentridge, Kendell Geers and Zwelethu Mthethwa received critical acclaim, with high-profile exhibitions, auctions and commissions, not only from Africa but the rest of the world, too.

As the decade draws to a close, a new generation of artists looks set to achieve even greater feats. Working in a variety of media reflecting an abundance of multi-layered identities, narratives and opinions, these young talents are the art stars of tomorrow.



## **DAWIT L PETROS** ERITREA

A true Afropolitan, Dawit L Petros and his family left his native Eritrea when he was two years old and travelled through four countries before settling in Canada seven years later. This early displacement motivates much of Petros' work as a conceptual artist. In his photographs, video works and installations, he places unrelated objects (or photos of objects) in close proximity to raise difficult questions about place, location and the cohabitation of diverse cultures and ideas in contemporary societies.

In one of Petros' better-known works, *Proposition 1: Mountain* (2007), a photograph shows a close-up view of a black hand holding a pile of ice (evoking a snow-capped mountain) set against a white background that turns out to be the arid salt flats of California.

In another, *Proposition 1: Sign* (2007), he relocates a blank signpost, similar to the one at the summit of Kenya's Mount Kilimanjaro, to a featureless arctic landscape. Both make the viewer aware of how displacement can

open up possibilities of misrecognition, alienation and fantasy.

Not all of Petros' work is so abstract. *Reinscriptions* (2004) includes photographs of Eritreans resident in Canada and the US. The carefully composed images contrast the typically North American homes – white picket fences, vegetable patches – with the Eritreans' physical identity, and show the changing face of the suburban middle classes. The artist says he sets out to "highlight the problems of representing historical and cultural positions from a position that is itself under reassessment."

An MFA graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Petros' first solo exhibition at the Alexander Gray Associates in New York received favourable reviews. As well as participating in *Flow*, the 2008 exhibition of contemporary African artists at Harlem's Studio Museum, he was invited to join its prestigious artist-in-residence programme, which is running until October. ◀



## LYNETTE YIADOM-BOAKYE

GHANA/UK

If the viability of portrait painting as a contemporary art form was ever in doubt, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's canvases of fictional characters put that suspicion to rest once and for all. As well as demonstrating her mastery of the techniques of European classical painting, she applies that classical knowledge in a way that gives her work a distinctive edge and resonant freshness.

The British-Ghanaian artist, who trained at Central St Martins College of Art and Design, uses characteristically dark colour palettes to create emotionally distant, unknown figures that, because of their facial expressions or body gestures, have an air of undeniable familiarity.

Although her paintings might appear to be simply portraits, they depict ideas rather than living individuals. "I am driven," explains the 32 year old, "by a sense of trying to get to something. I do not actually know what it is, but I feel that it is to do with power."

In other words, the five-foot-tall paintings aren't intended to capture the essence of a

human being, but the embodiment of an idea, concept or theme. That explains why the canvases bear unusual titles such as *Ambassador*, *Politics*, *Heaven Help Us All*, *Pleased to Meet You*, or *The Signifying Donkey's Feat*. They are painted, as the critic Adrian Searle of *The Guardian* notes, "with a loose and disbelieving swagger that seems to comment on both the characters of her subjects and what we might want from portraiture in the first place."

In addition to three solo exhibitions in London and Geneva, Yiadom-Boakye was invited to exhibit at the 2nd International Biennial of Contemporary Art, Seville (2006), and Gwangju Biennale (2008), both organised by the Nigerian-born Power-100 curator Okwui Enwezor. She was also included in *Flow*, the important survey of emerging African diaspora artists by New York's Studio Museum. As well as more conventional spaces, she has exhibited at the Platform For Art show, a group exhibition that was held at London's Gloucester Road Tube station. ◀

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**NANDIPHA MNTAMBO**  
SWAZILAND

In the world of sculptor Nandipha Mntambo, cowhide reigns supreme. The 29-year-old Swaziland native uses the hide to create disconcertingly sensual three-dimensional sculptures that have the power to simultaneously appeal to and repulse an audience.

Their creation is as exacting as it is messy. Mntambo scours away layers of smelly fat, douses the cleaned hide in tanning liquids and, while it is still wet, stretches it over a cast of her naked body or her mother's, which she used to create a piece titled *Beginning of the Empire*.

Critics have often connected the use of cowhide to the artist's cultural background. Cowhide is used in Swazi marriage rites and plays a significant role in indigenous wealth management. Mntambo, however, stresses that using cowhide has a greater significance than the obvious associations. "I have used cowhide as a means to subvert expected associations with corporeal presence, femininity, sexuality and vulnerability," she says.

A graduate from the Masters in Fine Art programme of the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, Mntambo had her first solo exhibition in 2007 at the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, one of the most respected galleries in Africa. Titled *Ingabisa*, which in Swazi culture refers to a girl's coming-of-age rites, the show's bold pieces brought the black female artist to the attention of the top echelons of the South African art world.

Today, global critics and curators are paying close attention to Mntambo's evolving work, and as a result she participated in the 2008 Dakar Biennale and the Black Womanhood show organised by the Hood Museum in New Hampshire. Her second solo show, held between April and May 2009 at Cape Town's Michael Stevenson Gallery, also featured photography and film. Highlights included *uMcedo*, a mud hut-inspired sculpture made of cows' tails; *Refuge*, an emotive cowhide sculpture of three kneeling women cut off at the waist, seemingly in a moment of prayer or plea; and the central installation, *Emabutfo*, a ghost-like army of cowhide figures moulded on Mntambo's body.

**MIKHAEL SUBOTZKY**  
SOUTH AFRICA

Although his photographs have been exhibited at New York's MOMA, the South African National Gallery and Foam (Fotografiemuseum Amsterdam), Mikhael Subotzky regards the opportunity to show his Die Vier Hoeke series inside Nelson Mandela's cell at Pollsmoor, Cape Town's maximum security prison, as his most important exhibition so far. "You could hear the banging of prison gates and smell the boiled cabbages as you looked at the photographs," he recalls. Fittingly, the images captured the daily lives of inmates then incarcerated at Pollsmoor.

Besides securing the opportunity to exhibit in one of the most extraordinary and culturally significant locations in the world, South African photographer Subotzky has accomplished the rare feat of getting his powerful and beautiful

documentary images embraced by the contemporary art world. South African art critic Ivor Powell commented, "It is not so much what is being done, but how well, how illuminatingly, how startlingly, how truly, how unexpectedly, how resonantly, even how beautifully it is being done."

Born in Cape Town, Subotzky graduated with distinction from the Michaelis School of Art in 2004. Die Vier Hoeke, which was his final year work, earned him the Michaelis Prize and the Simon Girson Prize, and alerted the art world to the emergence of a unique voice from the already hectic post-apartheid art scene.

The theme of incarceration runs through much of his work. Umjiegwana (The Outside) (2006) documents the precarious existence of a group of recently released prisoners,

while Beaufort West (2007) lays bare everyday life (in and out of prison) in the isolated town of the title, which, according to South Africa's Human Rights Commission, has "not broken away from the shackles of South Africa's apartheid past."

International response to Subotzky's work is unprecedented for any contemporary African artist. He is the youngest-ever photographer invited to join the rarified Magnum group of photographers, and was given a solo show last year by MOMA. He has won a string of prizes, including ICP Infinity (Young Photographer) Award, New York; Special Juror's Prize at the 7th Rencontres Africaines de la Photographie, Bamako; and KLM Paul Huff Award, Amsterdam. It's an impressive CV, even more so when you consider he's still only 28.



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IVOR POWELL ON MIKHAEL SUBOTZKY

## **NNENNA OKORE**

### **NIGERIA**

Nnenna Okore first came to the attention of the Lagos art scene in 2001, as a participating artist in the New Energies exhibition organised by celebrated contemporary artist El Anatsui.

Since then, Okore has steadily made her mark as a sculptor of tremendous promise by ingeniously transforming discarded materials – newspapers, magazines, sticks, fabrics, even rope – into intricately beautiful works of art.

She combines a Neo-Dada (artists influenced by Marcel Duchamp's elevation of items, such as the lowly toilet seat, to works of high art) appropriation of ordinary, discarded items as artist's materials, with a feminist reclamation of traditional feminine drawing room tasks – stitching, weaving, embroidery – as avant-garde art processes.

Her process is painstaking. Each stitch, twist, coil, curl and roll of the recovered materials used to create sculptures and installations is a considered act of reinterpretation. Of the trash-bound items she uses for her art, she says, "I'm trying to find meaning for these materials, to find ways of giving them value."

It was a desire to physically articulate her feelings about America's wasteful consumer culture – an aspect of life in the US that shocked Okore when she moved from Nigeria to Chicago – and an initial interest in recycling that sparked the creative process that would become her career-defining aesthetic.

A 2005 MFA graduate of the University of Iowa, Okore's career is on a rapid ascent. Important fellowships and residencies include the UNESCO-Aschberg Fellowship for Artists (2006); Artist Full Fellowship at Global Art Village, Delhi, India (2007); and a feature in the Angaza Afrika – African Art Now exhibition (2008) at The October Gallery. She also has a number of upcoming shows in Nigeria and across the US later this year and next.

Okore called her breakout solo show in London last year *Ulukububa – Infinite Flow*. Together, *Ulukububa* (the Igbo word for butterfly) and infinite flow symbolise her artistic imagination and the opulence of Igbo and Nigerian fashion, particularly women's ceremonial attire. Using rolled and coiled clay as her primary material, she created highly structured, fabric-like installations that evoked decadent laces and rich brocades. No one has ever made recycling look so stunning. ●





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DAWIT L. PETROS

