



African Art: Contemporary

by Joyce M. Youmans

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Black Africans typically shun members of their communities who are openly gay because they believe Westerners imposed homosexual behavior on their indigenous cultures. Consequently, and unfortunately, intolerance of homosexuality in Africa is frequently urged as an active moral and developmental good, and seen as part of the struggle of African nationalism against Western imperialism. In this difficult climate, only a few openly gay black African artists produce work with homosexual themes.

Bulelwa Madekurozwa

One such artist is the painter Bulelwa Madekurozwa (b. 1972), who lives and works in Harare, Zimbabwe. While studying in Harare in the early 1990s, Madekurozwa discovered that most of the artists in her school were men who painted portraits of stereotypically shy but proud African women tilling fields and toting babies. To challenge this representation, Madekurozwa painted portraits of strong black women with direct gazes.

Early in her career, Madekurozwa grappled with ways to express her thoughts and experiences as an African lesbian through her art. To put it mildly, lesbianism is not accepted in Zimbabwe. Although the country has an active women's rights movement, females are both socially and legally disadvantaged.

Since women traditionally were denied individual sexual identities, lesbians face horrifyingly violent anti-gay sentiments. As the country's gay community slowly takes shape, therefore, women are being left behind. While men who come out in Zimbabwe at least know that male homosexual relationships exist, the inability even to conceive of a lesbian relationship hinders the coming-out process for women.

It is therefore not surprising that Madekurozwa makes only veiled references to lesbianism in her paintings. In one early work, two figures--one clothed and androgynous, the other with the nude body of a black woman--embrace.

When the public did not take Madekurozwa's early paintings seriously, she decided to change her subject matter. She discovered that her work makes more of an impression on Zimbabweans when she addresses homosexuality through images of males. Additionally, painting semi-nude male figures allows Madekurozwa to counter the frivolous display of half-naked women's bodies on television and in movies, videos, magazines, and paintings. In her works, the male body becomes a commodity since it is objectified for the delight of the viewer.

Heaven (1997) depicts a young, uniformed policeman in a state of half undress crouching in an alluring pose. The painting grabs the viewer's attention since it is nearly life-sized and the composition looks like a close-up snapshot, with parts of the figure cut off at the edge of the canvas. The absence of margins around the figure encourages the viewer's eye to travel into the scene and caress the male body.

Heaven borrows the pin-up idea featured in the logo of a well-known gay club, and the scribbled messages

in the upper right-hand corner are reminiscent of lewd bathroom graffiti. Madekurozwa serves the policeman to the viewer like a piece of meat while making the point that figures of authority are as human as the rest of us and, as such, are sexual--sometimes homosexual--beings.

Sunday Afternoon (1997) addresses the homosexual nature of two male policemen. The figures, one of them only partially clothed, lovingly embrace while facing the viewer. Madekurozwa's large, flowing, sumptuously colored brushstrokes are so sensuous, the figures' expressions so tender and content, that the viewer is forced to ask: How can anything be wrong with this?

Madekurozwa's paintings of authority figures articulate the conflict between societal expectations, gender stereotyping, and personal needs. Her work encourages viewers to challenge convention so that they may achieve personal fulfillment.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode

Like Madekurozwa, the Nigerian-born, London-based photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955-1989) used his art to undermine conventional perceptions. His photographs of nude or semi-nude black males frequently blend African and Western iconography with sexual, sometimes homoerotic, themes. They present an alternate reality, transporting the viewer into unfamiliar worlds that encourage a reconsideration of commonly held ideas and assumptions about racial and sexual identity.

Living in London since adolescence, Fani-Kayode was all too aware of the Western world's misperception and misrepresentation of black Africans. His black and white photograph entitled *Mask* (1989) appears, at first glance, to fulfill the Western stereotype of the African "primitive": The male subject wears only a loincloth and crouches in an aggressive pose, seemingly ready to run into the jungle toting a bow and arrow.

Fani-Kayode also knew that, in the Western imagination, the African body is not only exotic but also erotic. Consequently, when the viewer scrutinizes *Mask*, she realizes that the loincloth is actually a studded leather jock strap. Further, the man's "teeth" are metal portions of the studded cock ring that he holds in his mouth. The jock strap and cock ring parody the Western idea that the black male is nothing more than a sex machine that emits semen and speaks salacious words.

Further, the over-the-top representation found in *Mask* challenges the validity of this stereotype. The two plant fronds that the figure holds in front of his face function as a mask, reminding viewers that they should look beyond stereotypes to discover complex personalities. By creating a brash, in-your-face image, Fani-Kayode forces the viewer to reconsider his understanding of race and sexuality.

Fani-Kayode's black and white photograph entitled *White Bouquet* (1987) also shakes the viewer's established worldview. The photo, a reinterpretation of Edouard Manet's famous painting *Olympia* (1863), shows a white man presenting a bouquet of flowers to a black male lounging on a chaise. Both nude figures turn their backs to the viewer. In Manet's work, a clothed black female servant gives flowers to a nude white female prostitute, and both women face the viewer.

White Bouquet's gender and racial reversal is echoed in its compositional inversion; even the presenter of the flowers is on the opposite side from that in *Olympia*. This undoing of the familiar results in an ambiguous image left open to many complex interpretations.

Conclusion

Although a few contemporary black African artists address issues of homosexuality, violent opposition to the gay lifestyle in Africa makes it difficult for them. While Bulelwa Madekurozwa cautiously exhibits her work in Zimbabwean galleries, Rotimi Fani-Kayode once stated that if he exhibited his works in Nigeria, riots

would break out. Certainly Fani-Kayode would have been accused of spreading corrupt and decadent Western values.

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About the Author

Joyce M. Youmans is Curatorial Assistant in the Department of African Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. She curated the exhibition "Another Africa." Her article "African Art at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art" appears in *African Arts*. Her research interests include contemporary Western and African art, the abject in visual art, and pragmatist aesthetics.