

EXHIBITION REVIEW

The Walala Wasala Fabric of African Politics” Exhibition, Goulburn Art Gallery, 16 May - 15 June 2008

The tour of the “Walala Wasala Fabric of African Politics” exhibition commenced in May 2006, with an itinerary covering eleven regional galleries in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria, finishing in 2009. The exhibition consists of two different art forms – one a selection of printed, commercially produced cotton printed materials and the other consisting of ten quilted and embroidered banners entitled the “Embroidered Leadership Banners series”. All works are part of Australian Tracey Naughton’s personal collection. She collected them while working from the early 1990s in Southern Africa on community broadcasting projects and while studying and travelling in the region. The exhibition was co-curated by Joan Winter, a freelance curator.

According to the Gallery staff, the opening of the exhibition in Goulburn on 16 May 2008 was a unique occasion for the city, providing a celebration of African culture which Goulburn residents thoroughly enjoyed. A grant from the Southern Tablelands Arts and Regional Arts, NSW enabled the Gallery to create the atmosphere of an African market with stalls selling arts and crafts, clothing and food, with accompanying music and floor talk. Former African residents now living in the Goulburn area participated, including some lending artefacts for display, which added to the atmosphere and the strong sense of community spirit associated with the event.

The touring exhibition itself is not the traditional kind associated with things-African, such as basketry and wooden carvings. Instead, the lengths of cloth displayed, which are used as wrap-arounds, (chitenge in Zambia, shweshwe in South Africa, khanga in Kenya), provide a more modern dimension of African life, although sometimes with a traditional heritage. Depending on the country, the printed patterns vary from intricate graphic designs with proverbs to more modern and photographic political, social and commercial themes and messages. “It is better to be poor than rich and in slavery” proclaims one while “Safe Motherhood” is advertised along with products and political parties, as well as modern phenomenon such as mobile phones and the Queen of Hearts-Princess Diana”. In short they act as mobile billboards. Cheap, light weight, easily available and easy to wash, such cloth is multi-purpose and a ubiquitous part of life in many parts of Africa. Being flat, such cloth makes a perfect medium for spreading political or other types of messages, useful in societies where illiteracy is high, newspapers are in short supply and local politics are a major point of conversation. A collection such as this is an unusual and a

valuable adjunct to other forms of historical records. It also provides Australians with a different and more modern view of African culture than is usually publicised.

The ten colourful quilted banners featuring various leaders are in a different medium but continue the political theme. They constitute a salute to the leaders, although the reverence accorded is not always easily justified to our western eyes, such as those who appear to be the epitome of evil (Zimbabwe) or gender insensitivity (Swaziland), a matter which is discussed in the catalogue.

Accompanying the exhibition is an impressively informative sixty-page catalogue, which helps to clearly explain the subject matter being presented. It provides an interesting coverage of the history of manufactured cloth in parts of Africa, the reasons for the success and failure of the industry in various countries and the role of cloth in portraying political statements and other aspects of modern social history. It is extensively and beautifully illustrated with colour photographs by Chris Kirchhoff.

The catalogue also provides a summarised historical overview of African settlement in Australia, and describes the changes in nationalities arriving and also public perceptions of them, which have occurred over time. Unfortunately one needs time to absorb the catalogue's contents, in order to make full sense of what is presented in the exhibition.

Nevertheless, there are some reservations about the exhibition. Firstly, the name "fabric" was a little misleading as that suggested traditional, locally woven natural materials such as Kuba cloth from the Democratic Republic of Congo or Kente cloth from Ghana. However, the title was a nice play on words and all that was missing was the key word "modern" which would have made the content of the exhibition somewhat clearer.

Secondly, the mixing of the printed cloths with quilted banners designed by the collector was somewhat confusing. Although covering the same political theme, the banners are in fact, a different genre and one that is not traditional to southern/eastern Africa. In Africa only Berber shepherds and soldiers and horses in the southern Sahara, especially Niger (now ceremonial), use quilted patchwork. However, culture evolves and "a visitor sometimes brings a sharp knife" (Zambian proverb). The Australian collector herself designed these banners, as a way of innovatively demonstrating how leaders "embroider" their images and neglect the welfare of their citizens. The banners use local materials and embellishments and were designed by Tracey Naughton herself, with beadwork by Estah Mamba (Swaziland), Martha Matlala and Gloria

Pakwe (South Africa) and Lena Cloete (Namibia). Naughton describes how the discussions that ensued during their making showed that local opinions were not always critical of excessive leadership practices, as discussed in the catalogue – a discussion which is useful for Australians trying to understand how African leadership is locally perceived.

It could be argued that it may have been more legitimate to describe the exhibition as containing two different genres on the same political theme, with the banners adding an extra dimension, albeit one from an Australian's creative mind. However, this maybe a purist's view, the banners in fact being an example of cross-cultural fertilization and modernization. They are also an interesting version of patchwork and quilting in their own right, even if not strictly "African".

Regardless, the exhibition has made a useful contribution to opening Australia's eyes to a different aspect of modern African life, thereby with the potential to increase understanding. Its presence in rural galleries has provided a valuable prompt for discussion of issues and an opportunity for the cultural backgrounds of African Australians to be better recognized. As well, the catalogue provides a valuable source of information on the socio-political significance of printed cloth in many countries in Africa, as well as the history of the textile industry, including the regrettable effects of globalization.

Copies of the catalogue can be obtained from: baboaarts@optusnet.com.au

Margaret O'Callaghan