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Black President

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by Peter Eleey



'Black President: The Art and Legacy of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti' explores the ways in which Kuti, a Nigerian musician and activist who died in 1997, has influenced a group of contemporary visual artists from various African, European and American

cities. At the invitation of guest curator Trevor Schoonmaker, 34 artists have contributed works that, taken together, attest to either their personal affinities for this complex figure or the context that surrounded him. Schoonmaker is careful not to suggest any broader influence Kuti may have had on the visual arts, and his modest touch allows a compelling spirit of admiration and respect to emerge in spite of the wildly uneven quality of the work presented.

The Afrobeat genre that Kuti created and performed at his club in post-colonial Lagos grew out of African high life, blending in Jazz, Yoruba percussion and James Brown-inspired funk with pointed political lyrics that often directly addressed the corrupt Nigerian political establishment. The exhibition's informative catalogue dissects Kuti from a number of angles, and includes plenty of vivid documentary images from his life and performances. Most of these photos are included in the show, mounted above listening stations that Piotr Orlov has organized to chart Kuti's musical development alongside the work of the many recording artists who

have been inspired by his sound - a sizeable and diverse group that counts among its members David Byrne, Wunmi, Mos Def and Antibalas. The highlights of 'Black President' include Adia Millett's embroidered graffiti motifs, Barkley Hendricks' radiant Florentine portrait of the musician, Wangechi Mutu's collage portrait of Kuti's mother, and Satch Hoyt's listening-booth shrine to Kuti's 27 wives. Using similar subject matter to much less interesting effect, Yinka Shonibare perplexingly arranged 27 headless female dolls on a tall wooden platform, all of them uninspiringly clad in Shonibare's signature fabric. Radcliffe Bailey and Ouattara Watts also created new paintings that look much like the rest of their work. (Perhaps their admiration for Kuti is such that it has been internalized into their wider practice.) Some of the video works could pass as cultural journalism (which doesn't make them any less interesting for these purposes); an intriguing projection by Tim Evans and Jason Smith turns Kuti's life into a themed-room video game.

The show stumbles here and there into territory beyond its mandate. 'Perhaps the reintroduction of the political to the art world during a time of global instability can assist us in exploring today's pressing socio-political issues', muses Schoonmaker in the exhibition's catalogue. Yes, perhaps. But 'political' to what art world, and in what way? Schoonmaker's inclusion of artists who don't operate within the 'art world' makes such generalizations difficult. Ghariokwu Lemi's original album cover drawings that he did for Fela during the 1970s, smartly included here, are unquestionably political works, but were primarily intended for a mass African public that could decipher his references to the political situation of the period. While Lemi's more recent drawings are not uninteresting, it is these decades-old album cover pieces that best convey the grit, chaos and burgeoning creativity that seem to have characterized Kuti's experience and milieu. But within the context of a New York contemporary museum (one recognized, in fact, for its history of presenting edgy political works) many of the pieces in this show can only be termed 'political' in an almost archaeological way, in that they exhume conceptual or pictorial strategies that have on the whole lost any sense of urgency and, like Lemi's album drawings, seem like relics from a previous moment.

'Black President' travels next to venues in San Francisco and London. What would it mean to take this show to Africa? Who does Marcia Kure, who was born and educated in Nigeria but now lives in Atlanta, imagine as her critical public? Undoubtedly, the series of pseudo-mythological figures she has painted in tribute to Kuti - which seem woefully amateurish to my eye - would look different in Africa (or in San Francisco or London, for that matter). But would they look better? Would Fred Wilson's pottery trap, which uses Kuti's music as bait, look as good outside the Western museum context upon which his work has been largely dependent?

The show's biggest misjudgement was the classical Mumuye figure Kendall Geers wrapped in what we are told, with complete seriousness, is the red-and-white striped tape of the Chevron oil company. For his part, the South African Geers reassures us that 'simply creating a work of art is a political act', arguing in his artist's statement that the 'material and social conditions' of Africa do not allow for artists to exist solely as such. Is this offered to clarify the extraordinary nature of Kuti's accomplishment, or as pre-emptive self-defence? Regardless, it is difficult to be sympathetic, given such evidence to the contrary. How can an exhibition about a man who heroically fought out a place for himself and for his art in this political and humanitarian mess, include such stale silliness passed off as a tribute?