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Shangaa: Art of Tanzania - QCC Art Gallery, City University of New York (CUNY) February 22-May 19, 2013; Portland Museum of Art, Maine June 8 - August 25, 2013 [Exhibition Review]

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### Shangaa: Art of Tanzania

QCC Art Gallery, City University of New York (CUNY)

February 22–May 19, 2013

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reviewed by Jonathan Shirland

How do you present Tanzanian art to a North American audience when the perception persists that no significant visual cultures have developed in the country? This was the challenge facing Gary van Wyk when curating “Shangaa: Art of Tanzania” at the QCC Gallery in New York, supported by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts: Art Works. The exhibition traveled to the Portland Museum of Art (PMA) where I had the pleasure of seeing the exhibition (Fig. 1).

Tanzanian art has received little attention in the United States due to the country’s status as a German colony until 1914 (thus falling outside Francophone taste-making in the earlier twentieth century; many of the objects ended up in German, Austrian, and Hungarian collections); the effects of Julius Nyerere’s socialist Ujamaa program, which isolated Tanzania whilst African art history was developing as an academic endeavor; as well as Tanzania’s complex entanglements in a nascent global economy before the colonial era; and the sheer fluidity of migration patterns and ethnic identities. There are important precursors to this exhibition, such as the fieldwork of Terence Ranger, Lazlo Holy, and Marc Leo Felix, Manfred Ewel and Anne Outwater’s edited 1991 volume *From Ritual to Modern Art: Tradition and Modernity in Tanzanian Sculpture*, and Tanzania’s inclusion in the Royal Academy of Art’s monumental “Africa: Art of a Continent” exhibition in 1995. A number of objects in the PMA show were also in the 1995 exhibit and it was fascinating to encounter them again in a more geographically focused context.

Despite these precursors, this was a landmark show: the first major exhibition dedicated to Tanzanian art held in the United States. Van Wyk negotiated the problem of presenting Tanzanian visual culture through the unifying notion of “Shangaa”—a Swahili term referring to things that have the aesthetic power to amaze, astonish, and dumbfound.



This strategy was helpful in dismantling preconceptions about Tanzanian art’s inferiority, but the term had to synthesize 165 diverse objects grouped into broad thematic categories: healing, initiation, regalia, the slave trade. I was left “amazed” at the range of styles and surfaces on view spanning the delicacy of an elephant shrew Litete rubbed smooth through bodily contact; the roughly hewn potency of Mabinda dance figures designed for maximum visibility (Fig. 2); a Makonde Lipiko mask of a revolutionary soldier adhering to the tenets of socialist realism; and the ethereal patina of a desiccated *kwere/zaramo* gravepost. Together with celebrating Tanzanian culture beyond the platitudes of its tourist economies, the show displayed the few established “masterpieces” of Tanzanian art alongside objects hitherto assumed to be nonexistent in the region, such as a couple of striking divination oracles. It also convincingly re-attributed some of these “masterpieces,” most obviously the “Berlin Throne” previously labeled as Nyamwezi, deepening our understanding of them (Fig. 3). It performed commendable service in disentangling the evolution of particular styles and crediting to groups formerly virtually invisible in art history many of the objects on display without subscribing to the reductive “one tribe, one style” paradigm the exhibition self-consciously sought to discredit.

The exhibition also demonstrated that important contact zones developed in the north, south, and west of the country as well as in coastal Swahili regions. Tongwe pieces, such as an elongated female figure standing on a stool, registered the cross-cultural exchanges with the DRC around Ujiji and across Lake Victoria (Fig. 4), whilst various works produced by the Nyamwezi reflected the exchanges engendered along major caravan routes. The diversity of ethnic types rep-

1 Installation view of the 3rd floor gallery, “Shangaa: Art of Tanzania” at the Portland Museum of Art, Maine, 2013.

Photo: © Portland Museum of Art, Maine

2 Dance figures (Mabinda)

Sukuma, 20th century

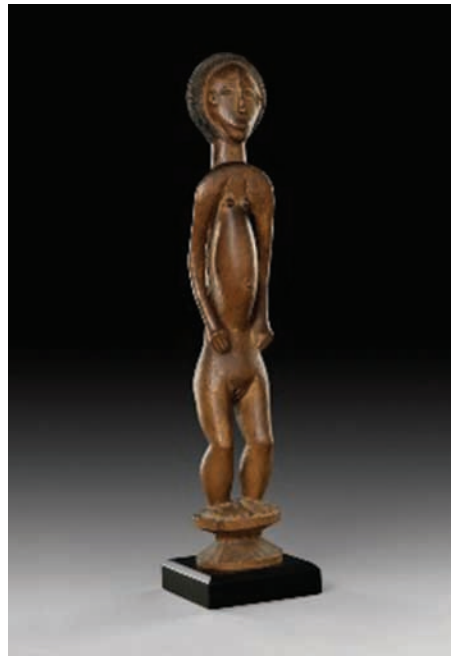
Wood, pigment, metal; left-right, H: 132 cm,

152.4 cm, 142.2 cm

Private collection

Photo: Michael Cichon





(clockwise from top left)  
**3** Chair Nyamwezi (?),  
 Probably Kimbu, late 19th  
 century  
 Wood, glass beads; H: 107 cm  
 Collection of the Ethnologisches  
 Museum Staatliche Museen zu  
 Berlin. Acc No. III E 6720  
 Photo: courtesy of the Port-  
 land Museum of Art

**4** Female figure on stool  
 Tongwe, late 19th–early 20th  
 century  
 Wood, pyrography; H: 68 cm  
 Private Collection  
 Photo: courtesy of the Port-  
 land Museum of Art

**5** Guardian figures  
 Sukuma, 20th century  
 Wood, metal (aluminum), hide,  
 ocher; H: 208.2 cm, 188 cm  
 Private collection  
 Photo: Michael Cichon

resented in the collection of Makonde masks on display affirmed Alexander Bortolot's identification of a "border mentality" around the Ruvuma River framing Tanzania from the south, whilst a subtle curatorial juxtaposition demonstrated the homologous importation of cattle imagery from opposite ends of the country. An isolated Ngoni headrest initially appeared anomalous, given that it seemed essentially southern African in form, notwithstanding the fact that it was less abstract than the Zulu and Swazi headrests it relates to. But it signaled the influence on Tanzanian art from the south, and opposite it was a case of Haya bovine figures that were also the product of the assimilation of "foreign" culture, this time from the Nile river region.

Also noteworthy was the installation of a pair of Sukuma Lusumbo guardian figures in front of a huge photograph of them in situ on a hilltop. The original lofty position of these great weathered planks embellished with aluminum, ocher, and animal hide was evoked by the raised platform built into the gallery design (Fig. 5). The most striking section of the show was the array of Sukuma dance figures. The more spacious third floor installation evoked a nascent dance competition space compared to the cramped spaces on the fourth floor, particularly because of the vibrant videos installed nearby. The Mabinda formed part of a diverse corpus of articulated figures in the exhibition, ranging from dance figures with a hidden system of pulleys to cause phallic rises at climatic moments in competitions, to a female puppet with removable stomach whose totemic presence transcended a simple educational purpose, to the large jointed Motto Wabandia erected at gravesides in Kwere and Zaramo cultures when a male elder died with-

out a son or nephew to officiate at the funeral.

But there were problems with the show, not least the fact that the "shangaa effect" was perhaps too diffuse to meaningfully illuminate everything on display; the thematic sections blurred into one another at points. Another disappointment was the omission of pottery and textiles, which were in the show as elements in various ensembles but were not examined directly. The histories of imported cloth and of ceramic figural production are crucial to works like the pair of tiny Shambaa clay figures wrapped in white, red, and black cloth. Kanga was represented only by one awkwardly positioned "Obama" example at the foot of the stairs from the fourth to the third floor. It is a pity they were not given greater attention, given Kanga's status as "national dress" since the 1960s paired with jewelry included in the show, and their framing role in ensembles like the Makonde female ceramic Shitengamata mask. Given that van Wyk is adamant that the exhibition refutes the contention that African art has been contaminated by interactions with Europeans the omission of the other ubiquitous forms of recent Tanzanian visual culture—*tingatinga* painting and Makonde blackwood carving—was striking. The social commentary in certain *tingatinga* could have introduced a contemporary form of "talking back" to pair with the drawings made by Karl Weule's porters a century earlier that are reproduced throughout the text panels like a connecting thread. Are these genres any more "contaminated" than the Makua skull mask inspired by American Halloween props? Or, for that matter, the celebrated Berlin and Vienna thrones that Van Wyk convincingly interprets as partly "tourist art" innovations themselves?





7. Mask  
Makonde, before 1906  
Wood; H: 17.5 cm  
Collection of the GRASSI Museum zu  
Völkerkunde Leipzig  
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Acc.  
No. MAf 16 567  
Photo: Bernd Cramer

Nonetheless, this exhibition admirably celebrated Tanzanian art's complexity whilst drawing out points of connection between various groups and geographical areas. The trio of representations opening the exhibit—the model Dhow contextualized by the map of trade routes, the video highlighting the landscapes and soundscapes still used in traditional Tanzanian healing, and the famous Leipzig mask that for years served as the Austrian museum's logo—immediately indicated the ambition of the show (Fig. 6). This was compounded on the reverse side of the first partition wall with a dizzying pie chart of the 120-plus ethnicities in Tanzania paired with a 1970s mask of a Chinese railway worker from Mbeya, an apt symbol of the show's stress on modernity, change and the depiction of "otherness." It was a heady mix that revealed for the first time the diversity of Tanzanian art, and its capacity to forge innovation out of continuity even during periods of profound upheaval. It is a pity that a symposium on Tanzanian art did not accompany them, but the exhibition and engrossing scholarly catalogue (Gary van Wyk, ed., *Shangaa: Art of Tanzania*, QCC Art Gallery Press, 2013; 432 pp. \$95.00 cloth) deserve to be the inspiration for a new wave of research into this amazing country.

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## book review



### Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey

Edited by Trevor Schoonmaker  
Durham, NC: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, date. 176 pp., illustrated exhibition checklist, selected bibliography, full color.

reviewed by Brenda Schmahmann

The year 2013 was important for Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972). Not only was she was one of twenty-five artists included in a publication on women born after 1960 who are producing significant feminist work (Heartney 2013), but her art was also the topic of *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey*, the first major survey of her to be published in the United States. Working in collage, video, installation and performance, Mutu—who was born in Nairobi and is based in New York—makes works which unsettle and critique racist and sexist visual language by unpacking and reconfiguring tropes associated with unequal power relations and a possessive gaze.

*Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* was published to accompany a travelling exhibition that commenced in March 2013 at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Mounted at the Brooklyn Museum in October 2013, the exhibition's schedule included the Museum of Contemporary Art in North Miami as well as the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, where it completed its run in December 2014. Introducing a range of the artists'

works made since the mid-1990s, when she was studying for a Bachelor of Fine Arts at Cooper Union, *Wangechi Mutu: A Fantastic Journey* serves as a catalogue for what might perhaps be understood as a mid-career retrospective.

This publication has much that is highly commendable. Lavishly illustrated and with excellent-quality printing and production, its reproductions do justice to Mutu's intriguing and complex works. It also includes three essays as well as a transcript of a substantial interview with the artist, thus including discursive engagement on the part of interpreters as well as opportunities for the artist herself to articulate her insights about the ideas and experiences that underpinned her making of her works. The biography incorporates photographs of the exhibitions that are cited, thus enabling it to provide simultaneously a helpful visual chronological survey of her works since the 1990s. Useful also was the inclusion of reproductions of each of the works featuring in the Exhibition Checklist. The Selected Bibliography is sufficiently detailed to enable it to serve as a starting point for researchers wishing to commence exploring Mutu's work.

A drawback of the catalogue, however, is its lack of clarity about the relative roles of the different essays. The essays are preceded by a Foreword by Sarah Schroth (Nancy Hanks Senior Curator and Interim Director of the Nasher Museum of Art) as well as Acknowledgements by the curator, Trevor Schoonmaker, and the artist. But none of these contributors has been tasked with providing a clear explanation of the contents of the publication and, more specifically, the relationship between essays. While it is accepted that an exhibition catalogue does not necessarily require a formal introduction as such, the absence of any explanation about what the reader will find in the publication (and by this I mean a rationale for the structure of the volume and choices that have been made rather than simply the provision of a table of contents), will almost invariably mean that the text becomes somewhat difficult to navigate.

The first of the catalogue's three essays, "A Fantastical Journey," is by Trevor Schoonmaker, who curated the exhibition. While Schoonmaker does not indicate the direction and scope of his essay in its opening section, it seems to function as a quasi-introduction to the catalogue because, prior to engaging with the content of particular works, it includes a very brief contextualization of the show itself. Schoonmaker points out that the exhibition is the first to contain some of Mutu's sketchbook drawings, and that these provide insights into her making process, while also informing the reader that the show includes three important new works which have not previously been shown: *Family Tree* (2012), *The End of eating*