

Chapter 1 : Search results for `Nina M. Mirarchi` - PhilPapers

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At present, the gallery represents over thirty artists from ten African countries. Karg has lived in Africa for extended periods and has worked on a range of development projects in various capacities for the World Bank, USAID, the United Nations, and a number of African governments. His work has been exhibited internationally for over two decades and has gained widespread acclaim. Diba eschews imported canvases and oil paints in favor of local materials, making his canvases out of locally woven fabrics. Diba layers his surfaces with a range of materials, including strips of cloth of differing densities and discarded objects found in and around his hometown of Dakar, Senegal. Indeed, Diba achieves the difficult task of harnessing these diverse formal elements into cohesive, complex surfaces that are also highly sculptural, exhibiting a three-dimensionality that at times tests the very boundaries of painting, and locates his works somewhere on the threshold between painting and sculpture. Where did your interest in African art originate and what were the initial aims behind the establishment of your gallery? I also knew that most of the artists that I was interested in were well known and well shown in Europe, yet virtually unknown in the United States and I felt that that should change. This is the beauty of working with contemporary artists: I can have conversations with them. My approach has always been a careful interpretation of the art based in its cultural context and this responsibility to, as much as possible, correctly interpret it to the collecting audience. This is something I feel very strongly about nowâ€”perhaps more so than I did back when I started in I have always gravitated toward abstraction, but with Viye it was his use of reused materials and color that really attracted me. He is one of the first African artists that I know of to use reused materials. In , when Viye started working in this minimalist way, his colors were extraordinarily bright and rich and this drew me to him. I was attracted to the color and also the fact that with every work Viye violates what would otherwise be the frame or the edge of the canvasâ€”either with an appendage very dramatically coming out from the front, as you see here in Red Escape II, sometimes on the edge or bottom of the work, and sometimes he actually breaks through the frame itself. Diba has been very creative in his physical handling of the media. Time in his work, however, is extraordinarily subtle and it is one of the things that he has mastered in an intuitive way that I have rarely seen. The sun in Dakar, and Senegal in general, is so strong that it fades everything. One has to look across a ten-year body of work to see it. This, in my opinion, is his comment on time. So any given work is part of a larger whole, and part of a process that is ultimately one body of work? Exactly, and depending on where any work might fall in that chronology it might be very different from another of his works. It really resonated with him. When I first met him he was painting representational paintings. So we had had a meeting here in New York about it and after Viye left he went back to Senegal and put everything down for almost three months. As a result of this, his way of working evolved and became abstract. It is fascinating that he turned to traditional African forms as a source of inspiration at this apparent moment of existential doubt, and yet came away making abstractionsâ€”that is, something that might be considered more universal in value, as opposed to a more vernacular approach. Yes, and it is almost minimalist in its presentation. But cleverly, the remnants of the human form are still there in it. In Red Escape II, for example the remnants of the human figure are found in the horizontal band of repeated pant-like shapes. You will find that form in every single work that he does. The more three-dimensional aspects of his artâ€”at times he has pouches that appear on the surface of his worksâ€”are reflective of his time of meditation in the antiquities museum, where he was surrounded by sculpture. The pouches are the remnants of the three dimensional aspects of that work. When we first met, you and I discussed the challenges in overcoming the ways in which African art has generally been marketed to and perceived by European and American collectors, which, especially in terms of African sculpture, has threatened to relegate it to the status of folk art or even curio. They also love the grainy texture and the faded colors of the work because that rings true with what one would expect from art coming out of Africa. In other

words, it strikes a chord that is seemingly widely felt, given our success in selling his work. Well, there is a real danger here that as the market for an African artist like Viye developsâ€”be it here or in Europeâ€”he might be encouraged to continue in a particular style and encouraged to create simply because he sells. No one sees it locally and no one collects it locally; the work is taken out of its cultural context. Why is it so important to you to try and preserve that connection to the local African context? And while they may be speaking to other parts of the world, for the first time in history we may have a significant number of our contemporary artists in Africa who have nothing to say to their own societies. Because of the mechanisms of the market? Right, exactly, but there are a few small remedial ways that we can combat this, and I am proposing these in a paper that I hope to be presenting in a few months at the triennial symposium of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association ACASA. We must redouble our efforts to work on the economic development of these countries so that its institutions and private collectors can afford to collect and keep more of this art within its countries of origin. The other remedial measure that I have dedicated myself to is the careful interpretation of the work, by which I mean such things as committing to bring artists to the States for their art openings. For example, Viye was here for his first opening and it was extraordinarily important to the people that attended. Luckily, because many of the artists I deal with are contemporary living artists, this is possible, so long as one is diligent enough to do it. What ought to be happening is that the art of someone like Viye ought to be in Dakarâ€”being seen, being collected, being talked about, being reviewed, and being socially interpreted there in Senegal. Its bold realist style and heroically idealized figuresâ€”supposedly used to convey a sense of African success and progressâ€”does so, somewhat ironically, through the idiom of Soviet style sculpture. Articulating Senegalese independence and celebrating an African renaissance through the vocabulary of Soviet aesthetics seems remarkable to me. As a gallery director, do you see this as a kind of burden or an opportunity when the work of an African artist exhibits stylistic affinitiesâ€”perceived or realâ€”with European or American modernist traditions? This type of stylistic affinity is problematic. In general, however, one of the greatest satisfactions I get out of my work is discovering affinities. I have a piece of Inuit art that people often think looks very much like a [Zimbabwean] Shona sculpture, and [that] the statistical probability that these different local artists are aware of what the other is doing is almost zero is very thrilling to me, because it says to me that there is in fact a universal consciousness at work here. I would argue that it is more important that the work is correctly interpreted and respected within its own culture, because almost all artists nowadays are aware of other things happening in the world, and are going to be influenced by it. It is problematic, however, when the influences only come from Europe and the West. In this case, it is my humble opinion that the art will be shaped by these external forces. This age of globalization and of a greater sharing of all thingsâ€”culture being only one of themâ€”only compounds and compels the reason for supporting these artists in their own culture. Otherwise what they produce will become so diluted in terms of its cultural context, and so seduced by what might bring greater financial success or notoriety, that it loses its significance. This raises some very interesting questions, one of which concerns the exhibition of contemporary African art. To me it seems that there might also be a danger in defining an African artist as such only by reaffirming some link to traditional methods or tribal forms and colors in their work, and a danger of such contemporary artists perhaps being burdened by such a tag. You really have to be careful to not stretch your interpretation of that setting to all others. The Met is by nature an extraordinarily rich, but also very conservative institution and the strength of the history of African art at the Met is in antiquities. It is very difficult for an institution to be nimble and contemporary and contemporaneous. So is there something gained in terms of the promotion and acceptance of African contemporary art by playing up, if you will, traditional associationsâ€”tribal colors and what have you? I was thinking only of the negative aspects of doing so, but is there a positive flipside to it? It is a very good question and it is almost impossible to unravel. I will say, however, that in most instances I have not been able to find much of a lineage from contemporary African art to traditional and historical African art. Her work is very contemporary, but the lost-wax process of creating bronze sculpture is years old in Africa, so there is a real lineage there. But this is rare. I think that they are doing their own thing and really starting over. Has the business of contemporary African art changed a lot since you started in â€”in terms of its marketing to the publicâ€”and are there things that you find encouraging

about the current position of contemporary African art in the international market now as opposed to when you first started? The most public marketing of contemporary African art over the years has been through auction houses. There have been a couple of very large collectors, Mr. Pigozzi chief among them. Pigozzi is a billionaire who has his own interpretation of what African contemporary art is and should be. He shows neither artists that are formally trained, nor artists that left Africa. Now there is a kind of purity to that, which I respect. There was a lot of press and attention for this sale and the difficulty is that because the standard has yet to be set, it can be influenced by a few people. Hubert Ponter is a very wealthy, Zimbabwean-born collector living on the west coast of the United States, who collects Zimbabwean art and has his own interpretation of that art. He and I agree on many of the artists worthy of collection, but not on the way of marketing them. I used to get an invitation to an opening where he would get a shipping container—a container! Try establishing a discriminating market using that approach! Another example is from when I was just beginning and poking around and trying to get a feel for what other people were doing in the field. I walked into Gumps department store in San Francisco—a high-end department store like Bloomingdale's—and I go into a department full of decorating accessories where I find these little, ephemeral pieces of Zimbabwean sculpture. I started turning them over and looking for a name on the bottom and asking people who worked there if they knew who had sculpted them. I think this does a disservice to the field. A couple of things have changed for the better though. One thing is that museums are buying more from me than before, so there is now a more educated audience collecting in the form of the museum curator. There was also a sea change that took place in academia where now it is nearly impossible to find someone who is getting a PhD in African art that is not studying the modern or contemporary period. When I started the gallery in , being an Africanist meant that you were an expert in African antiquities—focusing on some region or some tribal group and the artifacts that they produced. By mids that had totally changed. In closing, what are your thoughts on the contemporary African art market going forward? There needs to be a middle class and private and public collectors collecting contemporary art in Africa, otherwise there is no local reception and interpretation of the art being produced and the work becomes detached from the culture from which it originates. This is changing slowly and it is important that it continue. My aim now is really to work myself out of a job by having the art stay in the very culture that produced it.

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"I love rich and successful people," explains Parisian-born Jean Christophe Pigozzi, 27, who has spent the last decade focusing seven Leica cameras on the people he admires. Now he has published.