



Africa: Between Myth and Reality. Cinema Guild.

Reviewed by Lisa Gilman

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Africa: Between Myth and Reality The Paintings and Etchings of Betty Laduke

Betty Laduke is an artist from Oregon who has traveled over a ten-year period to countries throughout Africa, including Eritrea, Cameroon, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and the Ivory Coast. As she's traveled she's observed the lifestyles of rural people, paying special attention to women. In addition, she's met artists with whom she's shared ideas and techniques. Her travels have been inspirational, influencing her to integrate African themes into her etchings and paintings. Bruce Glenther introduces the video with a walk through a gallery exhibit of Laduke's paintings, during which he interprets the images and their symbolism. His soothing voice explains that many of Laduke's images embody the integration of spirituality, nature, music, women, and community in Africa. Her representation of women carrying wood on their heads, for example, elicits the magic connection between nature and humans in Africa. For Laduke, he says, "Africa opened a world in which those things [work, home, and spirit] are integrated, woven like the Bakuba cloth that clothes the people into a kaleidoscope of color." Out of the gallery, the video shifts to images of Africa, complete with drumming in the background. The artist talks, explains that Africa is diverse: no two countries are alike. Video footage and still-shots of rural African life dress the screen: fields, village markets, women pounding millet. She juxtaposes the experiences of Africans who live close to the soil, depend on the soil for their survival, with the lives of people living in the Bronx, suffocating surrounded by big buildings. She neglects to mention the existence of or show images of urban Africa. The viewer sees nothing of overflowing mini-buses, busy city

streets, crowded market-places, or even a building or a car. Laduke's inspirations include a sculpture of Oshun, whose image dances across the screen. With drums in the background, she tells about the Nigerian goddess and about African women. African women, she says carry the weight of survival with a great deal of joy. She romanticizes women's work, carrying wood and raising children, failing to mention the difficulties in many of their lives. The footage in Africa includes shots of women artists in markets and in their homes. Laduke explains that she once shared a picture of her work with artists at Cold Comfort Farm in Zimbabwe. The next time she visited, these artists showed her a tapestry they had made, inspired by her picture. The depiction of Laduke interacting with African artists was rich. I only wish there were more scenes such as this one! While Laduke's paintings are interesting, the video is not inspiring. The droning voiced-over narration that accompanies the images on the screen fails to do justice to the lively images in the artworks. The continual narration also gives little opportunity for the viewer to come to their own conclusions about either Laduke's paintings or the various images in Africa. While the title and presentation of the video imply that it is about Africa, I would not recommend that teachers use this video to teach students about Africa. The presentation is of a simple place where people live close to the soil, spirits, gods, and goddesses. Women are simple beings who accept their daily work, happy because of their spiritual connection to nature and goddesses. This portrayal resonates with popular stereotypes of Africa, showing little of the diversities and complexities of African life. The video

could, however, be used in art classes. Rather than seeing it as a video about African life, it could be presented as the story of one artist whose observations of people living in a context different from hers inspires her to develop her particular style. It could also be used to elicit a discussion among students about the differences between people's interpretations and presentations of the world they see versus the realities of that same world.

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