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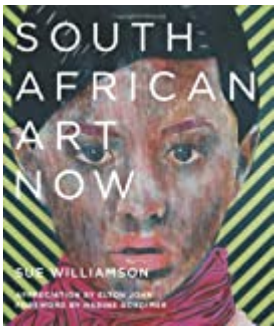

Sue Williamson. *South African Art Now.* New York: HarperCollins, 2009. Illustrations. 320 pp. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-06-134351-3.

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South African Panorama

South Africa is a country where art bubbles up from the sidewalks of the city and the dirt roads of the countryside. In a country with high levels of poverty and unemployment, many people employ themselves as informal traders, making items from wire, clay, cloth, or whatever material is close at hand. The resourcefulness and creativity of the untrained "artist" is everywhere in evidence, and not infrequently their products find their way into commercial galleries and private collections. At the other end of the continuum, art by trained artists in South Africa is equally vibrant, because of the country's relatively strong economy and arts infrastructure. Contemporary art from this formal sector for the most part responds to international trends, as opposed to the more localized traditions referenced in the artifacts found on the street. A new book offering a broad and inclusive survey of the work of South Africa's formal rather than informal producers has just been published in the United States by HarperCollins Publishers/Collins Design. Authored by Sue Williamson, one of the most respected artists in South Africa, and supported by numerous full-color reproductions, *South African Art Now* is a welcome addition to the literature on international contemporary art generally and to South African art specifically.

As the "Appreciation" by (Sir) Elton John bluntly admits–"Much as the rest of us might want to know about the art of South Africa, during the apartheid years and since then, most of us don't" (p. 13)–the book is directed primarily at a Western, English-speaking audience. When the cultural boycott of apartheid South Africa was lifted in 1990, the floodgates opened to Western curators and critics intensely interested in discovering the work that for decades had been cut off from a broader audience. Today, fifteen years after the establishment of democratic rule, the country can in a way be considered a microcosm of our globalized society, with its stark confrontation of first and third world economies; ongoing racial and ethnic tensions; and the continuous, destabilizing flux of both immigration and emigration, or "worlds in movement," as Achille Mbembe has phrased it.[1]

South Africa's art, like almost all non-Western contemporary art, has been presented and interpreted to the Western audience through temporary exhibitions and their accompanying catalogues. These catalogues have a fairly standard format: introductory essays, followed by reproductions of the artists' works that are usually accompanied by brief commentaries and/or biographical information. *South African Art Now* adopts that format, and because Williamson has assumed the daunting task of selecting which artists to include in this current survey, it would not be an exaggeration to describe the result as a curated book. As such, it resembles the catalogues for mega-exhibitions of African art, such as the two editions of Simon Njami's *Africa Remix* (2005, 2007); more focused catalogues, such as *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, edited by Sophie Perryer (2004); or recent overviews of South African art, such as *10 Years/100 Artists: Art in a Democratic South Africa*, also edited by Perryer (2004).[2]

Williamson's decisions were based largely on the artists' inclusion in recent gallery or special awards exhibitions, and logically enough, her essays in each section rely on those exhibitions to structure her portrait of the changing concerns in South African art generally. The result is a very up-to-date picture that balances younger, emerging talent with established names. The prevalence of the group exhibition as the means of summarizing the "new, democratic, post-apartheid South Africa," however, is not without problems. In his introduction to *South African Art Now*, Nigerian-born, U.S.-based critic and curator Okwui Enwezor argues that it is no surprise that "such group exhibitions ... tended to elide the clear differences inherent in the work of black and white artists.... Rarely were the disparities in modes of working, conceptual systems, and even educational training between black and white artists explored as part of the heritage of post-apartheid contemporary art. In fact, very seldom was the question ever asked about the precise designation of post-apartheid art, or what exactly unifies a one-time segregated culture into a singular, undifferentiated whole" (p. 17). My partial reply to his argument would be that trained artists, no matter what their background, are addressing an international art audience and market, which is why an appearance of unity is maintained, even if little uniformity exists in the conditions or contexts in which South African art is produced. His main point, however, stands: the unity is illusory.

Fortunately, Williamson's introductions to the thematic sections of *South African Art Now*, with the solid perspective she brings from her decades of arts activism, do begin to address the very real issue of the gulf between the artistic production of white and nonwhite artists. In the first two sections in particular–"The Stifling Years, A Time of Exile" and "Culture Turns Activist: The Spread of a New Resistance"–apartheid and post-apartheid art and history are integrated, so that the heritage on which many contemporary South African artists draw, and which conditions their outlook, is clearly explicated. As expatriate art historian RoseLee Goldberg observes in her essay on performance art, South African artists "are educated to describe what they do in terms of politics and history.... Because of their tumultuous political history, they understand the job of the artist as humanizing the present" (p. 105). This is the central premise of the book, and is further developed in Williamson's introductions to each of its twelve sections, or chapters.

However, the early distinctions Williamson initially draws tend to blur toward the middle of the book, thus understating the influential positions whites continue to hold in the South African art world. In addition, the emphasis on gallery and museum exhibitions both in the book's form and content is indicative of the powerful role that professional curators play as gatekeepers to the world of contemporary art, primarily as a result of their monetary muscle. Although Williamson acknowledges this situation in her introductory essay, "Art and Life in South Africa, 1968-2000," she avoids its negative consequences and instead contrasts the healthy market for contemporary art today with the virtually nonexistent one for art from the 1950s through the 1980s. What is lacking is a frank acknowledgement that the market has its own standards of "quality" based on what is likely to sell. Such an admission would help explain the pressures younger artists are under to conform to the market-based system that in fact dominates all of our lives.

The book's focus on individual artists reinforces this system, based as it is on identifying and marketing emerging talent. If Williamson's book had included the important activities of the many community arts centers and public art organizations in South Africa–that is, collective, nonprofit oriented art activities, including Artist Proof Studio in Johannesburg; Art for Humanity (AFH) in Durban; or the organization she cofounded, Public Eye, in Cape Town–a more complete picture of South African art today would have emerged. The intense creative engagement with the enormous problems faced by the country occurs mostly in these centers, which are frequently administered by artists who continue to make gallery work as well. The only community-based art discussed in the book is by Jane Solomon and the Bom-

banani Women's Group, whose "Positively-HIV" Body Maps project is one of the more successful efforts to use the arts to ameliorate the social devastation caused by the AIDS epidemic. However, it is only one, and surely others could have been included.[3] Of course, in the United States, one rarely finds discussions of community-based art or artists' collectives in "art books"; these are relegated to anthologies of "activist art," often published with few illustrations. Although it is hardly surprising that HarperCollins, owned by Rupert Murdoch, followed this established hierarchy, it does distort the South African picture, in my opinion.[4] To be fair, Williamson does devote a section to the "Venda" sculptors in Limpopo province, but the craft traditions are acknowledged only in terms of individual artists who reference those traditions to make "art." The important work of the embroidery or pottery collectives receives no mention.[5]

A further comment on the book's format: It is organized thematically for about the first two-thirds of the book, and because the themes proceed chronologically, they are clear and easy to follow. However, the last four of the twelve chapters are inexplicably categorized by medium. Because contemporary artists consistently work across media, it does not make much sense to me to categorize them as painters, sculptors, or photographers, and I was at a loss to find a rationale for it here. Most of the artists would have fit neatly into the established thematic categories, and indeed would have provided a more nuanced examination of them. For example, since "Punchline: A Grim Humor Holds Up a Mirror to Society" is a separate theme, why not place the younger performance artists whose work relies on satire and wit, including Ed Young, Dineo Seshee Bopape, James Webb, Ralph Borland, and Anthea Moys, under that rubric? And why, oh why, is South Africa's preeminent painter, Robert Hodgins, placed under "Humor" rather than under painting? Admittedly, organizing by themes can be so forced as to be meaningless, but most of the sections have solid logic behind them, hence my obsessive efforts to flesh them out further by mentally transferring the artists from the media categories into the thematic ones. Yet despite my mental gymnastics, I could never get an even balance of artists and categories, and I suspect that Williamson encountered similar frustrations when attempting to order the diverse, unruly, contested, and complex world of contemporary South African art.

Nonetheless, I cannot refrain from a final quibble about categories. Of the individual artists who are included in the section "Love and Gender in a Time of AIDS," the majority are gay. Some choose to address HIV/AIDS issues–Clive van den Berg most prominent among them–while others, such as gay rights activist Zanele Muholi, do not. As a result, the largely unrelated topics of HIV/AIDS and sexual orientation, both central to contemporary South African art, are inexplicably conflated. Because the contradiction between the liberal constitution, which explicitly guarantees full legal rights for gays, and the ongoing cultural prejudice against people with same-sex orientation is such an important topic in South African contemporary art, I would argue that either it should have been given its own section or placed under "Searching for Identity." The surprisingly muted response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the part of individual South African artists could then have been duly noted, and their reticence compensated for by including the impressive work of one or more of the collectives cited above, perhaps AFH's "Break the Silence" billboard project from 2000.

Finally, as noted above, one central theme that is not fully explored is that of "worlds in movement"–immigration and emigration. With respect to the former, issues of what constitutes South African identity have been sharpened by the influx of people from southern and central Africa, often driven by war or poverty, rendering the term "Rainbow Nation" problematic at best. This influx is counterbalanced by a steady outflow of people who have the means and opportunity to live elsewhere–including some of South Africa's most prominent artists. In this era of porous national borders and shifting populations, it is important to ask the question of how one might identify an artist as South African. The portraits on the covers of *South African Art Now*, for instance, are striking in this respect. The fashionable young woman on the front cover, whose ethnic and national origin remains quite deliberately indeterminate, is by Mustafa Maluka, who lives in Berlin (as does another well-known South African included in this book: Robin Rhode). On the back cover, the stunning portrait of fellow South African-born Moshekwa Langa is by Marlene Dumas; both Langa and Dumas live in Amsterdam. Neither of the artists who have been chosen to introduce South African art to the readers actually lives in the country, nor does their subject matter consistently address South African issues. This would not necessarily exclude them from this survey, but I would have preferred that the criteria for inclusion were made more explicit, if only because the broader topic is so important.

I must underscore that my minor criticisms of this book should not detract from its virtues. The essays are solid and concise, and Williamson's writing, which

is refreshingly free of jargon, is acutely sensitive to the content and context of the artists' works. In the end, my problems with the book's organization are minor in comparison to the enormous benefit this book provides in serving the cornucopia of South African art to a broad, general public. No single monograph could possibly cover the breadth and creativity of South African art today, but this pictorial survey does provide an invaluable overview of major artists and trends. It is just that– a solid introduction–and the reader would be encouraged to then turn to other books and journals to locate the scholarly creativity that is the counterpart to South Africa's vital artistic output, or to find a more hard hitting examination of the often contentious South African art world and the struggles its artists face in defining their place in a country riven with conflict.

Notes

[1]. Achille Mbembe, "Afropolitanism," in *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, ed. Simon Njami (Johannesburg: Jacana Media [Pty], Ltd., 2007) , 26.

[2]. For the record, the team assembled by Perryer was Emma Bedford, David Brodie, Thembinkosi Goniwe, Khwezi Gule, Sharlene Khan, David Koloane, Andrew Lamprecht, Moleleki Frank Ledimo, Virginia Mackenny, Sipho Mdanda, Tumelo Mosaka, Tracy Murinik, Colin Richards, Kathryn Smith, and Sue Williamson.

[3]. Williamson's "From the Inside" project (2000-2002) is one of the more important expressions of the voices of those silenced by the disease, and a successful example of collaboration between artist and subjects. Evidently, Williamson as critic/author felt obliged to sever her artist self from this book to avoid appearing self-serving. However, Enwezor does discuss her powerful portrait series of recent immigrants, "Better Lives" (2006), in his introduction.

[4]. See Bronwyn Law Viljoen, ed., *Art and Justice: The Art of the Constitutional Court of South Africa* (Johannesburg: David Krut Publishing, 2008). A more balanced view can be found in the art commissioned for the Constitutional Court of South Africa, where the work of rural "craft" collectives, urban community-based arts centers, and modern and contemporary South African artists coexist in democratic, nonhierarchical harmony. In this chronicle of purchasing and commissioning artwork for the new court building that would represent both the ideals and the reality of the new South Africa, the artist's charge of "humanizing the present" is far clearer.

[5]. See Jay Panther, ed., *Spier Contemporary 2007: Exhibition & Awards* (Cape Town: The Africa Centre, 2007). In this project of the Africa Centre, which was founded in 2005 because "Africans living on the continent have limited access to their own artistic heritage and to works created by contemporary African artists," the pithy introduction states that "a core tenet of the African Centre's practice is to break down the barriers that have historically existed between African art practices (including visual art, performance art, and craft, to name but a few) (pp. 2, 3). The excruciatingly democratic selection process for the center's biennial exhibition of emerging artists included curators, project managers, selectors, and judges! However, true to its mission, the exhibition, although corporate sponsored, was broadly inclusive of trained, untrained, and performance artists, and presented its diverse audiences with serious challenges to any unified or simplistic notion of "South African art."