

'Africa State of Mind' Will Stay with You

Jonathan Curiel

The new exhibit at the Museum of African Diaspora shows a contemporary Africa.



Kiluanji Kia Henda, The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N'zombo Before the Great Extinction Act I, 2017. Courtesy of the Museum of the African Diaspora

The average American knows embarrassingly little about Africa.

So many have called Africa a single “country” — most notably George W. Bush in 2001, when he was U.S. President (“Africa is a nation that suffers from incredible disease”) — it makes one wonder if anyone is dispensing knowledge about Africa that is smart and insightful.

The answer is yes; Africans and Europeans of African descent are doing a commendable job, and they’re doing it through visual art that has found its way to San Francisco’s Museum of the African Diaspora in the exhibit [“Africa State of Mind.”](#)

The exhibit accounts for Africa’s past and present, but “Africa State of Mind” is less a history lesson than a lesson in thinking that is forward-looking and frequently fantastical. In one MoAD gallery, we see Sammy Baloji’s photos of congested urban life in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where deteriorating architecture and littered roadways exist alongside new billboards and commercial signs that promise beauty, liberty, and vitality. In the same gallery: Michael MacGarry’s film, *Excuse Me While I Disappear*, where a young, poor worker visits a new, Chinese-built Angolan city for the middle and upper class. It’s a dramatization that almost seems like a documentary, but its ending resembles that of Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* — turning *Excuse Me While I Disappear* into a visually arresting allegory about class difference and Africa’s post-colonial potential.

Angola borders Congo. Both are former colonies of European countries that abused their power over millions of people and billions in resources, but that abuse continued with African strongmen like Mobutu Sese Seko, who renamed the Congo “Zaire” and then pillaged its coffers and repressed all opposition for 30 years until rebel leaders forced him out. The Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda had Mobutu in mind for his acerbic photo series called “The Last Journey of the Dictator Mussunda N’zombo Before the Great Extinction (in 5 acts)”, which has a Mobutu-like figure posing in fashionable wear (Mobutu was famous for his leopard hats) on made-up savannas with stuffed African animals. The backdrop is kitschy — similar to what Western museums dream up when they want to portray Westerners’ idea of a safari-like vista. Kia Henda’s dictator preens, uses binoculars, interacts with the taxidermied creatures, and then — in the final act — lies face down in the savanna, apparently dead. There’s no blood. No trauma. Just a dead dictator and a stuffed antelope in a scene with dark humor when you know Kia Henda is lampooning and celebrating the extinction of African despots.

Africa is comprised of 54 countries, but “Africa State of Mind” resists seeing the continent on those terms — instead dividing the exhibit into three main themes: “Inner Landscapes,” where photographers present subjective ideas of African identity; “Zones of Freedom,” where photographers explore issues of gender, sexuality, and identity; and “Hybrid Cities,” where urban centers are the focus. “Zones of Freedom” features Eric Gyamfi’s excellent black-and-white photography series of Ghana’s queer community, “Just Like Us”, and Sabelo Mlangeni’s equally memorable photography series of South Africa’s rural gay community, “Country Girls.”

Ethiopian photographers contribute two highlights of “Hybrid Cities”: Michael Tsegaye’s portraits of changing Addis Ababa, “Future Memories,” where older, village-like neighborhoods are giving way to tall, modern buildings; and Girma Berta’s “Moving Shadows” series that shows the daily lives of Addis Ababa’s streets — but repositions single people or couples onto single-color backgrounds, which turns these Ethiopians, their belongings, and their shadows into almost literary figures that demand to be noticed. By depopulating scenes from Ethiopia’s teeming capital of some 3 million people and repopulating them into these scenic spaces, “Moving Shadows” manages to take people from the shadows of anonymity even as it bathes them in their own shadows.

Curated by acclaimed British writer and arts director Ekow Eshun, “Africa State of Mind” tries to counter-balance how “ideas of Africanness have been presented in photography,” Eshun said at the exhibit’s media preview. “It deals with ways of encountering Africa in non-literal terms,” added Eshun, author of the 2005 memoir, *Black Gold of the Sun: Searching for Home in England and Africa*, which includes poignant details of visiting his parents’ native Ghana. “Its purpose is to think about and rethink and reimagine possibilities of how to articulate what Africa looks like — how it feels to live in Africa, how it feels to encounter Africa, how we might imagine Africa in the contemporary world.”

Good exhibits stay with you long after you leave, and “Africa State of Mind,” which opened on Sept. 4, has done that for me again and again — including the night of Sept. 12, when 10 Democratic presidential candidates debated on a Houston stage. During the nationally televised event, New Jersey Senator Cory Booker, who traces his family ancestry to Sierra Leone and has visited many African countries, cited what he called an African proverb: “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.”

Booker’s comment was in vivid contrast to one made in early 2018 by Donald Trump, who — in response to the idea of aiding immigrants from African countries, Haiti, and El Salvador — said this: “Why are we having all these people from shit-hole countries come here?”

Trump has yet to visit Africa as president, and has reportedly never been there. For those who’ve not set foot on the continent — and never seen its diversity of cultures, religions, and economies firsthand, and never spoken to someone on a continent of 1 billion people — Africa will remain a “state of mind” that is fragile and unformed at best. “Africa State of Mind” opened with several other MoAD exhibits, including DeShawn Dumas’ series of socially searing abstract paintings that address American inequities. It’s easy to connect the proverbial dots between Dumas’ painting of a bulletted scene with “Africa State of Mind” and U.S. presidential politics. Several candidates at the September debate addressed the idea of reparations for the centuries of American slavery. America’s past and Africa’s past were there on that Houston stage.

The past is also in “Africa State of Mind,” but like the older Addis Ababa neighborhoods in Michael Tsegaye’s photos, and Kia Henda’s photo of an obsolete dictator, that past is disappearing and giving way to something else. Not the future exactly. But another state: A state of transition that is there for anyone to see in MoAD’s galleries.

“Africa State of Mind”

Through Nov. 15 at the Museum of the African Diaspora, 685 Mission, \$5-\$10, 415-358-7200, moadsf.org