

NEW ORDER

THE LAST DECADE HAS SEEN A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE WORLD OF AFRICAN CONTEMPORARY ART. A NEW GENERATION OF INNOVATIVE, POLITICALLY AND ETHICALLY AWARE ARTISTS IS – FINALLY – GETTING RECOGNITION FOR ITS WORK

WORDS **CHIKA OKEKE-AGULU**

In the not too distant past, African contemporary art was underexposed and undervalued. Nigeria's Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya and Sokari Douglas bucked the trend, as did Mali's Abdoulaye Konate and Sudan's Ibrahim El Salahi, but largely speaking, artists from the continent weren't taken as seriously by the global art establishment as their European and American counterparts.

The turn of the millennium heralded a long-overdue change. Specialist US title ARTnews declared art from the continent "the newest avant-garde". And a slew of new galleries and agents, such as Michael Stevenson in South Africa and Arthouse Contemporary in Nigeria, opened, giving African artists more kudos, a wider critical audience, greater global leverage and higher price points.

At the same time, artists such as Nigeria's Yinka Shonibare, Kenya's Wangechi Mutu, Ghana's El Anatsui and South Africa's William Kentridge, Kendell Geers and Zwelethu Mthethwa received critical acclaim with high-profile exhibitions, auctions and commissions, not only from Africa but the rest of the world too.

As the decade draws to a close, a new generation of artists looks set to achieve even greater feats. Working in a variety of media reflecting an abundance of multi-layered identities, narratives and opinions, these young talents are the art stars of tomorrow.



DAWIT L PETROS ERITREA

A true Afropolitan, Dawit L Petros and his family left his native Eritrea when he was two years old and travelled through four countries before settling in Canada seven years later. This early displacement motivates much of Petros' work as a conceptual artist. In his photographs, video works and installations, he places unrelated objects (or photos of objects) in close proximity to raise difficult questions about place, location and the cohabitation of diverse cultures and ideas in contemporary societies.

In one of Petros' better-known works, *Proposition 1: Mountain* (2007), a photograph shows a close-up view of a black hand holding a pile of ice (evoking a snow-capped mountain) set against a white background that turns out to be the arid salt flats of California.

In another, *Proposition 1: Sign* (2007), he relocates a blank signpost similar to the one at the summit of Kenya's Mount Kilimanjaro to a featureless arctic landscape. Both make the viewer aware of how displacement can



open up possibilities of misrecognition, alienation and fantasy.

Not all of Petros' work is so abstract. *Reinscriptions* (2004) includes photographs of Eritreans resident in Canada and the US. The carefully composed images contrast the typically North American homes – white picket fences, vegetable patches – with the Eritreans' physical identity and show the changing face of the suburban middle classes. The artist says he sets out to "highlight the problems of representing historical and cultural positions from a position that is itself under reassessment".

An MFA graduate of the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Petros' first solo exhibition at the Alexander Gray Associates in New York received favourable reviews. In addition to participating in *Flow*, the 2008 exhibition of contemporary African artists at the Studio Museum in Harlem, he was offered its prestigious artist-in-residence programme that runs from now until October. ◀



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