

G L O B A L V I S I O N

NEW ART FROM THE 90's

7 MAY - 28 JUNE

NIKOS CHARALAMBIDIS - KCHO - CHRIS OFILI -

YINKA SHONIBARE - JOCELYN TAYLOR - KARA WALKER

Global Vision was conceived as a platform for the presentation and discussion of developments in contemporary art of the 90's, a time during which artistic experience has become increasingly multi-faceted and complex, and the art world has opened up to include more countries and cultures. Today, more than ever, artistic practice is characterised by diversity, pluralism, and the breakdown of strictly proscribed hierarchies. The selection of works in the exhibition - as the title suggests-is kaleidoscopic, reflecting the variety of languages and strategies artists freely employ today. As a consequence, the artists in *Global Vision* do not form a coherent group, and do not espouse any common aesthetic or ideological theorem. Many of them are of non-Western or mixed origin and bring fresh perspectives into contemporary artistic discourse.

At the same time most of them also belong to a particular trans-national generation, schooled in cultures that are hybrid, in which the concept of identity is constantly shifting. One of the challenges they face is that of trying to assess the meaning of being poised between different worlds and experiences, of defining themselves in relation to their multi-faceted cultural origins. Thus, the main thrust of the exhibition is characterised by a contradictory juxtaposition of issues and problematics. A multitude of parallel concepts and layers of narration can be traced through most of the

work; internationalism vs localism, tradition vs modernity, urbanism vs regionalism, local tradition vs popular culture, fact vs fiction, reality vs the world of the imagination - all these play off against one another but also intertwine and intersect in a paradoxical combination of ideas, references, and quotations.

What becomes apparent, then, is how each artist has managed to create his or her own unique style, from a synthesis of disparate sources, and the weaving of syncretic qualities of their own culture into contemporary urban concerns. The question that arises is common to all: how can one define one's space beyond geographical roots, yet maintain one's identity without lapsing into folklore or exotic overstatement confront the crumbling concept of the local and retain one's sense of "authenticity"; recall memory and the past without lapsing into nostalgia.

One thing all artists share in common is a penchant for the narration of personal identity and the assertion of individuality, whether ethnic, racial, or sexual. In view of this the importance attached to history, heritage, and memory is understandable; they function as points of departure for the construction of contemporary personae, and enable artists to define their territory.

Accordingly, issues of race and ethnicity permeate much of the work; yet the exhibition does not purport to make any heavy-handed statements about post-colonialism, and national identity, issues which are far too complex to be dealt with in an exhibition of works drawn from the collection of a private individual, let alone in an introductory text which is prone to reductivist definitions or sweeping generalisations.

Global Vision also marks a shift in orientation for the Collection, and contemporary art, in general. So, while Western art historical discourse during the previous decade (and especially in the US) was highly involved in the examination of commodity culture

and the deconstruction of the value systems that sustain it, recent art appears less concerned with the ethics of consumerism and the economics of the art market, while at the same time, challenging Western cultural hegemony. Thus, the slick surfaces, cool formalism, and sharply polished corporate aesthetics of the 80's have given way to work that is more lo-tech, rough-hewn, or meticulously handcrafted. Artists seem less interested in the politics of display and consumption; instead, their work belies a more meditative, introspective approach, with humanist undertones, and signals a return to narrative strategies and procedures. Much of the work combines a spirit of experimentation with dramatic staging and conceptual rigour. Strong iconographic references, traditional and contemporary, and often of a figurative nature, are fused to create new vocabularies. In the end, the language employed is altogether more introspective, intimate, even poetic, yet coupled with a heightened sense of social awareness, and political engagement which does not, however, degenerate into ideological dogmatism or empathy. As a result most works are open-ended, and open remain unresolved.

The Cuban artist **Kcho** works with found materials to deal with dramatic everyday realities that are the result of the island's prolonged isolation. His *Columna Infinita II*, a tower made of wood in shapes that resemble boats, canoes, oars, and inner tubes, examines an issue that is at once local and international: illegal emigration. The work is both a direct reference to Brancusi's *Endless Column*, and a poignant allusion to the plight of the Cuban boat people who resort to any form of jerry-built vessel in their attempt to flee the country. Thus the boat becomes a powerful metaphor for freedom, but also of loss and mourning, as large numbers have perished in their attempts to escape. The rough-hewn, readily-made appearance of the tower emphasises the non-

functionality of these hazardous vessels. Human drama, utopian aspirations and shattered dreams reside in the work's wooden trceries and eerie skeletal framework.

Kara Walker has become known for her dramatic black paper cut-out silhouettes. The African-American artist comes from the Southern part of the United States, a territory steeped with racial tension and conflict. In her work, she recreates a personal, highly charged version of the past through a combination of fantasy and fictional narrative. Her black silhouettes pasted onto white walls, centre around plantation iconography. Though they resemble cameos or illustrations found in nineteenth century adventure novels and historical romances, they speak, ultimately, of colour, race and heritage. In both these and her vividly graphic gouaches, we witness the unfolding of aberrant human behaviour which takes race relations to their extremes. The plantation becomes a sinister stage set for the re-enactment of revenge fantasies, violent behaviour, and grotesque, unimaginable deeds, thus unleashing the repressed aspect of historic slave narratives. A sadistic consciousness informs all action taking place; a vocabulary rooted in scatology, rape, sodomy, violence, brutality and sexual domination is used to subvert racial stereotypes of the subservient slave and evil master, and serves to illustrate a very specific form of social dysfunction. Yet Walker does not appear to take sides amidst the chaos and degradation: in her world there are no winners or losers, no distinctions between good or evil, normal or abnormal. Ambiguity permeates everything and the tragic co-exists with the comic in a world in which no one fares admirably.

Jocelyn Taylor's performance and video work, has prompted debates around representations and taboos surrounding black female sexuality. The artist uses her own body as a political tool to counteract derogatory stereotypes of the black female (more often

than not depicted as either exotic, fetishised objects of desire or sexless matriarchs). Her work is an ongoing thesis against racial and sexual discrimination. *Alien At Rest*, a 3-screen video installation depicts the artist striding down the streets of New York in the nude. This dynamically charged image is juxtaposed with images of Taylor submerged underwater in a state of suspension, where it appears that all bodily functions have come to a standstill. The work is a highly confrontational piece in which the black female body becomes a symbol of empowerment, and exhibitionism becomes a statement about personal determination, self affirmation, the shedding of taboos, as well as a declaration of sexual and racial identity. The artist's triumphant, unashamed display of the unadorned black body is a celebration of difference and "otherness", as well as an emancipatory act which invades the viewers space, challenging one's sense of propriety.

Yinka Shonibare's work examines the consequences of cultural duality. Shonibare was born in Britain of Nigerian parents, and his work deals with the issue of identity, the legacy of inherited colonial heritage, and the resulting problems of representation. His work *Dressing Down* – an elegant Victorian dress fashioned in African wax printed fabrics - exploits the connotations inherent in African textiles, and subsequently deconstructs the costume as a distinctive cultural signifier and emblem of unequivocal identity. It transpires that the fabric's iconic status as a confirmation of national identity or indicator of Afro-centric allegiance is misleading; it's "pedigree" is not as pure as one would be led to believe; the wax prints so typical of African textiles, in fact, originated not in Africa, but in Indonesia; they were then copied and manufactured by the Dutch, followed by the British, who re-designed, then exported the materials to West Africa. As a result of this ambiguous import-export history Shonibare exposes the dodgy ideology of

“authenticity” and “distinctiveness”. *Dressing Down*, is thus a hybrid construct, a visual paradox born of cross-cultural fertilisation, firmly grounded in post-modern and post-colonial discourse, where given signifiers begin to lose their given meaning in the circuits of cultural transformation. By re-contextualising received stereotypes from his background, Shonibare calls into question notions of “purity” and “uniqueness” and asks how it is possible to define an issue as complex, ambiguous, and multi-faceted as “national identity”.

In **Nikos Charalambidis'** work the costume - in this case the national Greek *foustanella* - is exploited, similarly, as an emblem of ethnicity, an anachronistic symbol of nationalistic fervour, and a platform from which a multitude of questions relating to the origins and definition of contemporary Hellenic identity are raised. A Greek-Cypriot, Charalambidis belongs to a generation of artists born in the 1960's who have grown up amidst the benefits of the post-war economic and building boom, and have witnessed the rapid transition of Greece and Cyprus from rural, agricultural societies, into Euro-centric, westernised markets of conspicuous consumption, that consequently suffer from a wide range of social and cultural contradictions. In his work, the heavy burden of tradition: classical heritage, and romantic folklore (which stems back to the War of Independence), co-exist with imported consumerist commodities and lifestyles. The artist examines the uneasy transition from traditional ways of life as dictated by local custom, to contemporary modes of existence as defined by urban experience, the infiltration of new technologies, and the obsession with material goods and technological progress. This cultural confusion, and the archetypal conflict between tradition and modernity, is eloquently illustrated in *Masqueraded Girl Cleaning without Brillo*, s chaotic concoction of disparate visual and cultural

sources. Here, references to history, politics, religion, folklore, art history, and popular culture, are all mixed up in a sarcastic, heterogeneous, veritable post-modern tableaux, a mosaic of confusing fragments and cultural signs that reside in a petit-bourgeois domestic interior complete with the latest domestic appliances. At the same time, the artist is poking fun at stereotypical, "Orientalist" depictions of "Greekness", as they manifest themselves in nineteenth century European art and literature. Charalambidis' working method is as disorienting as his sources; all his work originates in traditional methods of production such as painting or engraving, and is then subjected to digital manipulation and reproduction, so that in the end it becomes difficult to trace the original means. The artist effectively operates a kind of social and cultural analyst, a contemporary ethnographer, unashamedly appropriating motley symbols and references, in an attempt to make sense of the disparate strands that constitute neo-Hellenic collective consciousness.

Having been born in the UK of Nigerian parents, **Chris Ofili's** work is similarly layered with a multitude of cultural references and has assimilated different influences. His paintings thus resist categorisation, hovering as they do between abstraction and figuration, Western and African iconographic references, urban culture and folklore. Using a variety of materials such as resin-coated elephant dung, glitter, paint, and magazine cut-outs, Ofili builds up vivid, richly patterned, ornamental surfaces which challenge the norms of good taste and re-assess painterly aesthetic criteria. The resulting kaleidoscopic pictorial landscape, possesses all the sumptuousness of the meticulously hand-crafted. Here, references to ancient Maputo dot cave paintings blend with pornographic clippings or collages of male icons culled from black popular culture. *Pimp*, for example, plays upon stereotypes of the

black male - as the title suggests. The viewer is confronted by a giant penis, the symbol of black male sexuality, which is adorned with a collage of black personalities such as James Brown, while its companion, *Rodin: The Thinker* has been humorously transformed into a voluptuous black female sporting a garter belt and kinky underwear. Eclecticism is a key word here; Ofili's paintings are neither "traditional" nor "modern", rather they boldly articulate their idiosyncratic, hybrid nature. In these vibrant, lively surfaces, the artist has managed to devise a method akin to the multiple layering found in hip-hop music and jazz improvisation, creating his own unique blend of ethnic psychedelic, and urban exotica.

Globalisation, ever-improving means of communication, and the rapid assessment and exchange of information have all broken down the traditional separation between "center" and "periphery", first and third worlds, making it increasingly difficult to have one view of contemporary experience. Post-colonialism on the other hand has allowed for the breaking dawn of racial stereotypes and has prompted a major revision of our perception of the "other". Ultimately, *Global Vision*, is about crossing borders, bridging territorial and cultural barriers, public and private experience, and acknowledging the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in trans-national cultural discourse, and definitions of "ethnicity", "nationhood", and "identity". It is about how personal mythologies interlock with larger issues of internationalism and global trans-nationalism, how introspective manifestations of a private cosmology resonate with a more public reality.

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