Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise

SCULPTURE CENTER, NEW YORK

Claire Bishop

It's a cold January afternoon at Sculpture Center in Queens, New York, and a lineup of top-notch intellectuals are arranged before a small audience. Their task is to make sense of an exhibition of work by the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Cercle), an organization bringing together artists, activists, and intellectuals to address the issues of colonialism and its legacies in the Congo. The audience is comprised of art historians, curators, and activists, all of whom are united in their desire to understand the complex history of the Congo and its impact on contemporary art.

The exhibition features works by a range of artists, including sculptures, paintings, and installations, all of which draw on the rich history of the Congo. The artists use a variety of media, from traditional mud and wood to more contemporary materials like digital prints and video. The works are accompanied by detailed notes and essays, discussing the historical context and the message behind each piece.

The discussion is led by Claire Bishop, an art historian and curator, who introduces the audience to the works and the artists. She outlines the history of the Cercle, starting from its founding in the 1970s, and explains how the organization has evolved over the years to become a major player in the contemporary art world.

The audience is engaged, asking questions and offering their own insights and reflections on the works and the context in which they were created. The discussion is lively and thought-provoking, with a sense of purpose and determination to understand and address the complex issues at hand.

The exhibition and the discussion are part of a larger movement, one that seeks to bring the history of colonialism and its legacies into the public consciousness. The Cercle, with its commitment to education and activism, is at the forefront of this movement, and its work is a testament to the power of art to inspire change and bring about understanding.
The track record of similar projects is somewhat mixed. FIA invites comparison to other long-term art initiatives that have merged the international art world with rural non-Western locations, such as The Land, an experimental farm outside Chiang Mai funded in 1998 by Thai artists Rikee Tawasuwit and Kamin Lenchaisawarors. In 1997, a biennale system in Tanzania established and ran by the Danish collective Superflex. The biennale project became a sustainable local energy source, but when I visited the Land in 2006, it was somewhat disparate. On an agricultural level it was a failure, while in its quirky architectural pavilions (by Philippe Pareau and other members of the relational-aesthetics set, who also captured the site in various videos) were falling into disarray. The more thought-provoking analog for FIA, however, might be found in the United States, in the practice of Theater Gates, who sells assemblages, paintings, and ceramics and uses the money to acquire and renovate buildings on Chicago’s South Side (which in turn provide more material for his assemblages). Both Marmens and Gates have a slippery relationship to gentrification, but Gates seems work with an immediately recognizable aesthetic that permeates all aspects of his project, lending a visual and conceptual consistency to its various dispersed iterations.

At the moment, by contrast, Marmens’s Janaa-focused project suffers from an aesthetic illegibility. The white cube exists in jarring montage with the plantation (whose inventory thus far is 6,554 cacao plants, 801 oil palms, and 844 fruit trees). This disjunction is powerful, but the chocolate sculptures are another issue. Their production performs global economic networks, yet their appearance is primarily figurative, and does not always serve the cross-generational stories about poverty, exploitation, endurance, and resistance they attempt to convey (one, by Dodok Tamaiala, is titled Hear My Grandfather Survived, 2015). How exactly does their iconography relate to aesthetic production locally and in the Congo more broadly, past and present, and to Marmens’s cosmopolitan verbal critique of the art world? What does seem clear is that their meaning as stand-alone sculptures is secondary to their role within networks of economic and cultural capital—a situation exacerbated by their display at SullivanCronk, where they were marooned in a cavernous gallery, with three works inexplicably presented in a triple-exposure shot.

The Congo is, of course, still haunted by its colonial legacy. This history, including the almost unimaginable atrocities that transpired during Belgian rule, weighs heavily on Marmens. “I need to do this, not in spite of being a white man, but because I am a white man, because I am fed by the profit of an imperialist world,” he commented in a recent interview. It takes skill for a white European to navigate this history in meaningful terms, Marmens attempts to do so by harnessing figurative sculpture to a network critique of art-world economics, but the project can’t deliver the punch it seeks to pack, because the artist is fundamentally uninterested in objects. At best, his fusion of institutional critique, social practice, alternative economies, and self-identification is a disturbing and challenging proposition. But without aesthetic mediation, the two models of art that Marmens’s project activates—FIA’s institutional critique, which prevails on the contemporary-art circuit, and CATPC’s production of objects—become illegible and confusing when displaced into each other’s context. If this tension were manifest on an aesthetic level, and if forms were used to convey something about the diachronic of representation and intervention, Marmens’s mission might be far more viscerally transformative, even inspiring—rather than merely nagging our conscience. □

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