

ARTFORUM

March 2004

SAINT LOUIS

"A FICTION OF AUTHENTICITY"

CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
ST. LOUIS

This exhibition of newly commissioned artwork by eleven African artists born between 1956 and 1976 and working in Europe or the United States inaugurates this institution's new building and, presumably, higher profile. The curators—Shannon Fitzgerald of the Contemporary and Tumelo Mosaka of New York's Brooklyn Museum—"seek to analyze constructions of perceptions (fictions) about what constitutes an authentic Africa . . . and to what extent one's *Africanness* is expressed, understood, exploited, and relevant in contemporary global culture."

Siemon Allen (born in South Africa, lives in Washington, DC) focuses in on the view from elsewhere. He's assembled two years of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, mounted it on the wall, and covered it with tracing paper, except for the rare but predictable (AIDS, Mandela) articles on South Africa. Other artists grapple with their identity as Africans abroad: Fatma Charfi's *Suisse du Sud, Expo 03, 2003*, is made up of innumerable *abérics* (the word means "humans" in Arabic), tiny figures twisted from black, white, and red tissue and installed in small or large jumbles. Though they're stand-ins for her multiple identity as an Arab from North Africa living in Switzerland, these simple creatures also suggest the fragility of individuals of all kinds. And London-based Zineb Sedira, Paris-born of Algerian parents, presents video and photographs of her Arabic-speaking mother, Arabic- and French-speaking father, and English-speaking daughter that provide a moving window on Algerian colonial history as lived out within a single family.



Zineb Sedira, *Mother, Daughter, and I*, 2003, color photograph, 39 x 39". From "A Fiction of Authenticity."

Other artists cast an ambivalent eye on the modern(ist) century. Odili Donald Odita (born in Nigeria, lives in Florida) contributed three large abstract acrylics along with small drawings of street musicians and boys studying the Koran, among other everyday subjects. His abstractions riff on the classics of the genre, but their palette of greens, oranges, and violets and even a certain compositional sensibility seem traceable to his childhood in Nigeria. The giant black-and-white paintings of Owusu-Ankomah (born in Ghana, lives in Germany) juxtapose symbols from Ghanaian funerary cloth with Western ideograms such as the sign for "radioactive" or corporate logos, creating in the process a species of abstract history painting. And Mary Evans (born in Nigeria, lives in London) created a type of paper-cutout rosette window for the gallery walls that is furthermore meant to be viewed through a kaleidoscope. Stylized images—razors, bright red hearts, "hangman" gallows, and slave-ship diagrams—meet, lock, and unlock as the viewer peers through and manipulates the device.

The question that may remain is this: To what extent is the common artistic language of these young artists—Conceptualism-derived, unrestricted by medium, with a relatively easy-to-access identity-based political content—itsself a fiction, or at least an almost too-convenient vehicle? But, murmurings aside, this exhibition's ambition, clarity, and openly progressive politics cannot be dismissed.

—David Carrier