

Shifting Views: People and Politics in Contemporary African Art
curated by Shannen Hill with Kevin Tervala
Baltimore Museum of Art
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reviewed by Deborah Stokes

Shifting Views: People & Politics in Contemporary African Art is the third in a series of thematic exhibitions of African art installed in the Baltimore Museum of Art's (BMA) new Focus Gallery. The gallery debuted with *Diverging Streams: Eastern Nigerian Art* (April 26, 2015–April 17, 2016) followed by *Design for Mobile Living: Art from Eastern Africa* (June 1–November 27, 2016). Located adjacent to the recently (April 2015) reopened renovated and expanded galleries for African art, its 680 square feet fosters an intimate space for engagement through close looking, finding connections, critical thinking, and quiet reflection (Fig. 1).

Shifting Views, curated by Shannon Hill, Associate Curator for African Arts, with Kevin Tervala, former Curatorial Fellow in the Arts of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Pacific Islands, features twenty-four works on paper by seven artists from the museum's growing collection of contemporary art: David Goldblatt, Gavin Jantjes, William Kentridge, Julie Mehretu, Senam Okudzeto, Robin Rhode, and Diane Victor. Installed against muted gray walls, they illustrate a mastery of techniques: drawing, photography, printmaking, and a novel manipulation of captured carbon soot deposits. Viewers are invited to rethink profound themes of dislocation, racism, and loss, while locating connections to our own life and times—political, personal, and social, past and present histories.

The comfortable gallery size invites varying routes. My eye and aesthetic preferences led me the first time around. A second, longer look got me thinking about the historical/social time frames in which these seven artists were working. The earliest work is by acclaimed documentary photographer David Goldblatt. *Margaret Mcingana, who later became famous as the singer Margaret*



Singana, Zola, Soweto, October 1970 is a large format (40.6 cm x 50.8) portrait (Fig. 2). In this photograph the room's looming interior wall is as much a part of the subject as Ms. Mcingana reclining in the middleground of the composition. Notably, it is the first photograph that Goldblatt took in the Soweto township, and he remarks that

houses [were] designed specifically to discourage people from putting down roots. They wanted people who lived here to be labourers in the so-called white economy and to go back home to their tribal homelands. So that wall, that hellish wall, was a symbol to me of the claustrophobic tightness of that place (Goldblatt 2014).

About this same time (1974–75), artist/activist Gavin Jantjes was at work on his critical commentary *A South African Colouring Book*. Two of the eleven composite prints from the full portfolio Edition #4/20 are displayed here: *True Colors of the State* (n.d.) and *Color this Labor Dirt Cheap* (n.d.). The artist collected and overlaid selected photographs, newsprint, drawings, and texts representative of appalling apartheid injustices and ensuing explosive conflicts. In *True Colors of the State* Jantjes appropriates photographer Laurie Bloomfield's shot depicting resistance by black South Africans to racial rezoning policies near Durban. Presented as a child's coloring book page, the title of the suite at first relays a fond memory of a childhood activity of coloring printed line drawings—but the artist rapidly shifts the mood and meaning to the adult world by applying acerbic titles of instruction echoing the structural oppression and racial discrimination lived by blacks and coloreds in South Africa under the Afrikaner Nationalist Party rule. The print includes a color bar referring to racial classifications in South Africa at the

1 Installation view of the Focus Gallery, *Shifting Views: People & Politics in Contemporary African Art*, Baltimore Museum of Art

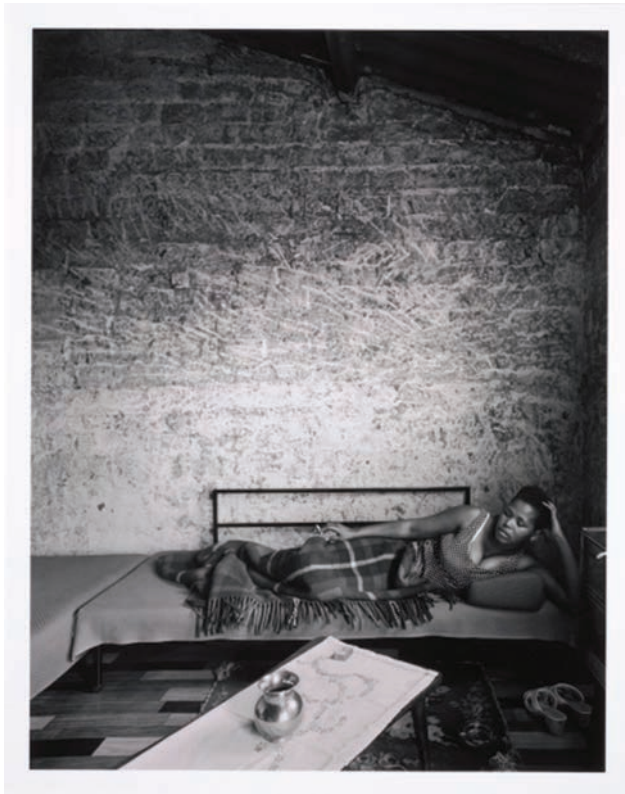
All photos courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Art

time. Jantjes has explained:

The racial label put on a non-white child at birth is not only a badge of a race, it is a permanent brand of inferiority, the brand of class distinction. Throughout his life his race label will warn all concerned which doors are open to him, and which are closed (Jantjes 1974–75).

Jantjes's work was banned in South Africa and the artist went into exile in 1982.

As a stinging political satire, William Kentridge's *Industry and Idleness* print series of 1986–87 was initiated one year after a 1985 state-of-emergency law, enacted in response to mounting violent internal opposition to and enforcement of apartheid laws. Kentridge looks to William Hogarth's 1747 series *Industry and Idleness*, a suite of twelve engravings contrasting the success in life of an industrious apprentice who is diligent and hardworking with the disastrous downfall of an idle one. Kentridge's series shifts the narrative to Johannesburg in the mid-1980s to express a demoralizing contrast between an industrious black man's life under apartheid to that of a white man who is wealthy and successful despite his offensive, lazy demeanor.



2 David Goldblatt
Margaret Mcingana, who later became Famous as the singer Margaret Singana, Zola, Soweto, October 1970 (1970, printed 2014)
 Gift of Joanne Gold and Andrew Stern
 Photo: © David Goldblatt

3 Senam Okudzeto
 Detail from the series *All Facts Have Been Changed to Protect the Ignorant* (2000–2001)
 Nathan L. and Suzanne F. Cohen Contemporary Art Endowment

Moving into the twenty-first century, Senam Okudzeto's *All Facts Have Been Changed to Protect the Ignorant* (2000) is composed of floating figural and circular gridded forms (Fig. 3). The four diminutive figures in a variety of shifting and plummeting poses are painted in acrylic over graphite onto thin, fragile, silver-wash rice paper. The curators equate the small paper pieces to pages torn from a slave ship's ledger. The unsteady figures, however, are floating through a large open space—contrary to the traumatic and dehumanizing method by which Africans were transported into slavery to Europe and the Americas. The figures evoke a sense of insecurity and dislocation; the silhouetted bodies are tethered and grasping at wavering, artist-drawn “lifelines,” suggesting precarious and uncertain

connections. The title reads as a parody of the tag line from the mid-twentieth century American crime show *Dragnet*: “Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.” However, perhaps these figures are in an unending mode of resistance and movement—and it is the viewer who has become complicit and “ignorant.”

Landscape Allegories (2003–2004) by Julie Mehretu bring together six exquisite abstract vistas (Fig. 4). Mehretu has chosen aquatint and drypoint engraving techniques to express movement through dramatically shifting sites and terrain. Through her use of meticulously drafted drypoint lines in short, sharply detached strokes, Mehretu's engraved burr holds a dense film of ink that prints as a rich, velvety black. She uses layer upon layer of tonal values and subtle color to evoke a visual momentum across the surface of the print. Her gestural action evokes a sensation of sweeping through summits, peaks, and upheavals of real and imagined movements, splintering and igniting passage through our shared landscapes.

Robin Rhode's series of four photogravure prints titled *Pan's Opticon Studies* (2009) creates a disquieting presence in this small



space. It is difficult to turn away from these foreboding and paranoia-inducing images. In *No. 2* Rhode places an anonymous black male smartly dressed in hat and scarf but with the jarring insertion of metal calipers used to measure the external size of an object (Fig. 5). In this case, the calipers are not hand-held, but rather somehow fixed to the face and/or eyes of the subject standing before a blank impenetrable and reflective surface. As a backdrop, Rhode uses an architectural plan drafted in late eighteenth century England for the circular prison called a panopticon. All jailed inmates could be efficiently observed by only one guard in a central interior station. In the nineteenth century, scientists and physical anthropologists practiced now-discredited “craniometry,” measuring cranial features of various racial groups with calipers in order to assign people to various character classifications. Rhode forces the viewer to cast our eyes as testament to the malevolence of harsh systems of governance and justice.

Two haunting portraits by Diane Victor are from her 2010 *Frailty and Failing* series: *Smokescreen 7* and *Smokescreen 9*. Her series of thirty-six “smoke” portraits of



4 Julie Mehretu
Plate 1 from the portfolio *Landscape Allegories* (2003–2004)
Julie Mehretu and Burnet Editions

5 Robin Rhode
Pan's Opticon Studies, No. 2 (2009)
Robin Rhode and Niels Borch Jensen
Photo: © Robin Rhode

people with AIDS whom the artist had encountered at the St. Raphael HIV/AIDS Centre clinic in Grahamstown also reflect those in our midst who have been victimized, cause discomfort in a society's daily consciousness, and are rendered invisible. Victor reinforces the notion of fragility through a process by which she captures the ethereal product of black carbon soot emitted from the point of a burning candle on white paper. Victor notes,

I was interested in the extremely fragile nature of these human lives and of all human life, attempting to translate this fragility into portraits made from a medium as impermanent as smoke itself.¹

In these ghostly faces, their identities unknown and vaporous, Victor evokes themes of loss and bereavement while finding resonance in commonality.

The BMA's Department of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs collection is considered one of the most significant holdings of works on paper in the country. The curators should be commended for partnering with the Department of African Art in sharing budgets, resources, and spaces, assisting in continuing to blur the lines between Western and non-Western art and artists through focused themed shows such as this. In presenting these artists—African-born or African-based—viewers are invited to engage with the important role of artists in times of conflict and dissent. The curators have embraced the challenge of

using the BMA's permanent collection—one can only show what one has—while at the same time building a framework around significant and profound themes. These works bring into view the ways that great art can express and arouse individual inquiry and transformation. Dialogs focusing on the role of resistance and activism playing a critical role in political outcomes are only one of many topics that can inspire conversations around this exhibition. *Shifting Views* is

the BMA's first exhibition of contemporary African art and with it demonstrates the museum's commitment to expanding the narrative of art history. This reviewer, for one, looks forward to the next focused installment.

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Notes

1 *Smoke Portraits*, Michael Stevenson Gallery, October 26–December 3, 2005

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