

Dak'Art ART meets the Arab Spring

Africa's premier art biennale kicked off on 11 May in Dakar, bringing together artists inspired by the upsurge in people power sparked by the Arab Spring and other citizen-led protests

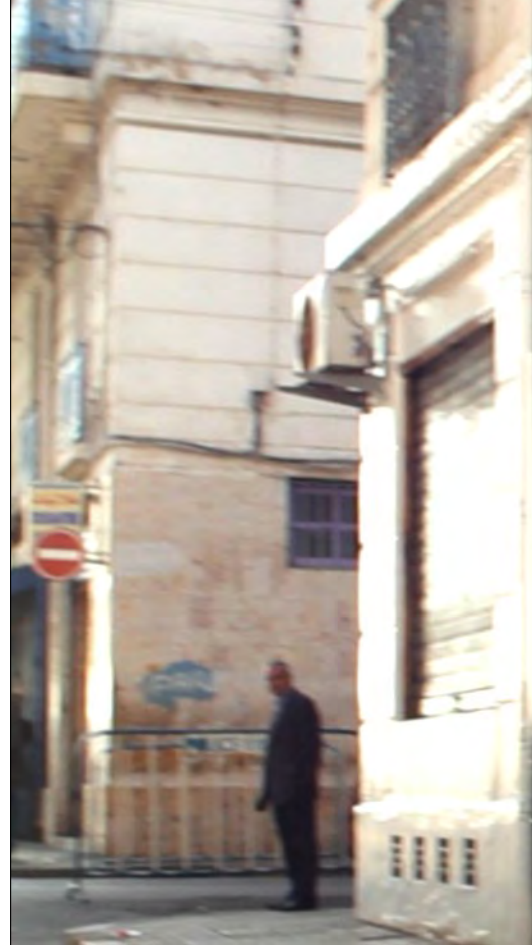
By **Caroline Rossiter**

In *Lost Springs*, an installation by Moroccan artist Mounir Fatmi, the flags of the 22 states of the Arab League hang at half-mast on the wall. Below the Tunisian and Egyptian flags sit two brooms, representing the demise of the two countries' presidents, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak. It is a subtle gesture. At a glance, the brooms could be mistaken for flagpoles. The flag/broom juxtaposition is a leitmotif in Fatmi's work, implying a metaphorical cleaning up. In the case of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, it suggests new beginnings and the sweeping away of old values. The domestic infiltrates the official sphere, as people demand their rights. Like much of Fatmi's work, *Lost Springs* is aesthetically minimal but laden with meaning.

This year Fatmi is one of 42 artists to participate in Dak'Art 2012, the biennale of contemporary African art, held in Dakar's *Musée Théodore Monod* between 11 May and 10 June. Dak'Art is celebrating its 10th edition this year, and its theme 'Contemporary Creation and Social Dynamics' is designed to showcase the dialogue between contemporary artists and a social environment in constant movement. "There are forces today that are shaking the world, and call for new positions, new responsibilities ●●●



FATMI MOUNIR/DAK'ART





KATIA KAMELI

Above: Katia Kameli's video *Untitled* was shot in Algiers during the Arab Spring and questions women's ability to be heard in the Arab world



MICHAEL STEVENSON GALLERY

Far left: Mounir Fatmi's installation *Oriental Accident* (see page 100)

Left: Mohau Modisakeng's performance *iButho* (military regiment in Zulu), in which 12 men stand in silent formation

●●● both individual and collective,” says Ousseynou Wade, general secretary of the biennale. “In that process, intellectuals and artists have a role.”

The theme – which emerged from the orientations of the invited artists – is large enough to encompass a variety of approaches, from the detailed architectural fantasies of self-taught Senegalese artist Mamadou Cissé to the surreal installations of Zambian-born Victor Mutelekesha, from South African Bridget Baker’s explorations of post-apartheid identity and Lerato Shadi’s expressive performance and video pieces.

Mutelekesha in particular has a global view that binds Dak’Art to the wider

world. A resident of Norway currently living in Beijing, through his work he engages with China’s view of itself, its regions and its relationship with Africa. In its more macabre moments, his oeuvre also looks at the commoditisation of the human body – in particular, Chinese – as immigrants are carted around the world.

Fatmi is also outward-looking, engaging with the contemporary struggle between peoples and oppressors. *Lost Springs* was censored at Art Dubai in March last year, the same day that Saudi security forces sent out tanks to support the monarchy in Bahrain. Fatmi wasn’t surprised by the censorship, which saw the brooms removed from the install-

ation. “The art world is not innocent, it’s not in its own bubble. Everything might be beautiful, luxurious, but it is also political. An act of censorship can’t be aesthetic or artistic, it can only be political.”

MAKING NOISE

Born and reared in the Moroccan port town of Tangiers, Fatmi now lives and works in Paris and is represented by galleries in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Geneva, London and Johannesburg. His work will also appear in Casablanca’s first international biennale in June, and in a solo show at the Goodman Gallery in Cape Town in September.

Fatmi does not get too far ahead of the revolutions that have swept the Arab world. “I’m positive about one thing, and that is change. The idea of change in Arab and African countries is already positive. Democracy is like a firearm – you can’t expect to hit the target the first time.”

Another of his installations taking inspiration from the Arab Spring is *Oriental Accident*. A large Oriental rug is spread out over a palette and loudspeakers protrude from the surface, projecting the sounds of protest. Nails have been added to some of the concave speakers and rattle around, adding a tinny, violent edge to the already piercing sounds. Noise was an important part of the uprisings, which began with people coming together to make their grievances heard. Fatmi also likens the speakers to volcanoes that have erupted after lying dormant for years, spewing out the aural equivalent of molten lava.

Fatmi has chosen to work with the concept of change for his contribution to Dak’Art 2012. His project will take the form of an advertising campaign exploring semantic shifts and questioning ideologies that lend themselves to commercial products (for example, the revolutionary Black Panther Party launching its own brand of hot sauce, or the Muslim alternative to Coca-Cola, Mecca Cola). The project explores the contemporary condition and its relationship to history and is a continuation of a previous project, *Out of History*, which won the Léopold Sédar Senghor Prize at the 2006 Dakar biennale.

“Contemporary art has a role to play – by its contemporaneity, it reflects what is happening now,” says Fatmi. “Politicians talk about the future, whereas youth wants answers and discussion now,” he

Gabrielle Goliath

A MASTER OF FINE ARTS from the University of Witwatersrand, conceptual artist Gabrielle Goliath holds a Tierney Photography Fellowship in New York. She uses video, sound and photography to force viewers to confront their feelings about violence, crime and other social issues in South Africa. At the biennale she will display two bodies of work, *Ek is ’n Kimberley Coloured* dealing with mistaken cultural identity, and *Bouquet III*, one of a three-part series dealing with innocence and abuse.



GABRIELLE GOLIATH/DAK'ART

Mamady Seydi

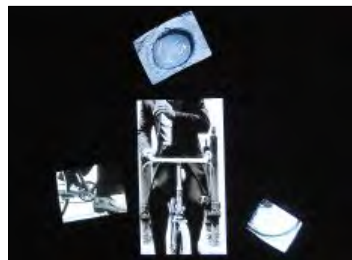
A REGULAR AT THE BIENNALE, Senegal’s Mamady Seydi is well-known for his half-man and half-beast sculptures. Using iron, paper, plastic and tissue, he recreates Wolof folktales and proverbs in physical form. His work on show at Dak’Art is inspired by Senegal’s 2008 fuel shortage. ‘*Celui qui ne sait pas où il va, doit retourner d’où il vient?*’ (Must he who knows not where he goes return whence he came?) depicts figures representing the animalistic traits that come out when it’s every man for himself.



MAMADY SEYDI/DAK'ART

Em’Kal Eyongakpa

CAMEROONIAN EM’KAL Eyongakpa crosses all artistic boundaries with his combination of video installations, sound, photography and poetry. His interest in the environment is captured in his *Njanga wata* project – pidgin English for ‘river of prawns’, the name first given to Cameroon, originally in Portuguese. The full body of work will be showcased at Dak’Art. After studying botany and ecology, Eyongakpa had his first exhibition in 2007 and has since been an artist in residence in South Africa and London.



EMKAL EYONGAKPA/DAK'ART

says. He concedes that contemporary art appeals to a fairly limited section of the population (be it in Africa, Europe or the United States) but believes it can still spark debate and can bring to the fore subjects that politicians would rather ignore. "No self-respecting city doesn't have a biennale," he says. "Once these things are in place they become another string of the political bow."

Senegal needs Dak'Art to succeed in order to counter the bad taste left by the World Festival of Black Arts, known as FESMAN, which took place in Dakar in December 2010. The event was marred by bad management and overspending. Some of the artists who sent works to the festival are still waiting for their pieces to be returned following a payment dispute with a shipping company.

CORRECTIVE VISION

Unlike other biennales, Dak'Art is limited to African artists and artists from the diaspora. This could be seen as a ghettoisation of African artists, but Dak'Art's Wade explains the importance of giving contemporary African artists a platform to exhibit. While there may be a received

Contemporary art can bring to the fore subjects that politicians would rather ignore

idea of African art outside of Africa, he sees the biennale as a way to correct the "caricatural or nostalgic view of an Africa that we don't live in anymore".

Wade says that positioning Africa in the world of contemporary art was the key goal. "But of course, even as we pursue this goal, we are not refusing the opening up of this biennale – and we have artists here that come from all over the world."

He also highlights the 'in' and 'off' elements of the event. In addition to the main biennale (the 'in'), numerous other events and shows will take place (the 'off'). Three guest artists – Peter Clarke, Goddy Leye and Berni Searle – have been invited to exhibit at the *Galerie Nationale*, and an exhibition of art and architecture will be held at the *Maison de la Culture Dousta Seck* (in partnership with the *Institut Valencià d'Art Modern*), while two other exhibitions will pay tribute to Papa Ibra Tall and Joe Ouakam. ●

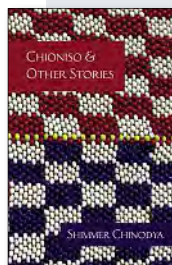
▶ BOOK REVIEWS

Chioniso & Other Stories

Shimmer Chinodya Weaver Press

& The Old Man in a State House and Other Stories

Tanure Ojaide African Heritage Press



Critics of the Caine Prize for African Writing say it puts too much attention on the short form and clips the wings of writers who would otherwise be producing novels. But two recent collections of short stories by former Commonwealth Writers' Prize winners – one from Nigerian writer Tanure Ojaide and another by Zimbabwean Shimmer Chinodya – show the importance even seasoned writers attach to the short story. Ojaide, an award-winning poet, crafts his like long proverbs. 'The Old Man in a State House' tells the wistful tale of a man who grows so old that his neighbours start fleeing his

village for fear of his supernatural powers. It is only when oil is discovered that they need him, and his wisdom, to settle disputes on their old land.

Chinodya, on the other hand, offers more personal vignettes of daily life. In 'Tavonga', a precocious two-year-old becomes the unknowing peacemaker in a family drama. In 'Queues', historical narrative interchanges with the tale of a love gone sour. Women are either victims or extremely strong characters – there is no halfway point for Chinodya. And most of the men, the narrators included, show their chauvinistic colours in the end. ●

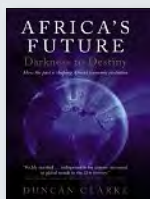


The Spider King's Daughter

Chibundu Onuzo

Faber & Faber

When Abike Johnson, the daughter of a wealthy businessman, had a chance meeting with a young street hawker whose family had fallen on hard times, neither of them could have predicted the events that were to follow. A tale of love and betrayal takes a sinister turn as Chibundu Onuzo narrates *The Spider King's Daughter* through the eyes of her two protagonists. Weaving together the relationships between various characters, she highlights both the thin line and the extreme contrasts between Nigeria's haves and have-nots. For a debut novel, 21-year-old Onuzo shows a lot of promise and a vivid imagination. ●



Africa's Future: Darkness to Destiny

Duncan Clarke Profile books

Duncan Clarke – the authority who wrote *Crude Continent*, the helpful guide to African hydrocarbons – rails against easy interpretations of Africa in his new book, *Africa's Future: Darkness to Destiny*. Some may balk at the title. Others will suggest that, after criticising the rash of books that try to capture the immensity of the continent in one neat economic treaty, he should refrain from following suit. But an entertaining blend of one liners about the excruciating positivity of the 'Davos man' and the well-documented historical sweep of the narrative keeps the reader cruising on. ●