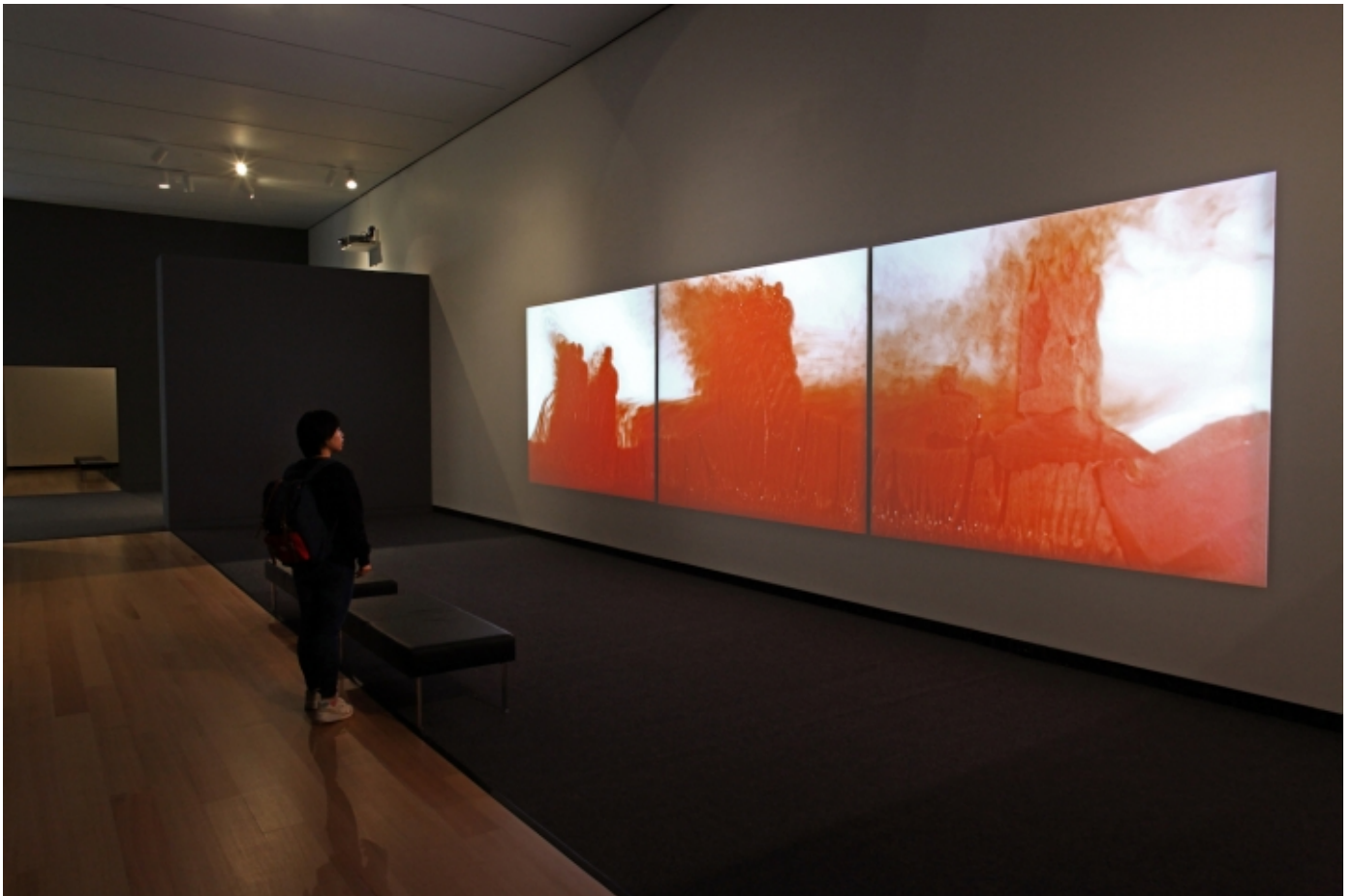


HYPERALLERGIC

The Appeal and Drawbacks of a Show of Video Art from Africa

An exhibition at the Wellin Museum in upstate New York brings together nine video and moving image works by seven artists born or living in Africa.

By Faheem Haider
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Installation view of *Senses of Time: Video and Film-Based Works of Africa* at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, featuring Berni Searle video (courtesy of the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art)

CLINTON, NY — In the idyll of Oneida County, the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art at Hamilton College is showing *Senses of Time: Video and Film-Based Works of Africa*, which features nine videos and films by seven artists, all of whom were born or grew up in the continent of Africa. The remarkably accomplished installation strategy, designed by the exhibition’s co-curator Karen E. Milbourne and orchestrated by the Wellin’s preparator Christopher Harrison, takes those nine separate works and stitches them together into an experience defined less by a given video’s narrative and spectral material than by its manifestation as spectacle.



Berni Searle, “A Matter of Time” (2003), single-channel video projection, 3:30 (© Berni Searle)

The nine works selected by Milbourne and her co-curator Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts take up the moral and conceptual draws and drawbacks associated with the word “Africa”: power, imperialism, blackness, poverty, and identity. The best works, however, unpack some of those concepts through allegory and testimonials, and reward not just audience attention, but also audience participation. Works like Sammy Baloji’s “Mémoire” (2006), Berni Searle’s “A Matter of Time” (2003), Sue Williamson’s interview archive-as-narrative piece “There’s Something I must tell you” (2013), and Yinka Shonibare’s “Un Ballo in Maschera” (2004) track some of the varieties of experiences that make up life in the African continent. Together, these works function as confessionals and force upon the viewer a recognition that she stands like a supplicant in a sanctuary, a hallowed ground where god herself is illuminated and projected as light onto church-high surfaces — surfaces installed as modular walls and projectors that discreetly shed light within the cavernous gallery spaces.



Sammy Baloji, “Mémoire” (2006), 14:30 video, National Museum of African Art (© Sammy Baloji, courtesy the artist and Axis Gallery, NY/NJ)

Searle’s short work, “A Matter of Time,” opens the show. You see Searle, projected immensely on a high, wide wall, performing, climbing, her feet traveling, slipping, closer and further away, on ground covered in oil. Here is a body ceaselessly taking on Sisyphus’s labors. In the perfectly haunting “About to Forget” (2005), Searle manufactures and manifests her biography through red crepe paper silhouette cutouts of members of her family, some dead, some aged. Dripping water turns into a deluge, washing away the paper and enacting her family’s erasure. Baloji’s short film “Mémoire” features dancer and choreographer Faustin Linyekula enraptured in a performance in the ruins of a copper mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo. He frames and is framed by the space in which he’s grounded; he is captured in his moment, and the accompanying audio composition of booming violence layered over political speeches conveys a message of promises deferred. It’s hard not to think that Billy Elliot dancing down the streets of Durham didn’t figure into the making of “Memoire,” and that Margaret Thatcher’s iron-fisted politics aren’t part of the fabric of the work.

Williamson’s multichannel video, “There’s Something I must tell you,” traces generations of older women — grandmothers who, when young, struggled against and helped defeat the Apartheid regime — and their granddaughters who grew up in free South Africa. The split video projection shows women being interviewed

alongside still images of the beloved person about whom they are speaking. Generations of women are literally projected together, brown immigrants and white and black natives, their lives undone and remade in time through politics and empathy. The images are projections on wooden surfaces that hang at varying distances off the wall; even as a projection, the work travels different distances to meet the gaze of its audience.



Installation view of *Senses of Time: Video and Film-Based Works of Africa* at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art, featuring Yinka Shonibare video (courtesy of the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art)

Shonibare's 2004 work, whose title translates to "A Masked Ball," is the clincher here. It's perhaps the most awe-inspiring piece in the show. Through its choreographed rendition of the assassination of Sweden's King Gustav III in 1792, it allegorizes not only the domination of the continent of Africa, the plunder of its riches and its people, and that of Iraq, but also seems to portend the horrifying fact that we're about to reenter the dark times of the George W. Bush years — during which so much across the world was destroyed — under Donald Trump. The pragmatist philosopher George Santayana wrote, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." Shonibare's masquerade rhymes perfectly with the US President-elect's apparent drive to reenact our national follies in foreign lands, and we are doomed to watch the bloody reenactment in repeat.

Senses of Time does have some weakness. I wish the show weren't framed as conveying work from "Africa," as if to suggest that Africa is defined by transcendent and therefore uniform histories and politics. Perhaps shifting the original curatorial strategy to pick specific histories of affect, specific traditions of making, or

specific local conducts and customs might have better served the celebratory and somewhat compensatory ethic that grounds the show. Consider: The late Malian photographer Malick Sidibé's work was no less performative for being static. There must have been a way to point to the kind of performativity that *Senses of Time* endorses without relying on pat idealism; no doubt right now some young video artist is making just that work.

Nevertheless, *Senses of Time* comes off well, in no small part due to the way it is installed. It's a lovely thing to see these pieces in upstate New York, and it makes the viewer eager for more of this urgent work.



Theo Eshutu, "Brave New World II" (1999), multimedia and video installation, 35:30, National Museum of African Art (© Theo Eshutu, courtesy the artist and Axis Gallery, NY/NJ)

Senses of Time: Video and Film–Based Works of Africa continues at the Ruth and Elmer Wellin Museum of Art (198 College Hill Road, Clinton, New York) through December 11.