

Imagings of Africa, Chained or Unchained, Dispersed or Together

By HOLLAND COTTER

Everything that arises must eventually converge. That's the physics of culture. Sometimes convergence is a harmonic interweaving. Sometimes it is a midair collision. Usually we're unaware it's happening. Artists keep tabs on such activity; they make it visible. And so, occasionally, do some of the people who collect, show and sell art.

Claude Simard, a co-director of Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, moved as a young adult to the United States from Canada in the 1980's. Because, by his own account, he felt very much an outsider in his adopted culture, he took a particular interest in the past of others who had been kept on the outside.

Castles that become coffins, memorabilia that becomes art.

He started collecting material related to African-American history from 19th-century artifacts to black power ephemera. Simultaneously, as a dealer, he became aware of new art being made in Africa, exciting stuff. So he went there, tracked artists down and arranged exhibitions at Shainman for the photographers Philip Kwame Apagya, Zwiethu Mthethwa and Malike Sidibe, and commissions for the sculptors Emile Guebri of Ivory Coast and Paa Joe of Ghana.

Paa Joe was, at one point, scheduled to make a solo debut at the gallery this month, with new sculptures based on colonial military architecture.

"The Whole World Is Rotten, Free Radicals and the Gold Coast Slave Castles of Paa Joe" remains on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, 513 West 20th Street, Chelsea (212) 645-1701, through March 12.

The Whole World Is Rotten

Jack Shainman Gallery

ture. A separate mini-show of black power material would have been on view at the same time. Sensing potent links between the two bodies of work, however, Mr. Simard decided to combine them, and then mixed in individual pieces or series of pieces by two dozen contemporary artists, black and white, from Africa, America and Europe.

The prickly tangle that resulted is on view at the gallery. It is titled "The Whole World Is Rotten: Free Radicals and the Gold Coast Slave Castles of Paa Joe." And it is one of the high points of the gallery season so far.

Soft-pedaling hard politics and historiography, it scans wide stretches of historical ground, beginning with Paa Joe's contribution. He's a nephew of the Ghanaian sculptor Kofi Kwei, whose fantastic custom-built coffins in the shapes of giant vegetables, birds or luxury cars became favorites of Western collectors in the 1980's. And Paa Joe works along similar lines.

At Mr. Simard's request, he produced a set of 13 coffins—suitable for burials but intended as sculptures—depicting European-built fortresses on the Ghana coast that once served as holding pens for America-bound slaves. Only two "castles," one British, one Dutch, are in the show, but with their miniature cannons, thick white walls and built-in coffins, they project a morbid view of racial history that is as hard to pin down as it is to shake off.

And they are surrounded by remarkable, very different but related things. One is a set of framed emblems by Nick Cave, with silhouetted images of severed limbs and a ball-and-chain sewn with human hair on ornamental white fabric. Mr. Cave is a Chicago-based dancer and couturier; this is his first appearance in a gallery show. I am sure there will be others.

Newly is a small Joseph Beuys



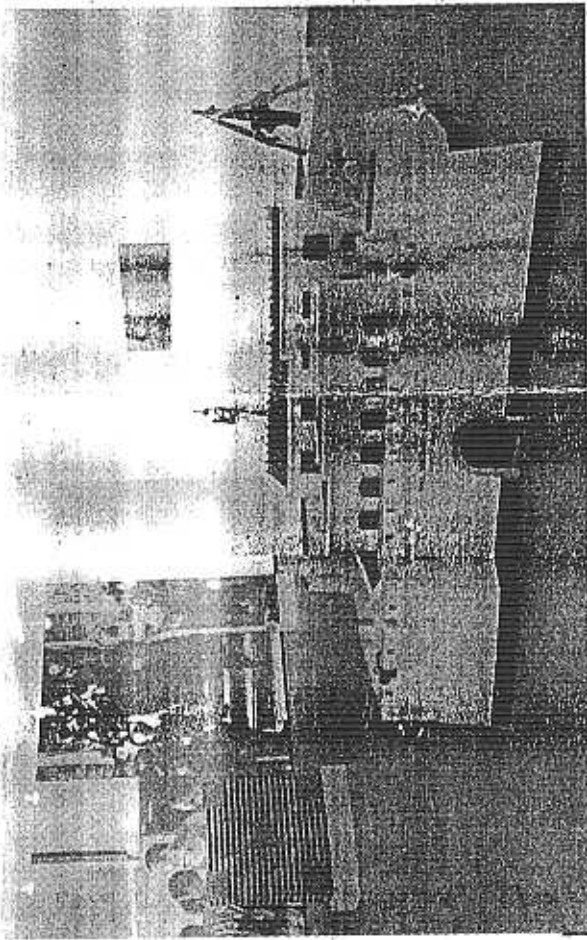
paintings by Tony Gray and Carlos Vega; in prints by Kerry James Marshall; in three sculptures by the promising young artist Roberto Yisani; and in two salon-style installations of civil rights and black power posters, pamphlets and photographs.

Mr. Simard could have presented nothing but such archival material and still have made a splash, so effectively do these artifacts evoke a turning-point political moment that is, for some, heroic beyond questioning. But the show he put together questions heroizing, simply by complicating responses to it.

Thus, Paul Sequeira's glam headshots of male Panthers from 1969 come up against Carrie Mae Weems's staged portraits of black female stereotypes. Mr. Mthethwa's convoluted pictures of men in South African barber shops sit beside Ellen Gallagher's "Bouffant Pride," a tight visual essay on bow pop fashion shapes racial self-image. (There are only four female artists in the show, a serious flaw.) And Jonathan Seligman's sculpture of a giant shopping bag in the colors of Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa flag suggests that black power has been diverted into black consumerism.

All of which raises old questions, which are also new questions. When black power is measured in cash, who really has that power, the consumers or those who take their money? Who really benefits from keeping "race" real? Who is really perpetuating the culture of violence that supports the big business of punishment known as the prison system?

The show attempts no answers. It just weaves various impulses, clashing and complementary, into a fabric that manages to be both porous and substantial. This is hard to do, so it is fortunate that the exhibition will travel after its Chelsea run. The Birmingham Museum of Art in Alabama has picked it up, and has plans to show all 13 castles; other museums are interested. Maybe someone will do a catalog and keep these images and ideas together for a time when they will make sense, or different sense. I bet it will happen. I think it was meant to be.



Photograph from the Jack Shainman Gallery

Left and above, installation views of "The Whole World Is Rotten," with castles by Paa Joe of Ghana, at Jack Shainman. Top right, a wooden sculpture of a reclining African-American man with a book tucked under his arm, circa 1870.



a church bombing the same year. The second picture, by Stephen Shames, is of the 1971 funeral of the Black Panther George Jackson, who was killed in a San Quentin shootout.

Across the gallery, in a photomontage by Arthur Jaffe, Jackson's younger brother Jonathan is seen moments before he was killed, at 17, while abducting a judge from a California courthouse. The Panthers are everywhere in the show, in cryptic

and a coolly meticulous 1978 painting by Berkeley Hendricks—why aren't people clamoring to see more of this wonderful artist's work?—it's titled "APB (Afro Parisian Brothers)." At the other extreme are photographs. One dating from 1963 is of the bombed-blasted home of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s brother; it was taken by Chris McNair, whose young daughter Dawn died in

and a poetically spun on this image comes through in one of the two pieces of 19th-century art in the show. It is a wood carving of an African-American man lying on his side asleep, a book under his arm. The artist's name is lost, but the little sculpture, probably made for a church or a school and hugging the ground like a tombstone, is sublime.

So is a piece by David Hammons: an oval stone coated with a thin furz of hair through which a spiral design has been shaved: a fashionable configuration? A scar? A Radcliffe Bailey installation is comparably restrained, with just three unadorned objects: an African spear; a gun owned by the artist's grandfather; and a white ceramic plate with an elegant design of a leaping panther.

Shifts between visual elegance and implied violence generate much of the show's tension. At one end of the spectrum are Jeff Soubasse's scintillating watercolor self-portraits,