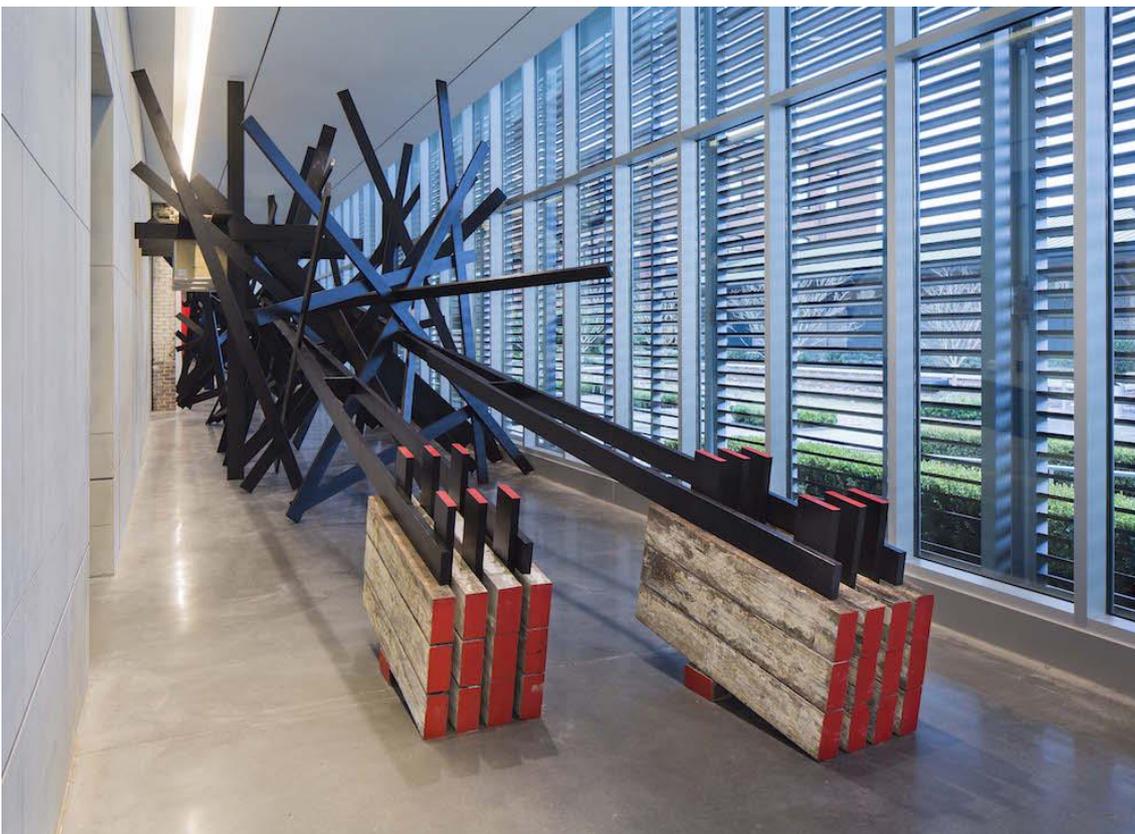


From Marianne Boesky to SCAD, Serge Alain Nitegeka's Black Plank Installations Stand Out

Brian Boucher, Saturday, March 7, 2015









Serge Alain Nitegeka, *Structural-Response II*, 2015.
Photo: John McKinnon, courtesy of SCAD.

To command attention at an art fair is no small feat, but Burundi-born artist Serge Alain Nitegeka managed to stand out at last year's Armory Show. He dominated New York dealer Marianne Boesky's entire large stand with a giant sculptural installation of long, black wooden planks, nailed together in angular arrangements such that visitors had to crouch and stretch to enter. Suspended within were several shipping crates. It bristled with so much energy that it seemed ready to break out of the booth. Only after navigating the welter of planks could one enter a back room to view the artist's paintings on plywood, dominated by black slashes that echo the sculpture.

A football-field-length, walk-through sculptural installation now at the SCAD Museum of Art at Georgia's Savannah College of Art and Design shows Nitegeka's game at another level. *Structural-Response II* (2015) uses similar black planks of wood to transform a long, narrow gallery that might have been an unaccommodating space into a powerful metaphor for flight. Nitegeka's is one of a number of shows that opened recently as part of the deFINE ART festival, which also includes solos by Xu Bing, Ryoji Ikeda, Michael Lin, :Mentalklinik, Caomin Xie and Nari Ward (see Nari Ward is Harvesting Smiles in Harlem). But Nitegeka's work stood out.

Menacing and spiky, the planks fill the gallery to both side walls and the ceiling. They dictate a narrow path through the work, though a few feet after you enter from the south end, a space quickly opens up, and for fifty feet or so the sculpture takes to the walls, where unpainted sheets of plywood combine with black planks, white walls, and bright-red crates to create something like an exploded Piet Mondrian.

Then it's back into the tight corridor created by another assembly of black planks, which, perhaps more than the neat black lines of Mondrian, powerfully recalls the slashing lines of Franz Kline. After you walk another fifty feet or so, the structure dictates a hairpin turn, and then another. Once you're back on track, you walk under three plywood crates suspended overhead in a row; then the structure opens up and you're spit out of the end. There, two pairs of planks extend like long appendages. Their ends rest on two clusters of boards, a few feet to a side, that are painted red at their ends. They echo a similar, bench-like structure at the far end, where you started.

For the artist, flight is not an abstraction. Born in 1983, he was forced out of Burundi by civil war as a child and had the bad fortune to wind up in Rwanda, where genocide again displaced him and his family. He ultimately landed in Johannesburg, where he is working toward an MFA from the University of Witwatersrand after earning a BFA in 2009. Since then he's had solo shows with Johannesburg's Stevenson Gallery and with Boesky, as well as appearing in group shows like the ninth Dakar Biennale, Senegal, and others in Paris (at the Palais de Tokyo) and Berlin (at IFA

Galleries). Visitors to the Rubell Family Collection during Art Basel Miami Beach 2014 (see Which Private Collections Have the Best Art at Art Basel in Miami Beach) found a Nitegeka sculpture dominating the passageway between two galleries in the group show "To Have and to Hold."

After the SCAD show's opening reception, I asked Nitegeka, a tall, gregarious man in aggressively retro spectacles, about the reference to flight in museum press materials. He played it down, saying only that his work deals with crucial moments and decisions: stay or go? If you go, where? If you have only moments to decide, what do you take with you? Perhaps as a parallel to that evocation of compressed time, he said that his installations are always executed quickly, and half-joked that he wishes he could add "time" to the list of materials on the wall labels. As far as materials, Nitegeka deliberately uses crates and the wood that constitutes them—the substance employed to ship art but that also sometimes hold refugees in flight. A 2013 solo show at Stevenson was called "Black Cargo," and many of his paintings include a representation of his own body among the wood planes, as if being smuggled.

Rather than his own refugee experience, Nitegeka was more eager to talk about stools. Refugees from nearby countries, he told me, often are stuck waiting for days in line outside Johannesburg government agencies, hoping to gain legal status, waiting and even sleeping outdoors. As an artwork, he built dozens of simple wooden stools and brought them in a truck, inviting people to take them or handing them to people with the simple introduction, "You look like you could use a seat." As far as he was concerned, the recipients didn't need to know he was an artist, or know his name.

When I remarked on the generosity embodied in the gesture, he was quick to say, "I've been given a lot in this life. I was in the streets selling cigarettes at nine, ten years old."

Other artists have addressed the topic of refugees, through their work and their political acts. Elham Rokni shed light on the situation of African refugees in Israel for Creative Time Reports in 2012. Artists pulled out of the 2014 Biennale of Sydney in protest over sponsorship of the exhibition by a company that ran detention centers for asylum seekers (Artists Make Good on Threat to Boycott Biennale of Sydney). The plight of immigrants to America from the south, arguably refugees from drug wars and other violence in many cases, has been taken up by many artists, such as Pedro Reyes and Tania Bruguera (see Why Is the Havana Biennial Afraid of Tania Bruguera and Is She the Cuban Ai Wei Wei?).

But in my experience at least, it's rare to see art effectively infused, and in a formal way, with the power of life-and-death situations, and informed by the arc of a life that has gone from the streets of Burundi to the Armory Show and to an American museum solo exhibition.

Serge Alain Nitegeka's "Structural-Response II," organized by Alexandra Sachs, SCAD curator of exhibitions, is on view through July 19.

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