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“The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists”

## **“The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists” At the National Museum of African Art to Aug. 2 Cleaving too close to a theme spells damnation for broad exhibitions.**

By Kriston Capps • April 24, 2015



“Prism 10 (Dead Laocoön)” by Wim Botha (2014)

Surely the plum spot in an art exhibition built around Dante Alighieri’s cosmology is the Gateway to Hell. “Paradiso” and “Purgatorio” have their virtues, but it’s Dante’s “Inferno” that’s known the world over, and for good reason: The fates that await the irredeemable are far more titillating than what’s in store for the morally praiseworthy, or worse still, folks who did just fine by life.

In an exhibit subdivided by Dante’s three celestial realms—Heaven and Hell with Purgatory in between—visitors should start where the sign reads, “All hope abandon, ye who enter here.” That’s where the National Museum of African Art is keeping the good stuff in “The Divine Comedy: Heaven, Purgatory, and

Hell Revisited by Contemporary African Artists.” In fact, viewers who want to get the most out of this sprawling exhibit should go straight to Hell—and maybe stay there.

Greeting people at the gate to perdition is Wim Botha’s “Prism 10 (Dead Laocoön),” a wondrous and dreadful bronze sculpture, a piece that could be a show by itself. Botha, a South African artist, is quoting “Laocoön and His Sons,” one of the great marble works of antiquity. After seeing the original at the Vatican, Botha carved his own take in polystyrene, casting the final work in bronze.

The story of Laocoön, a Trojan priest, has several indirect connections to Dante’s “Inferno.” It is principally laid out in *The Aeneid* by Virgil, the poet who guides Dante through the underworld. In *The Aeneid*, Poseidon kills Laocoön and his sons when the priest tries to warn the city of Troy that the great wooden horse sent by the Greeks is a trap. (Dante later assigns Sinon, the undercover Greek agent who convinces Troy to accept the Trojan Horse, to the Tenth Bolgia of the Circle of Fraud in “Inferno.”)

Citing the Laocoön Group sculpture is a bold move for an artist, to say the least. It pays off for Botha: He manages to invert everything that is noble and tragic about the story and its ancient depiction. The figures of the sons and the serpents that descend upon them are merged and fractured; it is impossible to tell snake from self. While the original Laocoön Group is an aching testament to beauty and the human form, Botha’s “Prism 10” looks machine-cut. One can almost see in the angular, geodesic protrusions of Botha’s sculpture the jagged outlines of the City of Dis at the center of Dante’s Hell—all sharp towers, ramparts, gates, and minarets of severe stone.

The weight of Botha’s sculpture is enough to cause the whole exhibit to collapse around it. That’s the problem with such a literal curatorial conceit as what Simon Njami has come up with for “The Divine Comedy” (which opened at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt last year). One work may resonate with the source material as much as Botha’s, but an entire show cannot hope to sustain the same level of intensity.

From there, it becomes an exercise of questioning the systematicity of Njami’s metaphor. Nicholas Hlobo’s floor-spanning, intestine-shaped “Tyaphaka” belongs in Hell, but then a giant black snake is almost too literal for the room. Whereas the Inferno selections include abstraction and installation, the Paradise rooms trend toward the figurative—surely a conscious decision, but not one in keeping with Dante’s depiction of an upward trajectory into perfect light at the end of “Paradiso.” At a certain point, some of the joy of seeing the artworks gets lost in worrying too much about the logic connecting them. Yet the interplay is there: The exhibition depends on it.

What if Njami’s “Divine Comedy” was conceived as something more like a plain-old biennial and less like an immersive narrative experience drawing on Dante? A challenging piece like Mwangi Hutter’s “In a Pure Land”—a project that combines dance and fabric art (via video) with installation text art—might get the room of its own that it deserves. Julie Mehretu’s painting is heavenly (even if her piece, called “Fragment,” is another entry from Hell), but her work shouldn’t be in an exhibit of bleeding-edge African artists at all. She is simply too well known. Several works with explicit connections to Dante’s poems (Maurice Pefura’s “The Silent Way Beatrice” or Berry Bickle’s “Beatrice and Virgil,” both from 2013) are too narrow to survive in a broader exhibition.

Most importantly, though, lifting the art from the “Divine Comedy” theme would rescue those poor artworks stuck in Purgatory—for the most part, the space around the stairs. It’s hardly the fault of the curator that so much of the National Museum of African Art is given over to the vast descending atrium. But it’s hard to take in Kiluanji Kia Henda’s splendid, uproarious, five-act photo series, “Othello’s Fate,” in the in-between spaces. (Hard, but worth it.) It’s tempting to guess that Henda’s photographs and Edson Chagas’s obscured portraits wound up in Purgatory simply because they were photos that could be displayed as a series along the museum’s least welcoming viewing spaces.

All the works should enjoy the pride of place that Myriam Mihindou’s “La robe envolée ou (The Dress Flew Off)” does—at the top of the Stairway to Heaven, as it were. Few could challenge Botha for the right to the Gateway to Hell, but none should have to work so hard to be seen. While the heaven-and-hell approach is a convenient way to organize all kinds of experiences, from nightclubs to frat parties to eternal resting places, when it comes to curating art, this scheme is a sin.

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