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OPINION / COLUMNISTS

CHRIS THURMAN: Beyond the clash of contraries and contrarians

A number of exhibitions at Stevenson deal with the relationality arising from all the facing off

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Rahima Gambo, 'The outer edges of millennium Park', 2022, Collage on paper. Picture: COURTESY OF STEVENSON GALLERY

“Without contraries is no progression,” wrote William Blake – one of the more famous proverbs in his book *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a fusion of poetry, philosophy, politics and mysticism published in the wake of the French Revolution. It has become an aphorism that can be recruited to bolster varying (you might say contrary) ideas, theories and arguments.

Mix in bits of Nietzsche and Hegel, and you get a “clash of civilisations” model in which West and East – or Europe and Africa, or Global North and Global South – face off against each other until some kind of cultural synthesis emerges. For those interested in religion and psychology, Blake’s epigraph supports the dualistic notion that each of us has two sides: it is followed by the assertion that, “attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hate are necessary to human existence.”

This is all very well, but it can also seem rather simplistic, reducing the human experience to Manichean binaries of good and evil. Blake’s poetry complicates these terms. Moreover, Blake and his Romantic contemporaries searched, in their different ways, for something beyond such a limited view of the individual – something that (despite the egocentrism of much Romantic poetry) transcends the self.

Call it relationality: the principle that a person only exists in relation to other people, beings, entities or energies. This could be rephrased, “I am because you are”. Now we’re in more familiar territory.



Installation view of Jane Alexander’s ‘Harbingers’ (2004) with ghost (2007) and hobbled ruminant (2003-2004). Picture: COURTESY OF STEVENSON GALLERY

It’s also a useful starting point for engaging with the work of Rahima Gambo, whose *Bird Sound Orientations* is being exhibited at Stevenson Gallery in Johannesburg.

Gambo is a photojournalist and documentarian by training, but her practice as a visual artist “foregrounds relationality and feeling”: it is, she says, “less about seeing, more about sensing between objects to create a third space, an alternative territory that evades the ‘capture’ of the camera and eludes the enclosure of linear, fixed narratives”.

Viewers of the videos, photographs, mixed media collages and installations comprising *Bird Sound Orientations* may find that they wish for a little more linearity. Gambo’s photos and short films of students playing choreographed games in the Nigerian city of Maiduguri, like her reappropriation of materials from Nigerian schoolbooks and urban planning manuals, give us only hints or clues as points of reference – it’s up to us to make the connections or identify the “third space”.



Shine Shivan’s ‘Nandammi’, 2019-2022. Picture: COURTESY OF STEVENSON GALLERY

Arguably this onus on the viewer complements Gambo’s conceptual approach, which emphasises how the imaginative perception of one’s environment can “mend a rupture, build a bridge, stitch a gash”. Like a Romantic poet, Gambo walks through her world ever open to “the idea of a vast invisible circulatory system, a labyrinth within and around me”; in this process the walking, sensing body becomes “a porous tool, a carrier bag, where all sorts of multisensory information can be gathered”.

Blakean contraries – and their revelatory possibilities – are also central to the pairings displayed at Stevenson in Cape Town, where the latest in the gallery’s “series of idiosyncratic two-person exhibitions”, *Juxtapositions*, places Shine Shivan’s works on paper in dialogue with Jane Alexander’s sculptural installations.

Shivan portrays gods and mortals from the Vedic tradition, their large eyes and smiling faces at odds with gestures and other details in the images that indicate the ever-present threat of violence. This disjunction is brought to the fore when the portraits are placed alongside Alexander’s troubling therianthropes: creatures whose forms lure us into seeing them as human though they have the head of a wild dog, the antlers of a buck or other animalistic qualities.

Such an otherworldly opposition, in turn, may be contrasted with the footage of sunny, silent Amsterdam that Dutch artist Kadir van Lohuizen captured while travelling through locked-down streets in 2020. It depicts what he considers an Amsterdam that now only exists in archival material such as Ed van der Elsken’s 1983 film *My Amsterdam*.

Van Lohuizen is the first artist exhibited in Stevenson’s AMS series, which will connect its SA galleries with its expanding footprint in the Dutch art scene. Watch this space for further progressive contraries.

• Bird Sound Orientations is at Stevenson Johannesburg until May 6. *Juxtapositions* and *AMS* are at Stevenson Cape Town until April 30.

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