



TWO FOR THE PRICE OF ONE
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Meschac Gaba recalls somewhat wryly that when he took his latest artificial hair sculptures walkabout in his native Benin, mothers pulled their children off the streets. No doubt they feared this was a masked secret society traversing the shared social spaces with an arcane agenda that boded no good.

In truth, the mothers' anxiety was misplaced. There was, as evidenced in Gaba's video of the event, nothing inherently threatening about the procession of his assistants, dressed in jeans and t-shirts, with hair extensions fashioned into the shapes of vehicles atop their heads and masking their faces. Nor was there any menace in the procession itself as it made

its way: past the museum of arts, round the traffic intersections, taking in the grandiose monuments of the old Marxist-Leninist regime; as it rubbed shoulders with matrons in stately passage, kids on the loose, men in languid conversation, dudes in their finery hanging out in cars; along reddish clay pathways under the giant shadow of ancient tropical trees; taking in the whole of the life of Cotonou. Gaba's procession had the feel of a private festivity - eccentric maybe, but not invasive or demanding of attention. What was noticeable in the general public response was the opposite of a fearful overreaction: for the most part people glanced up then went back to their business, leaving Gaba to get on with his.

Still, the mothers were not absolutely wrong. Gaba's *Tresses* are more than merely wig-sculptures. They draw - though playfully, humorously and satirically - on masking traditions that are invested with intense psycho-social power and magic throughout the commonwealth of West Africa. In some instances such masking traditions can be genuinely life-threatening - particularly those dedicated to the over-testosteroned gods of iron and hunting, or celebrating the role of the blacksmith in society. Devotees of such cults routinely (in the traditional frame) cut secret and dangerous ritual paths through sleeping villages, and not infrequently mete out random punishments to those they encounter. By and large, however, the mask is a more benign presence, and masking a socially subscribed and highly conventionalised mechanism for satire and the ritual ordering of things.

The immediate point is that, via the mask, the head is semantically transformed. A type of metonymy is effected: what is in the head (in metaphor) comes to be rendered on the head in the represented forms of the mask.

At the same time as Gaba's *Tresses* invoke the quasi-magical semantics of masking traditions, they are equally rooted in the secular frivolities of fashion. The other reservoir of reference in Gaba's wig-heads is the vanity of hair extensions, the styling of artificial braids to create more or less elaborate and sculptural coiffures. Though, historically, they emerged in African and particularly West African societies, these deliberately artificialising fashions have, in recent years, been enthusiastically taken up and given a baroque expressiveness in the African diaspora of North America and Europe.

Not insignificantly, it was in this diaspora that Gaba first started to explore the use of these hair extensions as both a material and a subject matter within his work - during a residency in New York. Within the account he gives of the *Tresses*, he discovered that a remarkable

number of West Africans were making a living in the Big Apple (as incidentally they do in South African cities) by braiding hair. Gaba then set about appropriating the experience of the high-rise magnificence of the American city through the medium of the artificial hair extension - both literally and in its cross-culturally restless plays of reference. Empire State and Chrysler Buildings, both inside and outside the head ... these gave rise to a staggered series of building tress-sculptures, developing (and, in the gesture, appropriating) symbolically laden architectural icons in London, Paris and in South Africa.

The new cycle of *Tresses* - while still insisting, via the use of emphatically artificial fluorescent hair extensions, on the diasporic character of the sculptural articulation - inverts the relationship between first and third worlds. Here the represented subject matter is that of vehicular transport - 'wheels' in the street vernacular - as a metonymic element within consciousness. On one level the underlying metonym is captured in the consumerist mantra: what you drive is what you are. On another, Gaba is wise to a multitude of ambivalences and ambiguities that are specifically African in character, or at least become positively febrile in the African context. In South Africa as I write this, an ongoing scandal is playing out in the media over the multi-million-rand vehicles that senior government officials, in a time of economic recession, acquire for themselves at taxpayers' expense. This is part of the reality that Gaba alludes to. Across the borders, in countries like Angola, you can still see ancient lorries labouring at speeds in the single digits of kilometres per hour under the weight of humans and their worldly goods and chattels piled up in pyramids like pineapples. This too is the reality that Gaba registers, as is the militarised warlord's tank-head sculpture ...

Gaba operates in the space that opens up in the exchanges between the first and third worlds, between Europe and the US on one side and Africa on the other. It is perhaps a little glib but nonetheless vividly illustrative to point to the fact that the material from which the *Tresses* are made - the artificial hair itself with all its African overtones and resonances - is made from a kind of plastic, what the technologised West makes from raw materials plucked out from the developing or underdeveloped parts of the world. And, of course it was acquired in the US, not in Benin. It is itself a product of identities characterised by deferral, aspiration and the second remove.

The point is that, like Gaba himself, the *Tresses* operate in the spaces in between what is specifically African and what belongs to the second life of Africa in the developed world. And in the spaces where the developed world has imprinted itself on, and been appropriated by,

the experience of Africa and of Africans. In his work nothing is either one thing or the other. His deeper subject matter lies in a zone of virtuality perpetually caught between the two. An unstable, ever shifting virtuality, a radioactive half-life of the spirit and of culture ...

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I am indebted to Michael Stevenson for a traveller's insight into the society and the lived realities of Benin. His take on Benin is that, as a society, it operates more or less exclusively on the business of trading per se. He notes the virtual absence of any intensive exploitation of natural resources, of any large-scale manufacturing, or, for that matter, of any significant agricultural production. Tropical, fertile, blessed with a basic sufficiency of food and subsistence material for survival and shelter, the society has evolved (unusually, if not uniquely) as a quintessentially mercantile economy, in which the fact of trading becomes its own justification and, in ways that sit uncomfortably with economic theory, sustains itself in anomalous defiance of economic fundamentals.

In such an economic climate, what is bought and sold, exchanged or bartered is less significant than the fact of the transaction. Surplus value - not in the classically Marxist sense of capitalist exploitation by captains of industry, but nonetheless not unrelated to this - comes to be the stock in trade, as value abstracted from and not directly predicted by labour or the production of economic value in the first place. The real currency here is entirely abstract, surplus value itself; what is being bought and sold is hardly more or less than buying and selling itself.

In his *Colours of Cotonou* installation Gaba takes objects like his old painter's smock, well-worn jeans, the flag of Benin, then flattens and fixes them into two-dimensional surfaces textured and patinated by use and encrusted history. These he fits into frames which themselves have been encrusted with carefully shredded and sorted banknotes - rendered useless as currency in the shredding (and in the fact that the notes are from discontinued series). Removed from the business of buying and selling, Gaba's 'banknote confetti' is turned into texture and impasto, still redolent though with material memories of what the mulch was made from.

It is this that becomes the frame - both literally and suggestively - into which the objects of use are fitted. In one way the framing evokes a meditation on art and value in a relatively

traditional postmodern context. But it goes beyond this in two ways. One rises from the conscious play that Gaba makes between the two meanings in French of the word 'cadre' - one literally meaning 'frame', the other referring to the human instrument of a political movement. The other arises from the fact that Gaba is not concerned to offer critique in and through his work. The zone of ambivalence is one which he *occupies*; his work begins inside, and embraces, the condition - the existential diaspora - of contradiction, and the deferred realities that define the dance of contradiction are turned into an existential strategy.

A case in point is *Vernissage*, the participatory performance played out at the opening of this exhibition. Here a nail bar such as you find in spaza stalls where hair braiding is also done, bought *voetstoets* off the street in Cotonou, is reinstalled in the gallery. Colours and colours of nail varnish, row upon row of vibrant artificial intensity; false nails of every hue and design; glues and the affixing agents. There is a busy traffic in painting the nails of opening-night visitors to the exhibition: the vanity made trenchant; high culture colliding with the cadres of the street. And, of course, with the *cadres* of the street - the frames of art, the povera materials ...

Vernissage rests upon another double entendre in French, with the word evoking both painting nails and a preview or private view of an art collection. It all depends on your frame of reference. And Gaba here, as in *Colours of Cotonou*, provides a spare frame. Two for the price of one. Good value because, at the end of the day, the frame is not different from what is caught inside it.