exhibition review

We Don’t Need Another Hero: 10th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art
curated by Gabi Ngcobo with Nomaduma Rose Masilela, Serubiri Moses, Thiago de Paulo Souza and Yvette Mutumba
Akademie der Künste; KW Institute for Contemporary Art; ZK/U-Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik; Hau Hebbel am Ufer; Volksbühne Pavillon, Berlin
June 9—September 9, 2018

reviewed by Liese Van Der Watt

In contrast to most biennials that are born from the vision and concept of a single artistic director, the Tenth Berlin Biennial was a collaborative effort by five curators, under the guidance of South African-born Gabi Ngcobo. Entitled We Don’t Need Another Hero, it is a biennial that centers the voices of artists that are perhaps less well known in an art world increasingly validated by art fairs and capital, but one where artists expect viewers to enter their worlds, to shift perspective if need be, and in so doing to meet the limits of their own subjectivities. With no unifying theme, it is a thought-provoking biennial that flatly refuses to take on the burden of identity politics.

“Let’s face it, we are at war,” announced Gabi Ngcobo in her opening statement at the press conference in June 2018 in Berlin, invoking the Fallist student movement that emerged in 2016 out of the #RhodesMustFall and subsequent #FeesMustFall campaigns in South Africa. Given the declarative force of this statement, buttressed by a quote from a protest banner—“Dear History, this revolution has women, gays, queers & trans”—that introduces the catalogue, viewers would have been forgiven for expecting a biennial firmly rooted in and engaged with oppositional politics. However, this was a show that made a far more powerful point about casually centering subjectivities and commanding a space already occupied, subtly reorienting history. In fact, the forty-six artists on show were not interested in opposition at all; rather, they were already on the inside, at the center, and the onus was on us, the viewers, to adjust our perceptions and expectations. Although neither belabored nor even mentioned, it was clear that the majority of artists were from Africa or its diaspora, producing a biennial that unceremoniously upended the expectations and statistics that usually accompany these international art shows. We Are Not What You Think We Are Not was the title of the public program that supplemented the Biennial, a perfect summation of this show’s refusal to answer to viewers’ preconceptions.

We may as well then begin with Ana Mendieta, because what was on show here were not the Mendieta that everyone has come to expect, where her body is burnt or buried into and onto the landscape—those were in a show at Gropius Bau in Berlin, though unrelated to the Biennial—but a few small, delicate drawings that were shown in the Akademie der Künste, one of five venues where the Biennial
was located and probably the one with the strongest art. Mendieta’s works here were intimate, quiet, understated, and yet insistent in their richly suggestive female-like forms (Fig. 1). These works are somehow both surprising and completely logical in a Biennial that has taken opacity, uncertainty, and complexity as central to its framework: Surprising, because in their simplicity they seemed at odds with a show of mostly contemporary (as in living) artists whose complex, layered, contradictory, and intersectional works speak to the times; yet completely logical, because Mendieta’s story is of asserting her place in the world, in the same way that this show was about calmly and quietly insisting on subjectivities that are frequently scrutinized, policed, regulated, disavowed.

Take the portrait by Firelei Báez that greeted you on entering the Akademie der Künste (Fig. 2). In an ornately baroque tromp-l’oeil frame, peeling with layers of histories, Báez painted an anonymous woman of indeterminate color or ethnicity—a painterly comment on the Academy’s century-old policy of selective (namely white male) membership. It may seem like a somewhat obvious strategy, but it immediately activated the curatorial commitment to engage with local spaces and to bring various histories to bear upon one another. In similar vein, Báez installed a ruin-like structure at the entrance to the Akademie, resembling that of Sans-Souci, a colonial castle built in Haiti and left in ruins despite its status as a UNESCO site. This structure was meant to invoke its local namesake: the splendid Palace of Sans-Souci on the outskirts of Berlin, maintained in its full glory to this day. As in the case of the portrait inside the Akademie, Báez’s simple act of juxtaposing similar yet wildly different instances invoked intersectional histories and the absences it spawns.

Báez’s portrait that greeted viewers in the Akademie also announced a curatorial leitmotif that recurred throughout the exhibition: the inclusion of portraits that prompted us to pause—like punctuation—over the centering of mostly female black subjectivities. Lynette Yiadom-Boakye showed a series of arresting female figures assessing the viewer thoughtfully, while Natasha A. Kelly, over in the KW Institute of Contemporary Art, featured eight black German women in films that provided complex and highly individualized portraits of their life and work in Germany.

At ZK/U—Zentrum für Kunst und...
Urbanistik, South African Dineo Seshee Bopape showed a new video work loosely based on the court transcripts of the rape trial in 2005 between Fezekile Kuzwayo and then-vice president of South Africa Jacob Zuma, who was eventually acquitted. In the film the predatory male is a much older man (Canadian actor Michel Forgues, reminding one of Al Pacino in Scent of a Woman) who, over the green expanse of a respectable velvet sofa, approaches a much younger female figure and eventually rapes her on the floral sheets of a suburban bed. It’s a layered and broken narrative focusing repeatedly on the clenched hands of the girl and the sordid searching hands of the perpetrator, interspliced with Bopape’s trademark patterning that slowly descends into a frenzied fury. What stayed with one, though, was not a picture of a black victim, but a portrait of her eventual rage—the girl’s repeated forceful forearm jerk, an “up yours” to her rapist but aimed directly at the viewer consuming yet another tale of sexual violence and victimization of the black female body.

These intense “portraits”—rooted in figuration or subjective experience—were counterbalanced by a range of abstract and minimalist works that recurred throughout the Biennial. A series of wooden assemblages by Mildred Thompson (1936–2003)—a research interest of curator Nomaduma Masilela—recalled her decision to shun representational imagery in the 1970s in an effort to free herself from the expectation that black artists address racial issues (Fig. 3). The inclusion of these works, along with Mosekwa Langa’s vast, abstracted “landscapes” that are more embodiments than representations of the land or Johanna Unzueta’s complex linear drawings that resemble the weaving, spinning, and dyeing practices that she studied in her native Chile, ensured that any expectations about this Biennial and what kind of work it would contain were consistently undermined (Fig. 4).

The relatively light curatorial touch that was a hallmark of this Biennial meant that it was never pedantic or overbearing. At its best it attempted to reorient history, including a refreshing selection of art works and artists that are less known on international art circuits or did not receive the recognition they should have in their lifetimes—I am thinking of a series of wonderful linocuts by the late South African Gabisile Nkosi commenting on the taboos around HIV through intimate personal narratives, or of the inclusion of a large body of collagraphs by Cuban artist Belkis Ayón (1967–1999), who explored the Afro-Cuban secret society known as the Abakúa (Figs. 5–6).

However, more curatorial input was probably needed in balancing the various venues—the shows at the Akademie and KW for Contemporary Art felt much stronger and engaging than the other venues, especially at the Z/KU, which seemed somewhat disengaged, like an afterthought. And even inside KW, a large reconfiguration of Seshee-Bopape’s 2016 installation Untitled (Of occult instability) (Fig. 7), casting the entire ground floor in a spectral orange glow, felt somewhat overbearing and dominant in the context of what was mostly a finely balanced and thoughtful show.

The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue in English and German: We Don’t Need Another Hero, edited by Gabi Ngcobo and Yvette Mutumba, with texts by Binyavanga Wainaina, Bongani Madondo, Jota Mombaça, Maryse Condé, Peggy Piesche, and other commissioned authors (Distanz Verlag, 2018; 400 pp., 200 color images, €25, paper). A public program, I’m Not Who You Think I’m Not, was also scheduled and included various performances, public readings, presentations, and panel discussions.

Liese Van Der Watt is a South African art historian based in London. She is the author of various articles and art catalogues and an associate editor for Contemporary &. lieseven-derwatt@gmail.com.