reviewed by Kathy Curnow

It’s rare that Americans can view a snapshot of contemporary African art made in one center by a sizable number of artists at a specific point in time. Without the opportunity to travel to Johannesburg, to Lagos, to Kinshasa, we lack that sense of a particular African art scene that thrives on its own zeitgeist, on the friendships and rivalries of its protagonists, on the deprivations and abundance shared by those who are not yet household names. *The View from Here* provided that kind of window into Dakar’s specific arts environment. Like Paris in the early twentieth century, the city itself may sprawl, but the microcosm its artists occupy creates a special energy, a magnetized pull that draws in painters, photographers, and other artists from Senegal and beyond. Even in the relatively compact space of Kent State’s Visual Arts Gallery, this exhibition clearly communicated Dakar’s sense of hustle, bright lights, and international verve.

*The View from Here* debuted at the 2018 Dak’Art Biennale’s OFF, which consists of numerous satellite exhibitions and installations scheduled in conjunction with the formal event. This exhibition’s vigor was ideal for a university gallery, for it combined a variety of approaches and materials that conveyed experimentation in both media and style. As a taster’s choice menu, it prompted discussions about provocative topics as far-ranging as urban and global citizenship, recycling, repurposing of historical arts (whether Senegal’s own reverse-glass painting or the silhouette), religious and gender tensions, or the worries and joys that layer city living. While most of the eleven featured artists were Senegalese, some were based abroad, calling Dakar home for briefer periods. Many were graduates of the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts de Dakar or the École National des Arts, while others attended overseas universities; only two were not academically trained. Overall, the artists’ levels of experience were uneven. While some had already participated in international exhibitions and garnered fellowships, residencies, and awards, others were at the beginning of their careers. The result was not dissimilar to an African market, with the artists’ works competing for attention: here color, here intricacy, here texture, motion, or scale.

One of the strongest participating artists was Ibrahima Dieye, whose multimedia works combined collage, canvas, pastels, acrylic paint, and ballpoint pen. His large-scale pieces exuded a sure sense of expressive development, nervous lines and scribbled figures or backgrounds, imbuing his anthropomorphized animals with metropolitan anxiety. While Dakar’s poor drainage and rainy season flooding were the impetus for his *Cry For Help* 2 (2018), he universalized such crises by his emphasis on individuals’ body language within their crumbling milieu. Because the water was alluded to but not stressed, the environmental decomposition could as easily refer to any situational or psychological crisis. In Dieye’s city, barbed wire both opposes and encloses; dripping paint spells disintegration. The creatures within it sometimes help each other and sometimes freeze with inaction, as his *Horror District* (2018) demonstrated (Fig. 1). This disconnect between the metropolitan organism and its inhabitants was a palpable reminder of the need for community within a frenetic environment. While the narratives of the animal hybrids drew one’s attention, Dieye’s background scrawls, blotches, and comments conversed with Jean-Michel Basquiat, though not in an imitative way. Stairs or an emblematic ladder like that of Martin Puryear’s *Ladder for Booker T.* Washington spoke to elusive aspirations. In *Cry For Help* 1 (2018)—present in the catalogue but sadly lost in a fire before transport—Dieye clarified in wobbling letters: “No Exit,” perhaps an apt reference to the English title of Sartre’s play *Huis Clos.*
Camara Guèye’s paintings explored literal and metaphorical interiors and exteriors. Two featured larger-than-life male figures. Diomaniaw (2016) focused on an abstract city dweller, cell phone in hand, who gazed placidly at the viewer. He was backed by rectangular urban vignettes in a far more neoexpressionist style: telephone poles, another aspirational ladder, a stained-glass window of a saint with an ardent heart, a lantern. The later Wahambane (2018) (Fig. 2) was flatter and more symbolic, integrating the figure with both ground and simplified objects: lantern, mortar and pestle, stools, basket, trousers. Possessions not only surrounded the man, they filled him. His mask-like face concealed his individuality, his stolid presence equivalent to his modest, functional acquisitions. Many of the personal symbols and stylistic elements visible in his current work were already present in Village Promenade (2012) (see Fig. 3, background) a more monochromatic piece that placed two smaller figures within an urban environment. This painting conveyed more of the aspirational and acquisitive aspects of city living through inclusions of a vehicle and molded balustrade. Smaller acrylic and ink on paper works further teased out Guèye’s personal iconography of interior and exterior cityscapes. Though echoes of modernists past were visible—the random color insertions of Stuart Davis, the thick outlines of a Rouault or a bolder, more heavy-handed Raoul Dufy—these works delivered a fresh impact.

Henri Sagna’s standout piece was his Un autre monde—est-il possible? (2012) (Fig. 4a–b). His innovative use of used rubber on twenty staggered plywood panels resulted in a fractured cityscape of mosques and churches. This commentary on amicable and ideal religious coexistence was further explored in an over nine-foot-tall object exhibited only in Dakar—Domes et Dogmes (2013), a large portrait of the late President Léopold Senghor, a minority Christian in a primarily Muslim state. As a giant in both the independence and Négritude movements, his efforts to make Senegal the cultural leader of Africa eventually resulted in the establishment of Dakar’s art schools, its Biennale, and, ultimately, exhibitions such as this. Although the work appeared to be a high-contrast photo, Senghor’s face was actually assembled from tiny rubber cut-outs of churches and mosques. What did Sagna’s use of industrial detritus in both works indicate? It might have interrogated Senegal’s industrialization, reflected a growing trend to repurpose available materials, or referenced tire-burning as an act of political protest, a not-uncommon event in Dakar.
Numerous collages by Fally Sene Sow exuded Dakar’s vitality. Many were all-encompassing scenes that pulled back in a panoramic shot, such as the full market view of Taibié yi ci talibi (2018) or the radiating traffic of Colhane carrefour (2018) (Fig. 3, foreground). A Dakar resident of the market area, Sow attaches importance to the objects encountered there daily. His distinctive approach involved transforming chewing gum foil and magazine scraps into buses, taxis, market umbrellas, streetlights, and scurrying pedestrians, all layered under glass. His aerial views were reminiscent of a Google Map come to life but skewed at unstable angles, the second-hand clothing and other goods available in the market. Buildings, stalls, and even the roads themselves had a tenuous air of improvisation and precariousness, as if a strong wind might reshuffle the elements into an unrecognizable state. Fixed as they were under glass, they were nonetheless fragile components that the actual or political climate might irrevocably alter.

The photographs and video that were absent from DakArt’s 2018 Biennale were key elements of The View from Here. Ibrahima Thiam, who has researched and curated Senegalese historical photography as well as practicing the art himself, held a central position in the installation. His works took divergent paths. He used full color to document a personal performance in his Maam Coumba Bang series (2018) (Fig. 5), a visual narrative that reenacted the story of a fisherman’s daughter who fell into the river and drowned, only to reappear as a spirit who fleetingly manifests. The artist revealed the spirit as sometimes disembodied, its pseudo-Baule mask floating in a calabash or near a tree, or as the full figure of the artist’s cousin, face covered by this same mask. In his Vintage Portraits series (2017) (Fig. 6), Thiam took a different, nonmythological approach. Allowing his subjects to select vintage Senegalese portrait photographs that appealed to them, the artist’s process was reminiscent of how Kehinde Wiley’s subjects choose art historical images of saints’ and aristocrats’ portraits for their own poses. Here, however, the result was more enigmatic than a commentary on power and its historic withholding. The subjects hold the chosen photograph before their faces, revealing only clothing, limbs, and their affinity for a stranger’s constructed image. Mysterious juxtapositions resulted. A member of the Sufi Islam Mourn du Mystic Brotherhood wore the order’s patchwork tunic, talismans, and enlarged prayer bead necklaces around his neck; a reproduction of the only known photo of the order’s founder, Amadou Bamba, blocked his face from view. That image allowed the subject to become one with a known, venerated, religious figure, but next to it was another subject whose “mask” provided greater juxtaposition. A young woman stood frontally, her torso covered by a denim shirt with pushed up sleeves, its fabric disguising any body curvature. If not for her painted nails, her gender would have remained ambiguous. However, her no-nonsense unisex attire contrasted sharply with the photograph concealing her face. The woman in the vintage image was dressed to the teeth in a wrap with leaves; Image 40 cm x 40 cm.

Three artists isolated their subjects from the city itself. Khalifa Diang avoided human representation while evoking human presence in four intimate 2017 studies of individual chairs. These portraits—for they seemed more portrait than still life—fill their canvases, conveying a sense of their own dignity and that of their invisible owners. Each was overlaid with a unifying series of colored blotches, producing an agrandized Pointillist effect. Two other artists likewise provided quieter views of Dakar and Senegal’s private spaces, whether domestic, studio, or initiatory. Artist-filmmaker Fatou Kandé Senghor documented Senegalese artist Seni Camara in a 30-minute video, Donner Naissance (2015). Camara rose to fame in the 1989 Paris exhibition Magiciens de la Terre and was then subject to public interpretations at the hands of French critics. This documentary, which allowed the artist to speak for herself, provided a corrective treatment. A second Kandé Senghor video, My Piece of Poetry (2007), followed Diola
Amadou Bamba's followers, whether intentionally or not, Fall's objects and documentation unfortunately suffered from inevitable spatial issues in the small gallery, their placement in a pathway crowding comfortable viewing.

Two other foreign artists were further disconnected from Dakar. American photographer Laylah Amatullah Barrayn's gorgeous color images examined multiple venues within Senegal, their human subjects standing out amid vivid hues and patterns (Fig. 8). Barrayn's familiarity with Senegal began with her participation in a study abroad program and deepened with subsequent stays. Her cultural integration was clear. However, her interest in the candid moment, the close-up that crops bodies and heads, was so grounded in Western photographic style that the images seemed alien, even as her beautiful compositions of women's activities, Mouride followers, and mosques drew the eye. Amalia Ramanankirahina's inked silhouettes of people and places in her Jardins dessai series (2013) bore the stronger flavor of an outsider in both subject choice and execution. The series takes its name from the French test gardens that accentuated crops from the colonial empire in the hope of profitable outcomes. In it, the Paris-based Franco-Malagasy artist, a participant in two prior DakArt biennials, explored isolated images, painting them on glassine in a nod to archival storage practices. While her conceptual underpinnings were stimulating—colonial use of science and classification to wring all possible benefit from Senegal—some of her images referenced Madagascar, one depicted Perseus, another Dakar's relatively recent African Renaissance monument. While the disparate subject choices—not all directly part of a colonial past—may be linked within Ramanankirahina's own oeuvre, they were disassociated from the rest of the exhibition, the puckered glassine adding little to their visual appeal.

Group shows are challenging to stage, especially with mediums that range from video to installation to two-dimensional works, and scales that vary considerably. Nonetheless, the gallery employed effective spatial flow and break-up, with some partial walls and a few large suspended frames allowing glimpses of what lay beyond. The exhibition's three sections—"Urban Textures," "Icons and Symbols," and "Negotiated Identities"—were distinguished by wall stripes that reflected the red, green, and yellow of Senegal's flag. In a truly decolonizing choice, all labels were written in Wolof, French, and English, an effective reminder regarding global mobility and privileging.

At its Kent State venue, associated programming included Ibrahima Dieye's two-week residency at the university and in other venues throughout northeast Ohio, as well as a panel discussion, "Mobility, Migration, and Movement: Contemporary Diasporas"; a two-scholar conversation, "Coming Together: Postcolonial Art and Literature"; and a colloquium, "Decolonizing the Arts: Museums and Restitution." Children's collage activities inspired by Sow's approach took place at local libraries, and a screening with discussion of Manthia Diawara's Negritude: A Dialogue Between Wole Soyinka and Léopold Senghor closed out the exhibition's associated activities. The exhibition made an additional stop at SUNY Stony Brook's Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery July 18–September 28, 2019, while previous venues included Dakar's Waru Studio from May 1–15, 2018 and The Wright Museum of Art at Beloit College from September 6–November 11, 2018.

A 95-page softbound eponymous catalogue, published by the Kent State School of Art Collection & Galleries, provides another compelling set of insights regarding Senegal's art scene. Seven scholars and artists participated. These included art historian and curator Joseph Underwood's historical perspective on Senegalese contemporary arts and political scientist Rachel Ellett's examination of Dakar's "ownership" and the question of artistic citizenship. The remainder of the catalogue provides lively insights into key artists through conversational interviews and career spotlights. The richly illustrated catalogue, like the exhibition, utilizes decorative bands in the colors of Senegal's flag as a means of graphic organization, and is written in Wolof, French, and English. The catalogue's price is $25.05 plus shipping.

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