reviewed by Esra Yıldız

In the summer of 2019, major museums in Paris hosted exhibitions with a theme of African or Black Art, and culture. From Black Models: From Géricault to Matisse (Musée d’Orsay), an exhibition about the representation of Black figures in visual arts through art historical background and racial and political issues, to Paris-London, Music Migrations (1968–89) (Musée National de l’Histoire de l’Immigration), an exhibition on musical migration between two cities formed with politics and antiracist struggle of the period (as in the example of “father of Afrobeat” Fela Kuti), recent exhibitions showed the interest of museums in these underrepresented artists and subjects. The Musée du Quai Branly—Jacques Chirac in cooperation with Musée d’Orsay, Musée de l’Orangerie (Paris), and MoMA (New York) held an exhibition about the journalist, editor, collector, and anarchist Félix Fénéon (1861–1944). It contained a very precious collection of about a hundred artifacts—including artworks from Africa and Oceania—and paintings by his artist friends, such as Matisse, Braque, and Modigliani, that belonged to Fénéon, a figure who fought for the recognition of non-Western arts during his lifetime.

Beside these exhibitions, for the very first time in France, the Centre Pompidou hosted a retrospective exhibition of the artist Ernest Mancoba, who fled apartheid in South Africa and lived in Europe from 1938. The exhibition reminded us of Félix Fénéon’s question from 1920 (“Seront-ils admis au Louvre?”—will they be admitted into the Louvre?) regarding the representation of non-Western artists in today’s cultural and sociopolitical context by surpassing the possibility of Eurocentrism within it. The question still remains the same in terms of inclusionary or exclusionary policies of non-Western artists in European and American museums and art institutions. Are those artists represented enough in contemporary and modern museums and major art events such as biennials? For example, in 2018, the Rencontres d’Arles was criticized for a lack of women artists. However, in 2019, artists from Africa were not represented. The African Art in Venice Forum was founded in 2017 to make contemporary art of African countries more visible at the Venice Biennale. Even in its latest edition, only eight out of fifty-four African countries were represented at the 58th Venice Biennale (2019), and countries such as Ghana and Madagascar made their debut in 2019 at the world’s oldest and one of the most prominent biennials. The 16th İstanbul Biennial (2019), curated by Nicolas Bourriaud, included only one artist from Africa out of fifty-seven artists and art collectives. Museums in European countries with a colonial past and in the United States do pay more attention nowadays to contemporary and modern African or American Black artists, but a majority of them are diaspora artists presented from the perspective of power structures of the Western art world, and most of them live in Europe or in the United States to be visible in the art world. I Shall Dance in a Different Society, the first retrospective exhibition of Johannesburg-born and Paris-based Ernest Mancoba (1904–2002) at the Centre Pompidou was a belated homage to this unique artist. As a part of its exhibition series devoted to non-Western art and artists in the last few years, it was also the first retrospective at Pompidou dedicated to a “Franco-South African artist,” as it was announced in exhibition brochure and press release. The same dates as Ernest Mancoba’s exhibition, his wife, Danish artist Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, had an exhibition also held at the Centre Pompidou near the Mancoba exhibition, his wife, Danish artist Sonja Ferlov Mancoba, had an exhibition also held at the Centre Pompidou near the Mancoba exhibition rooms. Since their artistic lives went hand in hand and influenced each other, it was a good institutional strategy to organize these two exhibitions at the same dates to be able to see their mutual interaction, allowing the audience to make a comparison on how an art institution can present two neglected artists; one “a Black man,” the other “a White Danish woman."

The exhibition took its name from Mancoba’s words given as an answer to an invitation to a dance at Bal Négre the first time he came to Paris: “I shall dance in a different society.” This was also a strong wish by the artist for a radical transformation in society that every human being, regardless of their origin and race, would live together.

Even though Mancoba lived in Europe—several years in Denmark but mostly in Paris—for more than sixty years until his death in 2002, his place in the art scene was...
not acknowledged enough in France, Europe, or in South Africa during that time. The 2000s was a period of rediscovery of Mancoba within exhibitions such as The Short Century (2001, Okwui Enwezor) and documenta 14 (2017), and via an article by Rasheed Araeen (2010) and an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist (2003). As Rasheed Araeen emphasizes, Mancoba was Africa’s most original modern artist even if he was erased from the art scene due to hidden ethnocentrism and Eurocentrism because, as he said, his work was suspected of both not being European enough and betraying (his) African origins.

As Mancoba felt himself seen as “a black spot” of CoBrA, he was not included in the group of artists who were part of this avant-garde movement, along with his wife, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba. Invitations to CoBrA exhibitions never reached them, he told Hans Ulrich Obrist. He referred to himself as an “invisible man” and felt he was marginalized due to the color of his skin. He was not European enough and was seen as a “nonentity.” Some people regarded him as “the comfort of a European woman artist.” As in the lyrics of Peter Tosh’s song “African,” “As long as you’re a Black man, you’re an African”: if you have a different nationality, like Mancoba, then your Blackness and African roots always follow you into the society where you live and become a reason for discrimination and exclusion. One of the most interesting points about Mancoba is not just his involvement with CoBrA as an artist from Africa, but rather his rejection of the figurative art expected of a “South African artist” for the abstract work that characterized his European years. His works featured automatism and subconscious methods, which surrealism-influenced CoBrA and Abstract Expressionist artists used during the same period, but with a spiritual meaning and figurative approach all his own.

Based on the idea of dance, a very powerful metaphor that unites individuals’ bodies and creates a dialogue between people, the exhibition consisted of seven thematic and chronological parts taking inspiration from the artist’s life, such as “Survival Art,” “Spirit over Matter,” “Paint as You Feel,” and “Painter and Humanist,” all clearly explained in wall texts. These sections included works from different periods in which Mancoba used various techniques (wood carvings, abstract figurative paintings, lithographs, ink drawings, watercolor, etc.) as an artist who had very limited production even though his life nearly spanned the entire twentieth century.

The exhibition welcomed the viewer with a sound recording of Mancoba interviewed by his son and with his spiritual baton as reminder of his African roots and its influence on his works. The next two rooms consisted of artists’ texts such as interviews, correspondence, other archival materials, and artist Kemang Wa Lehulere’s video about Mancoba. Sound and words/texts were important elements, forming the exhibition as a response to “subaltern can speak” discourse, as Mancoba did during his lifetime. Thus, the first three rooms served as a means to understand the artist’s exclusion from the art scene, his presence, his struggle, and the indifference towards him in art society. They portrayed Mancoba as an artist, activist, thinker, and humanist.

Different from the artists’ studios that visitors get used to seeing in exhibitions, one wall of the second room was covered with a photo of the outdoor view from Mancoba’s studio, which he shared with his wife near Montparnasse (Fig. 1). Their studio was not an elegant Parisian building. The photo, which seemed out of place, was a metaphor for their exiled lives and showed their modest living conditions in Paris.

While in Africa, as a self-taught artist, Mancoba produced wooden sculptures. One of those early sculptures, Bantu Madonna or African Madonna (1936), made of indigenous yellow wood, represented the Virgin Mary as a Black woman (Fig. 2). After leaving Africa in 1938, he studied art at École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, where he met his future wife. During those years, he stopped carving figurative sculpture and turned instead to abstract art, prevalent in the modernist approach of his European counterparts. As could be seen in the exhibition, and as he directly stated, it is difficult to decide if the central form in his paintings is figurative or abstract (Fig. 3); this dichotomy between the two genres animates and brings form to life.
ancêtres (When artists interact with ancestors), a performance event and talk with Pascale Obolo and exhibition curator Alicia Knock, was organized on September 11, 2019.

After visiting the exhibition, one might also question how Mancoba’s retrospective might affect the Centre Pompidou’s collection and its policy about exhibition making in the long term. A simple online search in April 2021 reveals the permanent collection of the Centre Pompidou has twelve works by Sonja Ferlov and only three works by Ernest Mancoba. Most of Mancoba’s works were acquired by the institution in recent years. In the back room of the exhibition, articles, radio conversations, the artist’s camp diary (which I found important and which contains information about his imprisonment from December 1940–February 1941 at Saint Denis Camp during World War II) were bound as a spiral book. Unfortunately, the exhibition did not have a catalogue, even though one had been announced. In contrast, Sonja Ferlov Mancoba’s exhibition was accompanied by a rich and beautifully illustrated catalogue and a documentary film about her (En dansk billednuger i Paris, 1977) that could be bought from the museum shop. Ernest Mancoba’s exhibition had nothing of remembrance to buy and keep after visiting the exhibition.

Nonetheless, Mancoba’s retrospective exhibition is clearly an acceptance of his presence and importance as a European/African/world modernist in an European museum. While it did not take place during his lifetime as he wished, his struggle and his art will be an inspiration to artists coming from other parts of the world who search for acceptance as he did. It is also an opportunity for a wider audience not only to linger on Mancoba’s erasure in art, as is mostly done, but to talk about his artworks, as rightly deserved.

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**exhibition review**

**Igwébúiku: Exhibition of Sculpture in Honour of El Anatsui at 75 Years curated by Chijioke Onuora National Gallery of Art, Enugu February 3–10, 2019**

reviewed by George C. Odoh and Nneka S. Odoh

For his phenomenal achievements in the contemporary art world, the second decade of the twenty-first century may be considered as the decade of El Anatsui, Africa’s foremost sculptor. The artist’s 2019 touring exhibition, *Triumphant Scale*, capped an eventful decade of international awards and recognitions for the artist, including the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement (2015), the Lorenzo il Magnifico Lifetime Achievement Award (2017), and Japan’s Praemium Imperiale International Arts Award (2017). *Triumphant Scale* marked a milestone in Anatsui’s life, as he turned 75 in February 2019. His experiences in the university town of Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria, where he has lived and worked for most of his adult life, offer insightful narratives on his life and art. From 1975, when he came to Nigeria from Ghana, till his recent retirement, he taught at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

On February 3, 2019, *Igwébúiku: Exhibition of Sculpture in Honour of El Anatsui at 75 Years* opened at the outstation of the National Gallery of Art in the coastal city of Enugu, Nigeria. The show, organized by staff of the sculpture section of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, provided a cryptic gaze into stylistic correspondences among artists whose creative sensibilities have been shaped by encounters with El Anatsui. The exhibiting artists, Chijioke Onuora, Eva Obodo, Chike Akahuike, Uche Onyishi, Ekene Anikpe, Sabastine Ugwoke, Amuche Ngwu, Livinus Ngwu, and Sunday Odoh, were taught by Anatsui at different times. In what may be considered the manifestations of the long arm of Anatsui’s influence, the show was, in an uncanny way, a retrospective reading of Anatsui’s stylistic developments, particularly his wood panel experiments of the late 1980s and his found wood installations, which *On Their Fateful Journey Nowhere* (1995) emphasizes. Stylistic echoes of Anatsui’s breathtaking monumental bottle-top sculpture installations also reverberated loudly in the show.

Although the participating artists projected diverse experimental foci, a uniting force that