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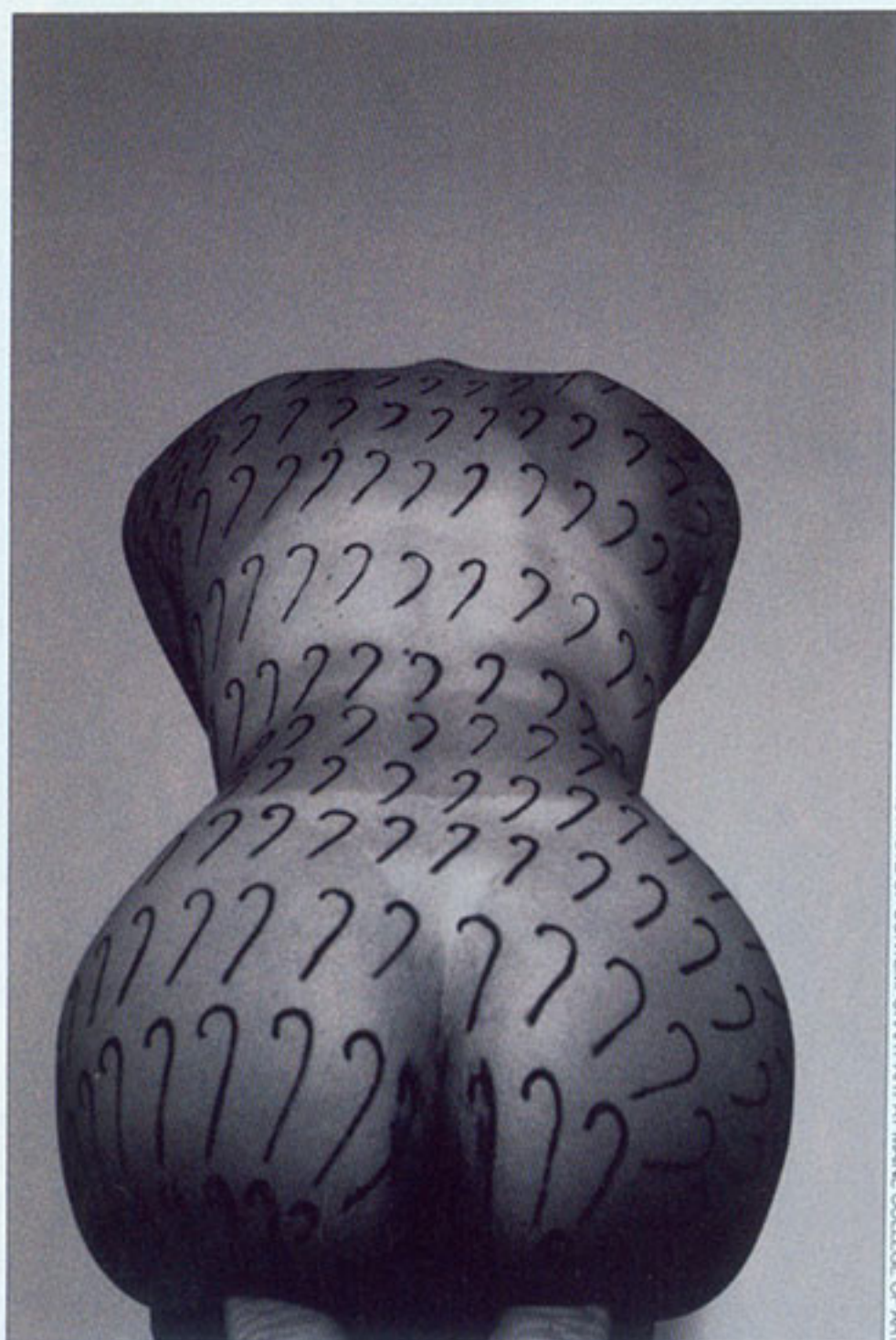
APRIL 2001

The Newest Avant-Garde

African art goes global

PLUS Digital Art Comes of Age
How Matisse Drives Us to Distraction
The Alchemist of Cuernavaca





Nigerian artist Iké Udé's C-print *Untitled (Uli)*, 1997, features a body he painted in black tempera.

For example, Nicholas Mukomberanwa, who shows at Reece Galleries in New York and is considered Zimbabwe's foremost stone sculptor, has been receiving critical attention since the mid-1970s. Praising the artist, who mixes European Cubism and modernism with Africa's Shona tradition of spiritualism and stone carving, critic Rex Weil observes, "Mukomberanwa's achievement is a near perfect synthesis of these influences." Samba, another from this more established generation of contemporary artists, who has been promoted by Annina Nosei Gallery in New York, is notable for his striking, sometimes sexually charged, narratives of everyday life.

Last summer, Sotheby's offered for sale the collection of Frenchman Jean Pigozzi, who amassed the world's largest private holding of contemporary African art after seeing the Pompidou show. The auction brought in a total of \$362,547 for 57 works. However popular these artists have become, they are not nearly as hot—or as expensive—as the new African avant-garde.

"Content: In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present," curated by Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya as part of the Guggenheim Museum's 1996 Africa exhibition, introduced a new view of African art to American audiences. With 130 works by 28 artists—including Malick Sidibé and Iké Udé—the show featured projects that incorporated appropriation, installation, and identity politics. It was geared to the sensibilities and expectations of contemporary-art sophisticates. There were light boxes by Nigerian artist Oladélé

Ajiboye Bamgboye and a mixed-media installation by Udé, also Nigerian, both using mass-media depictions of African stereotypes. Touhami Ennadre (from Morocco) showed extreme close-ups of contorted bodies that bordered on performance art, as did South African Gordon Bleach's pictures of himself constructing and deconstructing a ramshackle building.

The strategy worked, not only launching the careers of many of the artists but also bringing Enwezor international attention as a curator. Until then known only as the editor and cofounder of the Cornell University-based *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* (with Cornell professor Salah Hassan), Enwezor has since been appointed as curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, cocurator of the 1999 Carnegie International, and artistic director for Documenta XI (scheduled to open in 2002).

"I did not set out to make an exhibition to resolve political or economic conflicts," remarked the Nigerian-born Enwezor, who was also the artistic director of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale in 1997. However, the Biennale created a revolution on its own, transforming international opinion about contemporary African art. Under the umbrella of "Trade Routes: History and Geography," it brought together an array of artists whose work addressed issues of displacement, modernization, and alienation in a global context.

The biennial, benefiting from the liberated atmosphere of postapartheid South Africa, encompassed nine group shows in Cape Town and Johannesburg, including "Alternating Currents," cocurated by Enwezor and Zaya, and "Life's Little Necessities," curated by Yale art-history professor Kellie Jones. "The challenge was to renegotiate the categories for presenting art," says Lauri Firstenberg, an independent curator who assisted Enwezor with the biennial, "rather than emphasizing national identities, to show artists having multiple identities in this age of travel and global communication."

In "Alternating Currents," Western conceptualists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Sam Taylor-Wood, Gabriel Orozco, and Hans Haacke were appropriately paired with African contemporaries, represented by the stitched surfaces of Ghada Amer's canvases, the mixed-media pseudopedagogical installations of Olu Oguibe that parody colonial texts, and Zwelethu Mthethwa's insightful photographic portraits of transient work-



In his installation *Song of the Pig*, 2000, featuring 60 orange body bags, South African artist Kendell Geers addresses the issue of genocide.