

MOTT HAVEN HERALD

Africa: In Fashion and Fabric will run until June 4

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By Hayley Lind. JoJo Abot poses in front of her designs at the Bronx Music Heritage Center

The fashion designer Valentino showed long, tunic-inspired dresses, embroidered and beaded fabrics and tribal-inspired jewelry and sandals. Junya Watanabe showed lacey leopard dresses, zebra-print oxfords and leaf-like textiles. There is no doubt that African designs saturated the spring 2016 runways.

The bright colors and exotic looks were part of “Africa: In Fashion and Fabric,” an exhibition that will run until June 4 at the Bronx Music Heritage Center’s current location on Louis Nine Blvd. Though the Center generally hosts music and art-related events, Christie Gonzalez, one of its curators, says she immediately thought of African fashion.

“Lately, fashion has been one of the first things that we thought to connect with Africa,” she said. “It feels like there’s been a huge recent media presence.”

Gonzalez, 29, handpicked three designers and artists to headline the exhibition. She says she looked through articles about African fashion and reached out to the people who appealed to her most.

The three artists chosen were Archel Bernard, Victoria Udondian and Jojo Abot. Gonzalez didn’t just choose the artists because of their visually appealing aesthetics, but also because of their dedication to African culture and their socially responsible foundations. Gonzalez says the goal of the exhibition is to bring these artists out in the spotlight and expose them to a niche market that fits their demographic.

“Because we’re a community art center, we want something within the community,” Gonzalez explained.

Archel Bernard’s company, The Bombchel Factory, produces loose-fitting separates in bold, graphic prints with tribal undertones. Bernard uses earth tones like gold and green and juxtaposes them with deep reds, blues and purples. Bernard produces the collection in Liberia, where she currently lives. She focuses on hiring workers who have endured hardships, including Ebola survivors, rape victims and disabled students.

Victoria Udondian is a different type of artist. While she doesn’t describe herself as a designer, Udondian was influenced by African fashion for her exhibit at the BMHC. Nigerian-born Udondian, who moved to the country just two years ago, gathered used clothing from the streets of New York City. She then draped different pieces, such as old t-shirts, brocade fabrics, silk sashes and even baskets onto two male models. Udondian essentially created artwork that ironically resembles high fashion magazine spreads.

“She’s making these garments with found materials on the streets and giving them new life,” said Gonzalez.

Jojo Abot, who is both an artist and designer, had the largest display at the exhibition. There were several accessories including a necklace with oversized beads and an intricately etched brass purse, which she found in Africa, hanging on the wall. These pieces were overshadowed by the regal magenta velvet coat trimmed with tattered yellow fabric and the denim jacket embellished with pearls and decorated with scraps of black fabric printed with gold and white shapes.

Abot, who was born in Ghana, says her work plays with the social realities of her country, such as poverty and cultural identity.

“We can appreciate the beauty in decay but ultimately it is still decay,” Abot said.

The “decay” Abot is referring to is Ghana’s economic state. She says the key mission of her work is to show that it represents her country in a meaningful way, as opposed to the way she feels Africa is superficially portrayed in magazines.

“It makes a mockery of Vogue that goes out to Africa and poses with some tribe,” she said.

Abot’s beliefs, along with the irony in Udondian’s photographs and the socially responsible aspects of Bernard’s business show how passionate these women are about evoking and advocating African culture. Abot also says the work is about creating a sense of pride locally.

“It’s a more humanistic point of view,” Abot said. “I find that I am a part of this world so different cultures inspire me.”

Although the exhibition just started, Gonzalez feels that it will be successful, and is confident the artists will leave with new customers and fans.

“People like bold, brightness—especially the young generation,” she said. “I feel like the young generation wants to know that they’re doing something when they’re spending their money.”

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