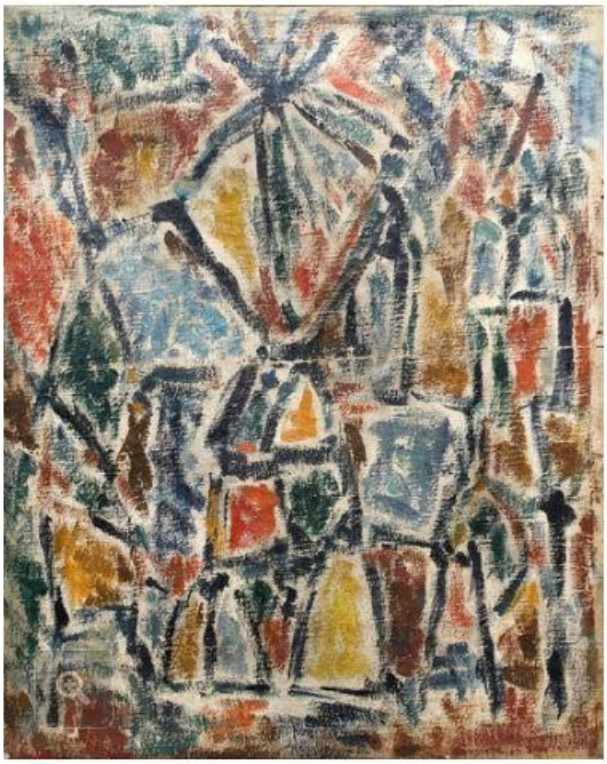
The New York Times

March 13, 2017

‘African Art in a Game of Catch-Up’

By Holland Cotter



Ernest Mancoba’s “Untitled (3).”
Ernest Mancoba, via Aicon Gallery

New York is catching up on Africa’s modern art history, though our big museums aren’t much in the picture. Two of that continent’s leading 20th-century painters are having first major solos here, not at the Museum of Modern Art or the Guggenheim, but at small downtown galleries. And a remarkable contemporary artist collective from the Democratic Republic of Congo is making its New York debut at an alternative space in Queens.

The Senegalese artist Mor Faye (1947-1984) made a vivid impression two decades ago in a group show at the now-defunct Museum for African Art, then in SoHo. His work, all but absent since, is being reintroduced by Skoto Gallery in one of the most stimulating painting shows in Chelsea this season.

Born in Dakar, Faye was a prodigy. At 14, he studied with the great modernist Iba N’Diaye, and within a few years was a teacher himself. His career coincided with a high postcolonial moment. Senegal’s poet-president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, gave art a leading role in shaping a national culture aligned with the literary movement called Négritude. In 1966, Faye was a star of the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar. And he was able, thanks to Senghor’s importing of European shows to Africa, to absorb first hand a wide range of Western art history.

But problems developed. A restless experimenter, Faye came to resent a state-dictated aesthetic that he viewed as too simplistic in its demand that art combine a recognizably African content and a European look. Adding to the tension was his history of psychiatric illness. His behavior grew unpredictable. In 1976, he stopped exhibiting, and spent time in mental hospitals until his death, at 37, from cerebral malaria.

Throughout everything, he stayed productive. He destroyed a lot of output, but some 800 pieces survive and Skoto’s modest survey of 27 works on paper gives an idea of his breadth. An exquisitely brushed acrylic painting from 1969 reads as a pan-cultural Romantic nocturne. It carries hints of a dramatic, even apocalyptic narrative, as does a 1970s piece with a Cubist-inflected block of color and line that could be a sinking house or a foundering ark. Witty, empathetic images of birds and animals recur. So do nightmarish figures, multi-limbed, multi-mouthed, multi-eyed. Stylistically, the work is kaleidoscopic, the binder being its propulsive energy. This is fabulously inventive picture-making. I can easily imagine young painters delighting in it, and learning from it.

Whereas Faye spent his life in Africa, Ernest Mancoba (1904-2002), who has a show of 23 drawings and paintings in a second-floor space at Aicon Gallery, left early and stayed away. The son of a South African miner, he started making sculpture when he was young and had ambitions for an art career. But he knew that, as a black man, doors were closed. At best, he’d be forced into turning out tribal art for the tourist trade. So in 1938, he made his way, via London, to Paris.

Sculptures by the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League collective. Joshua Bright for The New York Times

There he met with some young Danish artists (their English was good; his French was bad), one of whom, Sonja Ferlov, he would marry. With them, in 1948, he founded a group called Cobra. (The name combines letters from three cities: Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam.) With Karel Appel and Asger Jorn among its members, Cobra was leftist in politics, globalist in thinking, and rejecting of all narrowly defined styles, from naturalism to abstraction.

For Mancoba, this freedom also meant release from art that had to look African or Western; he could forge what he saw as a utopian synthesis. Accordingly, the work at Aicon, all from after Cobra dissolved in 1951, thwarts easy cultural readings. In small oil paintings, abstract strokes and daubs of color coalesce into sketchy, featureless figures; in related ink drawings they resemble large-headed African sculptures. Other ink drawings are entirely abstract, made up cursive forms that, like characters from an imagery alphabet, spin and tumble across a page.

Hoping to escape a sense of isolation in his homeland, Mancoba experienced it in Europe, too. He felt that his Cobra colleagues didn't know what to make of his art, or of him. In a 2002 interview with the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist he said: "The embarrassment that my presence caused, to the point of making me, in their eyes, some sort of 'Invisible Man' or merely the consort of a European woman artist — was understandable, as before me there had never been, to my knowledge, any black man taking part in the visual arts 'avant-garde' of the Western world."

The confusion, and ostracism, continues. Mancoba's name tends to be passed over, or included as a footnote, in many accounts of global modernism, whether written from a European or an African perspective. (He was, however, included in "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994," which traveled from Europe to MoMA PS1 in 2002.) The problem is perpetuated in a market that requires non-Western artists to wear their ethnicity like a brand.

Maybe things are changing. Work by Mancoba will be in this year's edition of the venerable European art showcase Documenta. And new artists are breaking, or are at least questioning, old molds. One of the most stimulating shows in New York right now, "Congolese Plantation Workers Art League," at SculptureCenter in

Long Island City, features work by a collective of Central African artists who are also field laborers on cacao and palm oil plantations. They transform one of the commodities their harvest produces — chocolate — into life-size sculptures that are part self-portraits, part ancestral figures and part cartoons.

Mr. Faye's "Untitled #108."
Courtesy of the Estate of Mor Faye and Skoto Gallery; Photograph by Chester Higgins Jr.

The enterprise is a complicated one. It was conceived by Europeans and led by the Dutch artist and filmmaker Renzo Martens. The striking sculptures, initially molded from clay, look, at a glance, like exactly the kind of art Mancoba did not want to make. The profits they bring in, largely from a Western market, are permitting members of the collective to reverse, on a local level, the crippling ecological and economic effects of long-term colonialism.

In short, the project, de-exoticizing and re-exoticizing, is politically problematic on almost every level, and it's fascinating for that reason. It raises questions about imbalances of power based on race and class that are at the very foundation of modern Western culture, but that our big museums have resolutely refused to address, never mind tried to answer.

Mor Faye: The Untitled Series, Works on Paper, 1969-84
Through Saturday at Skoto Gallery, Manhattan; 212-352-8058; skotogallery.com.

Ernest Mancoba
Through April 8 at Aicon Gallery, Manhattan; 212-725-6092; aicongallery.com.

Congolese Plantation Workers Art League
Through March 27 at SculptureCenter, Queens; 718-361-1750; sculpture-center.org.

A version of this review appears in print on March 14, 2017, on Page C1 of the New York edition with the headline: African Modernism Plays Catch-Up. Order Reprints | Today's Paper | Subscribe