

Art in America

Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise

By Mostafa Heddaya — May 23, 2017



View of chocolate sculptures in Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise's exhibition, 2017, at SculptureCenter.

A subtle smell—barely sweet, nearly fungal, vaguely familiar—hung in the air at **SculptureCenter**. The odor emanated from nine sculptures of folkloric or fantastical human figures made from chocolate by the **Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (Congolese Plantation Workers Art League, or CATPC)**, a Lusanga-based collective of workers who cultivate cacao for the global market. **Yet authorship here is a complex proposition, for CATPC's existence, and the production and international circulation of the group's art, is the outcome of an ongoing initiative by the Dutch artist Renzo Martens and his Institute for Human Activities (IHA)**, which he brought to the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2012. Martens has long engaged with the country and is perhaps best known for his controversial 2009 documentary film, *Episode III, Enjoy Poverty*, in which he attempts to train Congolese photographers to take advantage of the lucrative export market for images of suffering in their country.

Whether Martens “détourns” the global political economy of culture, as seems to be his intention, or simply stylizes its brutal contradictions is the obvious question. But to pursue this line of inquiry risks taking focus away from the Congolese artists themselves. “CATPC has chosen the path of the interpretation of traditional African art, but linked with the world of information and communication technologies so as to avoid anachronism,” the Congolese curator Charles Tumba Kekwo observes in a recent book on the group, before concluding: “CATPC does not have an easy answer to cultural resistance.”

CATPC was founded in 2014, with the ecological activist **René Ngongo** as president and Lusanga-based artist **Cedrick Tamasala** as vice president. Lusanga has been a hub for the production of agricultural commodities ever since Congo was a Belgian colony and the town was home to a palm oil plantation established by the British company Lever Brothers (during which time the town was known as Leverville).

The project, in Ngongo and Martens’s telling, represents the “closing of the divide between those who are forced to shut up and work and those who get a chance to shape contemporary taste and ideas,” and the exhibition at hand is the latest opportunity for CATPC to sell its sculptures to fund a higher standard of living in Lusanga. Such a polite entreaty to the art market would seem a poor substitute for the expropriation and redistribution of capital from Unilever (the multinational company that Lever Brothers grew into), but it’s at least something.

The CATPC artists originally rendered their sculptures in clay; it was Martens who insisted on having them 3D-printed and cast in chocolate. The mechanical nature of this process of transformation and replication registers on the sculptures themselves, whose smooth brown surfaces are coldly striated, with the hand of the artists glossed over, resulting in serial art commodities well equipped for Martens’s strategic game of labor-valorization.

While the exhibition was dominated by the sculptures, it also included nine figurative pen-and-ink drawings by the artists and a selection of supplementary works and materials. A reading room set up in a smaller gallery featured, among other items, books and articles on art, culture, and empire by writers such as Michael Taussig, Simon Gikandi, Brian O’Doherty, David Joselit, Ariella Azoulay, and Z.S. Strother. It also contained literature on a new white-cube institution in Lusanga, the **Lusanga International Research Centre for Art and Economic Inequality**, that **Rem Koolhaas’s Office for Metropolitan Architecture** designed pro bono for CATPC and IHA. A second peripheral gallery at SculptureCenter contained a remarkable forty-minute video work of hallucinatory socio-agricultural mythology, ***Upside Down World*** (2017). Filmed and edited by **Eléonore Hellio**, the video was the group’s only collectively authored work in the exhibition (the sculptures and drawings are all attributed to individual members). It masterfully interweaves the ecological concerns and human subjectivities and histories at play in Lusanga, showing residents in their natural and built environments, and placing the spark of ritual and real life in the long shadow of colonialism.