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Chocolate Sculpture, With a Bitter Taste of Colonialism

By Randy Kennedy — February 2, 2017



Mathieu Kilapi Kasiama with his sculpture “Man Is What the Head Is” (2015), at the SculptureCenter in Long Island City, Queens. Credit Joshua Bright for *The New York Times*

Until this week, **Mathieu Kilapi Kasiama**, an illiterate palm-nut cutter and sculptor from an impoverished region in the **Democratic Republic of Congo**, had never left the area, let alone flown in an airplane. And until recently, Mr. Kasiama had never tasted chocolate, the medium for his sculpture, made from the cacao beans that were a prime export during Belgium’s brutal rule of Congo and the country’s exploitation by Western companies.

The other day, at **SculptureCenter** in Long Island City, Queens, on his second day in New York City and bundled up against an unfamiliar chill, Mr. Kasiama walked through an exhibition of work by artisans from his hometown, Lusanga, made of so much chocolate you could smell it. Mottled-brown solid-chocolate sculptures, some life-size — including a phantasmagoric 2015 bust by Mr. Kasiama titled **“Man Is What the Head Is”** — lined the institution’s floor, representing more than two years’ work by the **Congolese Plantation Workers Art League**, a new collective whose work is being shown in the United States for the first time. (**The SculptureCenter show continues through March 27.**)



A detail of “The Art Collector” (2014), by Jérémie Mabiala and Djonga Bismar.
Credit Joshua Bright for *The New York Times*

For Mr. Kasiama and the 10 other members of the collective, the most basic impact of their entry into the Western commercial art world has been financial: Profits from the sale in Europe of small gift-sized works and larger gallery pieces have totaled almost \$100,000 for his community — a tremendous boon to a town where many people earn no more than \$20 a month.

“It’s helping little by little,” he said in an interview, speaking through a translator in a patois of his native Kikongo and French.

“I can take my mother to the hospital sometimes, and I don’t have to climb the palm trees anymore, which I have fallen from five times,” said Mr. Kasiama, who is in his early 30s and grew up in Lusanga. His hometown carries immense symbolic weight: It used to be Leverville, for Lever Brothers (later Unilever), the British soap giant that founded its first palm-oil plant there in 1911 under Belgian rule and sold its operations more than two decades ago, leaving an economic vacuum.

But creating income is only one goal of this unusual collective, which has sprung up at a highly sensitive intersection of postcolonial politics and rising art-world wealth. The brainchild of a Dutch artist, **Renzo Martens**, and a group of European collaborators, the workers’ collective has set out to upend, or at least thoroughly scramble, perceptions of the power dynamic between Africa and the West. Using as its material a luxury good — chocolate — whose production has relied heavily, often ruinously, on African labor and land, the project draws a direct line back to the institutional art world. Philanthropic support for museums sometimes comes from multinational corporations, like Unilever, that have profited from colonial rule. (For many years, for example, Unilever supported the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall commissions.)

Mr. Martens is a provocateur whose 2008 quasi-documentary, “**Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty,**” portrayed him as a troubling do-gooder, trying to persuade Congolese commercial photographers to turn their cameras from weddings and birthdays to focus on the poverty and violence around them in order to make real first-world money — in essence, because the Western news media already was.

The film received a lot of attention, some of it scathing. The art critic Dan Fox, in *Frieze* magazine, wrote that it performed “the same reductive stereotyping” that Mr. Martens supposedly criticizes, exploiting “art audiences’ desires for work that demonstrates ‘authentic’ political engagement.”



Cedrick Tamasala's "How My Grandfather Survived" (2015), surrounded by the work of other members of the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League collective, on view at the SculptureCenter.



Mbuku Kimpala's "Self-Portrait Without Clothes" (2014).
Credit Joshua Bright for *The New York Times*

But Mr. Martens's engagement didn't stop there. He moved to Congo with his family, and through an organization he established, the **Institute for Human Activities**, began to work with artists in Kinshasa, the capital, on the idea of encouraging current or former plantation workers to learn about art making and to form a collective.

"People accuse me of being neocolonial," Mr. Martens said in a recent interview. "But the world is neocolonial, and to end it we need to come up with some kind of apparatus. I feel that there's so much inequality in this world I can't just make politically critical art and show it in places of power. It's exactly because I'm a white middle-class artist that I have to do something like this."

After fits and starts, his plan took root in Lusanga, where residents were recruited and asked to choose others. **Eléonore Hellio**, a French artist and teacher who lives in Kinshasa and joined the project, initially with some misgivings, said: "We had an open call announcing that we would do a sculpture workshop and a lot of people showed up. We tried to select people who had a strong vision of their world and of their living conditions. People who had something to say. It wasn't like a selection in an art school when you pass a test. It was about trying to create a group dynamic. Some people were already woodcarvers, who made pieces for tourists or as fetish objects."



Mr. Kasiama studies "The Spirit of Palm Oil" (2014), by Djonga Bismar.
Credit Joshua Bright for *The New York Times*



Djonga Bismar's "The Spirit of Palm Oil," in the foreground, and two of Thomas Leba's "Poisonous Miracle" sculptures (2015). Credit Joshua Bright for *The New York Times*

The Europeans and artists from Kinshasa who helped found the collective are emphatic that they do not coach the artists regarding subject matter, titles and other creative decisions.

The members chosen ranged in age from 20 to 85, and the current group is nine men and two women. After debate, they chose chocolate as the medium for their sculpture, because some residents grow cacao and sell it to companies for a pittance but mostly because of chocolate's deeply vexed symbolism in Africa's relationship with the West.

"None, and I mean none, of the C.A.T.P.C. members had ever tasted processed chocolate in their lives," Ms. Hellio said, using the collective's French initials. Chocolate also turns out to be a surprisingly stable sculptural material, as long as it doesn't get too warm, and it has a lively history in contemporary art, used by Dieter Roth, Paul McCarthy, Janine Antoni and Hannah Wilke.

Artists in the collective work on their pieces at a covered gathering place outside town, using a multistage, long-distance process familiar to established artists who rely on fabricators: They make original figures from river mud, scooped from a tributary of the Congo; the pieces are 3-D scanned and the data is sent to Amsterdam, where the figures are cast in unsweetened chocolate, made by a French-Belgian company from African cacao beans.

The collective's pieces have been shown in exhibitions in Germany, England and the Netherlands, and profits have gone to the artists and to create locally owned fruit, palm and cacao gardens in Lusanga — what the project calls "postplantations."

This spring, the **Institute for Human Activities** will also open a small art center there. It will have a library, conference hall and gallery designed by **OMA**, the architecture firm founded by Rem Koolhaas, and be funded partly by donations from the art world. The idea, Mr. Martens said, is to bring "the legitimization machine — the Modernist white cube" — to a place like Lusanga to harness art's gentrifying powers. (The art historian Thomas McEvelley, whose writings were pivotal in debates about Africa's contributions to early Modernism, once described white-cube galleries as temples where "eternity is cast upon certain objects and, by extension, upon the attitudes and hegemony of the class to whom they belong.")



Jocelyn Morse Farmerie from Brooklyn talks to her children Bruno, 8, and Scarlet, 6, about “How My Grandfather Survived.” Credit Joshua Bright for The New York Times

Ruba Katrib, SculptureCenter’s curator and the show’s organizer, acknowledges that the project intentionally “raises a lot of questions, among them: ‘What is the value of bringing this work into a contemporary art conversation and should it be done? Maybe the money and effort would be better directed to an N.G.O. Is it worth it? I don’t know the answer, or if there are answers yet, and that’s what interested us.’”

Mr. Kasiama’s father, a palm-oil plantation worker, died of a hernia when his son was young, and Mr. Kasiama supported his family doing handyman jobs and hairdressing as well as the dangerous tree harvesting. Since he was a boy, he said, he had fashioned objects out of wood and woven grass, “and I never thought of those things as art, but now I do, and I think of art as a job.”

“I make things,” he said, “and I get paid for them.”

His New York trip came about after he was unexpectedly granted a visa and SculptureCenter sponsored his visit. It is the first time he has seen the collective’s work in a gallery. Looking over a particularly apt piece — a bespectacled, slightly sinister-looking figure titled “**The Art Collector**,” by his colleagues **Jérémie Mabiala and Djonga Bismar** — he smiled.

“It looks good here!” he said. “I wish they were here to see it.”

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

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