

Press Release – For immediate release

CONGO REVISITED - Roger Botembe (1959 – 2019)

Gallery MOMO Johannesburg

26 October 2021 – 14 December 2021

Gallery MOMO is honoured to stage the *Congo Revisited*, a focus on Roger Botembe's work.

Born in Kinshasa, on 4 March 1959, the artist, painter, muralist and sculptor Roger Botembe received many prizes and awards over his career. A painter of life's deeper sides, he believed that life is essentially about movement and mystery. He observed, surprised and translated life through increasingly enigmatic shapes, which his colour pallet defined and dissolved somewhere on the fringes of figurative and abstract art. As a founder of trans-symbolism, Botembe transcended the tradition by developing his painting through the exploration of signs and symbols taken from traditional African sculpture and masks a departure noted as the 'Renaissance of contemporary African art.'

Botembe benefited from a long and substantial artistic formation furthered by numerous travels to foreign countries including the National Art Institute in Abidjan, and his admission to the Beaux-Arts in Brussels. Throughout his career, he exhibited far and wide gaining recognition and acclaim including an Award of Excellence from the City of Brussels and Gold Medal from the Belgian Government to name but a few.

In 1992, he founded Ateliers Botembe, a Congolese school of contemporary African art. He was Associate professor and head of the Arts-Plastiques section at the Académie des Beaux Arts in Kinshasa and director of International Cooperation and Promotion at the Institute of National Museums of Congo since 2006.

Congo Revisited takes a step back in time to rediscover contemporary African art through Botembe's eyes in the zeitgeist of figurative black portraiture. The title of the show is borrowed from Angelo Turconi's book of the same title, a photographic memoir of his time that spans 50yrs in the Congo. In an attempt to satisfy his passion and curiosity through 'compassionate' portrayal of the daily lives of the Congolese focusing on their cultural heritage, artisanal and artistic traditions, the exhibition seeks to parallel this experience through the eyes of a Congolese. Turconi's photographs are described as capturing the power of ancestral ceremonies and celebrations presided over by chiefs that "still" occupy a prestigious position and in so being reveal the social structure of this central African community.

Moje Mokone wrote in 2005 in the foreword of the Trans – Symbolism catalog, Botembe’s second exhibition with Gallery MOMO, *“Here is an artist, whose paintings are inspired less by pressure to pander to political patronage but more than by the resurgence of democracy and the urgency to reposition Africa in the contemporary world; a griot who eschews the rhetoric, designs and desires of (post-colonial, post-apartheid) comprador bourgeoisie; his work serves not as an agent for grasping greed and power.”*

It is from this departure that *Congo Revisited* is curated, posing the question, “how do “we” see ourselves?” a pertinent question in the making of art and the documentation of ourselves, stories and heritage, a task that should not be left to the exercise of self-proclaimed external emissaries of memory.

The exhibition offers a broad view of Botembe’s interrogations of self and the broader community that he lived within. A community that was not confined to geography, as evidenced by his travels throughout the continent and abroad where he often enjoyed the company of philosophers, scholars and dignitaries. In his mixed media collage titled *Sakofa, 2011* (a title also shared by a powerful compilation of essays and images about Botembe’s work) Botembe in his nuanced manner invites us through this work that almost reads like a postage stamp into his world of nomadic inclination and aptly names the work in honour of his totemic symbol, the mysterious Sakofa, a symbol that eludes to the to- and-fro between the past and present.

Congo Revisited, a focus on Roger Botembe will be on show at Gallery MOMO, 52 7th Avenue, Parktown North, 2193 from the 26th of October 2021 until the 14th of December 2021.

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