

The Creators Project

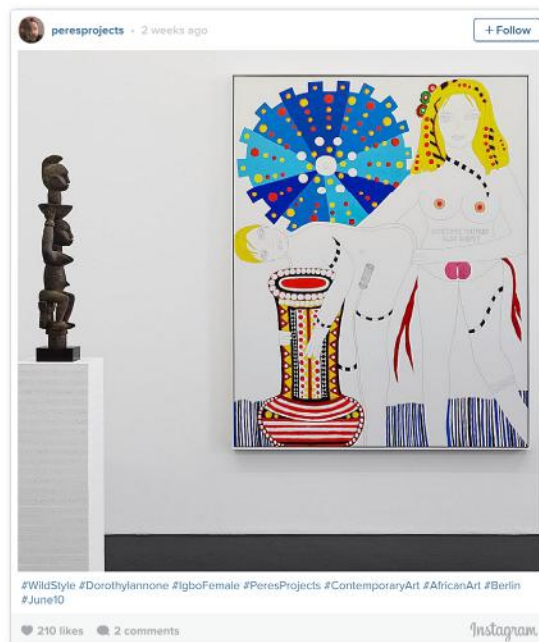
What Do Ancient Artifacts and Contemporary Paintings Have in Common?

Alyssa Buffenstein — Jun 25 2016



Practicing law in San Francisco in the year 2000, Javier Perés began collecting African Art. 16 years later, the Cuban-born collector, dealer, and gallerist operates Peres Projects, a pristine gallery facing the wide avenue of Karl-Marx-Allee in Berlin's Friedrichshain district. His passion for collecting African works, like ritual helmet-masks worn by Sande women, stemmed from an attraction to the formal beauty of African traditions from regions surrounding the Ivory Coast, and has evolved into a collection of more experimental sculptures from regions of Nigeria, Cameroon, Gabon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Over time, Perés' personal collection naturally began to overlap with his work as a gallerist, in which he champions edgy and sometimes controversial contemporary artists, mostly working in traditional media like painting and sculpture. Peres Projects' current show, which opened Friday, June 10th, is the second exhibition of works from Perés' private collection of African art exhibited alongside works of contemporary Western artists. *Wild Style: Exhibition of Figurative Art* encourages viewers to seek stylistic similarities between African sculpture from as early as 200 BC and Western works from the present day. An upcoming book, published with Skira, will include background information on the exhibition and will arrive this fall.



The artists are as varied as the 80-year-old, American-born, Berlin-based Dorothy Iannone and the Texas-based collagist Mark Flood. Intrusively-placed pedestals populate the floor space, on top of which stand the abstracted, geometric wooden sculptures from Africa. In this way, viewers are forced to draw connections, or at least simultaneously examine, the varied means of representing the human form developed by African artists and contemporary Western painters.

Iannone, whose straightforward, text-heavy erotic paintings allude to the spirituality of ecstatic love, is represented twice in the show. Once, with *Metaphor* (2009), a bright, animated-yet-sparse illustration of a Femdom couple, and again with *Signs of Love* (1985), a denser, more saturated piece filled with abstracted pictorial symbols. Next to *Metaphor* is a wooden headdress from Igbo, Nigeria of a seated figure holding another head on top of its own. Many of the African works have lost touch with their original meanings, a result of floundered oral histories and provenance muddled by colonization.

Adding some appropriative, advertorial Pop to the otherwise painterly modern selections is Flood's 1985 photocollage, *Keep it in Shape with a Simple Routine*, which is an advertisement featuring a tan, buff, blonde woman wearing a pale blue spandex one-piece, cut up and reproduced so she has at least seven arms and four legs. The piece hangs in a corner above a squat wooden sculpture with a satellite dish-shaped torso, titled *Female Figurative Spoon*, which was made in the 20th century by an artist from the Ivory Coast. Forcibly juxtaposed, the two manipulated female bodies perplex, considering their incomparable contextual histories.

Inspired by early 20th century exhibitions like those at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 gallery, Perés is interested in exploring the contemporary possibilities of furthering dialogue between premodern sculptures and today's evolving painting traditions. It wasn't until the early 20th century that Western viewers even began to consider African art as art—until then, sculptures like the ones at Peres Projects were considered ethnological objects. MoMA's contentiously titled *Exhibition of African Negro Art* in 1935 was influential to this recontextualization. The exhibition responded to and fueled the budding dialogue between African art and Modernism, particularly for artists including Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, and Amedeo Modigliani.

"Like in those early exhibitions, in *Wild Style*, I have removed the premodern African objects from their original context in order to present them purely as art objects, using the same modes of presentation typical in contemporary art," Perés tells The Creators Project. "This is not to say that the original uses and contexts of these objects are [uninteresting] or [not] important."

Perés' use of new context, set against the blank slate of freshly-painted white walls, builds new bridges between the two traditions. It's not the first time the gallerist has staged such ideas. In Summer 2014, Peres Projects presented *Group Spirit*, an exhibition of Bundu masks from the secret, all-female Sande society of modern-day Liberia and Sierra Leone. The masks were featured alongside the works of contemporary painters like *Assume Vivid*, *Astro Focus* and *Harmony Korine*. This exhibition posited a connection between the spiritual and ritualistic statuses of the masks with the paintings' affiliation within the abstract movement, imbuing hidden meanings into commonplace materials. *Wild Style*'s turn to the formal feels significantly more like an open-ended shift.

Wild Style: Exhibition of Figurative Art is on view at Peres Projects in Berlin until August 8, 2016. Find more information, [here](#).