A COLLECTIVE POINT OF VIEW

Student and guest curators offer their take on African art at UMass exhibit

By STEVE PFARRER
Staff writer

For several years now, the University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst has been inviting area artists to display their work in conjunction with materials they’ve reviewed and selected from the UMCA’s extensive collection. The program’s name? Dialogue With the Collection.

The museum has also put together a number of exhibits organized by student curatorial teams, with the aim of making UMCA a true teaching museum that’s

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Above, "Firespitter Mask, Kponyugo," a wood, metal and pigment piece from the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire.

"Ere Ibeji with Shell Coat," a wooden sculpture from Nigeria, one of many pieces of African art in the exhibit.

GAZETTE STAFF/SARAH CROSBY PHOTOS

A "Male Figure" wooden sculpture from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, part of the current exhibit at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at UMass Amherst.
Student and guest curators create UMass exhibit

UMass Amherst seniors Maddy Conover, left, and Abby Bonnazoli visit the University Museum of Contemporary Art's "5 Takes on African Art/42 Flags" exhibit as part of their advanced drawing class.

Loretta Yarlow, director of the University Museum of Contemporary Art at UMass Amherst, says the UMCA's new exhibit represents a "dialogue" between the faces of African art of Northampton collector Charles Derby and African flags painted by artist Fred Wilson.

Eliza, the Westfield State professor, concentrated on a belief system from the Yoruba people, from present-day Nigeria and Benin, called "Efeji," which is the name of a minor god representing human twins. As notes at his station, called "Collective Memory," explain, the ibeji sculptures are crafted to honor a twin who has died and to protect the surviving sibling from the "recessed spiritual" of the deceased one.

In her exhibit space, called "Authenticity," Yarlow notes that western biases, which tend to assume an older piece of "African art" is more valuable than a newer one, can get in the way of fully understanding African aesthetic traditions. Yarlow notes that Wilson grapples with a similar idea with his flag paintings by stripping away their traditional colors, seeing them largely as a vestige of the colonial era. "I think his idea is for viewers to fill in the blanks," she said.

The UMCA exhibit, which has been extended from its original closing date in December to run until April 29, has also hosted numerous visits by UMCA classes as well as special events such as a talk by Charles Derby. Yarlow hopes to bring Wilson back to the exhibit next semester too.

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For more information on the UMCA exhibit, visit fcc.umass.edu/UMCA-Online. The UMCA will be closed Nov. 23-26 and Dec. 11-Jan. 22.

Gazette Staff/Sarah Crosby

"Royal Fan and Shoes," Nigerian pieces made with glass beads and fabric, are part of the current exhibit at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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closely connected to students and their coursework.

But for its latest show, UMCA has developed an entirely new model: an exhibit drawn partly from the holdings of a private collector, the work of a New York artist, and a group of student curators.

For "5 Takes on African Art/42 Flags by Fred Wilson," four UMMA senior students and a Westfield State University professor, all from different fields, reviewed the enormous holdings of African and other tribal art of Charles Derby, a Northampton collector. Working with Derby, the students have each arranged separate stations of his art, grouped around different themes and their own interpretations of the work.

In concert with that, African American artist Fred Wilson, known for his installa-
tions and different interpreta-
tions of existing art, has created "Flags of Africa" — new paintings of 42 African national flags that have been stripped of their color, leaving just black and white lines and various symbols and shapes.

In an exhibition note, Wilson explains that removing the colors raises questions about what the flags signify — and whether they truly represent the people, history and geography of countries that until the 20th century were almost entirely controlled by European powers.

“This really began as an experiment,” said Loretta Yarlow, UMCA’s director, during a recent tour of the show. There’s no one in this area that teaches [African art], so we wanted to take a different approach in curating the show.”

Yarlow had met Derby, a UMMA alum, some years back and was impressed with his huge collection of African and Native American figurines, statues, masks and other artwork; Derby has acquired the work during a roughly 40-year career as a dealer, collector and appraiser of tribal art. But it wasn’t entirely clear to Yarlow at the time how the UMCA might exhibit some of Derby’s holdings.

“We thought about having one curator, maybe someone from the outside, do a show, but then it would just have been one person’s take,” she said.

Instead, she sought out some different curators: four UMMA graduate students from different departments, and Ima Imeh, a Nigerian-American professor of art and art history at Westfield State University.

These five curators — Imeh served as an advisor and mentor to the students — all met in turn with Derby at his home to examine his holdings, talk with him about why and where he’d acquired them, and select some to display at UMCA.

“I said to Charlie, ‘What if we had these ingrown com-

A Hembra wood stool from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, part of "5 Takes on African Art/42 Flags" at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Gazette Staff/Sarah Crosby