

Ângela Ferreira *Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Mozambique and its Diaspora*

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Review of Ferreira, A. (ed.) (2020). *Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Mozambique and its Diaspora*. Lisbon: Hangar Books, 265 pp.

Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Mozambique and its Diaspora is the second volume of the series of the same name devoted to tracing comprehensive, although artist-centred, overviews of Portuguese-speaking African countries' art scenes. The structure is exactly the same as that of the volume that preceded it, dedicated to Angola: a foreword and two introductory texts, by the editor (the diasporic Mozambican artist Ângela Ferreira) and the series' coordinator (the diasporic Angolan artist Mónica de Miranda), present the theoretical framework in which the whole book has to be understood; these are followed by visual essays on the artistic practice of fourteen artists, an in-tandem collaboration between each artist and theorist. Finally, an interview and three essays, which analyse some contextual features of the contemporary art scene in Mozambique, complete the book contents.

In her brief introduction, with the same title as that of the volume, Miranda proves more convincing than Ferreira in justifying the choice of a title, *Atlantica*, that in strictly geographical terms has nothing to do with Mozambique. It has to be considered, she explains, as an "organising principle" recalling "the flows and fluxes of migration and globalisation" (13) that deeply characterise our



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Submitted 2022-10-08

Published 2022-12-19

Open access

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Citation Girotto, A. (2022). Review of *Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Mozambique and its Diaspora*, by Ferreira, A. *Il Tolomeo*, 24, 337-342.

contemporary, postcolonial world and that have in the Atlantic slave trade surely their most widely studied precursor and example, from Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* onwards. So, it is in these evocative terms that 'Atlantica' can also be applied to the east coast of Africa bordering, instead, on the Indian Ocean, another symbolic space which some artists engage with, as Ferreira argues - albeit this engagement does not clearly emerge in the following section.

Being the volume's editor, Ferreira is also the protagonist of one of the fourteen visual essays that follow, and her own work as an artist is a perfect example of that "Practice in an entangled world" deemed by Storm Janse Van Rensburg, in his foreword, as being the all-encompassing framework in which contemporary art from Mozambique should be interpreted. From her diasporic location in Lisbon, in her audio-visual installations, she pays tribute to the liberation utopia of the Mozambican past and creates an 'art of decolonisation' giving a new life and critical interpretation to archive materials. Eugénia Mussa shares with Ferreira the same ex-centric point of view on Mozambique, thus contributing, with her "Archipelagic Painting", to the "reconfiguration of the Portuguese society's identity" (143), according to the reconstruction in Maria do Mar Fazenda's essay.

Diaspora is also at the core of Maimuna Adam's and Eurídice Kala's personal trajectories and practices. Both were born in Maputo, completed their artistic education in South Africa (like many other artists featured in the book) and currently work in Europe. UK-based Adam's installations and videos build what Raquel Schefer calls, in her text, a true "aesthetics of diaspora", which draws on the display of *objets trouvés* to deconstruct the collecting and ordering principle of colonial domination. "Circulating *capulanas*, Wedding Gowns and Black Dresses. Race and Gender Across Time and Space in the Work of Eurídice Kala Aka Zaituna Kala", by Ana Balona de Oliveira, shows right from the title some contents and themes addressed by the Paris-based artist. The keyword here is 'circulation', since many of her works are complex performances reflecting on cross-border movements of people and commodities in the history of colonial and postcolonial Mozambique.

The two other women artists presented in the book focus their production on the psychic consequences of (post)colonial violence. In "Death on Home Soil", Nkule Mabaso explores Marilú Námoda's search for an answer to "what it means to be a black woman in Mozambique today" (169), through her works *Collective Suicide* (2015) - an installation denouncing how the canons of white beauty still prevail in the construction of feminine identity - and *Memórias de uma língua de cão* (2019) - a video on the linguistic suppression suffered in colonial contexts. Delinda Collier's essay, in turn, is particularly incisive in considering the complex implications and global significance of Camila Maissune's series 3x4. This consists of mug-

shot-size photographs of full-figure women, parts of their body (and flesh) and details of the place where they were taken, i.e. two women's prisons in Maputo. The powerful, empathetic impression left on the viewer by this deeply political artwork is well described by Collier:

3x4's simplicity in creating this inventory of objects and bodies is precisely that we also connect the dots from individual trauma to the very epitome of structural violence: the prison. (194)

The importance of photography for the contemporary Mozambican art scene, which is historically reconstructed by Drew Thompson in a theoretical text in the third section of the volume, is also proven by the visual essays devoted exclusively to this medium in the practices of the artists involved. This is the case, in particular, of Mário Macilau, Félix Mula, Mauro Pinto and Filipe Branquinho. In "To Change People's Mind. The Transformative Lens in Mário Macilau's Photography as Social Practice", Nomusa Makhubu highlights "the politics of visibility and invisibility among those who are marginalized" (118), which the artist conveys through his pictures, created with the technique of superimposition of two different snapshots, often a portrait of some deprived persons and the impoverished landscape they inhabit - such as those taken after the cyclone Idai, which hit the Beira region in 2019. In turn, Rui Assubuji resorts to the term 'traderno' - which has already had a certain use in contemporary art critique in Mozambique and results from merging the Portuguese words for 'traditional' and 'modern' - to define Mula's fusion between life and art. An example of this fusion is the journey the artist went on to the grave of his grandfather, which turned into an artistic performance and was documented by a series of photographs. Finally, Pinto's 'emotional documentaries' are directly connected with the Mozambican tradition of photojournalism, since the artist, after his training in Johannesburg, had the opportunity to work with the pioneer photographer Ricardo Rangel. Paula Nascimento explains her definition of Pinto's photos in the following terms:

The images are not straight documentaries [...], in the sense that they are not literal readings and interpretations of reality, they oscillate between social commentary, artistic imagination and an experimental approach that results in more complex aesthetic and formal solutions. (186)

As for Filipe Branquinho, who also studied architecture and works as an illustrator, through his photography - deeply influenced by predecessors such as August Sander and (again) Ricardo Rangel - he carries out research into the failure of modernity as it shows up in post-colonial contexts. "In Search of Nothing: Filipe Branquinho and the

Void of Modernity”, by Álvaro Luís Lima, examines this very feature of the artist’s work, which appears especially in pictures where the human figure is absent or in portraits of subjects (the prostitute, the blue-collar worker) where the anachronism of contemporary times is more evident. Gonçalo Mabunda’s artworks, too, defy one of the discourses of modernity, “the modernist relationship between violence, technology, and art” (107). His thrones and masks created with deactivated firearms are maybe the most widely known sculptures of Mozambican contemporary art. Yet, as Afonso Dias Ramos underlines in his essay, the complexity of his works is often downplayed by readings that only focus on their pacifist message or on their neo-Cubist-like appearance – while their most striking interest lies in the reflection on the very concept of ‘object’ they inspire.

Engaging with the global contemporary debate on art from a local perspective, hence dynamising the Mozambican art scene, was the explicit purpose of the foundation, in 2002, of MUVART (Contemporary Art Movement of Mozambique), which the three remaining artists presented in the visual essays section had a leading role in. As pointed out by João Silvério, Celestino Mudaulane’s drawings, or ‘visual aphorisms’ – with their sculptural quality and the accumulation in them of patterns, signs and symbols recalling the fabrics of women’s clothing –, well represent the intermingling between the traditional legacy and the renewal that experimenting with new approaches and new techniques brought to the artistic work of this new generation (131).

A similar combinatory, merging process between painting and sculpture (and the other way round), can be also observed in the work of Jorge Dias, as the Mozambican art historian Alda Costa states in her essay “What Jorge Dias is Interested in is the Voices of the World that Reach Him in Several Languages and Formats”. Tracing out the artist’s own path of aesthetic evolution is an opportunity to describe the parallel, more general evolution of the art scene in the country and to state once more the importance of transnational exchanges (part of Dias’s training was carried out in Brazil) in opening up the national discussion on art and renovating artistic practices. Lastly, Gemuce’s activity is summed up by António Pinto Ribeiro as being that of a ‘painter in the city’, “an active participant in the life of the city, Maputo in particular” (75) not only through the production of artworks “that are free from the weight of fulfilling an established canon” and in which “the city is the subject, the context and the setting” (76), but also as a teacher of art at the Visual Art School, back in the ‘90s, and as a curator, first at MUVART and now of his own gallery Arte de Gema.

The conversations of Azu Nwagbogu with Gemuce, Jorge Dias and Rafael Mouzinho open the third section of the volume with reflections on curatorship in Mozambique. The choice of the interviewees

reaffirms the centrality of the experience of MUVART, as this was the starting point for their career development. In their answers to Nwagbogu's questions, the three artists and curators stress both challenges (the lack of acceptance and consumption of contemporary art in the country, the insufficient production of knowledge in the field) and opportunities (the involvement with activism) of curatorship and art practice in Mozambique. "Photography from the Shadows" retraces the history of this medium and its protagonists in Mozambique (not only Ricardo Rangel, but also José Machado and Kok Nam), and some issues related to its development, such as the constraints imposed by the geopolitics of the Cold War, the state control of photos for the press during Frelimo's socialist rule in the late '70s and '80s, the hindering role of the neighbouring South African art market. In "A Read-Through of Mozambique's Liberation Script", Álvaro Luís Lima adopts the concept of 'liberation script' - coined by Mozambican writer and historian João Paulo Borges Coelho to indicate "a national narrative that is well-known for its formulaic, if not propagandist quality" (222), a 'total historical explanation' that "contextualizes the present as continuation of the revolutionary process" (223) - and analyses how it is re-staged by some of the artists featured in the book, who interpret it through the notions of utopia, the collective, and feminine identity. It is on this latest element that Sihle Motsa bases her text on the contemporary arts of Mozambique, which closes the book, in the name of "contesting Lusophone genders" - even if it is not clear how 'genders', which should be understood here as a synonym for 'feminine identity', could be connoted by such a controversial and Eurocentric qualifier as 'Lusophone'.

Despite the perplexity raised by a title that serves the editor's and coordinator's intents and theoretical concerns rather than effectively corresponding to the volume's artistic contents, *Atlantica. Contemporary Art from Mozambique and its Diaspora* succeeds in giving a comprehensive picture of the Mozambican art scene of the last two decades. The visual essays serve as a valuable instrument for criticism on visual art, even though some reading and interpreting difficulties arise due to the fact that the images selected to exemplify each artist's practice do not always correspond to the artworks commented on in the respective texts. On the whole, it is one more 'mission accomplished' for the *Atlantica* series: also this second volume contributes to, as stated by Ângela Ferreira, "fill a gap in the international range of contemporary art publications" (9) on Portuguese-speaking African countries.

