

Artists' Books and Africa
Smithsonian National Museum of African Art
September 16, 2015–September 11, 2016

reviewed by Josh Hockensmith

The recent “Artists’ Books and Africa” exhibition at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art was a testament to the dedication and vision of Janet Stanley, librarian at the Museum’s Warren M. Robbins Library and the show’s curator. It highlighted an often-overlooked art form, presenting a range of historical and contemporary approaches to book arts by both well-known and lesser-known artists.

Mounted in a hallway gallery, the exhibition consisted of twenty books from the Robbins Library’s collection and five from the Museum’s. Since viewers could enter the gallery from either end, each entrance featured a panel of text introducing the idea of artists’ books and impressive elephant folio volumes to set the bookish context (Fig. 1). Inside the gallery, the show was organized in subcategories such as “Democratic multiples,” “Multi-part books,” “Accordion folds,” and “Artists’ illustrated books.”

Scholars and librarians expend a lot of energy articulating how artists’ books are original works of art created in book form, distinct from fine press publications and *livres d’artistes*. As a book artist and researcher, I was initially put off by the



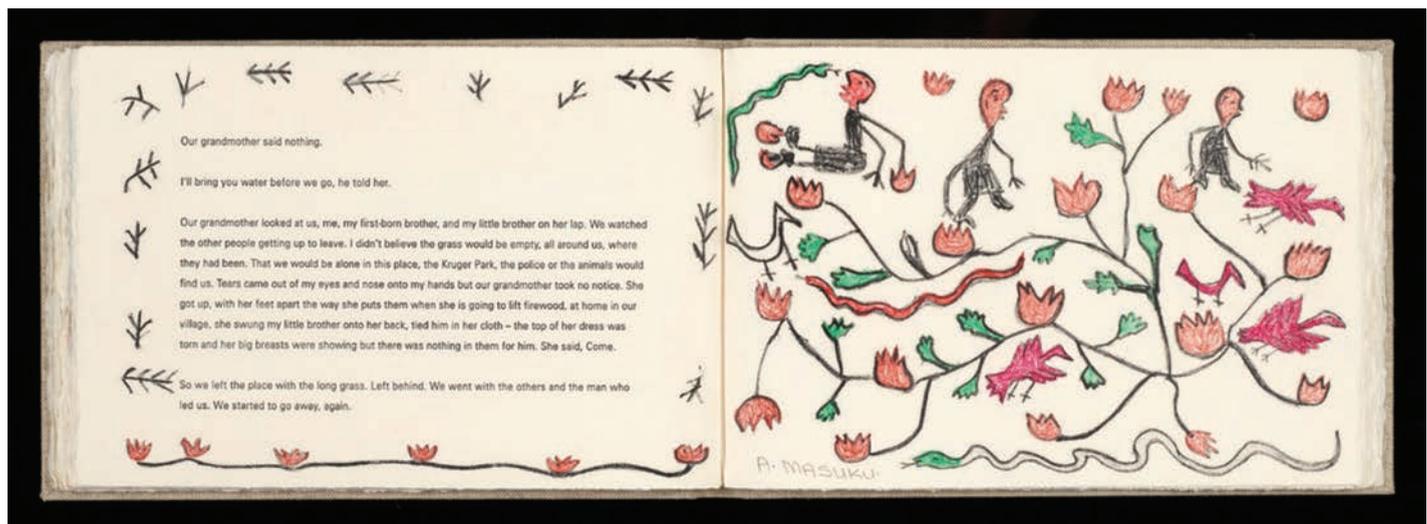
“Artists’ illustrated books” and “Fine art editions” categories, along with the fact that the gatekeeping elephant folio volumes weren’t by strict definition artists’ books, but rather illustrated volumes by nineteenth-century European explorers. The exhibition’s labels and website, however, addressed the distinctions within the field clearly and succinctly, while acknowledging that the categories are hardly black-and-white. Even so, the show’s subcategories remained a slightly problematic mixture of broad production styles, like “Fine art editions” and “Democratic multiples,” and very specific physical features, like “Gatefolds.” The featured items fit within those categories well enough, but the categories’ inconsistencies detracted a bit from the overall story of the show.

However, it’s hard to imagine a perfect alternative. More than many other media, artists’ books exist across the entire, diverse spectrum of art making. There are artists’ books as purely aesthetic objects, with emphasis on craft-intensive practices like

1 Elephant folio volume at one of the entrances to “Artists’ Books & Africa,” showing one of the more impressive custom supports made for displaying the books.

2 Page spread from *The Ultimate Safari*, by Nadine Gordimer, with original hand-printed lithographs by Aletah Masuku, Alsetah Manthosi, and Dorah Ngomane (Johannesburg: The Artists’ Press, 2001). The lithograph shown is by Masuku.

all photos by Franko Khoury, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution





3 Atta Kwami (b. 1956, Ghana)
Grace Kwami Sculpture (1993)
 Paper, millboard, cloth; 7,5 cm x 27 cm x 37,5 cm
 Purchase funds donated by Brian and Diane Leyden; 93-17-1

4 Daniel Halter (b. 1971, Zimbabwe)
Take Me to Your Leader (2006)
 Cape Town, South Africa: Daniel Halter, Smithsonian Libraries

printmaking, calligraphy, papermaking, and bookbinding. There are conceptual artists' books, eschewing craft in favor of embodying the creator's idea in the long-lasting, reproducible, portable, shareable-yet-intimate format of the book. And in the digital age, when the death of the book has been proclaimed repeatedly, artists constantly use new technologies to produce books, to generate or appropriate content, and even to create new multimodal reading experiences that oscillate between analog and digital media.¹ Exhibitions with more tightly focused narratives about artists' books can end up excluding whole swathes of exciting work in book form.

This show demonstrated that engaging bookworks are being created in (and about) Africa across that full spectrum. The "Artists' illustrated books" category of the show featured work in the *livre d'artiste* tradition. One striking book in the category was *The Ultimate Safari* (The Artist's Press, 2001), based on Nadine Gordimer's short story about the harrowing flight of refugees from Mozambique to South Africa. The *livre d'artiste* formula usually pairs famous writers and artists for maximum aesthetic—and commercial—effect. *The Ultimate Safari* subverts that formula effectively by illustrating the story with lithographs created by several of the refugees themselves (Fig. 2).

Another striking book in the exhibition

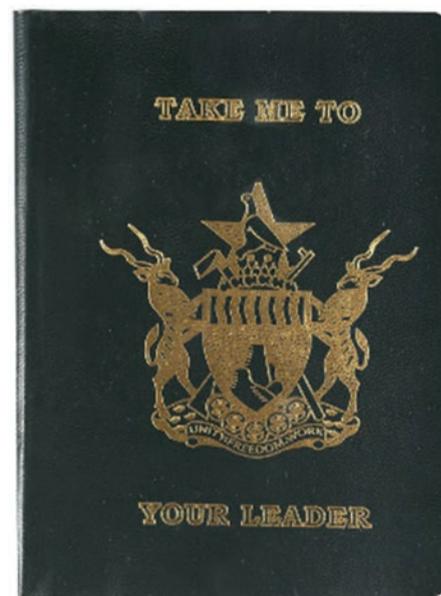
was Atta Kwami's *Grace Kwami Sculpture* (1993). It was displayed in the "Accordion fold" category, but it goes far beyond a conventional accordion book structure. As broader trends go, it belongs to a subset of artists' books whose structures become physical metaphors embodying their contents. Its eight accordion sections reach out from a central spine like legs, referencing the spider Ananse. The exhibition label described the book as a fitting tribute to the artist's mother, also an artist, due to Ananse's reputation for cleverness and Grace Kwami's work in multiple media (Fig. 3).

In general, the most compelling artists' books make creative use of characteristics that are special to the book form—physical attributes like binding structures, as in *Grace Kwami Sculpture*; conceptual attributes like sequence, pacing, and narrative; but also historical attributes like intertextuality and reference to the global history of the book. Every artist's book exists within the broader history of books, and book artists often use that referential power to great effect.

There were multiple examples of works that make self-conscious use of this broader history in the exhibition, and I'll highlight two of them. The first, *Take Me to Your Leader* (2006), by Daniel Halter, makes use of a biblio-archetype: the passport. Halter creates rich interplay between a passport's

inherent evocation of one's home country and the act of leaving it; the title phrase which evokes encounters with the alien; and his own biography which includes self-exile from Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe to South Africa (Fig. 4).

The second example is *Colored People* (C&C Press, 2008), by Blake J. Nolan, which refers to seminal artists' books of the same





5 One page from *Colored People*, by Blake J. Nolan in collaboration with Matt Cohen and Sher Zabazskiewicz (Pajaro, CA: C & C Press Artist's Book, 2008).

title by Ed Ruscha and Adrian Piper. While that kind of reference within the genre could lead to frustrating insider-ism, Nolan's book is strong in its own right. Where Ruscha's *Colored People* employs his characteristic detachment and humor (featuring color photos of cacti without a person in sight), and Piper's explores racial and semantic expectations with a series of portraits hand-colored to suit the subjects' moods ("Tickled pink," etc.), Nolan's book features crisp, beautiful photos from Cameroon that are primarily black-and-white except for the people, who are foregrounded in vibrant, varied colors (Fig. 5).

Because this was a small show, there were inevitably absences. One especially notable artist's book about Africa in recent years is Cristina de Middel's *The Afronauts* (2012)—a self-published photobook about a Zambian teacher's dream of developing a national space program in the 1960's. Unfortunately, it was published at the beginning of the current photobook boom and quickly became unavailable—it would have been perfect in this show. More obvious was the absence of William Kentridge, one of the most

prominent African artists producing book-works. One explanation may be that editions of his books are mass-produced rather than handmade, and often use the flipbook format—both considerations that make them less engaging in a gallery setting.

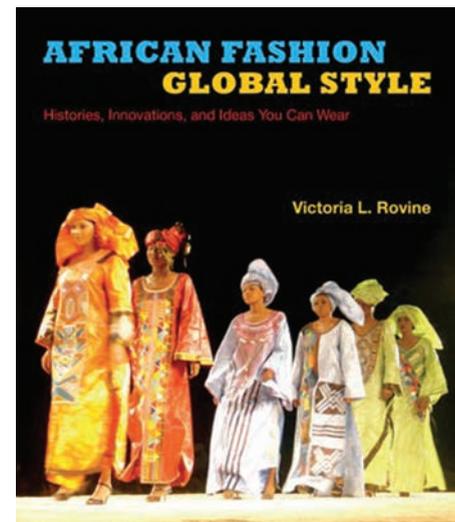
Returning to the gallery itself, artists' books are notoriously difficult to exhibit, but that difficulty was never evident here. Each book was mounted on a plexiglass stand custom-made to fit its shape and form. And while the exhibition didn't alleviate the main frustration that accompanies most shows of artists' books—our inability to actually handle and read the books—the label text was informative, and the exhibition's web presence (<http://library.si.edu/exhibition/artists-books-and-africa>) is exceptional, featuring an introductory video, a fantastic overview essay by Janet Stanley, and an interview with South African collector Jack Ginsberg. All in all, the show was a compelling introduction to the book as an artistic medium in Africa for the general viewer, while including new discoveries for scholars working deeper in the fields of both artists' books and African art.

JOSH HOCKENSMITH is the Library Assistant at Joseph C. Sloane Art Library at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, as well as a book artist who produces work under the press name Blue Bluer Books. hockensm@email.unc.edu

Note

1 As examples of artists' books in this fascinating latter category, see Chris Fritton's *Why We Lose Our Hands* (<http://chrisfritton.com/why-we-lose-our-hands-2/>), and Amaranth Borsuk & Brad Bouse's *Between Page and Screen* (<http://www.betweenpageandscreen.com/>).

book review



African Fashion, Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear
By Victoria L. Rovine
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015. 315 pages, 87 color ill. 10 b/w ill., notes, bibliography, index. \$40.00, paper

reviewed by Jonathan Zilberg

Victoria Rovine's *African Fashion, Global Style* is an exciting and elegant publication which signals the arrival of a vital new subfield in African art history: fashion studies. Being the first book-length study on this subject, it will resituate and reenergize our discipline for years to come; not only it is about a subject so fundamentally connected into people's daily lives and dreams but also the designers and brands presented here stand out as potent new icons of African art. They might even change how we see and what we see as contemporary African art.

Fashion matters—it really does. Rovine will bring into your classroom or living room the power of some superb African artists, their popular brands, and their sometimes eye-popping high-fashion creations. To highlight a very few, consider Amaka Osakwe, creator of Maki Oh, high priestess of the hyper-feminine, and the remarkable Hamidou Seydou Harira, both from Nigeria. From the striking and distinct aesthetics of Salah Barka from Tunisia and the uniquely complex constructions by Charlotte Mbatso from Cameroon to the unforgettable Ben Nonterah of Accra, Ghana, and Paris-based Lamina Kouate's Xuly Bet—eh! Your classroom—perhaps even your wardrobe, your brain—will surely never be the same again.

The first chapter begins with the Ghana