

A different view of Africa

Crafts Council exhibition

Will Bennett

It was for familiarly sad reasons that Africa was in the headlines last week. Sir Bob Geldof announced a concert to raise awareness of the continent's plight, and called on a million demonstrators to march on next month's G8 summit of world leaders in Scotland. Much of Africa of course is terribly scarred by war, famine and disease, but its image as a continent spiralling towards complete cultural collapse is one of many Western misconceptions about this complex, diverse group of nations. Most people asked to describe African art would unhesitatingly mention traditional tribal works, yet the continent has produced a new generation of contemporary artists using a huge range of materials and old and new skills who are influenced by Africa and the West alike.

This diversity is being celebrated across Britain throughout the summer by a series of events called "Africa 05", which hopes to challenge many of the long-held preconceptions about the continent's culture. Venues include the British Museum, Tate Modern, the Cheltenham Festival of Literature and even the more rural surroundings of the Royal Show at Stoneleigh, Warwickshire.

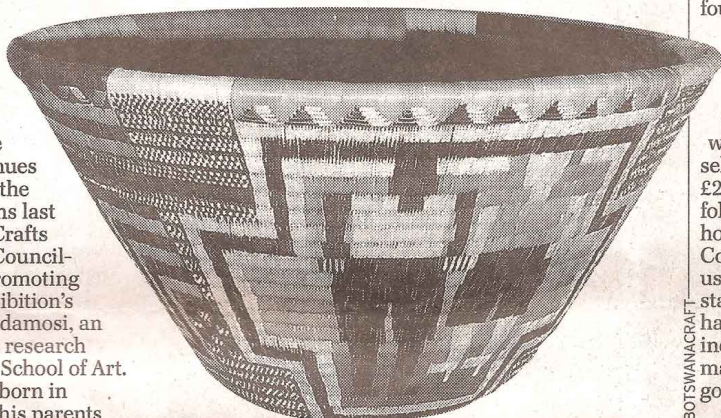
Last Thursday, a selling exhibition called *Mixed Belongings: Eight Contemporary African Makers* opened at the Crafts Council Gallery in Pentonville Road, north London. The show, which continues until August 21, is the result of discussions last year between the Crafts Council, the Arts Council-funded body for promoting crafts, and the exhibition's curator Raimi Gbadamosi, an artist who is also a research fellow at the Slade School of Art.

Gbadamosi was born in Manchester while his parents



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Challenging preconceptions: clockwise from above, bowl by Ndiri Ekubia, *Invocation 2002* by Khaled Ben Slimane, and basket by Gabatsholwe Ntwe



BOTSWANACRAFT

were at university there, but his family later returned to Nigeria before he finally came to live in Britain. "I think that the identity of African art relates to the identity of Africa itself, and all of a sudden Africa has become a viable topic," he says. "If we are going to talk about African art, we do not need to predicate it with outdated notions of primitivism."

Gbadamosi wants to promote a more flexible and accurate view of modern African art and looked at the work of about 35 artists before selecting eight to take part in the Crafts Council show. Four of them are based in

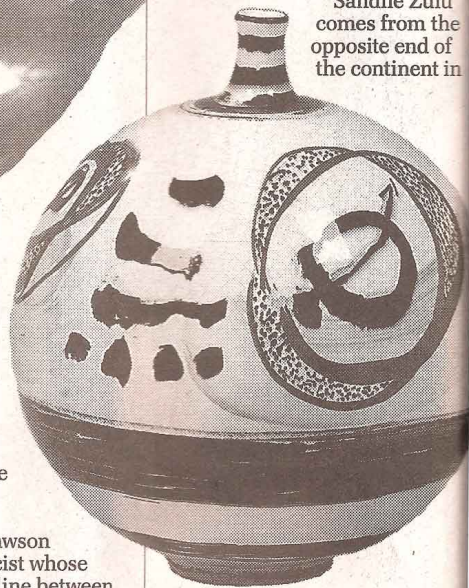
Britain and four in Africa, an even split reflecting the international exchange of artistic influences which he had envisaged from the very start of the project.

British-based Lawson Oyekan, a ceramicist whose work walks a fine line between sculpture and installation, has contributed a series of 4ft- to 6ft-high clay pillars called *Coming Up for Air*, priced at £16,000 to £26,000. Each one has holes to allow air to pass through, sometimes audibly, and they look like the termite mounds found across much of Africa.

His work contrasts totally with that of basket-maker Gabatsholwe Ntwe, who was taught to weave by her mother at the age of 12 and whose traditional pieces, selling at prices from £120 to £2,140, have patterns outlining folk stories from her Botswanan homeland. Ndiri Ekubia, a Royal College of Art postgraduate, also uses traditional skills but makes startlingly modern pieces of hand-beaten metalwork including *Tornado Swirl 2004* made from patinated copper and gold leaf and priced at £2,385.

Another common

misconception about Africa, culturally speaking, is that it comprises only the black nations south of the Sahara, and so Gbadamosi was keen to include a representative of Arab North Africa in the exhibition. He selected Khaled Ben Slimane from Tunisia, a ceramicist who uses North African motifs combining traditional Roman and Arabic elements in works that revolve around religion and symbolism. Prices for works by Slimane, who studied at art college in Spain, range from just £80 for small bowls to almost £2,500 for a larger ceramic vase.



Sandile Zulu comes from the opposite end of the continent in

South Africa and has produced two extraordinary pieces, priced at £7,690 and £10,900, made from a series of plastic pipes on which he has burned patterns and then attached to the wall. The use of fire has a random element that reflects the artist's lack of absolute control over the work and also his belief that something constructive can be born from an essentially destructive element.

Although a few London galleries do sell contemporary African art and crafts, the market has traditionally concentrated on tribal pieces, and the Crafts Council exhibition is hoping to change this. "Our aim is to convey the excitement of what is available and what contemporary makers are engaged in," says Gbadamosi. "This what people are making now."