Harlem artists talk ‘African art’ label with student groups

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for Spectator

IN FLUX | Harlem artists spoke in Malcolm X Lounge as part of Afropolitan Week.
By
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Artists of African descent walk a delicate line in the world of modern art, facing the risk of being marginalized by their ethnicity.

The African Students Association and the Black Students Organization brought that conversation to campus with a pop-up gallery and conversation on how topics from domestic violence to fashion trends and ancestral memory should be dealt with in painting.

The exhibition was a joint project with Art in FLUX Harlem, a collaborative of Harlem artists appearing in pop-up galleries, which took place Tuesday in the Malcolm X Lounge.

Artists Al Johnson, Beatrice Lebreton, Carl Karni-Bain, Ibou Ndoye, Leonardo Benzant, and Oluwatoyin Tella attended the event which was part of Afropolitan Week, the African Students Association’s annual showcase of African heritage.

Most of the artwork was not too abstract for a regular art observer, and there was a broad range of color, canvas, and shapes. One of the most notable pieces is Tella’s “Off the Chain.” The visually striking piece depicts two male presences, both of African descent, clouded in a blue haze. One has a chain around his neck—a symbol of the enslavement of Africans—and the other has a jewelry chain with a cross hanging from it. “The other chains that still suppress us: Scripture,” Tella said.

Ndoye’s “Tribute to Women” stood out as the most unusual piece. It was made of broken glass and painted wood, featuring beautiful color patterns and images of mothers with their children. Hidden within the piece are the poetic, almost illegible lines, “No woman, No mother, No wife ... No love, No life, Give them peace.”

The artists talked about their experiences as African artists and how they feel about being labeled as such.
“I would like to see us get rid of these tags,” Johnson said.

They also expressed frustration at their work merely being labeled simply as “African” or “tribal.”

“If I were to take a picture of the pieces I have shown here today and send them to my friends in Africa, they would say, ‘That’s not African art’ or ‘That’s not traditional,’” Ndoye said. “But here in America, they say my art is too ‘tribal’ or too ‘Afrocentric.’ So I don’t know where my art fits in.”

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