

GAGOSIAN

Forbes

Romuald Hazoumè, Gagosian, Park & 75, New York

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Romuald Hazoumè. Algoma, 2016. Plastic and raffia. 21 5/8 x 15 3/4 x 7 7/8 in.; 55 x 40 x 20 cm. ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ © 2018 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS. PHOTO: ZARKO VIJATOVIC. COURTESY GALERIE MAGNIN-A, PARIS AND GAGOSIAN.

“People forget that art essentially is like a potato: it grows everywhere in the world, but it has different tastes.” Romuald Hazoumè, *New African*, March 19, 2013

The apparent visual simplicity of Hazoumè’s masks belies their true complexity. Made from plastic jerry cans—gasoline or petrol cans—they are not casually recycled art. Hazoumè’s masks are objects that are plastics re-formed, re-made by hand. Yacouba Konaté, the Ivorian philosopher and curator, calls Hazoumè’s masks “Extreme Petrol Can[s],” “found objects,” each one speaking to Hazoumè “by its shape, its pedigree, its patina, or inscriptions, [then Hazoumè] negotiates its retirement from the field . . . from active duty, withdraws it from the trafficking world and reinvests it with an aesthetic mission.” (“The Art of the Extreme Petrol Can,” p. 112.)

A gasoline can is a vital everyday object and foremost a tool in black market commerce in Hazoumè’s native Benin, which shares a border with Nigeria to the east. Petrol carriers attach large quantities of plastic gas cans to their motorbikes and scooters, filling them with contraband fuel in oil-rich Nigeria, then illegally transporting them back to the farms and villages of Benin. To maximize efficiency, the smugglers, heat the plastic gas cans until they are soft and pliable. Why? An expanded, albeit thin-walled, gas can holds even more fuel. Filled beyond their normal capacity, the cans often explode with fatal consequences. So dangerous is the petrol trade, the black marketeers often paint the gas cans red and white, the colors of *Shango*, for the Vodun (Voodoo) deity of protection. Hazoumè says, that “Before these boys go out to collect the

gasoline, they go to the babalao (the Ifa priest) who asks the oracle if today is good for them or not. If he says it's not, they stay at home." The gas can represents success or failure.

Jerry cans, the artist's chosen material, are the profoundly degraded detritus of industrial society, consumer culture and commerce. Hazoumè, like the late Bodys Isek Kingelez (also known as Jean Baptiste, d. 2015), a Congolese artist, both demonstrate a genius for processing what ultimately is discarded, "by turbo-charging the popular tradition of recycling waste for other purposes, and instituting an aesthetic recycling based upon purely personal preferences." ("The Art of the Extreme Petrol Can," p. 112.) Hazoumè is not alone in reworking of everyday "disposable" material. Artistic redistribution of consumer objects is increasingly a significant mode of production in contemporary art. South African Nobukho Nqaba and Zimbabweans Dan Halter and Gerald Machona have all used "China bags" or "Chinese totes"—mesh bags made of red, blue and white polypropylene fibers—in their works. Like Hazoumè's jerry cans, the bags are prominent, visual elements in everyday African culture; but more importantly, migrants and cross-border traders use the bags as mobile storage containers or baggage.



Romuald Hazoumè. Cocotamba, 2017. Mixed media. 10 1/4 x 12 5/8 x 8 11/16 in.; 26 x 32 x 22 cm. ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ © 2018 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS. PHOTO: ZARKO VIJATOVIC. COURTESY GALERIE MAGNIN-A, PARIS AND GAGOSIAN.

In North America, Tara Donovan, Evan Holloway, Brian Jungen and Dan Peterman all evoke the history of how everyday things are absorbed into cultural production. Tara Donovan, for example, transforms widely used, mass-produced materials into visual and physical installations. Product (single medium) and process (repetitive labor) are key to her work. Holloway's recurring use of disposed, alkaline batteries offers a potential comparison to Hazoumè about dangerous, environmentally toxic materials. But, Holloway's sculptures are burdened—ironically so—with a certain pathos, evoking neither vibrant energy nor actual electricity. Conversely, Hazoumè's jerry can masks may be drained of petrol, but they are filled with life.

In artistic terms, Jungen's work makes for the most relevant comparison and contrast; first, because he specifically made masks, and second because his masks underscored the nature of contemporary art (*art qua art* or *potato qua potato*) versus anthropological artifact. In his series of 23 *Prototypes for New Understanding*, Jungen turned Air Jordan basketball shoes into masks that echoed the colors and styles of the Aboriginal Northwest Coast. Jungen stated, "It was interesting to see how by simply manipulating the Air Jordan shoes you could evoke specific cultural traditions whilst simultaneously amplifying the process of cultural corruption and

assimilation.” Like Hazoumè, Jungen mastered cultural hybridization, using new, synthetic materials to imitate historic, natural ethnographic ones.



Romuald Hazoumè. Oiseau bleu, 2018. Plastic and rooster feathers. 14 15/16 x 14 15/16 x 6 5/16 in.; 38 x. 38 x 16 cm. ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ © 2018 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS. PHOTO: ZARKO VIJATOVIC. COURTESY GALERIE MAGNIN-A, PARIS AND GAGOSIAN.

In more socio-political terms, Hazoumè’s work aligns well with Dan Peterman’s, which “investigates structures and systems that have been traditionally ignored by Western societies. In the West, progress has typically been defined as advancement, implying improvement rather than mere change . . . [Peterman] subscribes to the notion that the individual is part of a collective—one’s community or society—and that an artwork is incomplete until apprehended by a viewer—a long standing and traditional view.” (Lynne Warren, *Standard Kiosk* (Chicago), pp. 9-10.)

Hazoumè’s work is distinguished by how he “carves and fashions these masks furrowed and stained by the sweat of peoples’ lives.” (“The Art of the Extreme Petrol Can,” p. 115). The masks loosely replicate traditional masks, without ever obviously or directly appropriating them. This is part of Hazoumè’s originality, his genius. Hazoumè activates an object into a near-life form, possessing real history and exuding emotion. For him, the masks are “the real faces of people” from his culture, portraits reflecting reality. By amending a jerry can with feathers, smoking pipes, household brushes or other materials, Hazoumè reminds us, “now we forget [the meaning of the hairstyle] . . . and what I am doing is bringing back this culture.” He is reclaiming culture. Look at the jerry can, look at the brushes. Look at the faces, look at the hair.



Installation photo with Romuald Hazoumè, Alagbada, 2018. Plastic. 82 11/16 x 82 11/16 x 11 13/16 in.; 210 x 210 x 30 cm. ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ © 2018 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS. PHOTO: ROBERT MCKEEVER. COURTESY GAGOSIAN.

In addition to the masks in the smaller rear gallery is a disk-like sculpture, nearly 7 feet in diameter, made from plastic and 50-liter jerry cans. Titled *Alagbada*, a Yoruba word that translates, per the gallery, as “the one wearing the dress” or “the dress holder.” *Alagbada Ina*, a contemporary Yoruba song, translates as “The one whose outer garment is Fire.” The work is suspended on an angle, occupying full attention. The back is painted in brilliant blue and white—the colors of Yemoja, the mother spirit of rivers, water.

Hazoumè was born in 1962 in Porto-Novo, the capital of Benin. According to cultural journalist Bartholomäus Grill, the artist’s surname is derived from Hâtozoumê, which was corrupted during French colonialism (1894–1960). Hâ is a monkey whose shouting is so distinct and powerful that it scares the other animals. With such a bold name, he should be much better known outside Africa and Europe. Hazoumè’s résumé includes important early group exhibitions ranging from *Out of Africa* (The Saatchi Collection, 1992) to the 1997 Havana Biennial, from the Kwangju Biennale (2000) to documenta 12 (2007), where he won the Arnold Bode Prize. He has had numerous recent institutional solo exhibitions: *Romuald Hazoumè: My Paradise—Made in Porto-Novo*, Gerisch-Stiftung, Neumünster, Germany (2010); Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin (2011); *Romuald Hazoumè: Beninese Solidarity with Endangered Westerners*, Kunsthaus Graz, Austria (2013-2014); and *Romuald Hazoumè: Dance of the Butterflies*, Manchester Museum, England (2015). He had a solo show in New York in 1999, which was notable since the masks were made from industrial or commercial materials that he found or bought in Harlem. Nonetheless, this is Hazoumè’s first solo exhibition in New York in nearly 20 years.



Romuald Hazoumè. Toupieman, 2018. Plastic and brush. 12 5/8 x 10 1/4 x 10 1/4 in.; 32 x 26 x 26 cm. ROMUALD HAZOUMÈ © 2018 ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK / ADAGP, PARIS. PHOTO: ZARKO VIJATOVIC. COURTESY GALERIE MAGNIN-A, PARIS AND GAGOSIAN

There is a sense of never-ending-ness in Hazoumè's sculptures. He is revisiting cultural history, while simultaneously awakening it in contemporary terms. He is re-conceiving, but not replicating, motifs that have are embedded in the collective cultural imagination—both African and European. By transforming jerry cans, Hazoumè changes not only the things themselves, but also the way we think about what they used to be and what they have become. As he concluded in a 2013 interview, “If one doesn't make the effort to understand my work, one only sees masks and nothing else.”