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As a revitalizing self-confidence spreads across the African continent, the archaically stifling notions of colonization are shifting. The denigrating stereotypes of poverty and inequity were never meant to last, just as their ragged remnants were not the end of Africa's timeline. Africa is a continent of pride, of creative resurrection, and of agency. It would be deleterious to be reductive of one's opinion of Africa. A new generation of women and men are spurring change by starting businesses, organizing innovative projects, and inspiring important conversations. A continent rich in resources, and people are the richest resource of all; it is a youthful and growing population with a contemporary mindset and definitive African roots.

Extending far beyond the confines of canvas and the studio, the fibers of contemporary African art interweave with the patterns, textiles, and sands of the past. Together, they voice a complex multi-thread story that is mirrored in the landscapes of the voluptuous continent that they narrate. Viewed as a panoramic whole—from the creative hotspots of South Africa, the thriving music scene in Mali, the vibrant fashion community in Dakar to the myriad of art galleries in Lagos—there is a cohesive and powerful sense of change in the air.

No voice likes to be silenced and the artistic communities of Africa will be heard. Alongside the unabashed need to create, the works go beyond the philosophy of art for art's sake or even art as the fuel of a revolution: it is art for both a reclaimed heritage and self-directed future. A textile enterprise that trains its workers in the art of dyeing fabric with local clays from the Niger river and leaf extract from the N'galama trees is not just teaching how to produce a popular consumer good. It is teaching the traditional ways and showing how the traditional methods ignite dialogue with the current design trends of the West rather than being eclipsed by them.

African artisans grapple with the daily challenges that are present in their regions such as building houses in areas that avoid the mighty floods and using materials that suit their respective regions. There is a reality cloaked in the fantastical: an artistry that lends itself to a deeper consideration of form and function, as well as to the transcendent nature of African craftsmanship.

A comprehensive portrait of Africa manifests from marrying Peter Mabeo's furniture made from indigenous wood or the public-minded architecture of David Adjaye with the up-and-coming threads of Selly Raby Kane's energetic fashion or the soundscapes of Spoek Mathambo's Fantasma that fix Bantu lyrics to computerized beats. As they mold their own art internally, the vibrations ripple beyond the demarcation of homeland boundaries and mold the very way in which a worldwide audience, customers and creatives alike, view the continent. The stereotypes shift from narratives of poverty and famine to tales of resourcefulness and an optimism about the future. A vibration that connects with the oral traditions prevalent in heritage, bestowing truths and wisdom from generation to generation through speech just as this new generation of artists is telling the truth of its lush homeland.



Series of images taken
by Tao Farren-Hefer during his
travels through South
Africa over the past three years.

Designers work within their own national contexts, for Africa is not a homogenous creative whole. One must refrain from generalizing a continent of such magnitude into a sweeping generalization based upon a period of colonialization and suppressed culture. The spectrum encompassing the history, symbolism, languages, religions, wildlife, material wealth, and topography of a region, indubitably impacts the lens through which a designer perceives the world. Still life portraits that adapt the chrome masks of the Benin or design that crafts a triad of Indian, Swahili, and Arabic influence are physical manifestations of an identity that is inseparable from its geography.

Artists wear many different faces. Even in the recent past, the faces of African creatives and entrepreneurs have been shrouded behind occupations that serve tourism and those outside of the African diaspora, working as taxi drivers, waiters, hotel concierges. Driven by an inquisitive nature, the African people are moving into innovative professional sectors; the Silicon Cape is an iconic example of the manifestation of this palpable energetic shift. Curiosity is an essential aspect of a successful entrepreneurial spirit; an experience other to the Western business world allows for a new set of rules and work flow to be fashioned within these ventures. The focus is not on the supply chain, but the quality of the end product and the value that it offers to the community.

Projects that benefit both the land and the people are not mutually exclusive and this is where Africa's communities truly excel. As a self-sustaining industry is created, those behind the initiatives are mindful of the flora and fauna of their fertile homeland: a resource that calls for protection and respect. Structures are erected in accordance with the landscape; business models ensure that people and communities are actively involved; and, as cities evolve and succeed, areas previously avoided for their seedy reputations transform into fashionable districts. The vision of a rough and wild continent may seem to be fading, but it is being replaced by a bold image of a fruitful land for creative individuals and industries where nature thrives simpatico to the human element.



Creating poetry from the past is a natural, albeit often nebulous, progression; an inherent and primary function of art is to make a statement, to connect us to our shared humanity and to elevate our collective consciousness. Africa's art is also influenced by a new world that surges parallel to the poltergeist of history. Africa's artistic communities are actively generating the channels for these essential connections. Some artists choose to leave and seek advanced education exceeding what their native homes can offer, but many others choose to stay or even return after pursuing studies. They return with an intellectual fusion, a perspective from an interim home. And they return with the musings of their cognitive muscles. They return home to the place that gave them their heritage and they bring with them their gifts of imagination and skill.

There are certainly parts of the African continent that face drastic challenges. And not all of that can be changed through surging artistic energies or a new creative generation. But the conversations are being constructed and the symbols are being seen. Craft can be a catalyst for social and economic developments. Equally exhausted and motivated, from working under the burden of misnomers and archaic stereotypes, the creative communities of Africa are ready to overcome this traditional racism and ignorance. They have the strength to start nearly anew; they do not need rescue or a colonizing presence. They are their own salvation and this is in every nuance of their craft.

Africa is on the rise.