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ART IN REVIEW

'Primary Sources': 'Artists in Residence 2011-12'

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Studio Museum in Harlem

144 West 125th Street

Through Oct. 21

The accent is on Africa in the [Studio Museum](#)'s 2011-12 artists-in-residence show. Two of the three participants were born there: Njideka Akunyili in Nigeria in 1983, Meleko Mokgosi in Botswana in 1981. And although they now live in the United States, Africa and their experience of it is clearly a wellspring of their work.

Its presence is autobiographical in Ms. Akunyili's big collage paintings in which two figures, a black woman and a white man, recur: portraits of the artist and her American husband. In one picture we see them dancing close together and face to face in an urban music club; in another they play ceremonial roles in a traditional Nigerian wedding, which requires the bride to kneel before her spouse. Both figures seem to bleed into a background pattern of images cut from wedding pictures and clips from African magazines, as if to suggest that in Ms. Akunyili's world, old divisions between traditional and contemporary, Western and African, are false or at least permeable.

In Mr. Mokgosi's work the political content appears to be concrete and specific, dealing with the tensions and inequities of life in post-apartheid South Africa. But there is something surreal, even hallucinatory about this take on modern history. The details of the narratives don't add up; they defy logic.

He has pieced his painted works together from varied sources to create images that are no more realistically “African” than are the descriptions of that continent found in the Western museum labels that he quotes in a separate series of word paintings.

The show’s third artist, Xaviera Simmons, born in New York City in 1974, has for some time now been playing audacious photographic games with the “African” in “African-American,” adding blackface to black skin, setting young urban women loose in the “the bush” and generally scrambling categories like ethnic authenticity and historical objectivity.

Probably the most immediately African-looking images in the show (which has been organized by Lauren Haynes, an assistant curator at the Studio Museum) are found in Ms. Simmons’s close-up photographs of what look like traditional protective assemblages tied to the waists of black-skinned figures. In this case, though, she made the assemblages herself, mostly from materials gathered over the past year from the sidewalks of Harlem — an Africa, like many Africas, of the imagination.