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Resisting Invisibility: The Strength and Pride of African Women in Angèle Etoundi Essamba's Photography

Trudy Stevenson

Abstract

This is a review of the recent retrospective exhibition *Strength & Pride: 30 Years of Photographing the African Woman*, by Angèle Etoundi Essamba, in the Musée Théodore Monod (18 Feb-30 Mar, 2016), in Dakar, Senegal.

The retrospective exhibition *Force & Fierté: 30 Ans de Photographie de la Femme Africaine (Strength & Pride: 30 Years of Photographing the African Woman)* in Musée Theodore Monod, in Dakar, Senegal (18 Feb-30 March 2016) and the accompanying catalogue by the same title, present a celebration of the African woman, whose strength resists the multitude of challenges cast her way, as captured by the photographic eye of their champion, Cameroonian photographer Angèle Etoundi Essamba.

The title of the exhibition itself, *Strength and Pride*, puts the visitor into the right frame of mind to appreciate more than 200 photographs on display spanning a 30-year period, during which the photographer chronicles, through her lens, her own struggles and her pride in her African-ness, which has enabled her to resist the loss of her cultural identity while working and living abroad.

It is with her most recent series, "Invisible," that Essamba has identified the paradox that she has been struggling with since she first aimed her lens at the African woman. For she now shows in full colour the splendid spectacle of women whose work generally remains uncelebrated, invisible: women panning for cobalt (Fig. 1) and selling coal (Fig. 2) in the Democratic Republic of Congo; women collecting wood, whole tree-trunks on their backs in Ethiopia (Fig. 3); women harvesting salt under the blistering sun day in and day out at Pink Lake in Senegal (Fig. 4); women collecting oysters in the mangroves and harvesting rice in the paddy fields of Casamance; women diving for oysters in Benin (they are not allowed any other form of fishing) ...the list goes on.



Fig. 1. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Invisible: African Women in Action: Mining 002, Kipushi, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2015*. Source: www.essamba-art.com.



Fig. 2. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Invisible: African Women in Action: Energy 002, Democratic Republic of Congo, 2015*. Source: www.essamba-art.com.



Fig. 3. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Invisible: African Women in Action: Carriers 001*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 2015. Source: www.essamba-art.com.



Fig. 4. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Invisible: African Women in Action, Salt 008, Pink Lake, Senegal, 2015*. Source: www.essamba-art.com.

Her “Black and White” series, her oldest (1985-2010), records Essamba’s own struggle and resistance to her loss of identity when she moved to the Netherlands from Africa. Hence you have half-white masks; a white universe embraced by a black woman; white hair made of straw (thus artificial but also natural) (Fig. 5); and, most symbolically, the two cobra photos (Fig. 6), which recall Egyptian mummies and pharaohs (Queen Nefertiti) and Egypt’s fundamental role in African culture and history.

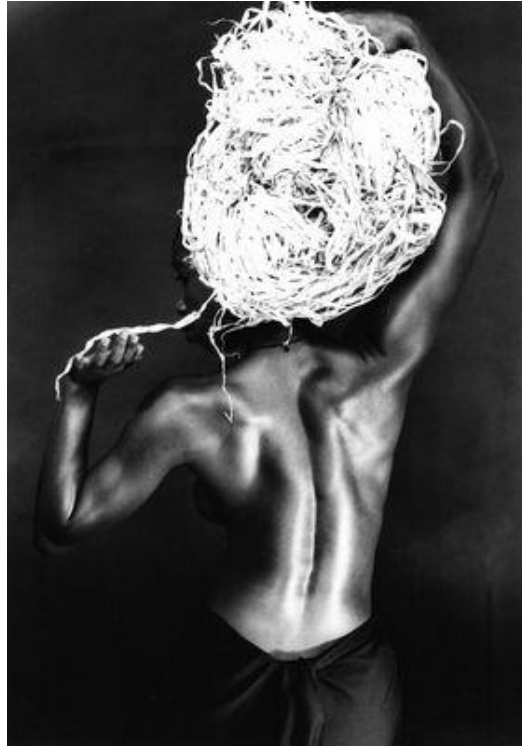


Fig. 5. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Black & White: Cheveux de Paille 1 (Straw Hair 1)*, 1990. Source: www.essamba-art.com.



Fig. 6. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Black & White: Cobra*, 1986. Source: www.essamba-art.com.

When she breaks into the “Color Series,” we see confidence and joy: Essamba has burst out like a butterfly, and wants to show off the magnificent spectacle of the African woman in all her Power and Pride. We have the colors and the warmth of the earth, sun, sky, landscape, but also the colors of the “Second Skin” (another series)—her clothes and adornments. Here we focus on the woman rather than her surrounds—as in the Goree woman (Fig. 7) or the Ethiopian woman (Fig. 8).



Fig. 7. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Un Air d'Antan (Looking Like Long Ago)*, 2002. Source: www.essamba-art.com.



Fig. 8. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Second Skin 6*, 2014. Source: www.essamba-art.com.

In the “Veil” series, we are reminded that the veil has been in use for centuries, not to hide but rather to obscure, to awaken curiosity and sensuality. The big eyes peeping out from the diaphanous veil, held in place or removed at will, highlight the woman’s power over man in this respect, not her subservience (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Angèle Etoundi Essamba. *Dévoilement (Unveiling)*, 2007. Source: www.essamba-art.com.

Indeed, Essamba makes it clear that, in her view, the new Islamist use of the veil is imposed: in her photographs the hijab is superimposed on the traditional veil.

The veil can conceal or reveal: it floats, opens and closes at will, or even by accident: this is all its fascination. Thus it can either present a spectacle or show resistance to the most piercing eye—just like a camera, in the right hands.

Angèle Etoundi Essamba's camera is clearly one of those in the right hands, for African women (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Women of the Water: O Boisson d'Eternité (Oh, Drink of Eternity)*, Ganvié, Benin, 2013. Source: *Strength & Pride* Exhibition Catalogue.

Works Cited

Angèle Etoundi Essamba, *Force & Fierté : 30 Ans de Photographie de la Femme Africaine (Strength & Pride: 30 Years of Photographing the African Woman)*. Retrospective Photographic Exhibit. Musée Theodore Monod. Dakar, Senegal. 18 Feb—30 March 2016.

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