

## Voyages through life, art and history.

As a new exhibition, *Voyages*, opens at the October Gallery in Bloomsbury, Rachel Escott talks to artists Julien Sinzogan and Tapfuma Gutsa, about the lasting impact of journeys.

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*Throughout history people have travelled across the globe. Very early, these voyages resulted in conflict when newly arriving peoples threatened resources or existing traditions. At the same time we are told travel 'broadens the mind' and breaks down prejudices. Do you believe good or trouble is the main outcome of this voyaging?*

*Tapfuma Gutsa (TG):* I would like to think it is for the good. It's within us to move. Elephants, whales they also have this tribal instinct to make journeys. I was born in Southern Rhodesia and for me, personally, it has led to painful times. But I wouldn't say I have suffered, exactly, since I can afford to smile. I think that pragmatism is an important aspect of life; if you are positive.

*Julien Sinzogan (JS):* People have forgotten where they come from. They have forgotten that this planet is a universal possession. It was created before people existed. We came, and we found this earth already made. And then over time we have enclosed this earth, divided it up, created boundaries to protect our different little interests.

As an artist I tend to appropriate the whole earth for myself, to gather into my art things from wherever they are. And so for me, to be able to travel is an extraordinary experience. Each time I go somewhere I marvel ... 'How did they do that, it's magnificent!' For me to travel is a pure joy. And it gives me great freedom, as an artist, to take many influences, new shapes, new approaches, new colours. A new sensibility.

*Yoruba beliefs hold that each individual arrives from another world, that of unborn spirits, and, at death, returns to the spirit world, to become an 'ancestor' figure. If the ancestors are properly remembered and venerated, all will be well, but if an ancestor spirit is scorned or forgotten harm is bound to follow. In light of this, what impact is there on the integrity of the ancestors from the mingling of traditions and beliefs as a result of living in other places?*

JS: Now we are in the realm of spiritual travel. In my opinion, everybody is tempted by the idea of reincarnation. We all reach a moment when we think, 'if I could start again I would do this, instead'. It's a wholly human characteristic. So our civilisations have embedded this trait into our cultures. In the Yoruba culture in Africa, the 'ancestors' are those who, in life, were known amongst their peers for great wisdom. When the Gods are praised or honoured, these ancestors are praised and honoured too. They intercede between people and the Gods, so that their descendents are protected and brought good fortune.

If you ask me whether this behaviour survives the movement of Yoruba peoples into communities outside their own, it's always possible to doubt that they are performing ceremonies in the right way. But as to whether the spirits accept the ceremonies performed outside their natural geography – you'll have to ask me that when I am of the spirit world!

*The October Gallery has written of Sinzogan's work '[his] vision attempts to reconcile and bring closure to this infamous chapter of history' (speaking of the Slave Trade). In Gates of Return, you present the ports of departure of the slave ships as places to where spirits are returning. What role do you think art can have on the 'healing' of old hurts – whether slavery or the results of other conflicts?*

JS: I'm going to sound pretentious! I feel that art combines visual beauty and poetry. There are unusual juxtapositions of colours, of shapes – unexpected things – and you have to find out the links between them, follow the threads like you do with poetry or literature. It's also an intellectual game, because you play with and decipher meaning. Because of this you can touch people the most deeply with it – and the widest number of people.

So with a subject as sensitive as the black slave trade, artists can more easily move into that area. I like especially that it demands both sensitivity and a kind of rebellion. I am black, and African: slavery was very much practiced in the part of Africa I come from. Yet the history of the slave trade wasn't taught at all in schools there. It was an accident that I found out about it, precisely because

of travel. I met people in Haiti, Martinique, Cuba ... Certain things were the same, customs were the same. I didn't know how that came about. I sensed that they had some hurt in them. So I had to ask 'what has happened, what is it all about?'

This history is common to all humans, but it's a history that has been little visited. Yet if I showed pictures of black people in chains, everyone would yawn and think they had already heard it all. Or that it's not so bad compared with, for example, the atomic bombs at Hiroshima. In our culture now we are used to seeing images of the most horrible violent actions. In contrast, to visit the spiritual space through my art, that affects people. It looks acceptable but it asks questions. It needles the consciousness and then the mind looks more deeply and makes connections ... People learn more from ideas if they have to piece things together themselves. They have to make part of the journey towards discovery themselves.

*Tapfuma, your sculptures 'narrate voyages, migrations, life cycles and battles in both the physical and spiritual worlds'. In recent sculptures, water spirits wipe out the trace of their passage with branches. Are you implying that movement and mingling of people is really unimportant in a world sense – the movements and differences in fact so slight as to be imperceptible? Or are you implying that as we travel we too easily forget our gods and the customs by which our societies were shaped?*

TG: The second, really. Something that kept coming into my mind is the tradition, all over Africa, of 'Mami Water', the water spirit. It reminded me of the Arawaks of Jamaica, who were completely wiped out by the Spanish. These people just vanished. In the water spirits work, there are boats with mummies. These represent the people who were transported out of Africa by force, and the people who leave, now. Some daydream that they want to meet a white woman, or they want to buy a car or they want to improve their village; but some become drug addicts. These are tragedies of travel. But when I realise sometimes people have brought this on themselves, I lose my anger.

*You have spoken about the irony of having to go to Western museums to source examples of African culture. Also you have mentioned being comfortable with borrowing from European artistic traditions, given that Europe has so often borrowed from Africa. Do you think artefacts should be returned to their places of origin, or is it important to have them in museums elsewhere in the world, to continue to open other people's eyes to African culture and to challenge our prejudices?*

TG: They should be returned – when the time is right. But for now, ironically, we have bought insurance by having stuff in the British Museum. We could not look after them ourselves. But in terms of other people being able to see them to break down barriers – I think knowledge is the most direct weapon. Property always causes conflict.

*Is it more important to you to challenge conventions of traditional art, or to challenge conventions of traditional society and political systems?*

TG: It's my voyage – life. I don't think I can put a finger on what exactly I'm trying to say in my art. I've seen people be shocked by it. I've seen a woman walk in the room and break down and cry in front of my art. And I've wondered 'what monster have I created?'

JS: What I value most is mixing tradition into my art, the awareness that I come from a tradition. I started working about the slave trade but suddenly I found I was making works about Roman architecture. People around me thought I had completely lost the thread. But there are always links and threads, between people and ideas; and I'm happy with what I am doing in uncovering those. *Those are the journeys I like to make.*

Voyages, October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3AL.  
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[www.octobergallery.co.uk](http://www.octobergallery.co.uk)