

# Earth matters: Land as material and metaphor in the art of Africa

Reviewed by Jessica Williams

**Karen E. Milbourne. *Earth matters: Land as material and metaphor in the art of Africa*. 2013. New York: Monacelli Press. \$50,00.**

Published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title, organised by the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art, Karen Milbourne's *Earth matters: Land as material and metaphor in the art of Africa* is an ambitious concept-driven project that explores African artists' diverse uses of, and relationships with, the continent's land. Initially looking to the physical material of the earth as medium, Milbourne expands her discussion throughout this beautifully compiled and well-illustrated publication to address topics ranging from the secular and spiritual relationships that exist between the land and one's ancestors, to how artists have engaged with the power of the earth as it extends across cultures and time. While her earlier chapters investigate the earth as material, her later chapters examine the earth as resource, exploring how artists have actively engaged with various environmental and political issues regarding the continent's land and its uses. Throughout her text Milbourne thoughtfully considers the continent's socially and psychologically constructed spaces, surveying how artists have looked to and utilised the earth as sites of memory, loss and rejuvenation. Comprised of six thematic chapters interwoven with statements by four contemporary artists – Wangechi Mutu, Clive van den Berg, Allan de Souza and George Osodi – Milbourne examines more than one hundred works created by artists from twenty-six of the continent's nations in a discussion that offers her reader the opportunity for an intriguing, though seemingly sprawling, encounter with 'land as material and metaphor in the art of Africa' (p. 20).<sup>1</sup>

Looking to earlier categorisations of the earth and its materials by scholars, Milbourne's first chapter, entitled 'Material earth', begins with a consideration of how 'earth' and 'land' have been defined across time and by select cultures on the continent. Of interest in this section is her exploration of how the linguistic biases of authors have affected our understanding of particular earthen materials and their diverse significances. Throughout the catalogue Milbourne builds on these various conceptions of the 'earth' and the layered meanings of 'land', creatively weaving

cultures, temporal frames and mediums into a thought-provoking narrative without sacrificing specificities or smoothing over the continent's celebrated pluralisms. In the section entitled 'Plants and the living earth', for instance, she introduces a remarkably stunning late nineteenth-century staff and sheath created for the Yoruba *orisha* Okoto, to honour the deity's powers of farming and the ability to heal through the use of herbs. After discussing the staff, held in the collection of the National Museum of African Art, Milbourne transitions to a consideration of the work of contemporary South African artist, Andrew Putter, who has also 'drawn on the power of plants to interpret his own life and experiences in relation to those who walked his homeland before him' (p. 32). While she does not critically or theoretically engage with Putter's 2008 series *Hottentot Holland: Flora Capensis*, offering a description of his work rather than contributing a particular insight or reading, the connections she draws across previously penciled borders are intriguing and fitting for the goal and scope of her project.

In Chapter Two, entitled 'The power of the earth', Milbourne continues her exploration of the materiality of the earth, shifting her concentration from how earth can be defined (as clay, soil, vegetation, sand, water, ash, etc.) to the complexities of its uses. Building on her examination of the use of earthen materials and focusing on these substances' diversely imbued powers, Milbourne productively places Songey power figures (or *mankishi*) and the *boliw* of Bamana blacksmiths in conversation with works by South African artist, Thabiso Phokompe, and effectively discusses Punu reliquary arts alongside the work of Mozambique-based Zimbabwean artist, Berry Bickle. Examining connections between the uses of similarly colored clays, metals and chalks by artists from across the continent and spanning decades, Milbourne succeeds in placing these once-considered-disparate objects in a dialogue that proves remarkably generative.

Separated from her first two chapters by Wangechi Mutu's short but insightfully placed essay on the roles the earth plays in identity formation, Milbourne's third and fourth chapters are organised with reference to the Kongo cosmic symbol of *dikenga* and offer an exploration of African artists' engagement

with the land's vertical depth and horizontal expanse. While for the exhibition the use of a *dikenga*-based organisational framework served to physically situate and move visitors through the Smithsonian's space in a way that brilliantly merged theoretical ideas with actual exhibition displays – in which video installations hung from the ceiling, works reached upwards from the floor and their pedestals, and partitions guided one horizontally through the darkened atmosphere – in the catalogue this framework is notably less successful.<sup>2</sup>

Echoing its original function in the Democratic Republic of Congo as a 'conduit', Milbourne begins her third chapter ('Imaging the underground') with an investigation into the spiritual meanings and potentials of the land beneath our feet by looking to a remarkable *dibondo* from the collection of the National Museum of African Art. It is through this object – particularly a description of the animal tracks suggested on its decorated registers – that she enters into a broad survey of the roles animals have played in communicating with the underground, and their forms' subsequent inclusion by artists in their works. From her discussion of the presence of the mudfish in Benin arts, to spider divination within Bamum culture and the dual symbolism of dogs among the Bakongo, Milbourne moves on to examine how individuals have communicated with deceased ancestors through sound, and, through specific colours and symbolic patterning, alluded to the netherworld in their works. Unlike her other chapters, in which she fluidly merges discussions of what have been referred to as classical and historic African arts with works by contemporary artists, 'Imaging the underground' makes a somewhat abrupt shift from detailed descriptions of Teke *kidumu* masks, Kongo *minkisi*, Pende performances of *giwoyo* and a lengthier multi-page conversation regarding the arts of the Ogboni society to the more recent engagements of artists with the history of mining. In the chapter sub-section entitled, 'When the earth gets turned upside down', Milbourne historically situates William Kentridge's 1991 film *Mine*, which, in the exhibition, was ingeniously projected on a screen suspended mid-air over the other works included in this section, its low murmurs and drips propelling the audience beneath the surface. Also included in this section of the text are stunningly reproduced stereographs from the National Museum of African Art's Eliot

Elisofan Photographic Archives of the De Beers Diamond Mines in Kimberly, South Africa, as well as Sam Nhlengethwa's 1996 lithograph (from his series *Mine Trip*) entitled, *Ingolovane*. Notably, it is within this section that the too-often perceived-as-invisible, and, as Hannah Arendt (1958:189) wrote, seemingly 'superfluous men' who labour beneath the earth's surface emerge in the discussion of the underground, revealing that ancestral spirits are not the sole occupiers of the layers of land hidden beneath the earth's crust.

For one compelled to view artworks through a critical lens, Milbourne's fourth chapter, 'Strategies of the surface', is perhaps the most captivating. Looking to Edward Said's discussions of the landscape and one's imagination, W.J.T. Mitchell's writings on the landscape as medium, Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's conception of 'Nomadology', and engaging in discussions of how artists have approached ideas of documenting and mapping identity onto landscapes (and vice versa), Milbourne's fourth chapter is by far the most diverse in terms of the works she addresses and yet also, interestingly, the most cohesive of the catalogue's six chapters. Among other topics, Milbourne examines the various ways in which landscape, gender and the body discursively intertwine while also undertaking an in-depth analysis of the layered social and political intricacies of the pieces at hand. The works included in this chapter range from hand-coloured gelatin silver print postcards from the 1920s to works by contemporary Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter (*One Dollar*, 2011) and modern Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu (*Storm Over Biafra*, 1972). In her discussion of cartographic arts in this chapter, Milbourne looks to Mbuti *pongo* cloths and a number of stunning *lukasa* boards created by Lubabanabalute, or 'men of memory'. The particular insights she offers regarding these various works and their histories captivatingly carry across the chapter's sections, bolstering the thematic interconnectivity of the earth as material and metaphor in African arts. Milbourne's fourth chapter is followed by Allan de Souza's essay, entitled 'Where you looking at?' in which he discusses notions of displacement and the perpetual wandering of diasporic peoples between and through the porous cultural boundaries that ambiguously shape notions of belonging in our contemporary moment.

'Art as environmental action', Milbourne's fifth chapter, takes as its locus of interest the ways in which African artists have responded to critical environmental issues such as the devastating consequences of climate change and the inadequately or corruptly regulated corporate extractions of fossil fuel and mineral resources. David Goldblatt's 1999 series on asbestos mining in South Africa's Northern Cape and the town of Wittendoom in Australia receives ample attention, as does, rightfully, Charles Okereke's 2009 series *Canal People* and Nyaba Léon Ouedraogo's 2008 documentation of e-waste recycling in Ghana (collectively entitled *The Hell of Copper*). Milbourne's writing on how African artists have variously challenged global communities to consider the ways in which governments are stewarding the earth covers environmental issues ranging from concerns about desertification and deforestation (Mumwa Crafts Association in Zambia), to the particular environmental issues accompanying overcrowded cities and urban sprawl (Viyé Diba's 2008 installation, *Nous sommes nombreux et nos problèmes avec*) to a broader discussion of climate change (Santu Mofokeng's 2007 photographic series, *Climate Change* and Georgia Papageorge's 2010 video *Kilimanjaro/Cold Fire*). Disappointingly for this reader, the base causes of many of these environmental failures – governments' and corporations' insatiable quest for capital – is left to a small section in this chapter labeled 'War', which looks to a sole work by Ghada Amer and Reza Farkhondeh from 2007, entitled *We are Destroying Planet Earth*. While the political layers of the works chosen for this fifth chapter emerge in some of Milbourne's discussions, the politics and policies with which these artists engage stay slightly beneath the surface of the text. For a curator of a national collection, Milbourne's restraint in her analysis and discussion of the politics of the pieces is not unexpected and is well handled – although there may not be a political boldness in her writing, her choice of works speaks volumes. Immediately following this fifth chapter is Nigerian photographer George Osodi's very brief addition to the catalogue, 'Matter, eco-ethics, and composite space: Thoughts on my pictorial compositions'.

The sixth and final chapter, entitled 'Earth works', looks to the history of the discourse of land arts, beginning with a conversation of

iconic American and British artists (such as Robert Smithson and Richard Long) who began creating monumental earthworks in the late 1960s. After surveying some of the key texts written about land art created in the West, Milbourne moves to examine the history of earthworks on the African continent, drawing into her narrative the pyramids of Egypt and Igbo *mbari* structures before discussing more contemporary pieces by the three artists who were invited to create works to accompany the exhibition on the grounds of the National Mall in Washington, DC.<sup>3</sup> Each of these artists – Strijdom van der Merwe, Ghada Amer and El Anatsui – are allocated sections in this chapter in which a range of their past engagements with the earth are considered alongside those pieces they specifically created for the 'Earth Matters' exhibition. Also included in this chapter are discussions of the work of artists Willem Boshoff and Rachid Koraichi.

Bringing together a wide range of artworks from across the African continent and time in a manner that is thematically and theoretically sound, both the 'Earth Matters' exhibition and its accompanying catalogue are remarkably comprehensive in their scope. Milbourne's research is admirably exhaustive and the reader will find her extensive notes as well as the catalogue's index and her list of select references extremely useful when conducting further research. While some of the organisational aspects that worked so well in the exhibition did not necessarily translate to the catalogue, the strength of Milbourne's text and her ability to generatively draw connections across borders (both geographical and temporal) is impressive.

Given the growing concerns in our contemporary moment regarding both climate change and the globally wrought wars fought over the earth's territories and its resources, *Earth matters: Land as material and metaphor in the art of Africa* is a well-timed publication that will no doubt serve as a reference for those seeking to expand upon art-historical scholarship on the many topics it presents. In her intriguing prose Milbourne successfully introduces and engages with numerous topics relating to 'land as material and metaphor in the art of Africa', suggesting their vast depth in a manner that begs the reader to further explore and excavate them.

## Notes

- 1 In her attempt to give a constructive frame to the project, the works chosen for the exhibition were created after 1807, the year in which the importation of slaves was legally abolished by both the United States and Great Britain.
- 2 For a thoughtful and comprehensive review of the 'Earth Matters' exhibition held at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art (22 April 2013–23 February 2014), see Magee (2014).
- 3 A fourth artist, Ledelle Moe of South Africa, also created a work for this exhibition. Positioned to

the left of the National Museum of African Art's entrance, the large piece served to both welcome and intrigue the museum's visitors. For a discussion of this particular piece (entitled *Land/Displacements*) and others in the artists' oeuvre, see Milbourne's second chapter, 'Power of the earth'.

## References

- Arendt, H. 1958. *The origins of totalitarianism*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Magee, C. 2014. Review of the 'Earth Matters' exhibition. *African Arts* 47(1):82–84.