



Opening doors

Without being drawn too far into the contemporary political arena, it is always worrying for a culture when it starts imposing boundaries and limitations on free movement of people. It is a truism barely worth repeating, for example, that the (continuing) vitality of British Art in the 20th century, has owed an incalculable amount to racism and political dictatorship in Europe and beyond – Bomberg, Freud, Auerbach, Kossoff, Naum Gabo for starters – and now an excellent loan exhibition at **Ben Uri Gallery**, entitled 'Out of Austria' and commemorating the 80th anniversary of the Austrian Anschluss in March 1938, reminds us of another significant strand in the story, that moment when an extremely distinguished group of Jewish and politically endangered artists, fled the country for the UK.

There are some big names among the 20 artists (and 40 works) represented here – most notably Oskar Kokoschka and Lucie Rie – but it is among the perhaps less familiar figures that the full weight and importance of this influx of talent can be felt, people like Willi Soukop, Georg Ehrlich and Siegfried Charoux (all well regarded Modernist sculptors incidentally) who through their practice and, in Soukop's case, by teaching also (he became Registrar of the RA Schools),

exerted a distinctly progressive influence on British art. The lesson, it seems, still needs learning – keep those borders open!

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African story

It has been an almost reflexive pattern in recent decades to think in largely negative terms about all things African; famine, disease, poverty, civil war and political corruption have become too often the defining context of our understanding of the continent. The richness and variety of its many cultures can be subsumed in a generalised and overwhelming portrait of misery that frequently makes us just turn away.

There is however an unmistakable sense that this picture is slowly shifting, one of the upsides of the internet and globalisation being that African writers, musicians and artists are now becoming increasingly familiar, mainstream and influential within our contemporary culture.

The 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair, for example, is now into its fourth highly successful iteration at Somerset House – the fifth in October this year – and has annual editions in New York and Marrakesh also.

The picture it presents is one of sharp visual commentary, the serious issues not ignored but not despaired of either and that, too,

is very much the sense one gets from the work in **Beaux Arts'** bold new venture with the Congolese sculptor Freddy Tsimba.

The Democratic Republic of Congo has known civil war on a scale more terrible than most and while this knowledge often forms an unmistakable element in Tsimba's work – for example the large, mostly female figures, his *Silhouettes Effacées* (Anonymous *Silhouettes*), constructed out of welded cartridge cases from conflict areas – the artistic outcomes are always very far from simple or clichéd statements on the nature of human cruelty. For while the women are often pregnant and show signs of mutilation, and their message is unquestionably bleak, Tsimba, at the same time, invests them with a tremendous dignity and beauty, so that they convey a message of hope and the sense, as he firmly believes, that "life also prevails".

Tsimba is acutely sensitive to the double meanings within the many other metal objects he uses in his work – machetes as weapons, but above all, agricultural implements, spoons as both hunger and subsistence, keys of imprisonment but also opening the doors to freedom. The message is always two fold and never hopeless – "I draw lines of reflection on matters which I haven't found answers to" he observes. In his first show in the UK, Tsimba seems well set to build on an already substantial European reputation.

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