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Waste not want not: The ugly truths behind trash

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There is a perception that African artists use waste products because they don't have the means, or education, to use more traditional ones. Westerners enjoy this idea of poor, noble Africans who rise despite their limits.



RUBBER SOUL: 'The Prophecy Untitled #2' by Fabrice Monteiro from Benin.

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It underpins their admiration for the ability to transform discarded materials into aesthetic objects that overwrite their provenance.

You would have thought Ghanaian artist El Anatsui, famous for his glimmering carpets of bottle tops, would have put these ideas to bed. He uses very specific caps - connected to liquor that originates from the West - to explore the ambiguous relations between Africans and the West.

The products he creates are a foil for this concern, but also, ironically, allow viewers to revel in the aesthetic beauty rather than confront the ugly truths belying them.

Similarly Patrick Bongoy has transformed rubber into incredible sculptures in his Revenants series showing at Ebony/Curated. The deft way in which he has pieced and woven thousands of strips of rubber to form life-size bodies begs interest.

However there's no denying the human suffering these works depict. With his head covered by a thick rubber blanket and his hands and legs bound, one subject appears like a victim of torture. Another has been subjected to such dehumanising conditions it has become "animal" - its feet are hooves and its body is doubled over by the weight of

three large balls.



Patrick Bongoy's 'Ebony'

The rubber allows Bongoy to literally evoke "blackness", but also how suffering can distort identity and erode a sense of humanity - it is a malleable and durable material. His subjects are built to last and exist despite the extreme pain they endure. A Congolese immigrant, Bongoy refers to the strife and crippling poverty in his former homeland.

Fabrice Monteiro from Benin is showing photographs at Gallery Momo of his ensembles fashioned from rubbish bags and other waste materials. They are grand enough to locate his subjects in a fantasy space, though the grim backgrounds work against the escapist thrust.

These otherworldly figures appear like creatures from the sea, like mermaids, yet their existence consists of the detritus of society. They are products of the waste at the bottom of the ocean - a mirror on the world, revealing their ugliness in a way that is at first seductive. This appears to be the modus operandi of African artists; they reel us in through dazzling or unbelievable surfaces only to confront us with banal materials that evoke unspeakable truths.

- *Bongoy is showing 'What's the Matter?' at Ebony/Curated in Cape Town until December 23 and Monteiro shows at 'Revival' at Gallery Momo in Cape Town*

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