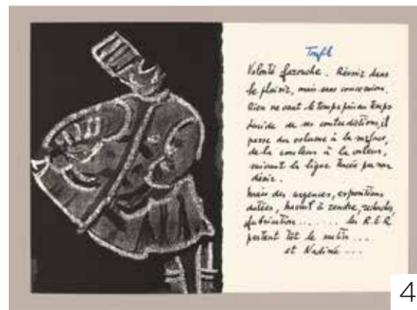




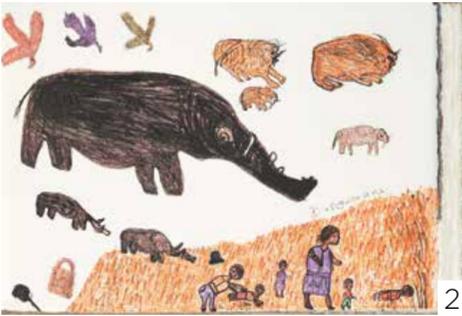
1



3



4



2



5

TREASURES ON SHOW

SOUTH AFRICAN ARTISTS' BOOKS ARE THE HIGHLIGHT AT A WASHINGTON MUSEUM EXHIBITION

text **PETRA MASON**

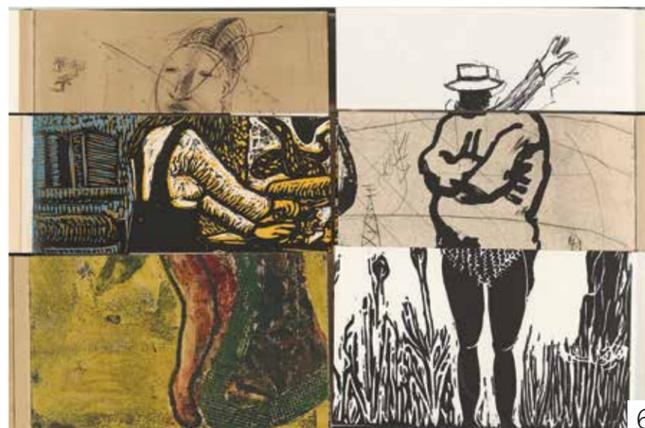
With the massive international interest in African art, the National Museum of African Art in Washington DC is the possibly the tiniest museum in the US capital and curiously designed, as most of the exhibition action happens below ground. A jewel box of a building, it is brimming with treasures from the continent, one of 19 museums under the wing of the Smithsonian Institution.

On view until September 11 is *Artists' Books and Africa*, an exhibition of 25 artists' books: five are from the museum's collection and 20 from the libraries' collection. Not all are numbered editions but all are inspired by or created on African soil.

Artists' books have a fairly recent history (globally circa the 1960s and 1970s) and have been flourishing in SA since the 1980s. SA's contribution takes up much of the showcase and rightly so, because artists' book production has proliferated on the southernmost tip.

Curated by Smithsonian librarian Janet Stanley, the visually expressive presentation includes unique works of art in book form that all conform to a codex of bound sequential pages. All are created by artists, poets, print studios, bookbinders and papermakers in editions that range from the smallest of 5/14 to the largest, of 223/230.

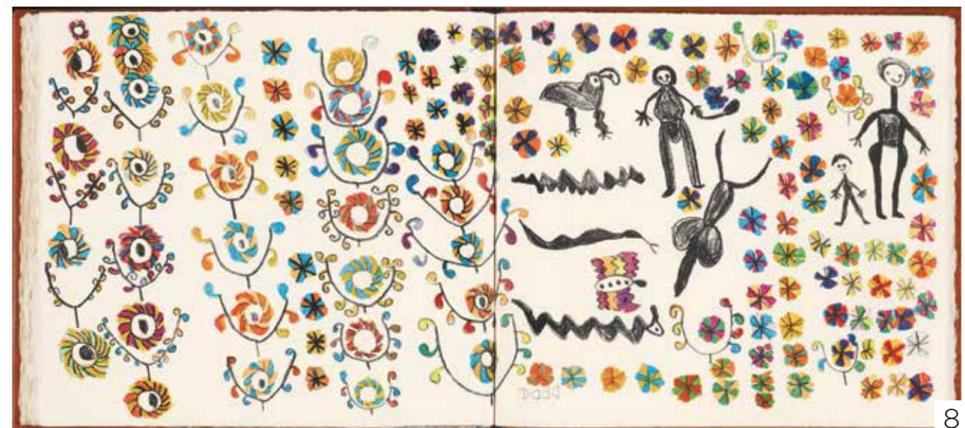
The range of materials that can be used to make an artist's book is wide open. But besides artist Peter



6



7



8

1. Bruce Onobrakpeya
2. Nadine Gordimer
3. Pippa Skotnes, *Sound from the Thinking Strings*

4. Toufik Berramdane, Algeria
5. Blake J Nolan, *Coloured People*
6. *Emandulo Re-creation* Artist Proof Studio, Johannesburg; Dobbin Books, New York

7. Judith Mason and Wilma Stockenström *Skoelapperheuwel*, *Skoelappervrou*; Broederstroom Press
8. Coex'ae Qgam. *Qgauqau: A San Folk Tale* from D'Kar.
9. Mark Attwood, *GIF 2*, The Artists' Press

10. Keith Dietrich, *Fourteen Stations of the Cross*, The Strange Press
11. Peter Clarke, *Bits and Pieces*, Ocean View, SA

Images: Courtesy of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution and Smithsonian Libraries.

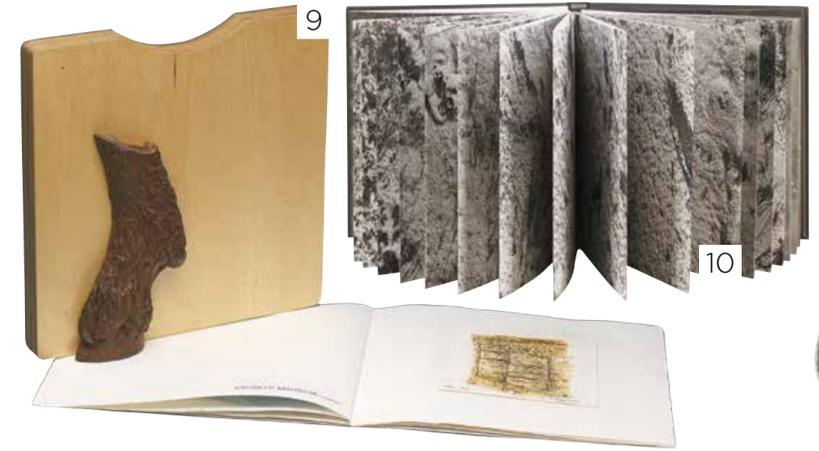
Clarke's whimsical, jazzy, compact accordion fold, *Bits and Pieces*, and "spontaneous collaboration", *GIF*, SA's contribution is much more serious, including subject matter that deals with displacement (*The Ultimate Safari* by Nadine Gordimer); a visual folk tale (*Qauqau*, created in collaboration with artists at the Kuru Art Project and published by The Artists' Press) and previously unrecorded San folktales (Pippa Skotnes' *Sound from the Thinking Strings*, published by Axeage Private Press) and even a surrealist-inspired *Exquisite Corpse*, in which 22 artists made prints over an eight-day period at the Joburg-based Artist Proof Studio with New York artist and paper maker Robbin Ami Silverberg.

The individually printed pages of the collaborative *Emandulo Re-Creation* themed project were then guillotined into six sections, much to the apparent horror of some of the artists. According to Ghanaian-born artist Atta Kwami, although the concept was explained to the artists upfront, when it came time to cut up the images they didn't want theirs chopped.

Interestingly for Silverberg, who was expecting a broad interpretation of *Re-Creation*, everyone's imagery referenced Christianity. Even the Handspring Puppet Company's contribution did so, but with a gay spin.

Displayed directly across on custom-made mounts is Keith Dietrich's mind-bogglingly detailed *Fourteen Stations of the Cross*. Mapping the maze of missionary stations in Africa, the edition of 14 features layers of information and levels of visual detail including a red river of blood, microscopic grains of sand, aerial photography and a maze. As you proceed through the book, the maze gets bigger. *Fourteen Stations of the Cross* is an example of how, as a medium, artists' books are solely able to tell a concentrated visual story of this kind.

Avant-garde Afrikaans poet Wilma Stockenström's *Skoelapperheuwel*, *Skoelappervrou* balances tough free-form text contemplating a women's role with equally strong visuals. Artist Judith Mason's eerie interpretive illustrations and thorny decorative elements – butterfly's wings and mongrels, gaping mouths and menstrual blood – combined with the masterful skills of the then Broederstroom Press, was published by New York-based Ombondi Editions. Featuring pencil drawings and



9



10

Artists' books have been flourishing in SA since the 1980s

collages transferred to plates which were then printed and overprinted as lithographs and selectively redrawn with colour, made for added emphasis. Ombondi Editions even went so far as to create a new typeface named Visigoth to fit the balanced visual text weight layout style. But just before the book was due to be published, it went missing. Then, the Broederstroom Press closed shop and Mason moved to Italy. Shortly after, the publisher died in New York and the whereabouts of the unbound pages remained a mystery. A quarter of a century later, the world-renowned South African book collector, Jack Ginsberg, stumbled upon the pages in the bookbinder's basement in Johannesburg. Finally, 30 copies were bound and Edition 10/30 now resides in Washington DC, kept under lock and key.

So, will these treasures be seen in the Motherland? Yes. In March the University of Johannesburg is hosting a huge exhibition and symposium on South African Book Arts, showcasing 250 examples from the Jack Ginsberg Collection. North American collectors, curators and librarians are already booking their flights.