

De-Colonizing Art Institutions

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First I want to tell about a new book by Iain Chambers: POSTCOLONIAL INTERRUPTIONS, UNAUTHORISED MODERNITIES. It is published in London by Rowman and Littlefield.

Chambers speaks about culture as no longer the property of the rich northern world with everyone else trying to keep up, with an erudition that is specific and always for the purpose of clarification. One wants to quote from every page, and I would like to send a copy of the book to every museum worker and curator.

But the subject I write about is an artwork I have seen only in photograph, and even that, many years ago. Maria Thereza Alves and I saw the image together and still speak of it often. It serves as a kind of standard of excellence for me. It also refreshes my soul and my mind whenever I ponder it again. It is a sculptural work that I remember when trying to make good sculpture. It was titled in the book we had, A MASK OF THE SPIRIT OF A BUBBLE OF SEA FOAM, which seems also a title to carry us away from normal concerns. The piece is not representational of anything yet seems to actually BE, as itself. It is so complexly asymmetrical that it vibrates even on a book page. It makes no sense. It forces me away from sense, like a tune often does. One thing, element, material, or shape does not lead to another. The whole is not only greater than the sum of its parts, it seems greater than itself.

The piece makes symmetry look like a cheap trick of simple-minded thinking.

There is great presence in the work, with no thoughts of representation nor abstraction. It has much colour and much starkness.

Friends have helped look for images that could be included in this writing, but find none.

It might be helpful when looking at art to know a bit of the background of the artist's culture and times. I would like to know more, for example, of the cultural factors involved in the production of an artwork such as the oil-and-pigment painting called, THE SCREAM (which I have also seen only as photograph in books.)

It would be helpful to know the general diet and methods of subsistence of the Norwegian people, and how they possibly came to prize what they term representational in art. If I could get some better sense of how they experience, perceive their flat oil paintings...

To make special museums that show only Norwegian, or Scandinavian, or European artworks, all with explanation of religious and dietary habits, might be too much, however. Maybe a simple line or two about the politico/economic traits would be enough. Anyway, why should those works not be included in any museum of art, instead of museums which seem to show only European (or 'white') art?

Jimmie Durham 2017