The Third Way

This month marks the opening of Lowery Stokes Sims's biggest show since joining New York’s Museum of Arts and Design as curator in 2007. Organized in collaboration with Leslie King-Hammond, graduate dean emeritus at the Maryland Institute College of Art, and on view from November 17 through May 15, "The Global Africa Project" contains works by more than 100 designers, craftsmen, and artists, categories whose boundaries become increasingly blurred here. The focus is on emerging designers based in Africa or of African heritage, but the show goes far deeper, contextualizing traditional craft practices within the global marketplace, for example. Displays range from a line of furniture made in Senegal by the New York-based Bibi Seck, to the architectural designs of Mervyn Awon, of Barbados, and Andrew Lyght, of Guyana, to a mural conceived by the artist Algernon Miller and crafted in Uganda from paper beads made of leftover Obama campaign literature. Meredith Mendelson spoke with Sims about the exhibition.

Why did you decide to do the show now?

Over the past few years, people have really worked to figure out ways to create economic solutions for Africa. The field of design and men's and women's crafts, although many practitioners will say there is not enough support from the continent's governments, is slowly growing. And because it's not aid or investment—it's more of a third way, a kind of small business venture—it has become very important.

Creators in remote areas are entering the global marketplace. Yes, look at the Gahaya Links weaving association [represented in the exhibition], which has brought together Hutu and Tutsi widows in Rwanda to give them a way to make money. They have a line they sell at Macy's and an in-house designer. So there is this kind of rural folkiness coexisting with economic and market savvy.

What will surprise viewers most?

That some of these works do not look African at all. In the section we're calling Composing Globally, we have designs by the Paris-based Togolese-Brazilian Kossi Aguessy, who has worked with Yves Saint Laurent and Cartier, and a recent fashion line by the Paris-based Sakina M'Sa, who comes from the Comoros Islands, to name just two.

It sounds as if the show will give designers inside and outside Africa some great exposure. Is there a commercial element?

We were very conscious of the fact that this could happen. The catalogue is a kind of guidebook, with each designer or artist or craftsperson's Web site and so on. It's interesting working in a museum dealing with craft and design because the way this work moves into the marketplace is so much more direct than it is with painting and sculpture. It was a surprise to me that I can talk about it and it won't be considered distasteful.