Travel: 'The Global Africa Project' Engaging new exhibit co-organized by MICA opens in New York

"Wrenching News," by MICA's Rinehart School of Sculpture director Maren Hassinger, is made from shredded, twisted and wrapped newspapers. It will be on display in New York as part of the "Global Africa Project." (Handout photo, MICA / November 18, 2010)

By Mary Carole McCauley, The Baltimore Sun

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On any map, the massive continent of Africa is parcelled into more than four dozen multicolored parcels. An ambitious new exhibit that opened this week in Manhattan, and which was co-organized by the Maryland Institute College of Art, aims to erase those — and other — distinctions.

"We are asking the question, 'What is Africa?"' says Leslie King-Hammond, who directs MICA's Center for Race and Culture and who is co-curator of the exhibit. "We aren't looking at traditional associations with black Africa. We're looking at Africa as a psychic space, an intellectual space and creative space that inspires artists."

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"The Global Africa Project," which is hosted by New York's Museum of Art and Design, includes artwork created by six MICA alumni and crosses boundaries in several ways. For instance, the artists need not ever have lived in Africa to participate in the exhibition. Indeed, the 100 artists in the show hail from the United States, India, Japan and the Caribbean.

"I think we hit every continent," King-Hammond says. "For instance, Joyce Scott, who is well-known in Baltimore, is a bead artist. This is a material that clearly is part of cultural reference of Africa, but she takes this traditional frame of reference and puts it into a whole new context."

The other MICA alumni whose work is on display are: painter and sculptor Willie Birch; photojournalist Linda Day Clark; conceptual artist Christopher Cozier; sculptor Chakaia Booker; and sculptor Maren Hassinger, who plans to exhibit a series of woven and folded newspaper "sit-upons."

As the above examples demonstrate, "Global Africa" is the rare art exhibit in which such fine arts as sculpture and painting mingle freely on the gallery floor with the crafts of basket weaving, chair-making, furniture and textiles.

For instance, auto manufacturer BMW commissioned a female South African artist to paint a car with feathers in a classic African Ndebele design that King-Hammond describes as "a show-stopper."

As she puts it: "We're not going by the strict definitions of art and craft."

The exhibit also includes machines and other objects that are infrequently, if ever, thought of as works of art. As a result, viewers are introduced to such remarkable thinkers as William Kamkwamba of Malawi.

Kamkwamba lived in a town without electricity or running water. In 2002, at age 14 and during the worst famine in 50 years, he was forced to drop out of school because his family couldn't afford the $80 annual tuition.

After seeing a picture of a windmill in a library book, the teen constructed a makeshift contraption from scrap metal, tractor parts and blue-gum trees. The windmill was crude, but it worked well enough to power a radio and several light bulbs.

Now 22, Kamkwamba finished school and is currently teaming up with companies working to bring modern technology to developing nations. Though Kamkwamba's story is dramatic, he's not the only innovator to find a creative new use for discarded materials.

"The exhibit has crafts made out of recycled bottles and out of fibers used to build telecommunications systems," King-Hammond says. "They were left behind when the engineers completed their work. We're looking at how the world of craft is continuing to evolve using materials that are newly available to the artists."

King-Hammond put the exhibit together with Lowery Sims, a high school pal who also forged a career in the visual arts. Throughout the years, the two friends curated several of exhibits together, focusing on artists "who were excluded, not recognized or in the blurry areas," King-Hammond says — in other words, artists who are female, self-taught, have a nontraditional gender orientation or who aren't Caucasian.

After Sims joined the New York museum as a curator in 2007, she approached King-Hammond about putting together an exhibit that looked at African culture from the standpoint of contemporary crafts and design. The results of their three-year collaboration opened Tuesday and sprawl over four floors of the museum.

"Lowery and I were in tears half the time at the opening," King-Hammond says.

"Twelve hundred people came, and the line of visitors waiting to get in stretched down the block. It was like a rock club. The exhibit is a delight to see, and breaks all of your assumptions and expectations about what Africa is supposed to be about."

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If you go

"The Global Africa Project" runs through May 15 at the Museum of Art and Design, 2 Columbus Circle in New York. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Admission costs $8. Call 212-299-7777 or go to madmuseum.org. For travel information, go to nygo.com.