



PRIMAVERA
Sokari Douglas Camp C.B.E.



Primavera (detail), 2015.
Steel, gold leaf and
acrylic paint,
201 x 72 x 162 cm.



Sokari Douglas Camp.
Photo: Jonathan Greet, 2016.

SOKARI DOUGLAS CAMP C.B.E. A NEW ALLEGORY FOR SPRING

Cloth is to the African what monuments are to westerners. Sonya Clark¹

The October Gallery's Spring exhibition for 2016 coincides with a series of exhibitions in other London galleries that concentrate on the work of one of the better known early Renaissance artists, Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, otherwise known as Botticelli.² Botticelli was the brilliant pupil of Fra Filippo Lippi and Andrea del Verrocchio, and his cerebral style, though greatly admired in his day, fell out of fashion, and he was almost forgotten by the time of his death. His eventual 'rediscovery', some four centuries later, in the 19th century, by members of the Aesthetic movement, re-established his critical significance in the narrative history of art. Indeed, so low had Botticelli's reputation fallen that, in 1872, John Ruskin, who'd previously travelled twice to Rome to study his Sistine Chapel frescoes, was able to purchase the *Virgin and Child* that now adorns the Ashmolean Museum's collection, for a mere £300! Together with the Pre-Raphaelite painters, writers like Ruskin and Pater resuscitated interest in the sensuous linearity of Botticelli's style, and elevated the Florentine master's status to a position where at least two of his masterpieces - *La Primavera* (c.1482) and *The Birth of Venus* (c.1486) - remain amongst the most instantly recognisable paintings of today.

Sokari Douglas Camp's engagement with the first of these two works so informs the sequence of figurative steel sculptures created over the last two years, that this exhibition borrows its title, the Italian word for Spring, from the name by which that masterpiece is known. In fact, no one knows today what the actual title was. *Primavera* was the name attributed to the large tempera on panel piece by the art historian, Giorgio Vasari, who first described it some seventy years after it was painted. In English, the work is often referred to as *The Allegory of Spring*, and whilst there is continual debate about exact interpretation of the work's interpenetrating levels of allegorical, symbolic and philosophical meanings, the basic sense appears reasonably clear. *Primavera* is about the heady attractions of love, marriage and fertility, all combined in that sensuality experienced in Spring as *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower.*³

In Botticelli's painting, six beguiling, feminine figures occupy a central triangular space, flanked by two male figures at the left and right-hand margins of the frame. The triangle's apex is surmounted by a winged Cupid aiming an arrow of love at one

member of the dancing trio below. The scene appears paused in a timeless moment of stillness before the arrow flies, and yet, at the same time, it swirls with an inner dynamic that flows from right to left. Movement begins from the irruption into the scene of the flying Zephyros - the cold West wind - who leans down to capture the attention of the nymph, Chloris, Goddess of Flowers, who is destined to become his wife. This classical story, retold in Ovid's *Book of Days*, describes how the surprised nymph transformed into Flora, the robed figure bedecked with flowers, to her left. Ovid is quite explicit when describing this metamorphosis, even to the point of etymological precision. 'As the Goddess talks, her lips breathe Spring roses. "I was Chloris, who am now called Flora. Latin speech corrupted the Greek letters of my name."⁴ The left-most figure of this transforming triad depicts the Goddess Flora, now fully dressed, distributing pink, white and red blossoms from the folds of her robe as she treads through the garden on a carpet of blooming flowers.

The calm, central figure, outlined against an arch of dark myrtle leaves, portrays Venus, the Goddess of Love and Queen of this enchanted bower. Her right hand is raised in benediction, as though sanctioning the arrow soon to be launched from Cupid's bow. The pointing arrow leads the eye towards the trio of dancing Graces, whose delicate poses and intricately entwined fingers capture the quintessence of movement contained by stillness. Finally, the expressive gaze of the foremost dancer darts towards the attractive youth. He, perhaps flirtatiously, concentrates his attention on raising his staff to ward off threatening clouds. The classically trained will recognise the *caduceus*, or herald's staff, which together with the winged helmet and boots identify the eye-catching youth as Mercury, Messenger of the Gods. Others see this casually armed figure, modelled on a scion of the wealthy Medici family thought to have commissioned the work, as representing Mars, the God of War, and one of Venus' long-standing paramours. The whole scene is organised around the central figure of Venus, who looks inquisitively at the viewer, with disconcerting directness. The longing of woman for man, at left, is balanced against the lust of man for woman, at right, and Cupid's winged arrow is nocked to deliver the shock that will shatter the stasis of time and set this enchanted frieze into flowing motion again. These basic ideas, based on ancient sources, were Greek in original expression; the Romans

reimagined them; and Botticelli painted his iconic revisioning of the tale some five hundred years ago.

Born in southern Nigeria, in Buguma a sizeable town in the Niger Delta, Sokari Douglas Camp grew up in a richly productive land of clean-flowing waters that nourished the green islands of that delta region. Around that same time, petroleum deposits were being discovered to the east, and large multi-nationals, such as the US firm Chevron and the Anglo-

her from being mentored by Lamidi Fakaye, the renowned Yoruba wood-carver, to study in America and England, where she progressed from Central (now called Central St. Martins) to the Royal College of Art. Her chosen medium is welded steel, which she reforms and wields with bravura, making light of the material's obdurate resistance to create lasting monuments to the intangibles of culture, human invention and sensitivity that, like islands in the stream, resist the onrushing flow of time.

of suffering souls from Dante or Verrochio's great equestrian statue in Venice. Sokari's sculptures showed knights in combat against unseen foes lifting anguished bodies that had images of cherubs set into their chests, suggestive of the innocent spirits trapped within. As the emergency gradually subsided, the idea of calming her inner turmoil by consciously examining works of beauty instead, became the germ of this latest *Primavera* project, beginning in Spring, 2015. The choice of Botticelli's allegorical paintings of beautiful figures in all their finery, poised

among the rising 21st century generation would be able to recount the story of Chloris and Zephyros or define just how Mars relates to Venus. Yet most, on seeing it, *will* recognise the Botticelli painting and realise that it communicates a significant story. Botticelli's two-dimensional account of these interlocking fables relied upon the understanding of an audience sufficiently familiar with the undercurrents of the day to catch his drift. His 15th century redrafting had given a revolutionary, novel spin to the antique original, drawing upon ideas that, in

Sandro Botticelli,
1445-1510.
La Primavera.
c.1482.
Florence,
Galleria degli
Uffizi, Tempera
on wood panel,
203 x 314 cm.

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courtesy of the
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Att. Culturali



Dutch Shell, moved in to exploit them commercially. Few in the west are familiar with the on-going drama that scars the account of the mismatched interplay of power and poverty played out in south-eastern Nigeria over the intervening five decades. Sokari's experience of history in her homeland sharpened her keen eye for such contrasts and developed her relish for the ironic twist that informs all her work. Therein lies the source of her instinct to acclaim bravery in the face of tragedy and her insistence on celebrating whatever small caches of hidden beauty she can uncover in a world overwhelmed by pollution, poverty and disease. Her ongoing artistic journey has taken

Following the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa, in early 2014, Douglas Camp's immediate response was to produce a difficult series of works exploring the human aspects of the epidemic, recording the cost in life and spirit to those caught in the path of the unseen menace. News images – for Sokari, a frequent source of visual stimulus – of medical aid workers, dressed in full-body protective clothing, treating sick and dying patients, to her suggested scenes of medieval conflict. With a second home in Italy, Sokari's head filled with associations linking these contemporary scenes to those medieval paintings of pestilence and battle often found in Italy: Botticelli's drawings



Left:
William Blake,
**Europe Supported
by Africa and
America.**
Hand coloured
Engraving,
published in 1976,
in *A Narrative
of a Five Year
Expedition against
the Revolted
Negroes of Surinam*
by Capt. John
Stedman.

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Scala, Florence.



Right:
Sokari Douglas
Camp, 2015.
Collage for
**Europe Supported
by Africa and
America.**

in a flourishing world of plenty seemed compelling. Predictably, however, no sooner did Sokari begin thinking of rebirth and renewal, of flowers and Spring, than incongruous thoughts of sweets, new cars, materialism and the clash of cultures quickly joined in the 'conversation' stream she describes as constantly filling her head while she works.

Sokari Douglas Camp's reformatting of the antique story of Venus presiding over the Bower of Love offers ample opportunity to recast the formal elements of the old myth by dressing it in clothing more intelligible to contemporary audiences. Few

earlier times, would certainly have been heretical. Since the fundamental elements of male and female relationships survive - necessarily intact - in the multicultural present, other avenues open up for exploration in this very different Internet age of global economies. Therefore, taking a leaf from Botticelli's own revisions, Douglas Camp breathes new life into these antique forms. This she achieves by moving between painting and sculpture, marking a radical stylistic transition between the two and three-dimensional approaches. Next, she deconstructs and refashions the legend in metal materials appropriate to the present age. Most importantly, however, using insights derived



from the imprint of her own Kalabari culture, and welding new elements onto the core components, she 'Africanises' the debate thereby adding exciting new vistas of wholly contemporary relevance. The results, when seen in context together as in this first exhibition, constitute a stunning *tour de force*.

The small piece *Three Graces* (2015) is the most faithful reworking of Botticelli's original as a metal sculpture and demonstrates precisely the kinds of differences involved in moving from two-dimensional paint to metal-work in the round. Examining another major sculpture of the same period, *Europe Supported by Africa and America* (2015), we recognise elements of the 'Three Graces' projected onto an image borrowed from William Blake. The Abolitionist Blake's allegorical etching presents the white figure of Europe supported by two darker figures personifying the continents of Africa and America. Here, in the conventional manner, the three figures are barely adorned, except for beads, garlands and bracelets. Sokari's main revision is to clothe these figures in a variety of fabrics that denote the material styles of the different continents. The inspiration for these changes came from an image of three Nigerian women sumptuously outfitted for a wedding, each wearing a distinctive combination of wrap, bodice and headdress. The subtle implication is that dressing both defines and displays culture. As Sonya Clark indicates, when it comes to African cloth, the material *is* the message. Botticelli was also aware of the critical importance of clothing. Best-known for his new-born, naked Venus, few realise she is actually on the point of being covered with a sumptuous cloth to hide her nakedness. Furthermore, the only artist whose *Judgement of Paris* breaks with convention to present Venus, Juno and Athena, not as naked but fully dressed, was Botticelli. The importance of cloth fabrics in denoting status and wealth is common throughout West Africa, and Kalabari culture puts

particular emphasis on its value as *the* significant vehicle of cultural transmission. Sokari's figures dressed in identifying clothing are less vulnerable to misinterpretation than their predecessors, and in her modernised version of the 'exchange' that occurs between the three continents, subtle shifts have been introduced to imply that the imbalance and exploitation of former times is at last, finally beginning to be redressed.

In the small steel work, *Posing with a Gun* (2015), the lone, male figure in *contrapposto* stance is taken to be Mars rather than Mercury, his long, curved sword having been swapped for a Kalashnikov on a shoulder sling. In all other respects, the figure reaching up towards the notional trees behind is a fair copy of the Botticelli work. The nickel-plated work, *Prick Gun* (2016), hammers home the more serious message of contemporary concerns, as both sword and staff of office are now transformed into sinister modern weapons. The cloth draped across his shoulder has been 'Africanised' and the ensemble completed by a brimless *kufi* hat. The impact of this piece rests on its underlying commentary about the power vested in young males with firearms. Here, the gun as phallic power object tells of the burdens falling on any society where semi-automatic weapons become commonplace objects of desire. We see how the contemporary paradigm shift attracts to itself associations that move the discussion beyond simple issues of love and fertility to encompass much more threatening implications. These murderous weapons in the wrong hands blight communities with deadly conflict. The background historical context refers to armed militia groups in the Delta from 2003 onwards – emerging in part to oppose the state-backed violence practised against them - which quickly descended into cyclical vendettas of terror and intimidation. We have seen all too often images of AK-47s being fired aloft in victory celebrations, and we cannot view this sculpture – and its telling title – without concern. Nigeria, today, is awash with guns, from the 'licensed' weapons of the Nigerian military and the dreaded Mobile Police Force to the 'illegal' guns in the hands of paramilitaries of all stripes, including the Islamic fundamentalist group, Boko Haram, using them to kidnap and rape schoolgirls and intimidate, by terror, the local communities.

Such contentious issues are calmed, however, in the delightful *Lovers Whispering* (2016) that harks back to *Whispering Blowing* (2015) a sister piece in nickel-plated steel. This impressive work reprises, in a more gentle form, the interaction between Zephyros and Chloris, the nymph whom he seized and impregnated. In the Greek myth, retribution was made and the expectant mother honoured as his wife. Yet the promptings of lust still exercise society's ability to constrain the simmering energies of youthful passion. Sokari's version of a young man softly blowing his love-song into the ears of the object of his

attentions charms us precisely because of its restraint. The asymmetric power of Zephyros swooping on a gust of wind from above has been equalised and, borrowing a leaf from Botticelli's book, Sokari makes the suitor's honeyed words figuratively transform into flowery leaves of golden speech. The young woman gently inclining her head to offer an inviting ear suggests her acceptance of his tender whisperings. In another nuanced association between the lovers and the protective grove where secretly they meet, the young lovers' headdresses reprise the foliage patterns of the Spring that surrounds them. Love, in any place or time and in any society should be as sweetly intoxicating as this image suggests, and the golden fruit hanging above their heads implies the ripeness of fulfilment. Oranges are, traditionally, symbolic of virginity and fertility, but we may also convert these bright perspex shapes into the Food of the Gods by reading them as ripe persimmons. Mirroring the voluptuous hanging fruit, the repetition of softly rounded shapes: eyes, cheeks, breasts and lips - all promise fruition. The young girl's half-hidden nipples, traced with delicate finery, display a sensitivity of touch - astonishing in steel - of which Botticelli himself would rightly have been proud.

The *Primavera* (2015) figure is a virtuoso piece revealing Douglas Camp at her finest. This adaptation of Botticelli's graceful Flora figure enhances our understanding as to how her descendants might appear in the present day. This is an energetic African goddess strewing flowers about her with élan. Attired in a heavily embroidered African 'lace' robe - itself an exercise in skilful working with a plasma cutter - the rich fabric and *gele* headdress in which this queen is wrapped are covered in a profusion of metal flowers painted in bright acrylics. The illusion is almost complete down to the wreath that ornaments the wrap on her head and the garland encircling her neck. However, the gaudiest colours amongst the flowers betray, by their mechanical forms, their less than natural provenance. One gradually distinguishes the toy motorcars lying hidden amongst the flowers, and as soon as the eye notices one imposter, others quickly appear. Perhaps new cars do represent the flowering tip of our modern technological civilisation. But there's a deeper note of ecological unease underlying Sokari's world-view evident, here, in the erosion of distinction between objects of the natural world and those of unnatural genesis. If this *were* a Greek myth, such hybridity, indiscriminately scattered about, would foretell the advent of peculiar fruit and troubling consequences.

The final figure that completes the tableau was finished only recently, in early 2016. In *Blind Love and Grace* (2016), Venus is envisioned with Cupid, the son of her long tryst with Mars, flying overhead. The graceful lines of Quattrocento clothing have been reformed into a beautifully embroidered gown of heavy African 'lace' overlain by a draped vermillion cloth

matching the *gele* headdress. Much attention has been given to recreating the architectural effects of the arch, or apse, that lends definition to the figure in Botticelli's painting and links her directly to the Christian figure of Mary, Queen of Heaven. Douglas Camp has created the structure behind her main figure by cutting open and expanding two recycled 42-gallon steel drums to approximate the frame of an arch. By cutting through the silver lining of the oil barrels' inner skin, camouflage patterns of positive and negative space create complex effects that branch upwards to create the aura of the wooded apse. Just as Botticelli concentrated his chiaroscuro efforts around Venus' head, the overhanging branches are, here, hung with green foliage created by reversing the drum material's turquoise outer skin. The effect is charged, a controlled explosion of light and dark, red upon green, and the armed cherub breaks from the forest shade like light emerging from the dark restraining clouds.

It is to this reredos, surrounding the central figure, which the eye repeatedly returns. Oil barrels, in metric tonnage extracted and shipped, define the fundamental indices by which we estimate our wealth on the planet today. Yet that oil, poisoning our lands and our skies, we know is running out. In her mind's eye, Sokari Douglas Camp makes a grasshopper leap to link in Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*. She conflates this red Grace/Venus here with that other naked Venus rising unsullied from the waves, borne landwards on a scallop shell. Using the recycled metals and form of these oil barrels to surround her clothed African queen, Sokari imaginatively places her standing against the icon of a powerful multi-national group that continues to this day to deny any responsibility for the oily, black swamps polluting the Niger Delta and for the displaced souls and the myriad ruined lives. Furthermore, since this contemporary redressing of the ancient Greek myth is sculpted in the round, we can peek behind her work to see another of those ironic twists in which Sokari so delights. The company logo proudly displayed on the emptied oil barrel spells out the word R-E-V-O-L-U-T-I-O-N. Someone has taken an oxy-acetylene torch and clinically sliced through the steel and lettering to coin the provocative nonce word Re. | .eV-O-L-U-T-I-O-N.

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1. Sonya Clark, quoted by El Anatsui in *Nsukka – A Place to Hide: Towards a conversation with El Anatsui*, Atta Kwami, *El Anatsui Gwawu*, Oriel Mostyn Gallery, 2003, p.32
2. *Botticelli and Treasures from the Hamilton Collection*, The Courtauld Gallery, 18/2/2016 ~ 15/5/2016 and *Botticelli Reimagined*, Victoria and Albert Museum, 5/3/2016 ~ 3/7/2016
3. *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower*, From, *The Poems of Dylan Thomas* (New Directions Publishing Corp.NY, 2003)
4. Ovid, *Fasti* 5. 193



Primavera, 2015.
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acrylic paint,
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