A MOCA FOR AFRICA

In a former Cape Town grain silo, reimagined by Thomas Heatherwick, Jochen Zeitz is opening the world's first major museum devoted to contemporary African art.

BY JAY CHESHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KYLE WEEKS

NEARLY THREE MONTHS before opening day, the double front doors of the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, the first major museum devoted to new art from the continent, are sealed like a vault. The interiors, by London architect Thomas Heatherwick—his first building in Africa—have been kept under wraps in an effort to build anticipation. From the outside, the building gives little away. New lantern windows bulge from its tower wing, the only apparent addition to this industrial-age artifact, a 96-year-old grain silo on the Cape Town waterfront stripped of its gungy magnolia paint down to gray concrete.

Inside, Heatherwick has carved a space from 42 steel and concrete grain-storage tubes, a soaring atrium hugged by white-box galleries—more than 100 of them on six floors—that curators and art handlers are already filling with sculpture, photography, film and paintings. "Normally with buildings the most iconic bit is the outside," says Heatherwick, touring the museum in early July. "We thought, What if we made it the inside—an innie rather than an outie?"

Glass elevators shooting past spiral staircases access a roof garden inspired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's in New York. On the climate-controlled floors below, designed to meet international standards for traveling shows, cowhides capturing the body contours of South African artist Nandipha Mntambo (the subject of an opening retrospective) are being installed in one room, while photomontages from Kudzanai Chiurai of Zimbabwe lean against walls in another.

The Zeitz museum, launching this month, focuses on 21st-century work and aims to offer an inclusive look at the African art scene today, with a big-tent approach featuring African, expat and diaspora artists. Though it's largely the vision of its executive director and chief curator, Mark Coetzee, a Cape Town artist turned curator, it would never have happened without the man whose name is inscribed above the door.

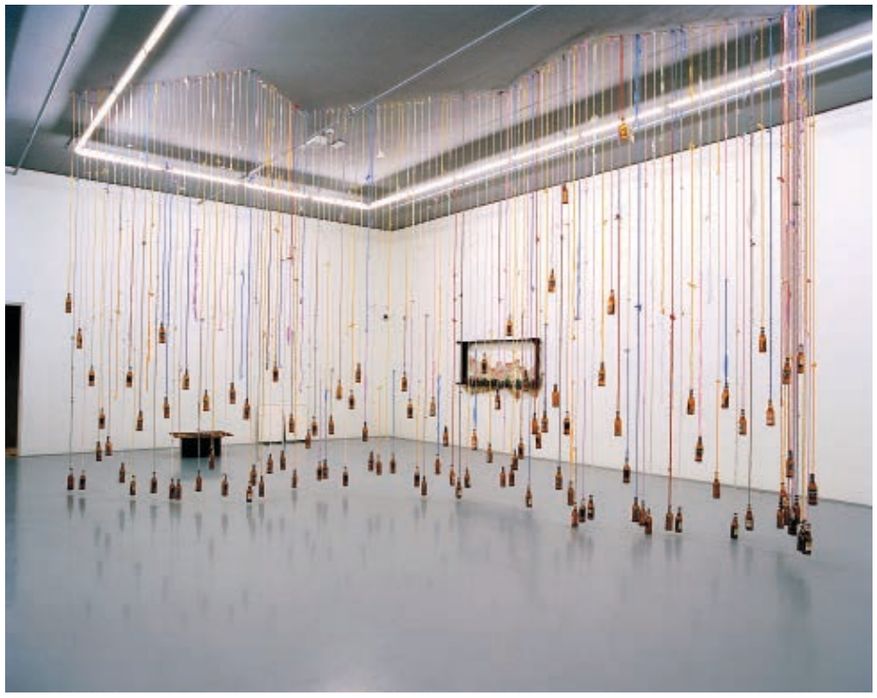
African contemporary art has long been the purview of private collectors. Unlike other big players in this emerging sector, Jochen Zeitz began his collection a decade ago with a museum in mind. "The story I wanted to tell is a story *I* wouldn't tell but that Africa would tell itself," he says.

TOTALLY TUBULAR Jochen Zeitz (right) with Thomas Heatherwick at Zeitz MOCAA. Opposite: The atrium, carved from a grain silo's interior, opens to the public this month.

ZEITZ, 54, is an old-fashioned polymath: adventurer, linguist, business prodigy and conservation crusader. One of the youngest CEOs in German corporate history—he was 30 when he took over a nearly bankrupt Puma—he speaks seven languages including Swahili, flies his own biplane, leads wildlife treks through the African bush and is the co-author, with Benedictine monk Anselm Grün, of a book about the spiritual aspects of business. In 2013, he launched the B Team with Richard Branson, a nonprofit devoted to sustainability that lobbied world leaders during the Paris climate talks. "We have similar views on people and humanity and how the world is," says Branson.

Zeitz also helped craft strategy for luxury conglomerate Kering (PPR at the time)—which took a controlling stake in Puma in 2007—by introducing an environmental component to its profit and loss statement. "Jochen was very advanced in his thinking," says Kering chief François-Henri Pinault. "He's the one who convinced me to bring people from outside the economic sphere into the corporation, people from NGOs, specialists in transportation, energy, raw materials."

Though he's obsessive about Africa—Zeitz owns a 50,000-acre wildlife conservancy and ranch, Segera, in Kenya, where he spends three to four months a year—until a decade ago he had little interest in African art. He was a casual collector with a couple of Warhols and Lichtensteins and a few Peter Beards. Today's African artists have never been more coveted abroad—the Fondation Louis Vuitton opened a big survey in Paris last spring, which was followed, a few weeks later, by Sotheby's first Modern and Contemporary African Art sale in London. But for Zeitz the museum is less a reflection of a new fixation than the culmination of an ongoing love affair with the continent.



SHAPE OF THINGS Right (from left): *Divider*, a 2016 installation at Zeitz MOCAA by South African artist Lungiswa Gqunta; the floors of the museum's roof garden feature an abstract work by Togolese artist El Loko; the atrium viewed from above. Below left: The museum's exterior showcases its bulging lantern windows.

Zeitz was 26 on his first visit in 1989, a two-week tour of Kenya between marketing gigs at Colgate-Palmolive and Puma. "Africa fascinated me from a very young age," he says. "I fell in love with the vibe, the people, the wildlife, everything."

That trip inspired him to travel across the continent searching for a place of his own—it took him 14 years to find his retreat, teeming with big game, on Kenya's Laikipia Plateau—and, eventually, to integrate Africa into Puma's branding.

The company had fallen far from its heyday in the 1970s, when Pelé was Puma's big star. Zeitz pioneered a new sports-lifestyle approach that introduced streetwear lines and collaborations with runway designers like Alexander McQueen and Jil Sander. "Jochen had a vision which I think a lot of people almost laughed at," says Thore Ohlsson, the Swedish executive and member of Puma's administrative board who championed Zeitz's promotion from vice president of international sales and marketing. "We were a volume, low-end brand with lousy distribution, while this guy was saying we were going to become the coolest brand on the market."

The strategy included sponsorship deals with underdog athletes and African soccer stars, along with a young sprinter from Jamaica named Usain Bolt. "I started to sign African teams, initially because we didn't have money to sign the big teams," says Zeitz. "There were so many amazing things about the continent nobody was looking at."

African art entered the picture at Puma in 2007, 14 years into Zeitz's tenure running the company, after his friend Peter Beard—in a characteristically provocative manner—dismissed, wholesale, the continent's contemporary art. "We talked about art," recalls Zeitz, of the exchange at Beard's Hog Ranch in Kenya. "I said, 'What about African artists?' And he said, 'There aren't any.' In his way he was always challenging you. I said, 'I'm sure there are, and they ought to be more visible. I want to do something about it.'" (Beard, who suffered a stroke a few years ago, doesn't recall details of the conversation but his wife, Nejma, says he "has always believed in African art.")

Driven to prove that African artists deserved a place in the global spotlight, Zeitz brought in an art consultant to explore sponsorship opportunities at Puma. In 2008 he hired Coetzee, a South African who had been running the Rubell Family Collection in Miami, to work full time as head of PUMAVision, a new arm focused on corporate responsibility. His mandate included offering broad support to the arts in Africa. On the side, Coetzee became a private adviser to Zeitz, tasked with scouring the continent for significant work. "Mark wanted to do something in Africa," recalls Zeitz. "I said, 'Why don't we join forces? We can build a collection, and then find a place where it belongs.'"

Coetzee began to focus on emerging artists—buying up entire shows, investing in future output, commissioning more ambitious pieces. "We made a decision to make a commitment to young people, to the new generation, and not take the easy way out," says Coetzee. "It puts us in a very risky situation because it's super easy to criticize, but I think it's a much more exciting territory to play in." He cast a wide net in bringing diaspora artists—broadly defined—into the collection, too, including well-established figures like British artists Chris Ofili and Isaac Julien.

The acquisitions were soon scattered among warehouses and Zeitz's various homes in New Mexico, Switzerland, Kenya and Britain. When Zeitz left Puma after 22 years in 2012, Coetzee followed him to focus on the collection full time. By then it had become significant enough for Zeitz to begin thinking

of a permanent public home. They considered locations in Kenya, Nigeria, Mali and Ghana. “It had to be a metropolitan city,” says Zeitz. “We wanted a place that people from outside Africa came to but that was accessible to people from within, too.” They were close to a deal on a site in downtown Cape Town when Coetzee got a call about the silo.

The building, on the Victoria & Alfred Waterfront—one of the most heavily trafficked tourist sites in Africa—had sat empty for more than two decades. Several reuse schemes had been floated over the years, including a parking garage, a mushroom farm and a Holiday Inn. By 2010 the area’s developers were exploring ideas for a world-class cultural institution—a “cathedral in the middle” of a new master-planned district, as Waterfront CEO David Green puts it. They reached out to architect Renzo Piano along with New York’s Guggenheim museum and the Tate in London, but all priced themselves out of contention. “We just didn’t have those sorts of funds,” says Green.

Eventually Heatherwick, who’d toured the silo for the first time while attending Cape Town’s Design Indaba conference in 2005, signed on to tackle the building—although he still wasn’t sure what it would house. “Our studio became a partner from an early stage,” he says. “We had a very open brief.”

Proposals for a design museum or an outpost for Charles Saatchi’s art collection had both fallen through when Coetzee got a call in 2013 and went to visit. Zeitz later flew in to look at the building and Heatherwick’s plans for it. “It ticked all the boxes,” he says. “It took me 30 seconds to say, ‘That’s it.’ ” To get the museum started, Zeitz offered his collection for his lifetime (or a minimum of 20 years).

Heatherwick had devised a plan to fuse two adjacent structures, connecting them with a cavernous atrium. “This was a building that was just made of tubes; there’s never been space in it before,” he says. “It needed a heart, something that would help you understand how to move around.” That heart, an engineering feat, follows the contours of a single digitally scanned kernel of corn, a nod to the building’s history as a grain silo. “We realized that curving surfaces interacting with a tubular structure did something beautiful,” says Heatherwick, “made unexpected lines and unexpected shapes.”

The architect, who is currently working on Google’s Silicon Valley headquarters with Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, calls the nearly $40 million transformation of the Cape Town structure “the most important launch my studio has ever had,” 23 years into its run. “We want people to be motivated that they have to come in,” he says, “and the best way to do that is to do something amazing beyond that threshold.”

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In the four years since the museum was announced, several new projects devoted to contemporary African art have emerged around the world. Venture capitalist Jean Pigozzi, who built a massive collection of sub-Saharan art over the past 30 years (featured in the Fondation Vuitton’s survey), recently announced he’s scouting locations for his own museum in Europe. “I want to be like the visual ambassador of Africa,” Pigozzi says. “The Zeitz museum is a terrific thing, but why do a second museum in Africa? If Zeitz did it there, let’s do something completely different.” Another serious collector, Sindika Dokolo, plans to open an “art lab” and exhibition space in Portugal later this year, an annex to his new art compound in Angola. “My example, the example of Zeitz, hopefully will inspire other people in other African countries,” says Dokolo, “so that we’ll start to have a solid, very sound African art market.”

Some critics have knives out awaiting the Zeitz museum’s opening in September and question Coetzee’s bona fides as an arbiter of African art. “I don’t think he will be able to represent the entire continent,” says Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi, the new curator for African art at the Cleveland Museum of Art. “There’s no idealism around the museum. It’s driven by capital.” An institution directed and funded largely by white faces in postapartheid South Africa has also raised the issue of race and privilege. “We’ve been tackling tough questions,” acknowledges Coetzee. “Who has the right to talk? Who represents whom? Who has the authority to talk on somebody else’s behalf?”

After the museum’s opening, Coetzee plans to treat Heatherwick’s vast atrium as a blank canvas for monumental pieces—a sort of Southern Hemisphere version of the Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall. Fundraising efforts, including a charity auction organized by Christie’s in London last spring, have helped build enough of an endowment for Coetzee to start buying up pieces owned outright by the museum, a permanent collection “held in trust in perpetuity for the people of Africa,” he says.

This is just the sort of legacy Zeitz had in mind when he started this project a decade ago. “It’s all part of a sort of puzzle in my head,” he says. “It’s not just about art, it’s about the messaging and people’s perceptions of Africa. In focusing on the 21st century, decades from now we’re automatically part of history.” •