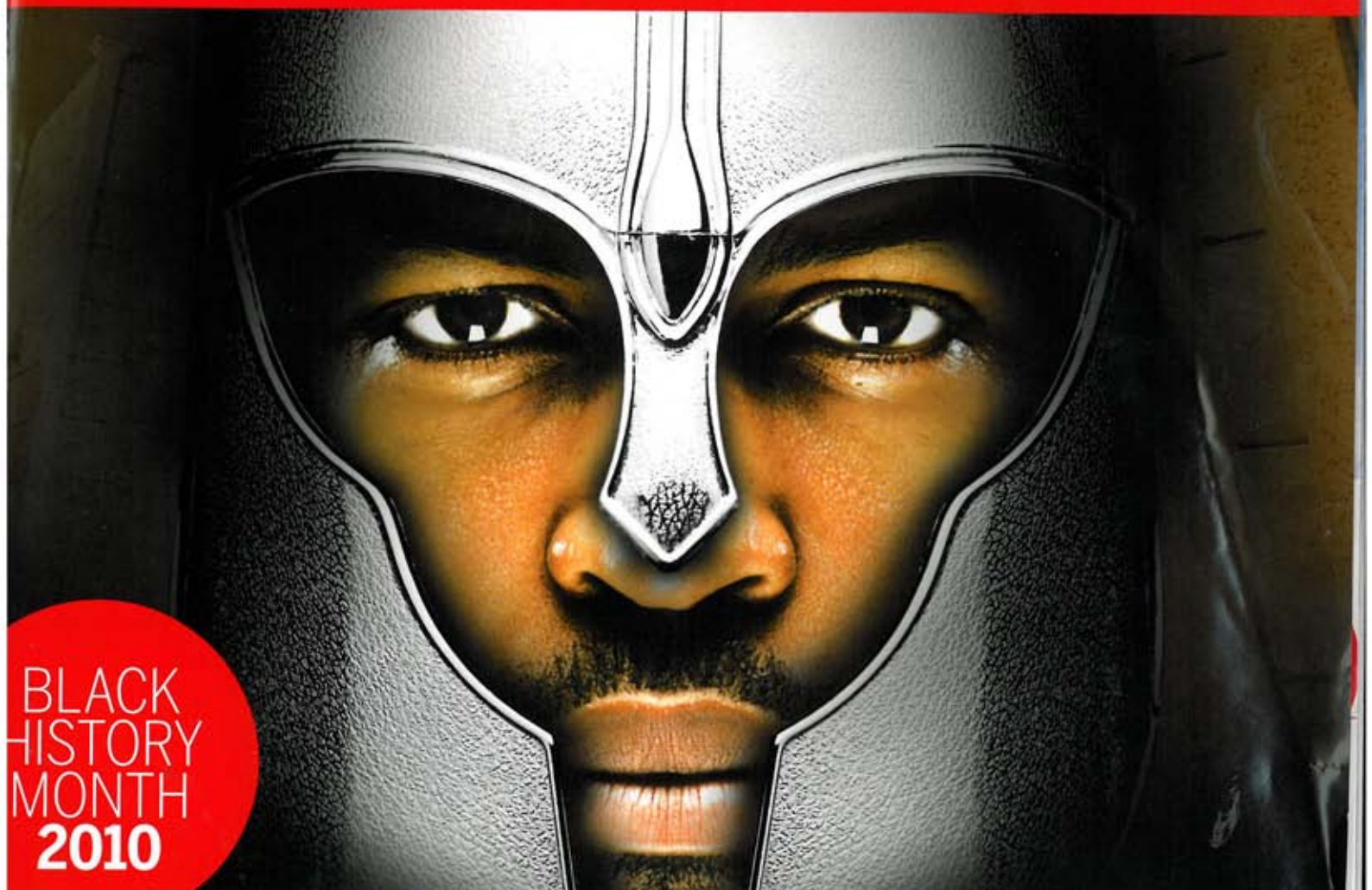


# NewAfrican



BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2010

## AFRICAN ROMANS WHO BUILT BRITAIN

**NIGERIA AT 50 THE GIANT OF AFRICA CELEBRATES**

**Mugabe:** 'I don't know how many times I die'

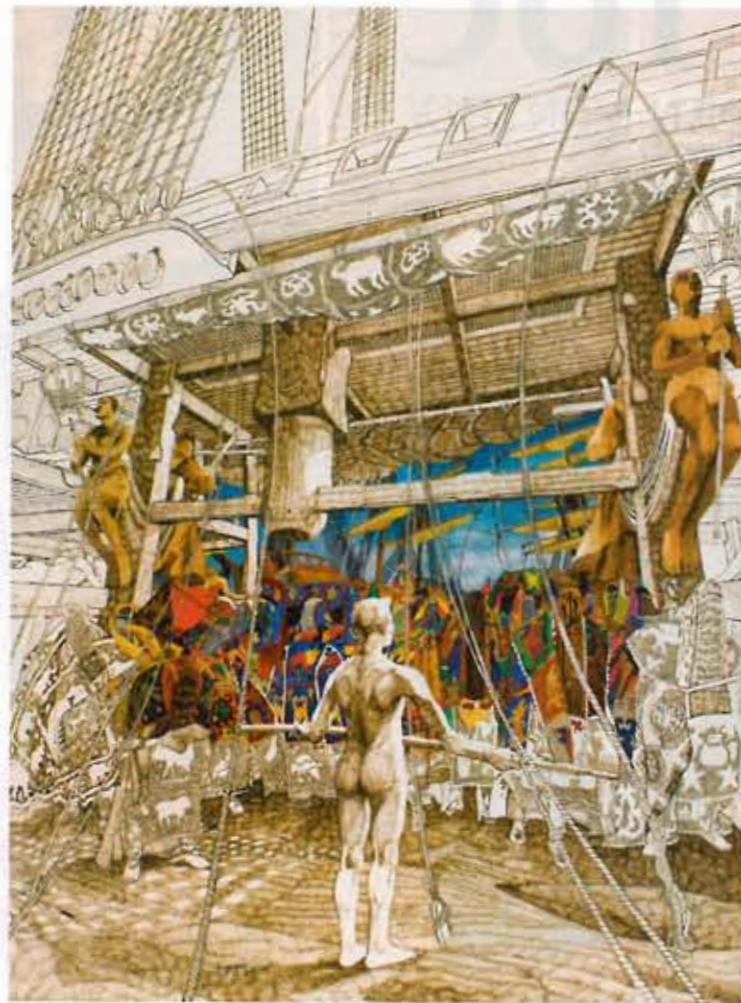
**Kenya:** A second rebirth **Liberia:** Inside a post-conflict country

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Left to right: Julien Sinzogan's "Gates of Return II"; "Those of Ife"; "Armada"



## Emerging from the "Gates of No Return"

Timed to coincide with Britain's Black History Month in October, Benin's Julien Sinzogan brings his first solo art exhibition to the UK – *Spirit Worlds* – which explores an unexpected aspect of the Atlantic Slave Trade – its spiritual dimension. Sinzogan believes that the real crime of slavery was the loss to the communities that remained in Africa, including the protective spirits of ancestors who did not return. But as **Juliet Highet** reports, while Sinzogan's visionary work also reveals journeys between the "real" or tangible world and the invisible spirit world of the slave trade, this is not a tale of doom and gloom. His message has redemptive and healing qualities.

## BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2010

**J**ULIEN SINZOGAN'S POWERFUL art is showing at the appropriately named October Gallery, in a month that celebrates black history throughout the United Kingdom. In a previous exhibition at the same venue, called *Voyages*, Sinzogan depicted the "Gates of No Return" – forts, prisons and ports built by slave-trading nations that poisoned the West African coastline for so many centuries. The "gates" were the last prison gates through

which so many millions of slaves were driven, before being forced to board ships, almost all of them never to return.

Sinzogan says: "There are voyages which should never have been – the Middle Passage for example. There are spiritual voyages, such as a meeting with a *babalawo* [a divining priest] well-known for travelling between visible and invisible worlds... and there are imaginary voyages, through Gates of Return, and Gates of No Return."

Rather than depicting these gates as just desperate points of departure and loss, they are also triumphant arrival points for African spirits returning home, a rejection of the miserable legacy of slavery. The ships in *Spirit Worlds* are not the dark stinking hulks of the Middle Passage; they are glorious phantom galleons whose "cargo" is now lost spirits, diviners and ancestral

ghosts from the Caribbean and America. Racing towards the African coast, their sails billow with colour and the rich patterns of the costumes of Egungun masqueraders. In the Yoruba theology of Benin and Nigeria, a direct interface between the realm of the spirit and the so-called "normal" world occurs during the Egungun masquerades at certain times of the year, during which dancers wearing masks and elaborate costumes ritually re-enact the compact between ancestor spirits and their living "mortal" descendants.

Wole Soyinka describes the Yoruba spiritual world-view as "a cyclical reality", in which life is seen as a trajectory through which an individual arrives from another world, that of unborn spirits, experiences the tangible realm (*aye*), then departs to the spirit world (*orun*), and is either reborn or becomes an ancestor spirit. As long as the ancestors are properly remembered and venerated by those on earth, all will be well. But if an ancestor spirit is insulted, or worse still, forgotten, it can bequeath a disastrous impact. This is where the Egungun serve humanity, renewing the bond between ancestor spirits and their living descendants. One of the tableau in *Spirit Worlds*, entitled "Those on High", depicts Egungun spirits floating above humans. Sinzogan deploys his customary curious colour palette – the ships are monochrome drawn with pen and ink, their sails throb with painted colour, a flock of living birds are just white silhouettes, while the Egungun spirits are clothed in the symbolic patterns of specific lineages and families, writhing in apparent chaos – here a leg, there an arm, there a ghostly face, their Gate of Return longed for, but not yet entered.

Sinzogan was born in Porto Novo, Republic of Benin, once one of the largest slave-trading ports on the West African coast. He originally studied architecture in Paris, his work displaying the technical finesse of a master draughtsman. Later, he ran a department providing computer images, and now, as a professional artist, his techniques and references move from areas of monochrome pen and ink into glimpses of other full-colour, painted scenarios. Two parallel themes emerge in these complex, multi-dimensional – and essentially gentle works. The first is a belief in the transmigration of African "soul", the survival of her unique culture, religious practices, values and dreams across the





Atlantic in the New World. The second is the return of the spirits of slaves to African shores. For Sinzogan, the real crime of slavery was the loss to the communities that remained in Africa of the protective spirits of ancestors who did not return. His work embodies the philosophy of the Yoruba religious and divinatory system of Ifa, which intersects with Vodoun, one of the most important traditional belief systems of Benin. Both insist on the significance of a permanent link between the visible world and the invisible spirit world of the ancestors. That connection, aided by worship of the *orisha*, the pantheon of Yoruba gods and goddesses, is the constant theme of Sinzogan's art.

Millions of enslaved Africans must have prayed to these *orisha*, as they departed through the "Gates of No Return". In another tableau of *Spirit Worlds* entitled "Those of Ife", Sinzogan depicts some of these deities. Olorun, supreme god and



**"Sinzogan's work attempts to reconcile and bring closure, to ease the lingering sore of guilt of both the African kings and chiefs who sold their captives, and the Europeans and Americans who so abused them in the killing fields of slavery."**

"Those on High", which pictures Egungun spirits floating above humans

owner of the sky is partnered by the other original creator, Olokun, goddess of water. Curling around them is a deity of the Fon people of Benin, Dan Aido Huedho, the rainbow serpent and messenger of the gods. "Ife" refers to the sacred home of the Yoruba people, the town of Ile-Ife, where the gods first descended to the waters, creating land. Lurking colourfully near the waters in the tableau are the Egungun once again, identifiable by their distinctive brilliant costumes.

Julien Sinzogan now lives and works in France, exhibiting throughout Europe and Africa. In 2007, the bicentenary of the abolition of Britain's slave trade, London's Victoria & Albert Museum commissioned a piece from him for their show *Uncomfortable Truths*. "Gates of Return" shows the now familiar galleons freighted with returning ancestor spirits. In the lower part of the picture, in monochrome, is a line of slaves resignedly awaiting their fate on the far side of some Gate of No Return. Above them another line moves towards the Gate of Return of the title – a queue of brilliantly robed Egungun masqueraders.

In this subtle, multi-layered, very still image, Sinzogan mourns the grim realities of this hideous history. Yet the vision that characterises all his work is somehow upbeat and incredibly uplifting. He attempts to reconcile and bring closure, to ease the lingering sore of guilt of both the African kings and chiefs who sold their captives, and the Europeans and Americans who so abused them in the killing-fields of slavery. Sinzogan describes the necessity for "a communal act of imagination that would realise an opened Gate of Return. This realisation would close the cycles of exploitation and violence done – man exploiting man – recognise the truth of our common humanity, and enable us to move forward into a future which would ensure that such atrocities could never, ever happen again." ■**NA**

#### EXHIBITION DATES:

24th September – 6th November  
Venue: October Gallery,  
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London WC1N 3AL. Tel: 020 7242 7367