

HYPERALLERGIC



Serge Alain Nitegeka, *Fragile Cargo XX* (2015), paint on wood, 125 x 125 x 85cm
(all photos courtesy of Stevenson Gallery)

Mining the Rich Interspace Between Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture

By: Nancy Dantas
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CAPE TOWN — All authors dabble with the risk of derivation. In *The Loss Library and Other Unfinished Stories*, South African-born writer Ivan Vladislavic ruminates about how every writer, which I would somewhat roguishly extend to every artist, belongs to one bastard line or another. “Standing on the shoulders of giants is a skill that comes from long practice. When you start, you are more likely to get under their feet. Don’t be surprised if the giants — or their legitimate progeny — come stomping after you in the playground: ‘We walk straight, so you better get out of the way!’” I would risk affirming that Burundi-born artist Serge Alain Nitegeka has reached lofty heights with his latest exhibition at Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, *Black Passage*, which boldly upholds constructivism and wears the colors of abstraction. He has crafted and laid claim to a space for himself on a difficult and historic playing field. Of the position he has come to occupy, I am sure he stands proud.

In *Black Passage*, Nitegeka takes up his usual materials — deploying inexpensive wood used for the crating and palletizing of artwork, together with an industrial palette of paints — to literally and boldly take over the gallery, arranging his forms into the white, tamed, and profoundly socialized and coded space, where he pursues an unsettling Proun-like project. Nitegeka deftly sweeps away the boredom of two-dimensional space to embrace the joys of Lissitzkian imaginary space, which he sets in motion and extends throughout the gallery via his army of paintings-cum-sculpture. The installation demonstrates a deep familiarity with the gallery’s architecture and a most impressive command of the environment: the rooms, lighting, and predetermined parcours, which he dishevels to lead his viewer on a new path through space. By bolting up entrances with wood and drawing commanding vision lines within the gallery, Nitegeka adroitly choreographs how we move through each room, drawing new and unexpected lines of tension that pull at his viewers, creating positions of multiplicity.



Serge Alain Nitegeka, *Interversionist III* (2015), paint on wood, 159.5 x 78.5 x 78.5cm

There is no ideal viewpoint for taking in his work, which plays with opacity and transparency and the perspectives opened by “seeing through,” between stoppage and motion. Instead of the fixed viewpoint, Nitegeka opens the playing field to an infinite number of vantage points from which one can take in this total experience. Although framed, his paintings are never really bounded; they extend and at times meld into the walls; they become part of the space. The gallery’s columns, which other artists working within the space may find incongruous and bothersome, are integrated into Nitegeka’s total, and can be appreciated or read together with these otherwise two-dimensional works. A particular instance where this happens is in one of the smallest rooms in the gallery, one which is often used for projection. Here, Nitegeka has delicately placed on the grey wall three small paintings. Individually, they are somewhat trite; their force is in their bounded relatedness, which the artist brings about through their subtle placement within this wonderfully choreographed container.



Serge Alain Nitegeka, *Black Passage*, installation view

More importantly and significantly, though, as a migrant — and here I hypothesize — with this spatial project Nitegeka foreshadows the interspace: the space between, a crossing of borders where everything changes and a newfound sensibility and perception of one's surroundings arises. The interspace is a space of breeding, of possibility, of transition, of temporal suspension that is brought to eruption. It is an interim where things lay bare and undressed, a space of impression where one is neither out nor in but between. The interspace in this exhibition finds its most explicit expression in the pathways the artist has torn open through existing drywall. The more attentive visitor will delight in how he has carefully kept the breeding dust of these interstitial zones.



Serge Alain Nitegeka, *Field Configuration V* (2015), paint on wood, 73 x 55cm

Ultimately, in this exhibition Nitegeka continues with his explorations of the realm between painting and sculpture, and between painting and architecture. He has cultivated another rich interspace, where mediums feed into each other. I would venture to say that for Nitegeka, an immigrant and a migrant himself, the interspace is also a lived space, one of transition, detention, and arrest; hence it is potentially also one of trauma or even of no return — in this way it is like the black passage for which the exhibition is named. As an aesthetic zone, though — and this is what we learn from wandering through the exhibition — the interspace is where space, energy, and forces are conjured and released.

Black Passage continues at Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town (Buchanan Building, 160 Sir Lowry Road, Woodstock) through November 14.