

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

***Tabwa Masks: Beaded masks from Africa
and Drawings by Matthew Monahan at Anton Kern Gallery***

Opening Thursday, September 11, Anton Kern Gallery will present a group of fourteen beaded masks by the Tabwa and Maasai tribes, as well as drawings by American artist Matthew Monahan.

Over the period of more than one hundred years, beaded and feathered headdresses and masks have been used by possession cult adepts among Tabwa, eastern Luba, Bemba and other closely related peoples of southeastern Zaire.¹ Some masks are crudely made with pieces of leather and only a few beads, while others are more colorful and majestic. The exhibition will focus on masks of the Maasai and Tabwa, which appear to be few in number and have yet to be the direct subject of field study.

The Tabwa live along the shores of Lake Tanganyika which borders Zambia and Zaire on the West, and Tanzania on the East. The facial masks are decorated with multicolored beadwork, fabric, thread, and sometimes fur (beads were used as a means for trade). Functioning as a religious "impersonation of mythical human beings or their animal counterparts," the mask in performance serves as a reenactment of the acquisition of the critical ritual.² The person wearing the mask, often "becomes an animated but hidden vehicle for meta-human, spiritual expression."³ Isosceles triangles and spirals are common in Tabwa iconography, and allow one to situate this mask in a broader field of cosmological representation.

Matthew Monahan's drawings and masks explore the body's desire to be free and the notion of a body addicted to escaping itself. Some of the drawings are larger than life and are installed into corners. In others, Monahan's figures wear paper masks. The human image is not captured by modelled surfaces but emerges from bristling notations and nervous systems that overlap and short circuit. Monahan calls his drawings "psychographies", in that he attempts to map out sensations and to diagram perception; he does not draw with dead lines. Instead, he draws with life lines charged with energy and movement held in the form of a body.

The viewer might recognize the underlying theme between these two divergent bodies of work. Monahan, a young artist, and these African tribes that have been making masks for centuries, share a sensibility.

¹Allen F. Roberts. "Tabwa Masks: An Old Trick of the Human Race," *African Arts Magazine*, April 1990, vol. XXIII, number 2, p. 39.

² Ibid, p. 40

³ Ibid, p. 39

The exhibition will run through October 18, 1997.

The gallery is open Tuesday through Saturday, 10 am - 6 pm.

For further information, please contact Angela Lange at (212) 965-1706.