

THE CHECKERED HISTORY OF CHECKS

Contemporary African artists speak about plaid



In 2007 Marc Jacobs's Spring/Summer collection for Louis Vuitton sported a version of the cheap nylon blue, red and white checkered bags that has become a familiar sight at train stations, airports and borders around the world. These ubiquitous bags are made in China and while some speculated that Vuitton's version was made of leather, it nevertheless looked exactly like the genuine article, printed with a huge Louis Vuitton passport-style stamp for this occasion. These bags may have been included innocently enough to remind the audience that Louis Vuitton has always been in the business of "bags and trunks" as the stamp proclaimed, but in a prevailing climate of xenophobia, refugeeism, migrancy and displacement, these bags have become shorthand for the dispossessed and the unwanted. Its various nicknames – *Polen* or *Türken Koffer* in Germany, *Zimbabwe-bags* in South Africa, *Guyanese Samsonite* in Trinidad, *Bangladeshi bags* in England, *Ghana-must-go-bags* in West Africa – speak to ongoing histories of expulsion and temporary residence. As a result, Marc Jacob'schutzpah to repurpose a mass product for a luxury brand, seemed to many like a callous act of cannibalistic appropriation.

The blogosphere erupted, especially in West Africa where these bags have long been associated with forced expulsion of Ghanaians from Nigeria in the early 1980s, filled with whatever possessions the banished were able to pack in the few days they were given to get out. One anonymous commentator opined that Louis Vuitton's appropriation of the bag is another "colonial invasion rip-off saga", but many pointed out that these bags are not the property of Africans – they are made in China and therefore do not have the same status as something like Ashanti Kente cloth from southern Ghana. As Korateng Ofusah-Ahmaah, a popular blogger of

Firstview

Ghanaian descent, concluded, "slumming is a trope in the rarefied heights of haute couture"; the whole debate was a "tempest in a tea pot". Since 2007, the plaid design of these bags has been re-used repeatedly; in Celine's Winter 2010 collection, and just this June German designer Chris Rehberger launched *The Standard bag*, a goat-skin version he describes as, "the last bag you will ever need."

These debates are interesting not because of the issue of cultural ownership, but rather because they highlight the inability of an industry devoted to consumerism and capitalism to simultaneously articulate a critical stance. The sight of this familiar pattern in a luxury store or on the catwalk provokes a certain discomfort, not because of where these bags originated or to whom they belong, but due to the much more sobering fact that, as Korateng put it, these "utility bags designate immigrants, refugees or those down on their luck. They are emblems of hardship, relative poverty and exigency." This is an aspect that sits uneasily in the world of fashion, despite fashion houses' best attempts to decontextualize these bags as mere decorative inspiration.

In contemporary art, however, and especially in the hands of a number of contemporary African artists, these bags have consistently been invoked to articulate the dislocation and discomfort that life in contemporary Africa often entails. In 2004 artist Senam Okudzeto collaged intimate portraits from her own history onto these inexpensive plaid bags, re-telling the story of her childhood that included histories of sudden exile and the way in which "the boundaries that meant nothing in pre-colonial past, now loom large in Africa." ▶

Regula Tschumi



Page 52 left: Marc Jacobs for Louis Vuitton Spring/Summer 2007

Page 52 right: Celine Ready-to-Wear Runway Collection Fall / Winter 2013

Page 53 Top and Bottom Serge Attukwei Clottey GoLokal collective 'My mother's wardrobe', the performance entailed 57 participants walking through the streets of Accra, wearing clothes that belonged to their mothers and toting huge Ghana-must-go bags with more items from their mothers' wardrobes. 2015

Below left: Noboku Nqaba Umaskhenkethe Likhya Lam (the China bag project), 2012

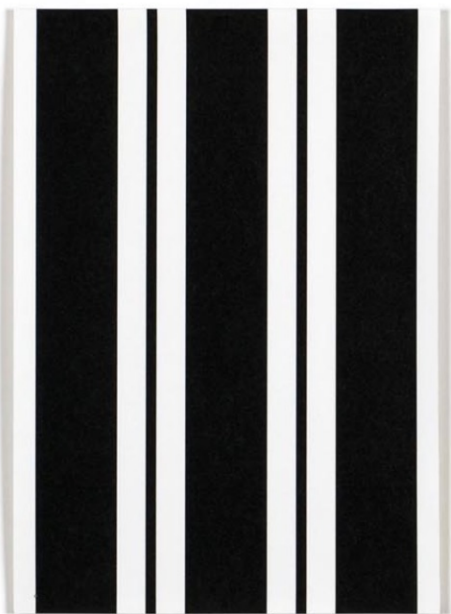
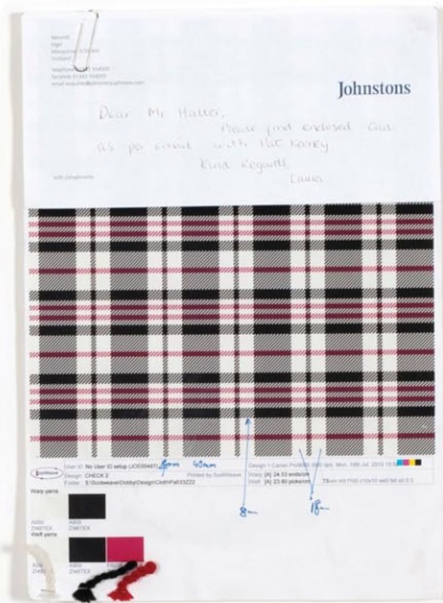
Below right: Dan Halter Patterns of Migration 2013

Opposite: Johnston of Elgin's tartan weave for Dan Halter During a residency at the Glenfiddich Distillery in 2013

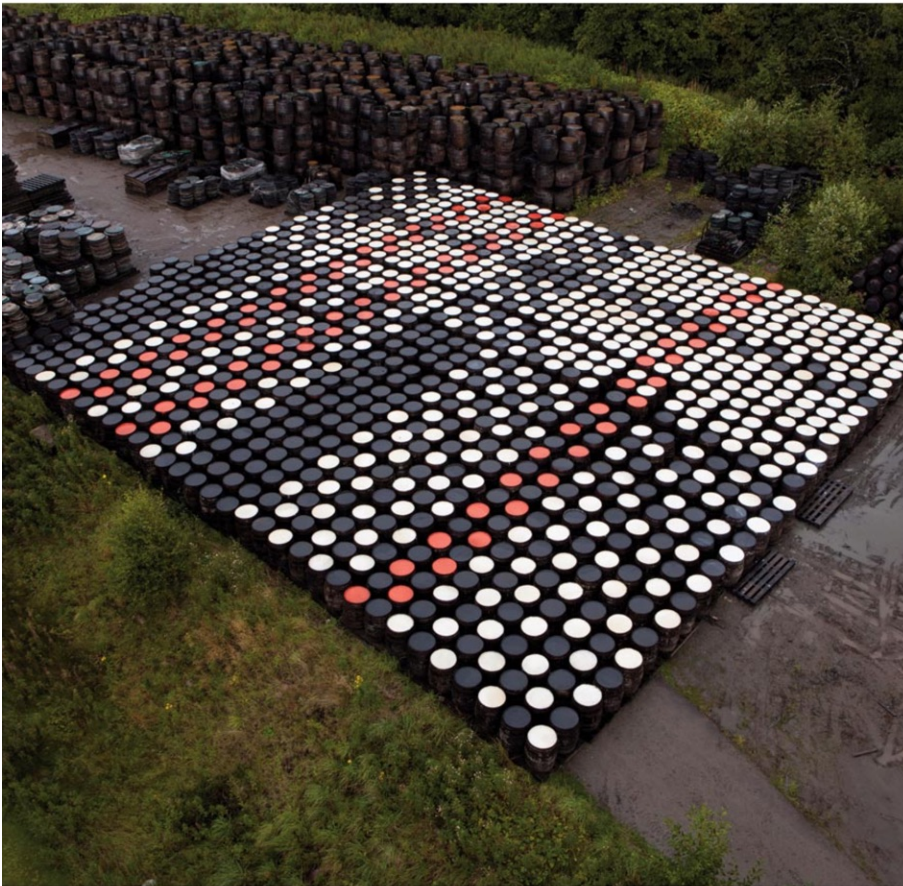


In 2010, Zimbabwean artist Dan Halter used these bags in an installation at a taxi rank in Johannesburg to outline a motif from the now classic arcade video-game *Space Invader*, designed by Tomohiro Nishikado in 1978. Halter's haunting juxtaposition of ideas about aliens invading our 'space', with a pattern that has come to designate refugees, at a location that points to continual arrival and departure, spoke powerfully about the plight of Zimbabwean refugees travelling to South Africa at a time when xenophobic violence against these immigrants was perpetrated by South African locals. Since then this plaid motif has been used again and again in Halter's work to point to refugeeism more generally, and to the politics of displacement. During a residency at the Glenfiddich Distillery in Scotland in 2013, Halter commissioned Johnston's of Elgin to weave him a custom-made tartan, based on the pattern of the Chinese bags, to create a woollen weave as "a tartan for the refugee clans of the world". In a series called *Patterns of Migration* Halter mixes this woollen tartan with used and found nylon bags, building a figure with tartan legs and three huge bags in place of a torso – the tartan weave quite literally becomes the African migrant.

Similarly drawing on histories of refugeeism and migration, Ghanaian artist Serge Attukwei Clottey adds a personal history of loss when he staged an elaborate street performance with his GoLokal collective for the opening of Gallery 1957 in Accra in 2015. Dubbed 'My mother's wardrobe', the performance entailed 57 participants walking through the streets of Accra, wearing clothes that belonged to their mothers and toting huge ▶



Below: Dan Halter 'The Truth Lies Here' 2012



Ghana-must-go bags with more items from their mothers' wardrobes. The performance was intensely personal for Clotney – after his mother's death, customs forbade him from owning anything from her wardrobe, causing a disconnect with her and his personal history. These garments carry the residue of memories and while the *Ghana-must-go* bags are containers for these possessions, they also contain and protect these lost histories – both very personal and more general.

South African artist Nobokho Nqaba – whose work is on show in the Camden Art Centre's *Making and Unmaking* exhibition – likewise uses these bags to relate her personal stories of displacement to more general tales of refugeeism in Africa. A staple item from her childhood, these bags were always present in the many moves she undertook with and without her family. Her pictures – staged self portraits in environments covered with these bags – portray her love-hate relationship with *Unomgcana*, the Xhosa word for these Chinese bags. For Nqaba, these bags are symbols of migration – but also of the hope that accompanies the moves to greener pastures.

And perhaps this ultimately is the story of these checks: they have never been neutral plaids. They invariably recall stories of hasty departures, of inadvertent movement, of forced exile – think of the pictures of Syrian refugees on Europe's borders. But in their very durability – packed to the brim with provisions – they also transport dreams and the hopes of survival. *** **Liese Van Der Watt**

Making & Unmaking: Camden Arts Centre, Arkwright Road London W19 6JE 18 September



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