

Art in America

APRIL 2008



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THE NEW MUSEUM

Afi Nayo at Skoto

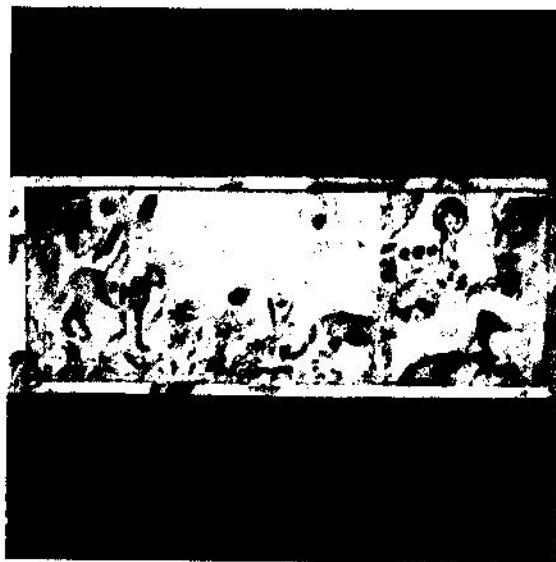
Afi Nayo was born in 1969 in Lome, Togo, and moved to Paris at a young age. She studied briefly at the Ecole nationale supérieure des beaux-arts and has exhibited in galleries in Europe and Africa since 1994. This, her first exhibition in New York, contained small- to medium-size painted wood panels. In each work, figures and animals are conjured through the idiosyncratic technique of stippling countless tiny black dots in lines and patterns that contrast with a pale ground.

These dots have a range in density but cumulatively suggest an almost vaporous insubstantiality.

Titled "Love Suites," the show's 36 works (2007) present hallucinatory scenes with figures, animals and abstract patterns. Spotlit in the darkened gallery, the images glow amid the prevailing matte black that covers much of the surface in each piece.

Each of the 19½-inch-square pieces of *Love Suite VI*, lining two walls of the gallery, featured a recessed central panel. Almost all of the surfaces are painted black and incised with vertical pinstripes, but the central panel has an ivory-colored ground in which tiny images are defined in a gossamer trail of points. Traces of cloudy wash and smudges of color lend a weathered patina to the whole. Other panels are divided into irregular grids creating compartmentalized scenes showing a recurring cast of characters. The faint images include leopards and elephants as well as faces, figures and flowers.

In *Love Suite II*, two dark horizontal panels surround a light central one that is inhabited by several striding leopards. Identical in shape, each body is patterned in various arrangements of dots, and some have facial markings that suggest human features. All are facing to the right and appear to move across a space incongruously bordered by curtainlike hangings and figures that are either elongated or abbreviated. From the lower center, an exotic plant extends upward; its circular blossoms separate from the branches to become



Afi Nayo: *Love Suite II*, 2007, mixed mediums on board, 19½ inches square; at Skoto.

delicate floating balls made up of fine points.

Other than sharing an ethereal space, the figures and animals seem not to have any direct interaction. Occasionally, the leopards are paired *en face* as a quasi-heraldic emblem evoking the guardian animals found in ancient art, such as the Etruscan *Tomb of the Leopards*. Powerful feline sculptures guarded early Greek temples and Anatolian palaces in addition to occupying a prominent role in African spirit narratives. Nayo's empathetic imagery transcends specific traditions, however, and draws from a universal well of imagination and wonder.

—Gerard McCarthy