

Art in Review

Aime Mpane

Back to Congo

*Skoto Gallery
529 West 20th Street, Chelsea
Through Jan. 27*

As one of New York's very few full-time commercial spaces devoted mainly to contemporary African art, Skoto Gallery is worth keeping an eye on. Its present show is a strong solo by the Congolese-born artist Aime Mpane, who divides his time between Kinshasa and Brussels.

Skoto's front gallery is given over to large sculptural installations that address Western pillaging of Africa, military and cultural, that gained full force in the late 19th century and continues. In one piece a tiny sculptural figure of a European soldier casts a huge drawn shadow on the gallery wall. In another, shown at the 2006 Dakar Biennial, the life-size figure of an African man, made entirely from matchsticks, stares at a grave marked 1885, the year Africa was definitively carved up and distributed among several European nations.

Even with colonialism ended, the mining of African culture continues, as suggested in a third sculpture, of the German artist and self-declared shaman Joseph Beuys kissing African feet. Some of the continuing effects of a disastrous past are evident in dozens of small paintings hung salon-style in the gallery's back room, all done during one of Mr. Mpane's recent stays in Kinshasa.

Most were painted at night by firelight or candlelight in a city short of electricity. (Mr. Mpane could fully see the paintings only hours after they were done, in daylight.) They are images made, like the whole show, of shadow and light, and they are extraordinary.

HOLLAND COTTER