Primavera (detail), 2015.
Steel, gold leaf and acrylic paint, 201 x 72 x 162 cm.
The Octoberry Gallery’s Spring exhibition for 2016 coincides with a series of exhibitions in other London galleries that concentrate on the work of one of the better known early Renaissance artists, Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi, otherwise known as Botticelli. Botticelli was the brilliant pupil of Fra Filippo Lippi and Andrea del Verrocchio, and his cerebral style, though greatly admired in his day, fell out of fashion, and he was almost forgotten by the time of his death. His eventual ‘rediscovery’, some four centuries later, in the 19th century, by members of the Aesthetic movement, re-established his critical significance in the narrative history of art. Indeed, so low had Botticelli’s reputation fallen that, in 1872, John Ruskin, who’d previously travelled twice to Rome to study his Sistine Chapel frescoes, was able to purchase the ‘Virgin and Child’ that now adorns the Ashmolean Museum’s collection, for a mere £300. Together with the Pre-Raphaelite painters, writers like Ruskin and Pater revitalised interest in the sensuous linearity of Botticelli’s style, and elevated the Florentine master’s status to a position where at least two of his masterpieces – *La Primavera* (c.1482) and *The Birth of Venus* (c.1486) – remain amongst the most instantly recognisable paintings of today.

Sokari Douglas Camp’s engagement with the first of these two works so informs the sequence of figurative steel sculptures created over the last two years, that this exhibition borrows its title, the Italian word for Spring, from the name by which that masterpiece is known. In fact, no one knows today what the actual title was. *Primavera* was the name attributed to the large tempera on panel piece by the art historian, Giorgio Vasari, who first described it some seventy years after it was painted. In English, the work is often referred to as *The Allegory of Spring*, and whilst there is continual debate about exact interpretations of the work’s interpenetrating levels of allegorical, symbolic and philosophical meanings, the basic sense appears reasonably clear. *Primavera* is about the heady attractions of love, marriage and fertility, all combined in that sensuality experienced in Spring as *The force that through the green fuse drives the flower.*

In Botticelli’s painting, six beguiling, feminine figures occupy a central triangular space, flanked by two male figures at the left and right-hand margins of the frame. The triangle’s apex is surmounted by a winged Cupid aiming an arrow of love at one member of the dancing trio below. The scene appears paused in a timeless moment of stillness before the arrow flies, and yet, at the same time, it swirls with an inner dynamic that flows from right to left. Movement begins from the irruption into the scene of the flying Zephyros – the cold West wind – who leans down to capture the attention of the nymph, Chloris, Goddess of Flowers, who is destined to become his wife. This classical story, retold in Ovid’s *Book of Days*, describes how the surprised nymph transformed into Flora, the robed figure bedecked with flowers, to her left. Ovid is quite explicit when describing this metamorphosis, even to the point of etymological precision. *As the Goddess talks, her lips breathe Spring roses. “I was Chloris, who am now called Flora. Latin speech corrupted the Greek letters of my name.”* The left-most figure of this transforming triad depicts the Goddess Flora, now fully dressed, distributing pink, white and red blossoms from the folds of her robe as she treads through the garden on a carpet of blooming flowers. The calm, central figure, outlined against an arch of dark myrtle leaves, portrays Venus, the Goddess of Love and Queen of this enchanted bower. Her right hand is raised in benediction, as though sanctioning the arrow soon to be launched from Cupid’s bow. The pointing arrow leads the eye towards the trio of dancing Graces, whose delicate poses and intricately entwined fingers capture the quintessence of movement contained by stillness. Finally, the expressive gaze of the foremost dancer darts towards the viewer, with disconcerting directness. The longing of woman for man, at left, is balanced against the lust of man for woman, at right, and Cupid’s winged arrow is nocked to deliver the shock that will shatter the stasis of time and set this enchanted frieze into flowing motion again. These basic ideas, based on ancient sources, were Greek in original expression; the Romans...
Sandro Botticelli, on wood panel, Ministero Beni e Att. Culturali courtesy of the Uffizi, Tempera La Primavera, 203 x 314 cm. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence - Photo Scala, © 2016. c.1482.

Born in southern Nigeria, in Buguma a sizable town in the Niger Delta, Sokari Douglas Camp grew up in a richly productive land of clean-flowing waters that nourished the green islands of that delta region. Around that same time, petroleum deposits were being discovered to the east, and large multinational, such as the US firm Chevron and the Anglo-Dutch Shell, moved in to exploit them commercially. Few in the west are familiar with the on-going drama that scars the account of the mismatched interplay of power and poverty played out in southeastern Nigeria over the intervening five decades. Sokari's experience of history in her homeland sharpened her keen eye for such contrasts and developed her relish for the ironic twist that informs all her work. Therein lies the source of her instinct to acclaim bravery in the face of tragedy and of suffering souls from Dante or Vernicle's great epusrian statue in Venice. Sokari's sculptures showed knights in combat against unseen foes lifting anguish bodies that had images of cherubs set into their chests, suggestive of the innocent spirits trapped within. As the emergency gradually subsided, the idea of calming her inner turmoil by consciously examining works of beauty instead, became the germ of this latest Primavera project, beginning in Spring, 2013. The choice of Botticelli's allegorical paintings of beautiful figures in all their finery, poised in a flourishing world of plenty seemed compelling. Predictably, however, no sooner did Sokari begin thinking of rebirth and renewal, of flowers and Spring, than incoherent thoughts of sweets, new cars, materialism and the clash of cultures quickly opened up for exploration in this very different Internet age of global economies. Therefore, taking a leaf from Botticelli's own revisions, Douglas Camp breathes new life into these antique fables relied upon the understanding of an audience sufficiently familiar with the undercurrents of the day to catch his drift. His 15th century redrafting had given a revolutionary, novel spin to the antique original, drawing upon ideas that, in a second home in Italy, Sokari's head filled with associations linking these contemporary scenes to those medieval paintings of pestilence and battle often found in Italy: Botticelli's drawings of Venus presiding over the Bower of Love offers ample opportunity to recount the story of Chloris and Zephyros or define just how Mars relates to Venus. Yet most, on seeing it, will recognise the Botticelli painting and realise that it communicates a significant story. Botticelli's two-dimensional account of these interlocking fables relied upon the understanding of an audience sufficiently familiar with the undercurrents of the day to catch his drift. His 15th century redrafting had given a revolutionary, novel spin to the antique original, drawing upon ideas that, in

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Following the Ebola virus outbreak in West Africa, in early 2014, Douglas Camp's immediate response was to produce a difficult series of works exploring the human aspects of the epidemic, recouping the cost in life and spirit to those caught in the path of the unseen menace. News images – for Sokari, a frequent source of visual stimulus – of medical aid workers, dressed in full-body protective clothing, treating sick and dying patients, to her suggested scenes of medieval conflict. With a second home in Italy, Sokari's head filled with associations linking these contemporary scenes to those medieval paintings of pestilence and battle often found in Italy: Botticelli's drawings of suffering souls from Dante or Vernicle's great epusrian statue in Venice. Sokari's sculptures showed knights in combat against unseen foes lifting anguish bodies that had images of cherubs set into their chests, suggestive of the innocent spirits trapped within. As the emergency gradually subsided, the idea of calming her inner turmoil by consciously examining works of beauty instead, became the germ of this latest Primavera project, beginning in Spring, 2013. The choice of Botticelli's allegorical paintings of beautiful figures in all their finery, poised in a flourishing world of plenty seemed compelling. Predictably, however, no sooner did Sokari begin thinking of rebirth and renewal, of flowers and Spring, than incoherent thoughts of sweets, new cars, materialism and the clash of cultures quickly opened up for exploration in this very different Internet age of global economies. Therefore, taking a leaf from Botticelli's own revisions, Douglas Camp breathes new life into these antique fables relied upon the understanding of an audience sufficiently familiar with the undercurrents of the day to catch his drift. His 15th century redrafting had given a revolutionary, novel spin to the antique original, drawing upon ideas that, in

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Sketches for Love and Grace, 2015.

Sonya Clark, quoted by El Anatsui in 2016.


2. El Anatsui and Douglas Camp. "The Abolitionist Blake’s allegorical etching presents the white figure of Europe supported by two darker figures personifying the continents of Africa and America. Here, in the conventional manner, the three figures are barely adorned, except for beads, garlands and bracelets. Sokari’s main revision is to clothe these figures in a variety of fabrics that denote the material styles of the different continents. The inspiration for these changes came from an image of three Niger women sumptuously outfitted for a wedding, each wearing a distinctive combination of wrap, bodice and headdress. The subtle implication is that dressing both deliners and displays culture. As Sonya Clark indicates, when it comes to African cloth, the material is the message. Botticelli was also aware of the critical importance of clothing. Best-known for his new-born, naked Venus, few realize she is actually on the point of being covered with a sumptuous cloth to hide her nakedness. Furthermore, the only artist whose clothing is completely visible is the figure in Botticelli’s painting and which he directly to the Christian figure of Mary, Queen of Heaven. Douglas Camp has created the structure behind her main figure by cutting open and expanding two recycled 43-gallon steel drums to approximate the frame of an arch. By cutting through the silver lining of the oil barrels’ inner skin, camouflage patterns of positive and negative space create complex effects that branch upwards to create the aura of the wooded area. As stated in Botticelli concentrated his chiaroscuro efforts around Venus, head, the overflowing branches are, here, hung with green foliage created by reversing the drum material’s natural copper skin. The effect is charged, a controlled explosion of light and dark, red upon green, and the arched chels breaks from the forest shad like light emerging from the dark descending cloud.

It is to this redress, surrounding the central figure, which the eye repeatedly returns. Oil barrels, in metric tonnage extracted and shipped, define the fundamental indices by which we estimate our wealth on the planet today. That oil, poisoning our lands and our skies, we know is running out. In her mind’s eye, Sokari Douglas Camp makes a grasshopper leap to link in Botticelli’s The Birth of Venus. She contemplates this red Grace/Venus here with that other naked Venus rising unscathed from the waves, borne landwards on a scallop shell. Using the recycled metals and form of these oil barrels to surround her clothed African Venus, Sokari imaginatively places her standing against the icon of a powerful multi-national group that continues to this day to deny any responsibility for the environmental damage in the Delta and for the displaced souls and the myriad ruined lives. Furthermore, since this contemporary redressing of the ancient Greek myth is sculpted in the round, we can peek behind her head, and the Garland encircling her neck. However, the gaudy colors of the women’s attire, by land its tellingly contrasted with their less than natural provenance. A gradually distinguishable toy locomotives lying hidden amongst the flowers, and as soon as the toy is returned the grasshopper strewing flowers about her with élan. Attired in a heavily embroidered African ‘lace’ robe itself – an exercise in skillful two-dimensional paint to metal-work in the round. Examining of Botticelli’s original as a metal sculpture and demonstrates precisely the kind of differences involved in moving from two-dimensional painted work to metal-work in the round. Examining another major sculpture of the same period, Europe Supported by African and American Continents (2015), we see how the ‘Graces’projected onto an image borrowed from William Blake. The Abolitionist Blake’s allegorical etching presents the white figure of Europe supported by two darker figures personifying the continents of Africa and America. Here, in the conventional manner, the three figures are barely adorned, except for beads, garlands and bracelets. Sokari’s main revision is to clothe these figures in a variety of fabrics that denote the material styles of the different continents. The inspiration for these changes came from an image of three Niger women sumptuously outfitted for a wedding, each wearing a distinctive combination of wrap, bodice and headdress. The subtle implication is that dressing both deliners and displays culture. As Sonya Clark indicates, when it comes to African cloth, the material is the message. Botticelli was also aware of the critical importance of clothing. Best-known for his new-born, naked Venus, few realize she is actually on the point of being covered with a sumptuous cloth to hide her nakedness. Furthermore, the only artist whose clothing is completely visible is the figure in Botticelli’s painting and which he directly to the Christian figure of Mary, Queen of Heaven. Douglas Camp has created the structure behind her main figure by cutting open and expanding two recycled 43-gallon steel drums to approximate the frame of an arch. By cutting through the silver lining of the oil barrels’ inner skin, camouflage patterns of positive and negative space create complex effects that branch upwards to create the aura of the wooded area. As stated in Botticelli concentrated his chiaroscuro efforts around Venus, head, the overflowing branches are, here, hung with green foliage created by reversing the drum material’s natural copper skin. The effect is charged, a controlled explosion of light and dark, red upon green, and the arched chels breaks from the forest shad like light emerging from the dark descending cloud.
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