



Haunting: some of the work in the show

Art with hint of voodoo spells out a bright future

Artists in Haiti are creating works using human bones. **Martin Bentham** meets the Hackney photographer who is helping them put on a show that is winning wide acclaim

THE exposed bone of the human skull glints in the sunlight beneath the hand of London artist Leah Gordon amid a clutter of exhibits in

the open-air Haitian gallery. Perched above a brightly-coloured shirt and more sombre tie, the skull is the focal point of a sculpture that will feature in a "Ghetto Biennale" next month in the

capital Port au Prince. Other pieces displayed nearby make similar use of skeletal remains, mixing human bone and teeth with detritus scavenged from the streets to create a range of extraordinary art that captures attention in an unavoidable way.

It might seem ghoulish to Western eyes. But as Ms Gordon, a photographer and film-maker from Hackney who is staging the show, explains, recycling material, even when human, is part of life in Haiti. "We are quite near the cemetery and Port au Prince has limited burial space so they rent out tombs. But people often only rent for three months so then the coffins are taken out and piled in a corner.

"When it rains the bones spill out anyway. So you don't have to be a grave robber to get them. It's just part of the way the cemetery is run."

Other art in the gallery is fashioned from wood, scrap metal, plastic, pieces of old tyre, nails and fabric.

Ms Gordon, who is represented by Soho's Riflemaker gallery and whose work has been displayed at the National Portrait Gallery and venues worldwide, says the forthcoming show will be her third "Ghetto Biennale" since launching the idea in 2009. Her aim, she adds, is to bring such art to the world's attention, enthusing about its quality as she walks around showing favourite exhibits.

"There is a frisson of excitement here," she says. "It shows what you can make in such difficult circumstances. It's also about portraying a different side of Haiti and saying 'let's show people that it's not all about running around with guns, smoking crack'. The art world now is getting excited about what's happening here because it's so unique."

Around 45 artists, some from overseas, will take part in the Biennale and the band Arcade Fire, one of whom is Haitian, will present a video.

Ms Gordon's own interest in Haiti, which dates from her first visit in 1991 during the notorious "Baby Doc" dictatorship, has a fittingly unusual origin.

"It was Jill Dando," she says. "I was watching the BBC Holiday programme thinking about going somewhere. She was in the Dominican Republic and right at the end of the programme she said 'over the border there is Haiti and whatever you do don't get there: there



Creating interest: artist Leah Gordon

are military coups, voodoo, dictatorship and death squads'. I was immediately hooked and decided to come."

After reading Graham Greene's novel *The Comedians*, famously set in Haiti, she handed in her notice and set off. "I stayed at the Olofsson Hotel because that's where the book's based," she adds. "When I told the owner I was in a punk band, he cut the rate to 20 dollars a night so I stayed for a month. I've been coming back ever since."

As she continues her tour, Ms Gordon points to a sculpture she recently bought. Made by the Haitian artist Andre Eugene, it features dolls' heads mounted on rubber tubing to create a two-headed creature mounted on an old food mixer. A solitary woman's shoe stands between its legs.

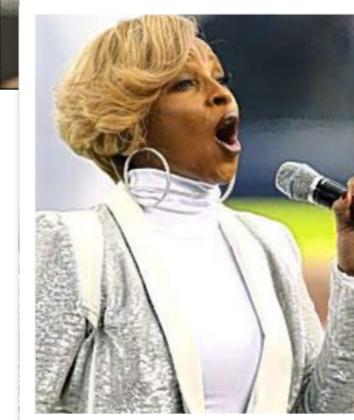
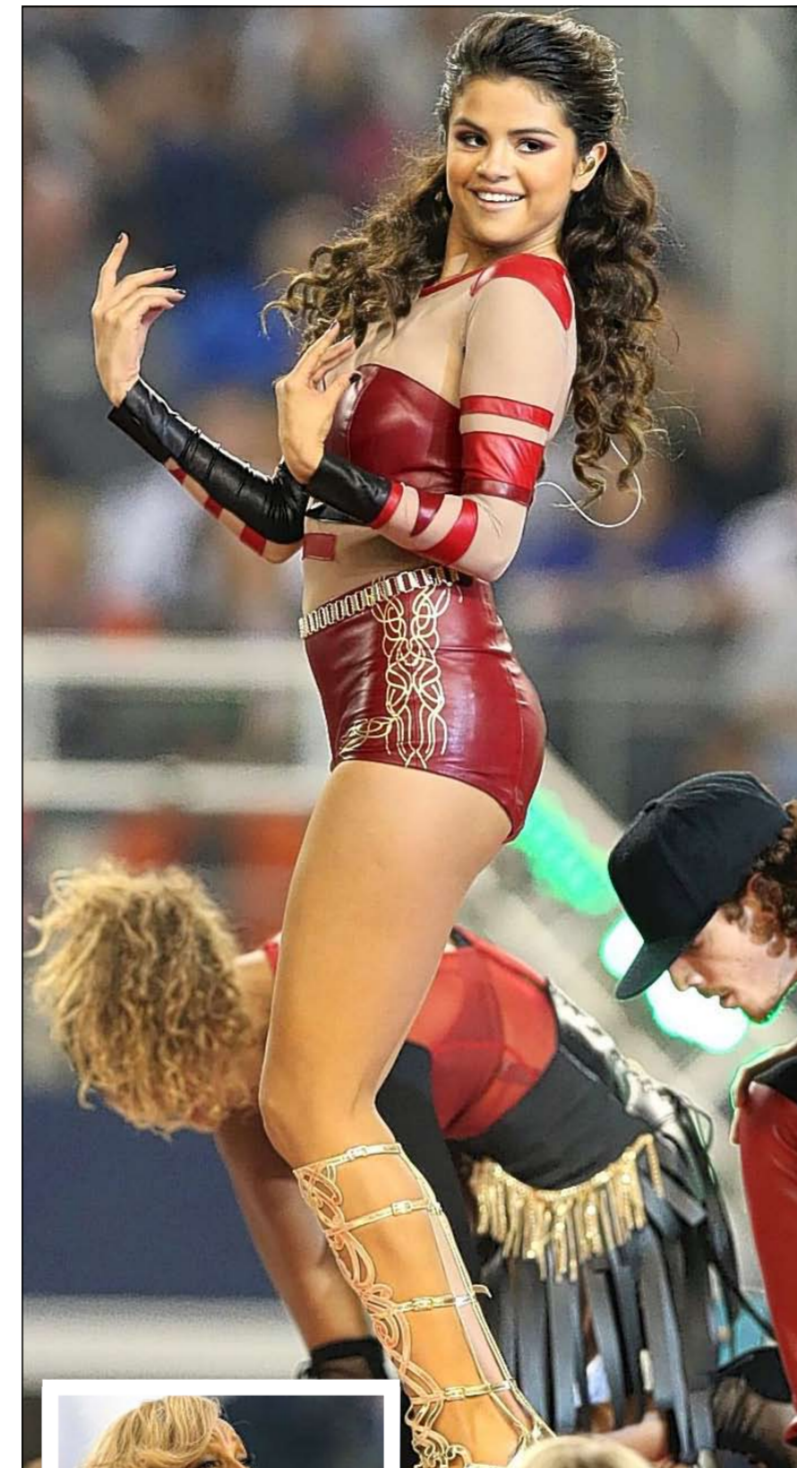
SHE is told that the artist intended the piece to represent two faces of Haitians – one spiritual, the other untrustworthy – with the shoe symbolising that such contrasting traits can be present in one person. The buttons on the food mixer can, apparently, only be operated by God.

Nearby, Mr Eugene, whose work has been shown and sold overseas, says the "Ghetto Biennale" and the accompanying growth in interest in Haitian art will benefit his country as it seeks to overcome its negative image. "We can make it better for all the people here through this art," he says.

Ms Gordon agrees, highlighting how the contrasting facets of its art reflect what she sees as Haiti's emerging vitality. "Some of the art is looking back to the past, using voodoo, revolution and Haitian culture, but there's also a dystopian, futuristic part that's looking forward," she says.

"The younger artists are saying 'No, I'm not voodoo, I'm a contemporary artist instead'. So we're seeing something different and new that you can't find elsewhere. I can't say I like it all, but what I do like is that there is something definitely happening here."

COWGIRL SELENAS CHARITY KICK-OFF



SELENA GOMEZ was the star as the NFL's Dallas Cowboys used their Thanksgiving game to help kick-off the Salvation Army's traditional Christmas Red Kettle collection campaign – the 17th year they have done so. Gomez, a Dallas local, took a break from her Stars Dance World Tour to perform a seven-minute medley of hits at half-time in the game against the Oakland Raiders. Mary J Blige, inset, sang the national anthem before the game.

Argentine jail threat to UK oil workers

Joseph Watts
Political Correspondent

ARGENTINA today threatened to lock up British workers for 15 years if they begin oil exploration off the Falkland Islands.

It also warned of huge fines for oil firms and said equipment and assets could be confiscated.

Argentina's London embassy announced that the country had approved laws to punish exploration which it claims breaches a UN resolution. The move follows written warn-

ings from Buenos Aires that oil firms face civil and criminal action if they operate around the islands.

The Foreign Office responded by insisting that Argentine law held no sway over the Falklands or any activity off their coast.

Argentina claimed the new rules meant oil firms could suffer "fines equivalent to the value of 1.5 million barrels of oil". Companies and individuals could also be banned from working in the country.

A statement said: "The Argentine government has protested against and

rejected all of the United Kingdom's attempts to promote and authorize such hydrocarbon exploration."

In a recent referendum, Falkland Islanders voted by 1,513 to remain a British overseas territory.

A Foreign Office spokesman said: "These activities are wholly legitimate and legal. The UK Government unequivocally supports the right of the Falkland Islanders to develop their natural resources for their own economic benefit."

"This right is an integral part of their right of self-determination."

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WORLD IN BRIEF

'Killer of homeless' dies in US custody

A FORMER US Marine accused of killing four homeless men, a woman and her son has died after falling ill in his jail cell in California. Mexican-born Itzcoatl Ocampo, 25, was taken to hospital and pronounced dead yesterday. No cause of death was given. Prosecutors alleged Ocampo stabbed the homeless men in late 2011 and early 2012 as he felt they were a blight on the community.

18 abducted in Iraq are found shot dead

THE bodies of 18 men were found near Iraq's capital Baghdad today, hours after they were abducted from their homes by gunmen in military uniforms. The corpses, with gunshot wounds in the head, included two tribal chiefs, four policemen and an army major. They were found near the Sunni town of Mishahda. The killings come amid a surge in sectarian violence.

Taliban hits out at Tendulkar reaction

THE Taliban in Pakistan has hit out at the country's "disloyal" media and fans over praise for Indian cricket star Sachin Tendulkar in coverage of his retirement. The 40-year-old, lauded as the world's greatest batsman, bowed out earlier this month. A Taliban spokesman said Pakistanis should know "they should not praise him, it is against Pakistani nationalism and against loyalty to the country".

Hospital gave babies to wrong parents

A JAPANESE hospital has been ordered to pay almost £230,000 in damages to a man who was sent home with the wrong parents 60 years ago. He lived in poverty while another boy went to university and now heads a property firm. The mix-up happened at Tokyo's Sankukai hospital when the boys, born 13 minutes apart, were bathed and returned to the wrong mothers.

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