

Wole Lagunju: Yoruba Remix

This is an important exhibition by Wole Lagunju and highlights his achievements thus far as an innovative and dynamic artist. He is an artist who has gained increasing international attention during the second decade of the twenty first century. The artworks he produces strike a powerful chord in the viewer by bringing together a range of concerns and a seductive formal visual aesthetic to the key themes and imagery that he develops and explores. He offers multiple ways of considering some of the dominant visual tropes of social/cultural relations within and between societies which he reconstitutes in innovative and challenging ways within his painting and iconographies.

His art offers playful yet seductive engagements and inflections on the interconnectivities of human experience that resonate with the viewer, whatever their perspectives, cultural dispositions and experiences. At the same time it celebrates but also fuses together intrinsic cultural specificities and ways of seeing deployed at particular localities and with differing cultural outlooks. This is achieved in a variety of ways through his creative articulations of imagery that brings together within the same frame the intersections of the local, regional and the intercontinental. Moreover his spatial imagination roams far and wide, inflecting the local and the global simultaneously. He plunders the possibilities of history, juxtaposing contrasting cultural modes plucked from differing times and spaces to invoke new forms of encounter and new ways of reflecting on the actual historical encounters between differing cultures with all the inequalities these presaged. The terms of these historical encounters he imaginatively re-views and re-writes within his innovative iconographies to free them from the constraints of domination/subjugation. Instead he make images as spaces of subversion, reversion and playful delight in the restitution to the viewer of unexpected yet diverse positionings and perspectives that offer new forms of engagement and enchantment. Lagunju's art liberates and captivates the viewer by offering new possibilities as this exhibition makes apparent.

Wole Lagunju was born in 1966 in Oshogbo in Osun state in Southern Nigeria where he grew up. His father's pharmacy was adjacent to the then well-known art gallery, Mbari Mbayo. The gallery was part of a building where the celebrated playwright, Duro Ladipo had lived. It was with Ladipo's theatre troupe in Oshogbo that the German Ulli Beier began to formulate and advance the emergence of the Oshogbo school of art in the early sixties. As a young child Lagunju remembers the local impact and revitalisation it had in Oshogbo as a new centre of contemporary art. The Oshogbo school encouraged individuals to express their creativity in visual mediums through a range of workshops held by Ulli Beier out of which a number of artists emerged, such as Twins Seven Seven among others. Furthermore Ulli Beier's first wife Suzanne Wenger settled for the rest of her life in

Oshogbo and promoted the famous Osun grove of the city into which she was inducted as a priestess. This creative dynamism inspired Lagunju and encouraged him to pursue a path in the arts.

Lagunju progressed to Obafemi Awolowo University at Ile Ife, gaining a Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine art in 1986 with a major in graphic design. Obafemi Awolowo University has a lively art department and is notable as the centre for the influential Ona art movement that developed in the 1980s, in which Yoruba speaking artists sought to link their contemporary art practice to local Yoruba cultural approaches and visual traditions in a range of mediums, such as, for example, the forms produced in textiles or ceramics. He was taught by some of the founders of this art movement during his time at university. Subsequently Lagunju worked as an illustrator for the Daily Times Newspapers, Lagos, linking up there with another notable artist Victor Ekpuk who had graduated in 1989 from the same university. For a few years he worked in illustration but by the mid-nineties he set up his own studio practice and also worked for Glendora, The African Quarterly on the Arts, which was the seminal arts journal that explored the resurgent art scene and cultural industries in Lagos as they recovered from the economic vicissitudes and consequences of the Reaganomic structural adjustment economic programme imposed at the end of the nineteen eighties. This had resulted in a decade or more of acute economic hardship accompanied by high rates of inflation throughout Nigeria and which had made life difficult for artists as patronage diminished substantially. During this time he exhibited mainly in Lagos and Port Harcourt, such as the exhibition *Ona – Best of Ife* at the Signature Gallery in Lagos, 1995 with one or two international exhibitions, such as at Mainz in 1997 and in Trinidad and Tobago in 2002.

His paintings and installations during this period often made reference to Adire, the famous Yoruba women's indigo dyeing tradition in which resist patterns are inscribed onto and stand out against the cotton cloth dyed indigo to produce patterned rectangular panels in seriate composition, using figurative and non-figurative designs. Adire is sold in the textile section at markets, and the market is often conceptualised in local Yoruba terms as the meeting place for the world, both near and far away, material and metaphysical. In his installations when pots featured as part of the installation, they were often wrapped in Adire cloth. Moreover this practice also alluded to local religious beliefs as it is also a practice for encasing known or unknown metaphysical forces contained within such pot forms at local shrines. His artwork during this period interrogated the vicissitudes and insecurity experienced in market transaction and exchange to explore wider questions of uncertainty and change imposed from without by unseen forces, often couched in terms of a globalisation with its unforeseen punitive local consequences.

In 2006 Lagunju was awarded the prestigious Phillip Ravenhill Fellowship by the University of California, Los Angeles, and this precipitated his decision to move permanently to the United States to pursue his art. He was now situated as a transnational artist located in both Yoruba and American society with differing contextual perspectives and ways of seeing, and he seized the creative possibilities this double consciousness offered, building on the trajectory of practice he had already embarked upon. As Imo Dara noted(<https://www.imodara.com/magazine/artist-spotlight-wole-lagunju-nigeria/>, accessed 17/11/2018), in 1996 Lagunju had been commissioned by the Goethe Institute (the cultural centre representing German cultural interests in Lagos) to produce a poster for a collaborative project between German and Nigerian playwrights which they had sponsored. From childhood he had a visual interest in masquerades which performed in the markets and other public spaces of Oshogbo and the image of his poster contained a depiction of a European wearing a Gelede mask. This was partly inspired during his time at university when he had been taught by Babatunde Lawal who carried out research on Gelede masquerades advocating by his own example analysis on its own local terms (and models of performance) rather than to have imposed external euroamerican modes of analysis that colonised its putative subject. In the United States Lagunju developed this iconography and the autonomy of Gelede masquerade further as Lawal's approach had earlier indicated to him. With his interests in media and representation, derived in part from his professional trajectory as illustrator and art director for Glendora which had sensitivised him to such issues, he absorbed the debates in the United States concerning the marginalisation of models of colour in the fashion industry. Now he created portrait paintings that situated famous fashion models wearing Gelede masks to interrogate ideas concerning race and the intersectionalities of identity constituted within a euroamerican hegemony.

The portrait commissioned from the artist has been a key genre of representation and self-presentation by its subject in European art history, defining within its frame particular constructions of personhood at a given historical moment (and society) from the renaissance onwards. Moreover within this European trajectory, the conventions of the portrait define the attributes of identity and inscribe the thereby constituted individual with the intersectionalities of gender, race, age and sexuality among others as configured at that moment within its regime of power. However Lagunju creatively takes up the possibilities of the portrait genre in the twenty first century (with all its various recastings and insertions in media and new media, such as the selfie) and institutes an alternative and autonomous regime of power by framing the painterly portrait as Gelede masquerader. A Gelede masquerader facing out of the pictorial frame and returning the gaze of the viewer.

Gelede or Efe Gelede masquerade (signifying that it is performed sequentially during the day and night) takes place in the market and is directed at women, especially mature women. Historically successful Yoruba men measured wealth and success in the numbers of followers that they attracted and the women who married them swelled their numbers by bearing children. Women were seen to have great metaphysical power through their reproductive capacity which they could also withhold, thereby using it to the detriment of the lineage and the wider Yoruba community. Gelede masquerade is performed exclusively by men in order to please and entertain women through dance, music and song, so that they will not be antagonised and withhold or lose children to disease and death through their metaphysical capacities. Further to this, Efe Gelede carried out at night involves the singing of satirical songs that make public the hidden wrongdoings of the rich and powerful to the entertainment of the entire community, but especially to the delight of these mature women who have the power to exercise this ambivalent metaphysical power. The identities of the performers are not hidden or concealed in Gelede masquerade performance and such singers in any other context than Gelede would risk being severely punished or expelled from the community for revealing such hidden secrets and scandals in their songs. However the masqueraders are protected by the metaphysical powers of the women who are entertained by their performance, such that no-one no matter how powerful would dare to punish or discipline them. To do so would be to risk metaphysical retribution in the form of loss of children and wealth within their own family and lineage.

Lagunju draws on these conceptions of the power and gendered relationships articulated by Gelede to insert multiple and autonomous gendered positionings within his artwork. The imagery of a Gelede masquerade is juxtaposed with fashion models of colour, highlighting the gendered and racialised inequalities of the United States, in order to play each dialectically with the other. Their juxtaposition opens up a co-terminous transnational pictorial space for the viewer to engage with that empowers female model of colour and potently rebuts the intersectionalities of inequality.

Further subversion and a transgressive and ambiguous playfulness is realised through the portraits of Gelede clearly being demarcated as female, raising the question of whether such a portrait is the embodiment of the Gelede masquerader typifying ideas of female beauty and femininity thereby representation of womanhood, or of the masquerader who is exclusively a male performer. The exclusivity of male performance is undermined by the imagery of iconic contemporary female fashion models who have featured in the media. This set of gendered intersectionalities is further explored and elaborated within this exhibition where the gendering of the figure is less fixed and more fluid, seemingly moving across a diverse range of gender positionings.

This transgressive subversion and play is enhanced by the various other series of portraits that Lagunju has developed. The iconic model series references fashion and modes of pop art that emerged in the nineteen seventies at a time of liberation and decolonisation in Africa as well as the civil rights movement in the United States. This series can be juxtaposed with other series of portraits based on iconographies derived from the sixteenth, seventeenth and nineteenth century European conventions of the elite female portrait respectively. The sixteenth and seventeenth century were a historical period when European nations expanded their mercantilism to other parts of the world and established the precursors to colonialism, most tragically in the brutal enforced migrations of people from Africa to the new world, including Yoruba diasporas. The conventions of European elite female portraiture, especially in the clothing and adornment, reflected the opulence and wealth that such elites gained from participation in the slave trade. The end of nineteenth century saw the imposition of the colonial enclosures, including what is now the Yoruba speaking areas of Nigeria and Republic of Benin. These gendered portraits with Gelede masks bear witness to these hierarchies of imposed domination with their presence and visually offer an autonomous local and gendered power to contest and deconstruct them.

A by-product of the colonial enclosures in Africa, initiated from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, was the importation of artworks (including carved sculptures) back to the European metropolises. Their forms were displayed in museums and taken up by European artists in their developments of European modernism in the early twentieth century but bereft of their originating contexts. Gelede masks with their artful contemporary and topical imagery skilfully carved and incorporated into the headpiece have been a favoured artwork to collect and are found in museums around the world. Part of Lagunju's strategy is to make these masks visible in his iconography and thereby reclaim their heritage from the euroamerican museums that now exhibit them. As he stated in his Imo Dara interview (<https://www.imodara.com/magazine/artist-spotlight-wole-lagunju-nigeria/>, accessed 17/11/2018), "I started by appropriating images and memorabilia from the social hierarchies of the Western world, and juxtapose them [with] *Gelede* masks from the Yoruba people of Nigeria. In my thinking, this was a way to reclaim a stolen heritage and a critique of the racial and social dogma that so permeates the cultural ideologies of the 20th century. "

His jewel like ink drawings also feature in the exhibition and adopt a more gestural approach in which the artist's spontaneity can be traced in the fluid runs of liquid colour into and across the paper. They are often inspired by Yoruba sayings and proverbs articulated into condensed and allusive motifs which can be interpreted in multiple ways. A notable series is the Oya Ma Yawa series inspired by the Yoruba precept that family kin should not be parted from each other in the way that serrated points of the carved wooden comb separate out the hair. Moreover the points of

the comb can be taken to represent the different members of the family but remain tied to each other by the ridge of the comb, reiterating the precept through the visual form of the comb. Lagunju uses this as a creative starting point to elicit a multiplicity of images that hinge on this visual structure but rapidly transform into a range of vivid forms; human, masquerade, animal and that seemingly at times cascade, coalesce and flow into each other. The forms evoke the folklore and proverbial imagery that is found in Yoruba cultural life. The hues chosen and their flows of colour create a glowing world of the imagination that invites the viewer to enter. They are virtuoso renderings of the artist's imagination at the height of his mastery.

In conclusion Wole Lagunju is the quintessential twenty first century transnational artist situated both within the Yoruba speaking cultures of southern Nigeria and in the consumer orientated post-fordist capitalist culture of the United States. Confronted by hierarchies and contradictions of inequality and ongoing narratives of imperialism and domination, which were also part of the history of what is now the nation state of Nigeria, his art and its iconographies have drawn on and straddled a range of cultural resources derived from both cultures to address these issues directly. He skilfully mobilises the genres of portrait painting to his own purposes to playfully decentre and deconstruct the narratives of power that seek to legitimate inequality through imaginative and vivid compositions with their deft and imaginative handling of brilliant colour. Centring the Gelede mask at the heart of his iconography, it gazes out at the viewer to pose fundamental yet liberating questions as to heterogeneity, diversity, gendering and the exercises of power to the viewer.

References:

Interview with Wole Lagunju, Imo Dara, <https://www.imodara.com/magazine/artist-spotlight-wole-lagunju-nigeria/>, accessed 17/11/2018

Interview with Wole Lagunju, Charles Gore, London, United Kingdom, 16/8/2018.

Dr. Charles Gore

School of Arts, SOAS