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Forged and Forced Unions: Interview with Marcia Kure

Polly Brock on 9 mars 2015



The artist Marcia Kure was born and raised in Nigeria, where she also attended art school at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, before moving to the United State where she now continues to live and work. Kure's art is inspired by these two sharply contrasting cultures: she draws upon African cave paintings, textiles and bodypainting, but is equally inspired by American hip-hop and fashion. A particularly strong influence throughout her work has been Uli, an artistic tradition of the Igbo women in eastern Nigeria and much of Kure's work has gone on to investigate femininity within art. Her experiences of migration and multiculturalism have informed the chief themes of her work too- Kure is fascinated by issues of identity and of gender.

Kure's paintings are loose, aqueous explorations of form and tone painted in earthy pigments. Her sculpture too is sensuous and corporeal: soft bodily forms made of fabric and undulating shapes cut out of felt and fur. Indeed, Kure's materiality and her fabric work are a fine example of the 'fiber art' that dominated at the Armory show in New York last week.

Her work has been exhibited across the world, including at Dak'Art and the Palais de Tokyo in Paris and she has been the subject of solo exhibitions in the USA, Africa and Europe and is also now featured in many important collections including that of the British Museum and the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, USA. For three months in 2014 she was also an artist-in-residence at the Victoria and Albert Museum and she will be returning this summer to Purdy Hicks gallery where she will put on an exhibition of work entitled *Alex and Me* inspired by Alexander McQueen.

I asked Kure more about her work:

How do you define yourself as an artist?

I define myself as an artist who attempts to communicate ideas about identity through a synthesis of traditional and contemporary modalities of art making. My practice draws from the Uli tradition of drawing and painting and the power of line. This technique, used primarily as decorative body and wall painting for ceremony, has transitioned in my work into more permanent iterations. I use the language of body painting as a strategy for depicting the corporeal. My work is ultimately a narrative about what the body means in relation to identity.

How do you think your upbringing in Nigeria and the move to America has influenced your work?

In the beginning I struggled with my separation from Nigeria, but over time I have observed that distance often offers new perspectives. I have discovered the ability to reinterpret cultural aesthetics in another context, to forge, twist and squeeze language so that it translates the traits of my influences viewed through an African lens. As an artist, my understanding of place is dependent on the story and tradition I was brought up with but I have made a push to access it in a new way by redefining myself and carving out an identity. I travel to Nigeria every now and then to conduct research, but because of my own itinerant experience, in my work I am trying to make an argument for people who do not have a defined place.

My practice deals with this liminal space, this non-space. I do not like definitions though I know they are necessary. Being defined fixes you in a place and I feel in today's world you do not have to operate from one fixed position. I find power in opposing forces, things that contrast and repel, yet are similar. In these forged and forced unions, affinities seem to arise. The result is an area that has no definition, no borders, no name. I am not interested in either or, in what something is or what it is not; rather, I prefer the grey area that deals directly with oppositions and juxtapositions. I find the ability to inhabit different views very inspiring. I think the assimilation of western forms and techniques in my work allows me to integrate and interpret the world through a prismatic lens much better than one who has a singular view. The Igbo say, "In order to appreciate the beauty of the masquerade dance, you can't stand in one position." To better understand the world you live in you must also view it from different perspectives.

Could you describe your experience as artist-in-residence at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London?

My residency at the V&A was an attempt to explore notions of childhood and the fantasies we create as children that haunt and shape us as adults. I used this time to study textiles, dress patterns, and children's clothing as source material for my exhibition *Conformity* at Purdy Hicks Gallery in 2014. The materials gathered—patterns, colours, garment textures, types of decorative embellishments—were used to make forms of child-like garments that were un-wearable and illogical. From these I created watercolor paintings, collages, sculptures and installations. I also examined how clothing is used to construct identity. I investigated identity as a clothing pattern, that each cut, fabric choice, stitch could mimic the way adults deconstruct and reconstruct themselves anew. With *Conformity*, I pushed my drawings further. Using pattern in the form of narrative, I attempted to inscribe a circle in the viewers mind. You can read more about my experiences as an artist in residence at the V&A [HERE & HERE](#).

Whilst in London you became interested in the idea of childhood and regularly went to the Museum of Childhood to research children's clothing, could you explain what it was about children that inspired your work while you were in London?

Childhood is a cultural phenomenon that was firmly established in the Victorian period with the proliferation of children's literature, regulations regarding child labor and the institutionalization of early education. In addition, with the industrial revolution came an increasing amount of marketable goods, which resulted in objects once considered luxury items such as children's toys becoming widely available. I have often worked with toys and stuffed animals as surrogates for ideas I want to discuss in my work. They stand in for superheroes, or culturally commodified notions of cuteness. They are fetish objects and



signifiers of infantile regression as other artists such as Mike Kelley who referred to the stuffed animal as a “neutered pet” and Annette Messager who uses these creatures as symbols of historical narrative have explored. There is a clear analogy between a soft toy and the body, and in this sense toys and clothing take on similar aspects as we can project our own physicality onto them. In a dress for example, there is usually a place for the head, hands or feet, it mimics

the shape of the body and as such takes on appearances of the body. For me this creates a dichotomy in the work, enabling me talk about both the innocence of childhood and the morbid realities of adulthood at the same time.

How did you find the art scene in London and how was it different to the scene you are used to in the US?

I found London to be diverse and multicultural due largely to its proximity to the whole of Continental Europe. The US art scene I am involved in comparatively tends to be more insular and familiar, but this could easily be a case of the outsider looking in.



How do textiles influence you?

I see an analogy between the body and textiles. I use this notion to explore shifting boundaries between fantasy and trauma, between colonial and postcolonial regimes of violence. Textiles cover and protect the way skin does—concealing and covering. For me the relationship between the body and textiles or costume is manifest in Uli body painting, and my exploration of clothing as a medium is a way of communicating or accessing this Uli ideology. I am examining how fabric and textile act as extensions of the body, pushing beyond the boundaries of clothing and the traditions of sculptural representation. I am attempting to make an explicit link between a fractured political body and that of the aestheticized corpus as a site of haptic or optic inquiry.

I see my textile works as bodies and myself as a surgeon, marking, cutting, stitching. By

making surgical stitches on the cloth, drawing with scissors, needle and thread, I am fixing or mending, performing a cathartic act. These keloids, and scars stand in as metonymy for a struggle between beauty and pain. I am interested in the way the material and the body merge into one. The cut, slashed and sutured textiles represent marks on the “skin/body” as memories and persistence of pain of colonial and postcolonial trauma, they become a second skin that reveals, performs and communicates.

The marks you make are often very fluid and aqueous, why do you think you are drawn to this type of painting?

My practice involves a constant reference to the elements and principles of Uli drawing and painting, whose tenets are simplicity, directness of execution, and the use of positive and negative space. I use flow and force when I make a mark, quick lines yield the gestural or calligraphic qualities of line I am attracted to which can be seen in the curvilinear, biomorphic shapes I explore most explicitly in my watercolors.

In “Grey,” currently on view at Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, my aim was to explore the negative spaces prescribed by the Uli tradition, to speak to the absence and physicality of the body, the role of memory and social and political discontent. My drawings and paintings also explore a universe of hybrid bodies, masked and secret aspects at the edges of our daily lives. Our vices, fear, anxiety and shame, once concealed, become highlighted if not revealed. What are the other forms of armor we wield, the daily rituals we perform to disguise the truth of what lies beneath the surface? Drawings for me, unveil the secrets that lie in our deepest recesses. They make manifest our inner ceremonial attire, accessories of shame, regret and suffering in full panoply.

Colours such as the layered garments worn by the masquerade are added by glazing: thin washes, each layer enriching the visual experience but not obscuring the pigment lying beneath, rather enhancing it ever so slightly. The faceless, shrouded, obscured or partially revealed figure adds to the power of their anonymity. In their concealment they are defiant and gather strength.

What does being a female artist mean to you?



People often question my textile works. The use of the hand evokes undeniable metaphors about women’s work, and I understand the unavoidable associations. Gender is inevitably mixed up with these other identifiers. I enjoy the ability to express femininity in my work; it is an option I will always be able to call on because I am a woman. Ultimately though, I draw from my own physical and psychological experiences of being a woman

in the world as a conceptual framework for dealing with issues of identity and embodiment but I see gender as adjectival. Sometimes I want to believe that my work is above gender but I don’t know if that is possible.

Is the marginalisation of female artists an issue that inspires you in any way?

Yes, I am concerned with the marginalization of female artists and women in general. But, ultimately it is humanity that I speak to in my work and my own experience as a displaced, colonized African woman. Yes, I wish there were more female artists in museums and gallery shows. I wish the prices of our works competed evenly with that of our male counterparts and I question the triviality that women's art is often regarded with but I do not take it on as a topical issue.

Do you think it is important for female artists to deal with issues that are often overlooked by male artists (i.e. violence against women, the patriarchy etc.)?

I think it is important for both male and female artist to deal with these issues. The female as well as the male condition is a human condition. When we begin to see women as human beings deserving of respect just as men are, I think humanity will be better for it. I believe that if one is affected by the kidnapping of the Chibok girls and acts of violence against the female body, it should not be because they are female, black or white; it should be because they are human.



How has hip-hop inspired you?

My work is influenced by the nascent phase of hip-hop which was conceived of as a reactive and performative, social politic in the United States. In turn, the attendant music and lifestyle served as powerful platform from which to challenge entrenched systems of sartorial propriety. A few weeks before the end of my Smithsonian artist research fellowship at the Copper Hewitt Museum in New York in 2008, I missed my subway stop en-route home and decided to continue—down a rabbit hole—as it were. I emerged in the Bronx, the birthplace of hip-hop. I felt a visceral connection to this place that transported me back to my teenage years in my family living room in Lagos, Nigeria. When I was growing up my parents traveled out of the country quite a bit and often brought back the diverse cultures they encountered by way of film, music and literature. In that moment I saw myself opening a box of CDs and videos by LL Cool J, Run DMC, DMX. I saw myself dancing to Push it, by Salt-N-Pepa. The connection I encountered in the Bronx— the sounds, the swagger, the coolness, the manner of speaking, the gestures of hands and speech— was strong and familiar. I realized that hip-hop was a link for me. It put me in a place where I could talk about my connection to African American communities and my colonial past through a visual and gestural relationship to culture.

The Dressed Up series which was shown at Susan Inglett Gallery in 2011 and then as part of a larger exhibition, which took the series as its title at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in 2013, are self-portraits inspired by this realization. They speak to my postcolonial experiences and encounters in the United States. The Victorian haute couture garments addressed issues of my colonial past and the hip-hop imagery called on the connections between that culture and my own encounters at home and in the United

States. This series as a whole, presented mythological conclusions as solutions to issues of identity. These centaurs, cyborgs and citizens of the world remind us that we all inhabit an increasingly liminal space in the world of representation. The language of drawing with a pair of scissors and the tension and forced fusion of collage was an appropriate medium to capture this sentiment. I feel there are pieces of me are everywhere, and it was easier to create that kind of narrative through collage, there is a rhythm and poetry to this modality that suited the subject matter.

What does the future hold for you and your art?

This summer I have a show coming up at The Purdy Hicks Gallery in London called *Alex and Me*, based on the influence of the designer, Alexander McQueen's work on mine. It is a conceptual relationship or affair, if you will, with McQueen in terms of imagery. I am examining his obsession with craft and tradition in tandem with my own obsessions, which employ different ends and means. But the exhibition will not just examine the formal framework of McQueen's technical practice, it will also explore the darker aspects of his life and what led him ultimately to death at his own hands.

I constantly strive to take my work to a higher place, a place that tries to understand what it means to be mortal. I felt McQueen was doing that as well, he would cut a pattern on the model making the relationship of cloth and the body explicit. "He would do a black coat, but then he would line it with human hair and it was blood red inside. So it was like a body. It was like the flesh with blood."* Just as I have examined the relationship of toys to the body, I also see a correlation especially with McQueen's work in the way one relates to a dress on a mannequin, the paradigm of postwar consumer society, a manufactured hybrid body that both mimics and beckons, a mirror and a mirage. McQueen did this by employing technique and research. He was interested in ethnic traditions and mythology much as I am; His F/W 2000/1 collection titled Eshu is a jumping off point for my exhibition. It was visual and technical investigation into the ideology of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria. It is this ability to animate and anthropomorphize inanimate objects or philosophies in order to communicate the human conditions that interests me most.

* 'The Works', BBC documentary – Alexander McQueen, 'Cutting Up Rough', 1997

