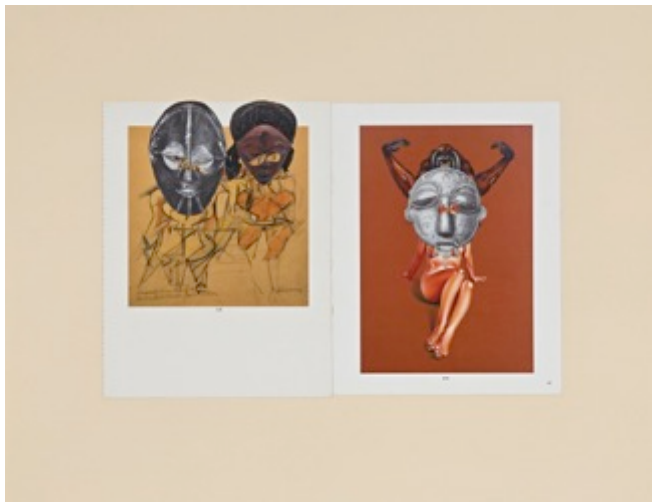


Johnson, Ken. "Disguise: Masks and Global African Art,' Where Tradition Meets Avant-Garde," *New York Times*, 23 June 2016.

The New York Times

'Disguise: Masks and Global African Art,' Where Tradition Meets Avant-Garde

By Ken Johnson



African masks had an enormous influence on the development of Modern art, as luminaries like Picasso, Matisse and Giacometti appropriated and interpreted their startling forms and materials. But what about modern artists of African descent? Do they have a distinct relationship of their own to that history? That's a question raised, if not definitively answered, by "[Disguise: Masks and Global African Art](#)," an intermittently edifying and generally entertaining exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum.

The show features pieces by 25 African artists and artists of African descent, whose works all relate in some way to masks and masquerade while involving neon lights, video projections, found objects, photography or other typical devices of the global avant-garde. Distributed among these new works is a selection of traditional African masks drawn from the esteemed collections of the Brooklyn Museum and the Seattle Art Museum.

The historical objects are not the focus of the show, but are here to reflect sources of inspiration for the living artists. Yet the most compelling contemporary works reveal complicated relations to historical African art.

Organized by Pamela McClusky, curator of African and Oceanic art at the Seattle Art Museum, "Disguise" is best viewed as a conversation starter. Helpfully, some of the participating artists are extensively quoted in the otherwise disappointingly slim exhibition catalog.

Of particular interest are the thoughts of Jacoby Satterwhite, who creates digitally animated videos in which he appears as a dancing figure in virtual, anti-gravitational mindscapes populated by constantly moving, glowing forms that resemble elastic neon tubing. He fashions other virtual figures as well, some resembling primordial humans made of stone. Seemingly unfolding in a futuristic parallel universe, his imagery is thrilling to behold.

In his comments in the catalog, Mr. Satterwhite explains that his source material is not so much African art as video games he played as a boy. "Being lost in infinite 3-D arenas like the ones seen

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in 'Lara Croft: Tomb Raider,' 'The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time,' 'Metal Gear Solid' or 'Resident Evil' is what shaped my visual lexicon," he says.

Mr. Satterwhite also expresses ambivalence about racial and gender categories: "I wanted people to think about a strange post-race and post-gender body operating in the world." You might wonder if this artist belongs in an exhibition that ties him so tightly to a specifically African identity and heritage. Yet, as cosmic visions involving costumed, godlike figures, his works may have a deeper affinity with the animistic worldviews of much African art than it might superficially seem.

[Saya Woolfalk](#) generates a fantasy universe similar to Mr. Satterwhite's. (It would be interesting to see them collaborate on a project.) Her spectacular installation "ChimaTEK: Virtual Chimeric Space" incorporates video projections, fields of colored dots painted on walls and floors, and mannequins dressed in sumptuous costumes of her own creation. Three of the five figures have sculptural heads based on [Sowe masks](#) made by the Mende people of Sierra Leone and worn by women. (A beautiful Sowe mask is displayed near Ms. Woolfalk's installation.)

The tableau suggests a religious ceremony of a highly spiritually evolved race of beings. This archetypal arrangement certainly has antecedents in African tribal rituals but also recalls precedents in Islamic, Hindu and other cultures, as well as in science-fiction novels like Frank Herbert's operatic "Dune." Like Mr. Satterwhite, Ms. Woolfalk seems less interested in an identity rooted strictly in ancestry than in bringing into play a kind of super-expanded consciousness for the future.

The historical relationship between African artists and Western colonizers, collectors and tourists comes up in an installation by [Brendan Fernandes](#) called "[Neo Primitivism 2](#)" (2007–14). It consists of a herd of life-size plastic deer wearing cheap white copies of a tribal mask. Mr. Fernandes thus satirizes the popular fantasy of African art as a symbol of primitive authenticity.

Since at least as far back as the 1950s, mask-making in Africa has been a big industry in which craftsmen produce artificially aged new masks for a worldwide market. African art has given rise to its own form of kitsch, a décor for the masses. But the production of masks for popular consumption began long before that, when European colonizers began collecting tribal artifacts in the 19th century, and, in response, African craftsmen began to make works for the market that were separate from those created for their tribal ceremonies.

Then, largely thanks to Picasso's electrifying encounter with African masks around 1907 and the colleagues who followed suit, Europeanized African aesthetics became integral to Modern art. That development is skewered here by [William Villalongo](#)'s neatly made collages. In several, an African mask cut from a photograph has been glued over a woman's head in a reproduction of a painting by a European or an American, from a zaftig nude by Renoir to a pinup by the Pop artist Mel Ramos.

Mask-making in Africa has not entirely succumbed to market forces. In 1980s Nigeria, a new form of masquerade called Ogele emerged, in which men wore top-heavy tiered wooden masks carved and painted to represent both real people and imaginary beings. In the exhibition, a series of 2014 photographs by Zina Saro-Wiwa, titled "[Men of the Ogele](#)," portrays some of these muscular players, in some cases posed with their masks off. No actual Ogele masks are in the show, which is unfortunate, as they look wonderful in Ms. Saro-Wiwa's photographs.

One of the show's most abstractly evocative works is a Minimalist video loop called "[Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera](#)," by Sondra K. Perry. It shows a person wildly dancing in an empty studio, but most of the body — all but the hair, arms and feet — is digitally blurred almost to invisibility, turning the figure into a hyperactive ghost. Here, you might imagine, is the mercurial spirit of the masquerade itself.