

The logo for the African Artists' Foundation (AAF) is a white rectangular box with the text "African Artists' Foundation (AAF)" in a magenta, sans-serif font. It is positioned in the upper left corner of the slide. The background of the slide is a vibrant, abstract artwork featuring a collage of various patterns and colors, including yellow, orange, black, white, and purple. The patterns include geometric shapes like triangles and diamonds, as well as more organic, flowing lines and textures. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional African art, with a focus on bold colors and intricate designs.

African Artists' Foundation (AAF)

OBINNA MAKATA

The title "METAHISTORIES" is displayed in a magenta, sans-serif font within a white rectangular box. This box is located in the lower left area of the slide, partially overlapping the abstract artwork. The background of the slide is a vibrant, abstract artwork featuring a collage of various patterns and colors, including yellow, orange, black, white, and purple. The patterns include geometric shapes like triangles and diamonds, as well as more organic, flowing lines and textures. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional African art, with a focus on bold colors and intricate designs.

METAHISTORIES



OBINNA MAKATA: METAHISTORIES

14 September - 30 September 2012

African Artists' Foundation (AAF)
54 Raymond Njoku Street
Ikoyi, Lagos
Nigeria

ESSAY

Metahistories

Joseph Gergel

Curator, African Artists' Foundation (AAF)

If Obinna Makata's collages could be prematurely and stereotypically classified as "African" art, with their geographically specific patterns, colours and elongated figures so common in what Western art institutions not so long ago termed "Primitive" art, they are unabashedly conscious of their designation as such. Makata's collages ambivalently force such signification to the forefront of the discourse of contemporary art in Africa and use the preconceptions of "African" art as a driving conceptual framework. Makata describes his collages as "broken pieces of African culture", a response to the omnipresence of foreign influence that continues to threaten traditional value systems and artistic processes that are unique to the Continent. For Makata, his work is not about a specifically "Nigerian" experience or a personal experience as such. It is about referencing "Africanity" as a visual metaphor. Such a process is fundamentally different than the commercial enterprises of "Airport Art", work that has been defined to cater to international tourists in search of souvenirs and that gives the false aura of authenticity of a time passed.¹ In the spirit of Senghor's concept of "Negritude", which embraced an African aesthetic as a combative tool to the perceived superiority of the West, or the "Zaria Rebels" attack on the academic artistic style propagated by colonialist art institutions, Makata's implicit references to traditional African art are used as a protective defense of a dying culture.²

In Makata's mixed media collages, diverse visual elements such as ink drawing and cut fabric are used to form a combination of ambiguous bodies and intricately designed patterns. To describe the forms as "human" might not be the most precise metaphor, as the figures are rarely gendered and have disproportionate limbs and misshaped heads. The figures more closely resemble stick figure drawing or a child's doodling, where there is a lack of technical expertise or a displayed mastery of painterly skill. This is not, of course, the result of a lack of artistic talent but rather a deliberate choice in how the conceptual message is articulated and negotiated by the viewer. Incorporated onto the figure's bodies and composition are pieces of torn fabric and detailed pen drawing, where the sombre tones of the ink contrast with the bright and colourful patterns of the textile designs. It is clear at first glance that Makata's collages have an embedded tension in the contrasting tonalities and motifs, one that is in flux, combative, and unresolved. Makata's collages reflect a clash of traditional artistic practices and contemporary influences, of the figurative and the abstract, and of the lighthearted and the threatening.

Obinna Makata's collages are not unique to his practice. Makata was trained in sculpture at the University of

Nigeria, Nsukka, an arts programme that is synonymous with an emphasis on a conceptual approach to art, one that prioritises ideas over techniques. Yet, before his artistic training at university, Makata was already well versed in the processes of art production. After being discovered at the age of eleven by a local artist, Makata worked as a studio assistant for a woodcarver and learned the skills of his trade. Makata describes this experience as in many ways a “lost childhood”, and this process of doodling is perhaps subconsciously reflected in his work. In fact, it was not until university that Makata first picked up painting. Becoming an artist was something that was deeply embedded into his childhood and life experience. This is not to fall into the trap of depicting the African artist as somehow more in touch with his emotions than artists of other cultures, a neocolonialist perspective that stifles the importance of art production made in Africa in a global context. Instead, Makata’s experience growing up as an artist was one that focused on a technical approach to art, and it is this background that contrasts so deeply with his choice of such an informal approach to his collages.

Makata’s collages, produced in the last year, came about as a new approach to his artistic production. Makata explains that, after a difficult time financially, he found himself working with what was readily available and

inexpensive to produce, including ink pens and scraps of fabric that were left in the dustbin of his neighbor who was a local tailor. Yet, despite the haphazard way that Makata initially approached African textiles as a medium, it has become the core of the work and a vehicle of which the message is carried. Makata states: "The use of the fabric depicts "Africanness" but in different contexts. Sometimes it can symbolise pride, sometimes mere aesthetic, sometimes lost culture, as you can see in the body of figures without fabric." ³ In fact, while such fabric designs immediately carry significations of Africa, they come from a history of cultural appropriation that highlights the positive trade and exchange between Africa and Europe. While each individual work alludes to a different narrative association and artistic approach, they share a commonality in their sense of confusion and ambiguity of a distinctly African identity. Obinna Makata's artistic approach confronts the viewer to question their definition of contemporary African art, and, in the process, forces an understanding of art made on the Continent out of a solely assimilative paradigm and one that could proudly and distinctly be defined as "African". At the same time, Makata contributes to a discourse that traverses cultures and speaks to a dialogue that is inherently global.

Footnotes

1. In H.O. Babatunde's book *A Comprehensive Approach to Creative and Visual Arts for Schools and Colleges*, Airport Art is defined as "a contemporary art style in African [sic] being produce [sic] on commercial level to serve and satisfy the tourists in transits of airport hotels or guests houses and public spaces. They are artwork without originality, therefore it is cheaper."
2. "Negritude" is a cultural philosophy that was developed in the 1930s by a group of francophone African intellectuals led by Léopold Sedar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas. The group propagated the idea of establishing a unique African culture with its own traits of literary and artistic expression as a tool to reject colonial domination. The "Zaria Rebels" were a group of artists that were members of the Zaria Art Society, who argued for an artistic expression that was positioned against the strict academic curriculum of Nigerian art schools.
3. Interview with the artist (18 August 2012).

IMAGES



Left

Immigrants. 2012

Ink and fabric on paper. 26.5 x 35.5 cm

Right

The Broken Tune. 2012

Ink and fabric on paper. 25.5 x 40 cm



Left
Visa Queue. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 35.5 x 27 cm

Right
The Elder's Diary. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 32 x 34.5 cm





History Has Taken the Chain Off Our Feet to the Brain. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 35.5 x 27 cm



The Face Behind the Mask. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 37 x 30.5 cm



Left

Visa Lottery (The Rhythm of Modern Slavery). 2012

Ink and fabric on paper. 37 x 31 cm

Right

Visa Lottery (The Rhythm of Modern Slavery 2). 2012

Ink and fabric on paper. 26.5 x 35.5 cm





The Usher. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 32 x 24.5 cm



Through the Eye of a Needle. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 35 x 27 cm



Left
Untitled. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 35.5 x 27 cm

Right
Pregnant in the Head. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 26.5 x 35.5 cm





Left

Pregnant in the Head 2. 2012

Ink and fabric on paper. 26.5 x 35 cm

Right

Pregnant in the Head 3. 2012

Ink and fabric on paper. 30.5 x 37 cm



Pregnant in the Belly. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 26.5 x 35.5 cm

How to Love Upside Down. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 30.5 x 37 cm





Left
Two Heads Are Better Than One. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 30.5 x 37 cm

Right
Untitled. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 235.5 x 37 cm

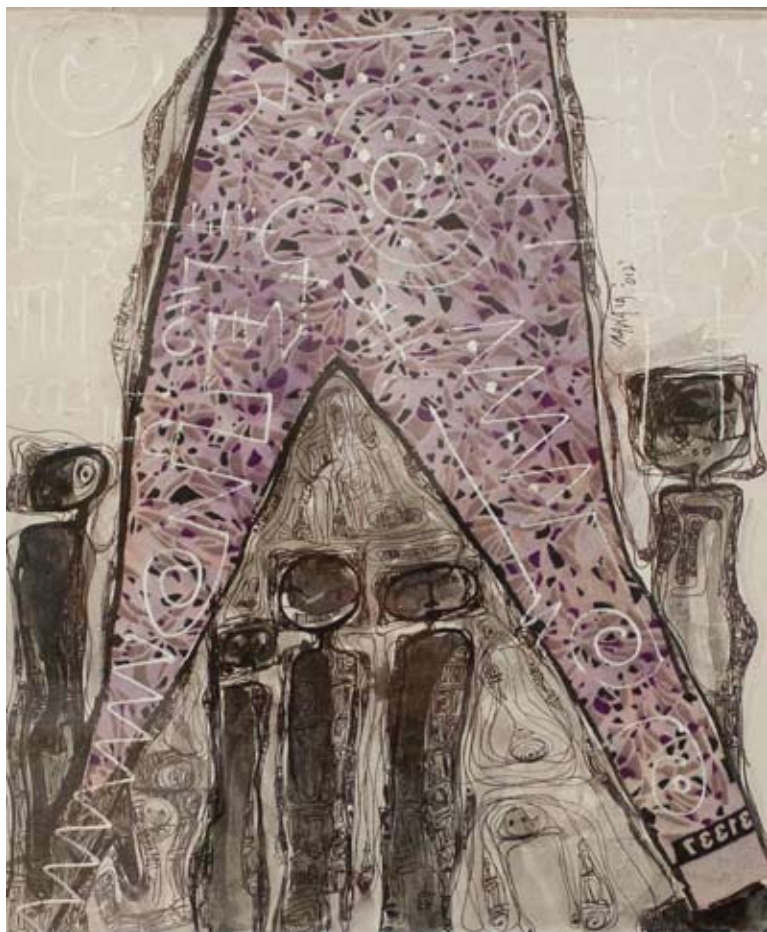




The Red Cap Chiefs. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 36 x 23.5 cm



Untitled. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 65 x 31 cm



*She Stood and Conquered. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 30.5 x 37 cm*



The New Map of Africa. 2012
Ink and fabric on paper. 35 x 32 cm

BIO + CV

Obinna Makata was born in 1981 and is from Ezimo, Enugu State, Nigeria. Makata graduated from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in 2007, where he majored in sculpture. Makata is a full time studio artist who lives and works in Abuja and is the Founder and Creative Director of Mma-Nka Studio.

He works in diverse mediums such as sculpture, painting, and mixed media practices. Makata's work focuses on the fading aspects of traditional African culture and values in contemporary society. Makata has participated actively in fifteen group exhibitions since 2003.

Obinna Makata: Metahistories is Makata's first solo exhibition. Makata will begin an artist residency at the African Artists' Foundation in October 2012.

Select Group Exhibitions:

2009 Blossom. Yaradua Centre Abuja. An Innagural Exhibition by the Society of Nigerian Artists, Abuja Branch.

2007 African Heritage. Pendulum Art Gallery, Lagos. Exhibition by Pan African Circle of Artists (PACA).

2006 Away But Not Gone. Ana Gallery, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. A departmental exhibition by the Fine and Applied Art Department.

2005 Dreams Alive 3 : New Art Theatre, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. A departmental exhibition by the Fine and Applied Art Department.

2004 Image of Africa. Alliance Francaise Enugu. A group exhibition of Kambani art.

2003 The Stide. National Musium Enugu. A group exhibition by selected artists from University of Nigeria Nsukka

This exhibition catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Obinna Makata: Metahistories* at the African Artists' Foundation (AAF).
14 September - 30 September 2012

Curated by Joseph Gergel, African Artists' Foundation (AAF)

Catalogue Design by Alafuro Sikoki

Obinna Makata: Metahistories is organised by the African Artists' Foundation.
© 2012 African Artists' Foundation (AAF)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication shall be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior permission from the author.

About AAF:

The African Artists' Foundation (AAF) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the promotion and development of contemporary African art and artists. Established in 2007, the African Artists' Foundation aims to encourage the highest standard of art in Africa. The African Artists' Foundation serves a significant role in art and academic communities through organising art exhibitions, competitions, and workshops with the aim of unearthing and developing talent, creating societal awareness, and providing a platform to express creativity.

By providing assistance to professional and emerging artists in Africa and support to international exhibitions and community outreach programs, the African Artists' Foundation views the contribution to a strong cultural landscape in Africa as a transformative element in driving social change.

Cover Image: (*Untitled*. 2012)

Ink and fabric on paper. 35.5 x 27 cm

