

Wahala Temi



Body Work

This catalogue is published to accompany the exhibition “Wahala Temi - Body Work” at the Walsh Gallery at Seton Hall University, on display from May 10 through May 21, 2010.

Curated by Jeanne Brasile

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Front Cover Image:
Wahala Temi “Sacrifice” mixed media, dimensions variable, 2010.
Image courtesy of Sandro Gomes

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Walsh Gallery
Seton Hall University

On my first studio visit with Wahala Temi in the early months of 2009, her work primarily consisted of paintings on wood and canvas. She was also exploring sculptural forms made from repurposed IKEA furniture. It was also around this time that Wahala began incorporating branches bound with thread onto stretched canvases, an outgrowth of her paintings that became the impetus for her move into purely sculptural forms. The bound branches and thread moved her work metaphorically into the space of a dialogue about her life as a Nigerian-American and her time spent living in two diverse countries. Mining her life experiences for subject matter led Wahala to make commentaries about her life in Western Africa and Brooklyn, the place of her birth. Her dual heritage gives her a unique perspective on both societies – and she unabashedly critiques both cultures in her work.

The branches in her mixed-media works are bound with red or black thread, immobilized physically, as an allusion to the immobility imposed on women culturally, financially and physically by the male-dominated culture of Nigeria. The black thread she uses is specifically the same type used by women to bind their hair into braids and other forms, an important aspect of both Nigerian and African-American culture. She purchases her raw materials in West African markets that dot the Newark neighborhood she frequents.

The other prevalent medium in her recent work is the palm stem brush, also purchased in West African markets. Palm stem brushes, or *igbale*, are made of individual palm stems, lashed together to form a broom used by women to keep house in small towns in Nigeria like those in which her grandmother lived. Wahala transforms the *igbale* by using them in installations such as “Sacrifice” and “Shields.” Cleverly, the palm stem brush finds its way into several forms, and different discourses in her work.

“Sacrifice” is an installation of *igbale* in circular and ovoid forms that hang from the ceiling and burst from the wall. The manner in which Wahala works the palms makes them resemble corpuscles. Conceptually, there is a correlation to the sacrifice which women must make in terms of their deference to men in a male-centric society. Thematically, the palm stems also reference

the ongoing practice of female-genital mutilation in Nigeria specifically, though the practice is still wide-spread in other areas of the world.

In a different manner, "Shields" again transforms the slender igbale, this time into geometric forms laden with negative space. These shields enclose the viewer, much in the same way the palm groves in Nigeria form a protective canopy beneath the tree-line. Wahala transforms the "lowly" quotidian material into a symbol of empowerment. Brooms are traditionally used for sweeping, with the user - typically a woman - casting her eyes downward to keep her attention on the task of sweeping. In "Shields," the palms stems are hung from the ceiling, forcing the viewer to look up, a symbolic act of liberation and defiance.

The shields also evoke the beaded shields worn over the faces of Yoruba royalty to hide the ruler's identity, but also to protect the viewer from the power of the king's direct gaze. As the function of a ruler is ostensibly to protect his people, these shields also suggest a sense of security. Wahala's "Shields" are used in an installation format, echoing architectural forms that are meant to provide shelter and protection from the elements. In this way, Wahala's training as an architect finds its way into her artwork, creating a complex interplay between her vocational training, life experience and cultural duality.

The diptych "Dance Connection" brings the important Yoruba tradition of dance into the discourse of Wahala's work. The artwork, a mixed-media collage of paint, straw mats and broken compact discs forms the shape of two dancers. Moving past the obvious associations of dance in Yoruba and African-American cultures, the straw mats and compact discs, when conflated against one another, form a critique of mechanized culture in the United States and traditions of Nigeria, some being left behind and others, for better or worse, being carried into the present.



figure 1

Wahala's work also critiques the colonial mind-set of people who continue to subjugate themselves despite having gained political and social freedom. In "Bleachers," a series of re-purposed sculptural objects, she tackles the phenomenon of dark-skinned people using bleaching products in an attempt to lighten



figure 2

their skin. This practice comments on the diminished self-esteem of those who use the products. The sculptures also beg the question of why someone would use these harsh chemicals to conform to society's ideal - pale skin equals good, dark skin equals bad. In an earlier version of her artist statement, Wahala noted "my ideas on family, religion, culture and lifestyle... tend to clash with those of family, friends and relatives. My art reflects this tension." It is no wonder. Wahala's art is brutally frank. She puts forth questions and supposi-

tions that others have been reluctant to tackle. Despite her recriminations, she embraces both Western and Nigerian culture. She seeks to redress the bad, welcome the good and hopes that an open dialogue might induce positive change where it is necessary. Another part of that same statement reads, "I feel it in my creative process...with transformation there is immense sacrifice and pain. In the process of dismantling, breaking and bending broom stems, I free them from the confines of Post-Colonial-Yoruba-Culture." I feel Temi's message deeply when viewing the work, and judging from the public's response, so do they.

Jeanne Brasile, Curator

The Walsh Gallery and Wahala Temi extend their gratitude to those who made this exhibition possible:

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Images:

title page - "Dance Connection I and II (diptych)" mixed media, 60" x 40"each, 2010,
image courtesy of Sandro Gomes

fig. 1 - "Type I" mixed media, 60" x 40", 2010, image courtesy of Ryan Joseph

fig. 2 - "Shields"(detail) and "Sacrifice" mixed media, dimensions variable, 2010 ,
image courtesy of the Walsh Gallery

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