

**METAPHORS IN MATERIALS AND
IMAGERY FOR SELF RECLAMATION AND
EMPOWERMENT.**

by

JANICE LARDEY

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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Printmaking of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island.

Approved by:

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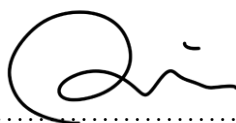
Megan Foster
Graduate Program Director and Associate Professor, RISD Printmaking
Department Thesis Chair

.....

Andrew Raftery
Professor, RISD Printmaking Department
Co-Chair

.....

Anna Mcneary
Critic, RISD Printmaking
Thesis
Advisor



.....

Kelly Taylor Mitchell
Artist/Assistant Professor of Art and Visual Culture / Art Program Director, Spelman
College /External Critic

Thanksgiving

I would like to begin by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to the Almighty God, who has made it possible for me to complete this journey. It has been two years of His unwavering faithfulness, wisdom, and strength that have brought me this far. I am also thankful for the knowledge and fresh grace He has bestowed upon me, enabling me to create my artworks.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this phase of my life to my siblings, who have been my driving force and inspiration.

"Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name." 1

Chronicles 29:13

Abstract

As an experimental multidisciplinary artist, my creative process draws inspiration from daily experiences and encounters with the mundane. I am particularly interested in West African textile cultural practices, specifically the use of symbols and basic geometric forms to communicate through materials (specifically fabrics) and the role these images and forms play in African culture. In my work, I am developing my own distinct vocabulary of symbols and patterns, inspired by these practices.

My artistic practice explores a wide range of themes related to women, sustainability, loss, everydayness, wear and tear, degeneration, the transitory nature of life, and material effects, often through the repurposing of household fabrics. Through experimentation with layering, repetition, and investing my creative process, I aim to contribute to the conversation around gender and societal expectations that persists in our current world, while also engaging in a personal search for identity and belonging.

This thesis will examine my practice, including my sources of inspiration and artistic process, to explore how I respond to the themes that particularly interest me, and how my work contributes to the ongoing dialogue of contemporary art practices.

Ultimately, I aim to use my art to challenge traditional societal gender and patriarchal norms and empower myself and the women around me.

Repetition, Layer upon layer

365 days of passing time,
I wake to repeat, in rhythm and rhyme,
From infancy to now, a daily grind,
Of sleep, bath, brush, dress, and eat.

For twenty-five years, I've followed this tune,
A cycle of life, from night to noon,
Walk, fall, and talk, and back to bed,
Repeat, each day, as my routine led.

Now, as life moves forward, so does the beat,
A routine that adapts to each day's feat,
Prayer and devotion, a morning greeting,
Brush, bath, and school, a new day's meeting.

Talk, read, and work, all in a day's plan,
Studio, assignments, and social media span,
Friends and fun, a break from the norm,
Think, pray, and sleep, a cycle reborn.

Seems, mundane and tedious, but life's magic lies,
In the layers of each day, as time flies,
Iconographies and patterns, a beautiful blend,
Of repetition and layering, till life's end.

Mummy and Mama Ama's Wardrobe

Growing up surrounded by a plethora of fabrics and textiles, I developed an appreciation and interest in colour, symbols, patterns, and texture. My Nigerian and Ghanaian heritage exposed me to the rich history and traditions of these cultures and countries. My grandmother, who we all fondly call Mummy, had a wardrobe filled with Nigerian and Ghanaian fabrics and jute bags as well as black polythene bags under the bed filled with different fabrics. My sleeping area was on the ground, the area created in front of the bed and the wardrobe. I remember my sleeping mat with striped colours and its rough surface and my cover cloths, which were passed down to me from her collection. I recall instances when my mother would visit me and bring along some of her fabrics, which were mostly like her *akata* so in Twi (amongst Asantes in Ghana) for me to use while sleeping. This also translates in English as wrapper, and it is called that among Nigerians.

The interest in textiles followed me as I grew older, and I was not surprised to find that when I moved to live with my parents, the wardrobe of my mother (Mama Ama) was also filled with different fabrics that she had not yet sewn.

As I matured, I started to notice the prevalence of fabric in my community. For specific occasions, host families would provide everyone with a particular garment that they had purchased and sewn into desired styles for the event. This diversity in the use of fabrics is something that I loved seeing. It became evident to me that fabric plays a significant role in the identity of West Africa and its culture. This custom is still practiced and very cherished in my home church in Ghana where I used to see it often before travelling for my master's at RISD.

Through my experiences and encounters with textiles, I have seen that fabrics carry symbolic meaning and are a medium of communication, self-expression, and cultural identity. They convey the stories and meaning of their makers and wearers. Through the patterns and colours, one can tell the occasion or reason for which a particular cloth is worn.

Additionally, I noticed these fabrics carry strong symbolic meanings and are sometimes imbued with gender classifications which one could easily tell in the colors used for men or women and in the patterns used in designing the cloths.

My appreciation for fabrics and their rich history and symbolic tradition has led me to create artwork that involves experimenting with the approaches of how these fabrics are made and the symbols that are used, as well as recreating my own narratives through them. In doing this, my work examines themes of transition, domesticity, identity, self, gender roles, patriarchy, sustainability, and everyday life. This is an embodiment of my quest of self-reclamation and an attempt to create counter narratives to certain societal stereotypes that I naturally became inclined to pursue as my work and ideas evolved.

In this thesis, I delve into my experiences with textiles and rely on personal experiences as a woman who has faced society's constraints. Some of these experiences have influenced my approach to work, and I use fabric as metaphors for commenting on the themes listed above through painting, printmaking, papermaking, and dyeing techniques intermixed with other experimentations.

My research focus has always aimed at exploring West African textile and print cultures as a tool for self-reclamation and to create utopic experiences for myself to thrive in. My work attempts to highlight the significance of fabrics from Ghana and Nigeria by reimagining these practices. Through my process, I pay homage to the rich cultures of these two countries and their ability to convey meaning and stories concurrently.

Politics of West African Print and Textiles Cultures

West African textile and print traditions from Ghana and Nigeria are the primary sources of inspiration for my works. Much of Africa's history is communicated orally, passed down within ethnic groups from older to younger members in the form of myths or family traditions that are often acted out and not understood by outsiders (Polakoff, 1980).

I will provide a brief background into these textiles and print practices, drawing from my observations and experiences, as well as information passed down to me or from my reading.

West African textile cultures are characterized by a rich history of pattern making, dyeing, and printing techniques. They also show technical skills and creative ingenuity of the creators/designers. As discussed in the book "The Essential Art of African Textiles", African textiles are commonly seen as artworks that are present everywhere, and their beauty is derived from a combination of traditional techniques and a desire for new ideas. The basic concept behind this is that textile design is an ever-evolving range of possibilities, and this perspective still influences contemporary creative practices.

Some of the most prominent techniques which interest me include batik, tie-dye, Adinkra, Kente, and Adire. They have been used for centuries to create beautiful and intricate fabrics that represent cultural identity and social status. These traditional textiles and print cultures in which I am particularly interested continue to evolve and change due to modernity and as society adapts to moving trends. Today, they are now more used in fashion, whereas traditionally they were preserved for specific occasions.

In the context of these techniques, I am particularly interested in *symbols* along with patterns and colour. In the next chapters, I discuss how colours, patterns and symbols are used in some West African practices and provide examples of its meanings and associations. Additionally, I briefly discuss some forms of textile fabrics/ cultures in Ghana and Nigeria.

Colours, Patterns, and Symbols in a Traditional African Context

Colours

Colours play an important role in many aspects of African life, including art, fashion, and culture. They are not just used for aesthetic purposes, but also to convey deep cultural and historical meanings. For instance, in many African societies, specific colours are associated with different stages of life, such as birth, marriage, and death. For example, the colours black and red are mostly worn to mourn the dead in most parts of Ghana.

Moreover, colours can be used to signify the social status, gender, or profession of the wearer. For example, certain colours like gold may be used for royalty, while others are worn by commoners. In some cultures, women are expected to wear specific colours that reflect their marital status or social position. Similarly, some professions may have their own colour codes that reflect their work, such as military or medical personnel. For example, the colours green and white are mostly associated with nursing uniforms in Ghana.

Despite the cultural importance of colours in African societies, the meaning and symbolism of colours are changing due to globalization and the influence of Western cultures. For instance, some Western-influenced African designers may use colours based on Western fashion trends rather than traditional cultural meanings. Moreover, some people may not be aware of the cultural significance of colours and may use them purely for aesthetic purposes.

Overall, colours are an essential part of African cultures and convey important cultural and historical meanings. However, their significance is evolving in response to changing cultural and societal contexts.

In Kente cloth making in Ghana, colours have specific meanings that reflect the values and traditions of the Ashanti people. The table below shows examples of what colours mean when used in Kente cloth making in Ghana.

	Blue	peace, togetherness; love and harmony
	Black	maturity, spiritual energy, mourning, funeral and passing rites
	Gold	high worth, richness, fertility, royalty, prosperity, monetary wealth
	Green	land, crops, vegetation, harvest, growth, spiritual growth and renewal
	Yellow	high worth, richness, fertility, royalty, prosperity, monetary wealth
	Grey	healing rituals; cleansing rituals; symbolizes ash
	Pink	feminine; mildness and feminine qualities
	White	pureness, cleansing rites and festivals
	Maroon	mother earth and healing
	Red	death; funerals; mourning
	Purple	feminine; worn by girls and women
	Silver	peace and joy; referencing to the moon

Image source: kentecloth.net

Patterns

In addition to colours, patterns also hold significant cultural and historical meanings in African textiles. Like colours, patterns represent various aspects of African life, such as social status, gender, age, or profession. Often, symbols and motifs are used to generate patterns, which can be derived from everyday objects, natural forms, and experiences.

Some patterns are created by repeating a single element, while others combine multiple elements like forms, shapes, and lines to create a larger image. This repetition can create a sense of movement, rhythm, and balance within the pattern, making it visually appealing and culturally significant. For example, patterns used in African textiles may represent a story or communicate a message about the wearer or the occasion.

One notable example of how patterns are designed is by using Adinkra symbols to create a design, either repeat or not. These symbols are derived from the traditional Akan culture in Ghana and represent specific concepts or messages, such as unity, bravery, or wisdom. Adinkra symbols are often used in textiles to convey cultural values and beliefs. Moreover, patterns also reflect regional or tribal differences in African textiles. For example, the patterns used in West African textiles such as Kente or Bogolan cloth differ from those used in East or Southern African textiles such as Shweshwe or Kanga.

In the image below, a repeat pattern using lines and an Adinkra symbol called *Ananse ntontan* which stands for wisdom and creativity”.



Sample repeat pattern (photo taken by Janice Lardey in 2019) at Ntonso village, Kumasi, Ghana

Symbols and Symbolism

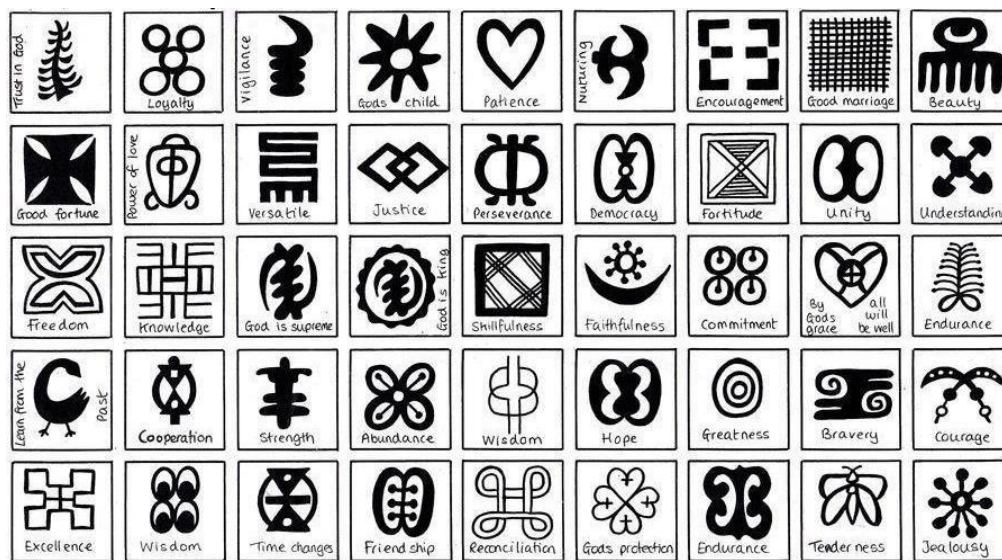
Symbols are an essential aspect of many cultural practices, and they are not limited to Africa. The use of symbols is universal and transcends language and cultural barriers. In the West, symbols are also used extensively in fabric and other forms of art to communicate a range of messages and meanings.

The development of symbols is often attributed to the need for communication and writing in cultures that lack a formal system of writing. In traditional African societies, symbols were used to send messages or as a medium of expression. In Ghana and other African countries, symbols are characterized by pictograms and ideograms and carry decorative functions. They are used to convey proverbs, stories, and historical events through their visual form.

Despite their historical meanings, symbols can be ambiguous and have multiple interpretations. This ambiguity allows them to be open to a range of meanings and interpretations, depending on the context in which they are used. As such, symbols can be a powerful tool for expressing complex ideas and emotions in a simple yet effective way.

Symbols are important elements in communicating through fabric, and they are not limited to any one culture or region. They are a universal language that can convey messages and meanings in a simple yet effective way, making them an essential aspect of many cultural practices around the world.

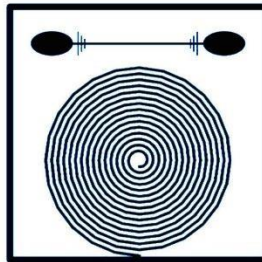
Below are some examples of symbols from Nigeria and Ghana.



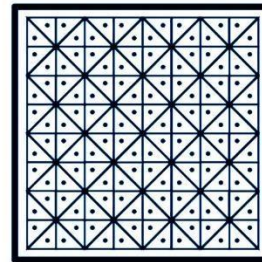
Adinkra symbols from Ghana



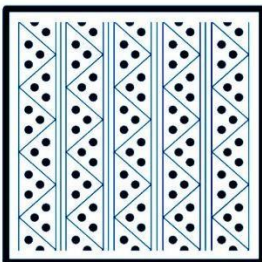
Mirrors
Someone that's a reflection in your life



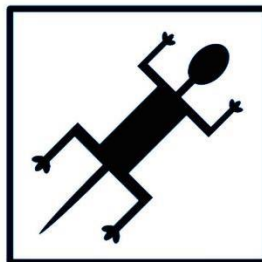
Cycle of life
Every stage of life is art (with pillar)



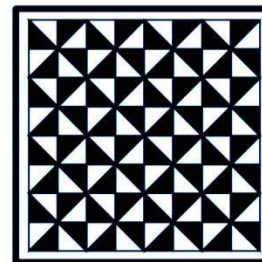
Sekere
Barbwire



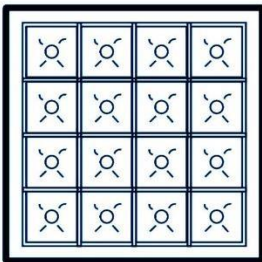
Crossroads
The crossroads of life



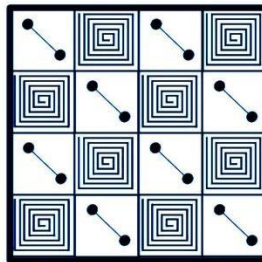
Wall Gecko
Peaceful Home



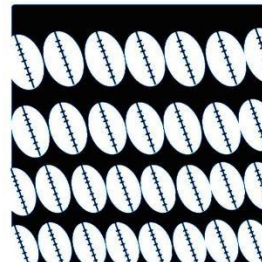
Talking Drum
Sending messages through the drum



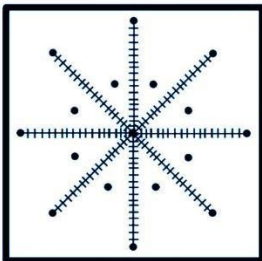
Earring
Only hear good news



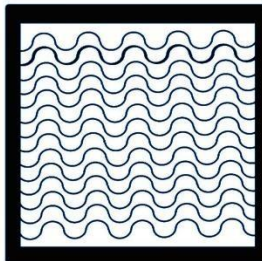
Long life
Continuous with pillar



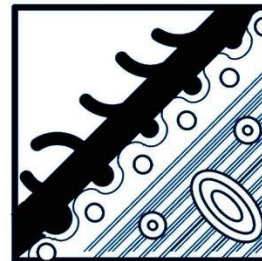
Cowries
Money



Guinea Corn
The hand that feeds you never lacks



Wave of life
Wave away any troubles



Shango
Protects from thunder

Symbols from Nigeria used in Yoruba Adire Cloth making.

Some Examples of Print/Dyeing Techniques and Fabric cultures in Ghana and Nigeria.

Batik

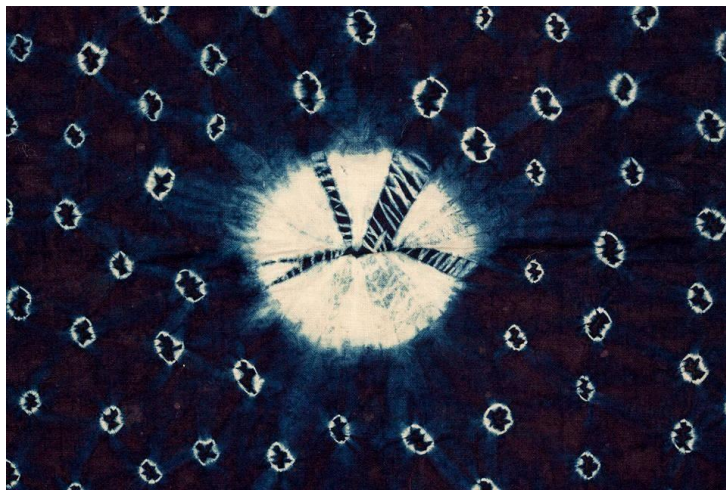
Batik is a wax-resist dyeing technique. Designs are drawn or stamped onto cotton fabrics using melted wax, which acts as the resist before the fabrics are dipped in dyes. The wax prevents colors from penetrating those parts. After dyeing and drying, the wax is removed to reveal the underlying fabric colour. Batik has a long history that originated in Indonesia and then spread to West African countries like Nigeria and Ghana through trade and travel. This process requires skills, patience, and attention to detail.



Sample of batik, image courtesy by Kitengestore

Tie-dye and Adire

These are patterning and dyeing methods where part of the cloth to be designed is either stitched or tied at some point to act as a resist before the fabric is dyed. The areas tied prevent dyes from reaching the parts of the fabric protected within the knots and folds. This process is called tie-dye in Ghana, and Adire among the Yoruba of Nigeria, which means "to take, to tie and dye." The Yoruba have two types of this form of textile making - *Adire eleko* and *Adire eleso*. *Adire eleso* is when the design is tied and sewn, whereas *Adire eleko* is when the design is created by applying a paste-like resist made from cassava root. Adire is mostly dyed with Indigo while the tie-dye in Ghana uses a whole range of colours and dyes from natural to synthetic dyes.



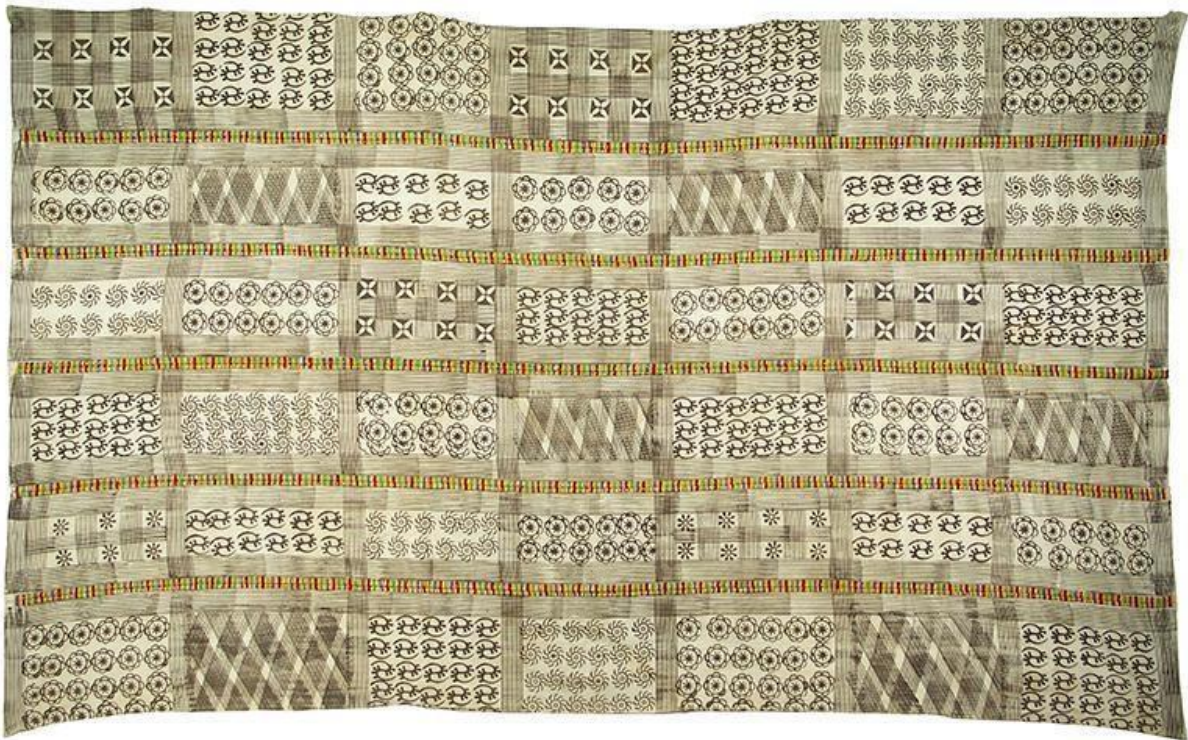
*Detail of an indigo resist-dyed cotton in 'moons and fruits' pattern, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960s.
Museum no. Circ.592-1965. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London*



Sample tie-dye from Ghana Fidelis Sesenu

Adinkra

Adinkra is a Twi word in Ghana that means "goodbye" or "farewell." Adinkra printing employs the use of symbols (Adinkra symbols) to communicate through fabrics. Originally, Adinkra symbols came about as a medium of communication among the Asantes in Ghana. These symbols are used in the Adinkra printing process. Though they were originally used to convey information, they have now been widely adapted by others in cloth production and designs. Adinkra cloth was initially printed from stamp designs carved from cassava and cocoyam but was later replaced with calabash. Different materials like foam and felt are now used as print tools. The cloth is characterized by an overall repeat pattern where the Adinkra symbols and basic lines and shapes are employed.



Adinkra Cloth sample. Photographs © Hamill Gallery

Kente

Kente is a form of cloth / cloth making in Ghana. There are two forms of Kente: the Asante Kente, and the Ewe Kente. These forms of cloth making are also intended for communication. The colours of the cloth have individual characters and hold symbolic meanings. The Kente cloth is traditionally woven by men in 4-inch strips, which are then assembled to form long strips or bands of fabric mostly by women. The motifs are often the weavers' creations, and each is created per the given occasion or wearer. At times, they are the weavers' space for creative expression. These fabrics tell the spoken rhetoric proverbs among Asantes.



Asante Kente cloth, 20th century, silk and cotton (Vatican Museums)

As mentioned earlier, I am deeply influenced by these textiles and print cultures, and I often draw inspiration from them in creating my works. Their rich histories and visual languages continue to fascinate me, and I find their flexibility to be particularly intriguing. The fluidity of symbols and geometric forms allows them to take on different meanings and interpretations in various contexts, making them a versatile tool for creative expression.

When developing patterns and symbols for my prints and paintings, I often draw from my daily routine and experiences. I also reference West African symbols from countries like Ghana and Nigeria, as well as iconographies such as surface pattern designs, arabesque patterns, and geometric forms found on building surfaces. Sometimes, I merge different symbols, alter them, or use them in their original state, depending on the message I want to convey. Some of these symbols are used to communicate a feeling or a particular message while working, while others are used to give the work an identity. I even use some symbols as alphabets to code messages in my art.

I enjoy the relationship that exists between symbols and their meanings, and I invite my audience to engage with this fluid interplay and to interpret my works in unique ways.

The Everyday and Fabrics

Fabrics hold a rich and intriguing history, woven with the threads of trade, slavery, and the exchange of goods between African nations and the West. They have always been a symbol of status, identity, and wealth, and their production and distribution were impacted by colonialism and global trade routes.

For me, fabric is an everyday element of life, from the clothes we wear to the mattresses we sleep on to everyday household items such as tablecloths and curtains. Yet, despite their everyday presence, fabrics remain a remarkable icon of our interaction with the world around us. As an artist, I am drawn to the mundanity of the everyday (like waking up to a 8-5pm job weekly, bathing and many more), and the fleeting moments that we often overlook like cooking. I capture and document them through the lens of fabric and how it reflects our everyday experiences.

In Ghana, it is common for hand-me-downs to be passed onto the younger generation from older family members, a tradition that becomes an integral part of our daily lives. I remember my trips to secondhand thrift stores or "bend-down boutiques," as they are called in Ghana looking for clothes.

This experience contributed to shaping my interest in the politics surrounding used clothes, leading me to explore local traders in *fooseline* for plain secondhand fabric to use for my undergraduate thesis project. *Fooseline* is a slang term used to describe thrift shops that sell secondhand fabrics and clothes in Adum- Kumasi, Ghana. I was interested in how I could transform these plain fabrics into new patterned designed fabrics. Ever since then, secondhand fabrics have become my material of choice.

My fascination lies in the dynamic histories and memories associated with secondhand fabrics. The use of these fabrics has a deep connection to trans-Atlantic trade, and markets such as the *fooseline* Central Market in Adum, Ghana are a testament to the historic ties between Africa and the West. For centuries, Europe exported manufactured goods, including textiles, to Africa in exchange for natural resources and enslaved people. Even today, the secondhand textile market in Africa is dominated by cast-off garments from the West.

Despite this history of exploitation and trade, secondhand fabrics still hold significant cultural value to African communities. They have taken on new meanings and uses in African fashion and identity, often repurposed, and reimagined by designers and wearers alike. They have become a vibrant and indispensable part of African textile traditions, representing the resilience and creativity of African cultures.

I source a variety of materials for my work, including bed sheets, pillowcases, blankets, placemats, and laces. However, I love the vulnerability of these fabrics and I am particularly drawn to secondhand fabrics sourced from thrift stores. They exude a domestic feel and are often associated with softness, comfort, femininity, and warmth.

My work draws upon a variety of influences and ideas but my identity as a woman and an artist is a key factor in the themes that I explore. These themes include gender roles and patriarchy, among others. Specifically, I am drawn to topics such as gender roles and patriarchy because they continue to affect our society today, despite the progress that has been made. While we have made significant strides toward creating a more equitable and balanced society, it is important to recognize that biases and imbalances persist. This is particularly true in my own life and experiences.

It is important to continue discussing these ongoing issues within contemporary art because they play a critical role in shaping our society and culture. I am committed to contributing to this dialogue through my art practice and work. Through my art, I hope to challenge and disrupt traditional gender norms and offer new perspectives on these complex issues. It is important to state that my work is not solely about embracing femininity or reinforcing traditional gender roles, but rather about reimagining and expanding the possibilities for self-expression and individuality while playing around with materials. By engaging with these topics in my work, I aim to create a space for reflection, critique, and dialogue that can lead to greater understanding and progress.

Gender Roles and Patriarchy

The production of textiles and prints in West Africa is closely connected to gender roles, patriarchy, and social hierarchies. Traditionally, men were responsible for weaving and dyeing cloth, while women were responsible for spinning and sewing. These gender roles were reinforced by patriarchal social structures that limited women's access to education, economic resources, and political power. However, despite these limitations, women were able to use textiles as a means of social and cultural expression, such as traditional Yoruba costumes that express social status, cultural identity, and personal style.

Gender roles in West Africa have varied over time and across cultures, but traditional societies have generally been patriarchal, with men holding positions of power and authority, and women occupying more subservient roles. Men were typically responsible for hunting, farming, and trading, while women were relegated to traditional roles such as homemaker, caregiver, and support roles in the workplace, often with fewer opportunities for advancement compared to men. The book *Persistent Inequalities* sheds light on how traditional values precondition the minds of young boys to fight and girls to always obey, creating mental pictures of how they see themselves in their present and future roles.

Despite these gendered roles, there were examples of women taking on leadership roles in traditional West African societies, such as Yaa Asantewaa (Queen mother of Ejisu, Ashanti Region, Ghana) and the warrior women of Dahomey. In recent times, there has been a shift towards more gender equality in West Africa, particularly in urban areas, with more opportunities for women to pursue education, careers, and leadership roles. However, traditional gender roles and biases still exist in some societies, particularly in rural areas.

As someone who has personally experienced biases and limitations based on gender, the issue of gender roles in West Africa is particularly important to me. Drawing on family stories and experiences, I use textile practices such as patterns, symbols, and colour as a metaphor to create counter-narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and empower women.

My focus in this regard and for this thesis is on how women might claim traditional male roles as their own, and how I might do so myself.

Paper as Therapy

For three hours I cooked the fibers,
Breaking them down, making them fragile with soda ash,
And in their whispers, I could hear them cry out to me,
As if urging me to create something magnificent.

The endless hours spent scraping and cleaning,
The rhythm and music created from beating the paper pulp,
All added to the magic that filled the air,
And stirred my soul the more.

Receipts and scraps of paper,
Gathered with care and purposeful labor,
Soaked to softness, yielding to my touch,
Pulped up and ready to be mixed.

Then came the hours in the naginata,
With sloshing sounds of nori and paper fibers in the vats,
As if dancing to the music that only I could hear,
I formed the sheets that would bear witness to my creation.

And at last, the beautiful sheets appeared,
Each one a masterpiece in its own right,
A testament to the long hours of labor,
And the beauty that can be born from my hands.

May these sheets, like the fibers that formed them,
Serve as a reminder of the endless possibilities, And
the beauty that can arise from one's efforts,
As you seek to create something that will endure.

Papermaking has become a space of liberation for me, a space for my mind to wander freely. It allows me to take a break from the meticulousness of fabric work and indulge in the tactile pleasure of working with mulberry and other fibers. With mulberry and other fibers at my disposal, I can take a break from fabrics and play around with the creative process in a loose, expressive way through materials and technique. For example, playing around with moldy bread, and combining that with mulberry plant barks to push the boundaries of papermaking. As an incorrigible hoarder, I tend to keep everything, including papers like receipts and documents. However, papermaking has become a savior, allowing me to repurpose these materials and preserve them as a part of my life's journey. Each sheet of paper is a testament to my memories, my spending, and my data.

Moreover, papermaking has opened a new realm of creativity for me. My paper works are not just a complementary material to my fabric creations, but often stand alone as a whole new body of work. I am constantly experimenting with new techniques, styles, and themes, hoping to evoke emotions, memories, and connections in my audience. Through my works, I aim to create new experiences, reconnect with my past and present, and convey my themes of interest using different materials like handmade paper. In this way, I hope to enrich my artistic practice and leave a lasting impression on those who view my works.

Grocery Shopping + Cooking

now she is hungry.....

she headed to the groceries, unsure of what she wanted to eat.

with no plan,

with no list

she decided to just go and see what she could find.

As she walked through the aisles, she picked up different ingredients, trying to imagine how they might work together to create a meal.

Ooopps.... Sorry did I digress?

Well let's get things on track!

After leaving the market with a cart full of food and potential ingredients, she heads home to start cooking. She didn't have a clear idea of what she wanted to do, but she trusted her intuition and let the process unfold naturally.

She sorts the ingredients and begins to put them together. It was like layering, repeating, and experimenting - adding spices and seasoning, tasting, and adjusting as she went along. And then the magic happened -- the food was ready.

Well...I approach my art in a similar manner, sourcing different materials and allowing them to guide me in creating something unique and unexpected.

As I work, I see the similarities between my approach and my cooking, both involving a balance of collaboration, experimentation, a process of layering and repetition.

As an artist, my approach to creating art is rooted in process, experimentation, and repetition which I consider as crucial components of my practice, informing my interest in textures, patterns, colour, and abstraction. In addition, the forms of my work evolve out of my visual and sensual interaction with my environment.

I often start with a collection of materials and take occasional trips to thrift stores to find new items, mostly fabrics. I'm drawn to these materials because they carry embedded identities of their past owners and histories, much like textile traditions that pass fabrics down from generation to generation without necessarily knowing their origin.

In my work, the surfaces of my materials go through stages of transformation which include fabric and paper collage, quilting, dyeing, staining, and burning, among other techniques and processes. I am also inspired by Kente patterns as well as, by the traditional quilting technique in Ghana among the Asantes called Asaasa; involves the use of different patterned and coloured textiles, mostly scraps of fabric pieced and stitched together to form large fabric.

I use staining as another surface treatment to create patterns that allude to stains of life and memories, stains on clothes from performing both domestic and masculine trade jobs which are often done with dyes, rust metals, hot tools, and paints. By using rust, I seek to make a comment on its associations with masculinity and manual labor.

With no predetermined end results for my projects, I choose to orchestrate randomness and allow the fabrics and materials I source to speak to me and to each other. I am very open to chance, embracing the surprising failures and mistakes that lead me in new directions.

As I walk through the stores and even my surroundings, I can't help but notice the colours and patterns of the fabrics around me, which gives me an idea of what I could potentially create in my art. I work with these as references with their own unique personalities to express myself as an artist.

For my colour reference and choice, they naturally unfold as I work coming from an understanding of the colour palette of West African textile and print practices and how each colour has symbolic meanings.

Mostly, I work with a single matrix or printing tool and use that tool/screen repeatedly to build my image on my surface. This gives me the freedom to decide where a pattern, print, or image goes and allows room to embrace mistakes and errors, which all blend in well to give the work its unique voice.

Moreover, I use some of the source fabrics and materials as printmaking matrices and stencils (like laces and robes). I sometimes treat them as my transparency for developing an image onto my screen. The laces and ropes, often manipulated slightly by tying or cutting, are directly placed on the surface of the light box. Then, the same step for burning an image from an acetate to the screen is used.

I use Caran d'Ache watercolour pastels for screen monoprints, screen printing fabric inks, food dyes, oil pastels, powdered pigments, Indian ink, and natural dyes mixed with thickeners such as guar gum/ xanthan gum to act as printing paste.

As I experiment with my creative process, I find myself exploring unconventional tools and printing techniques to challenge preconceived notions of how a medium or approach should yield a particular outcome. Recently, I have been using kitchen tools as printing stamps to comment on women's association with domesticity, as defined by traditional and societal standards. This exploration has even led me to collect various kitchen tools that could potentially be incorporated into an installation piece.

Interestingly, my experimentation has also sparked a newfound interest in researching and creating works centered around traditional Yoruba attire that connects to my patrilineal lineage to Nigeria. At present, I am particularly drawn to the Iro and Buba garments. This research is inspiring me to consider ways in which I can transform my prints from two-dimensional surfaces into soft sculptures and domestic objects, further pushing the boundaries of my creative process.

Gradually, I am developing an intimate and personalized way of making a mind with materials and ideas and then transforming them.

My recent work has been centered around exploring the association of gender roles with certain job(work) costumes and performances, often tagged as either masculine or feminine. I have been using painting, printmaking, and collage as a medium to introduce subjects devoid of facial features and other imagery into my prints. I often draw inspiration from my personal photo library, internet sources, and personal and family stories. To challenge traditional gender roles, I have intentionally placed myself in male-dominated costumes, aiming to create a utopian desire and experience of my place as a female. These images serve as symbols that construct a new identity for me, one that is not limited by traditional gender roles and societal expectations. This current exploration is the summary of my thesis projects.

Thesis work + future!

My thesis is comprised of three distinct pieces that delve into the intricate relationship between manual labor and gender roles. Through my chosen materials and unique approach, I aspire to redefine and reclaim masculine space and my own identity. My artwork is a reflection of my deep fascination with the process of creation, African textile cultures and the transformative power of materials.

For this thesis, I scoured thrift stores to collect an assortment of materials, which I then subjected to tie-dyeing with indigo and rust treatments. I layered these materials with imagery and symbols, employing techniques like painting, screen printing, and collage using handmade paper, fabric, and gaffers' industrial tape. These techniques added depth, texture, and a tangible presence to the materials.

When designing my textile patterns, I drew inspiration from Adinkra symbols, which I then combined, manipulated, and collaged with other elements and patterns from my surroundings, such as lines and arabesque forms. As I experimented with different images for screen print transparencies, I used ropes as matrices to develop the images on screens and print them onto the fabric. Additionally, I enjoyed using kitchen tools to create rubbings and screen monoprints onto the material's surface.

My objective was to restructure and recontextualize the significance of materials and symbols, thus creating new narratives that challenge traditional gender roles and societal norms. The figures referenced in my artwork are self-portraits, meticulously staged and documented through photographs or sketches. These figures allude to specific roles without being overt, aiming to create ambiguous gestures and abstract imagery open to interpretation.

For my fabric collages, I purposefully selected materials that subtly evoke feminine ideas, including delicate lace and intricate floral patterns, serving as a starting point for exploring themes of gender roles and societal expectations. By making this intentional choice, I aim to create an interplay of textures and motifs that challenges traditional gender associations. This deliberate juxtaposition of materials adds complexity to my work, encouraging viewers to question and reconsider preconceived notions of femininity and masculinity. Also, I combine and manipulate these fabrics with other elements, such as bold colors or abstract shapes.

In two of my pieces, I employed rope both as an abstract painting/printing tool and as a sculptural element. In some instances, I used rope as a matrix while in others, I utilized it as yarns, weaving them through the metal openings and coils of a mattress frame. Rope carries diverse associations, encompassing utility, strength, rigidity, and symbolism related to gender and African cultures. In these cultures, it can symbolize physical strength and endurance for men, as well as a woman's transition into adulthood when tied around the waist as part of an initiation ritual. Rope can also evoke confinement and restriction. By employing rope both as a matrix and as a material in my work, I aim to

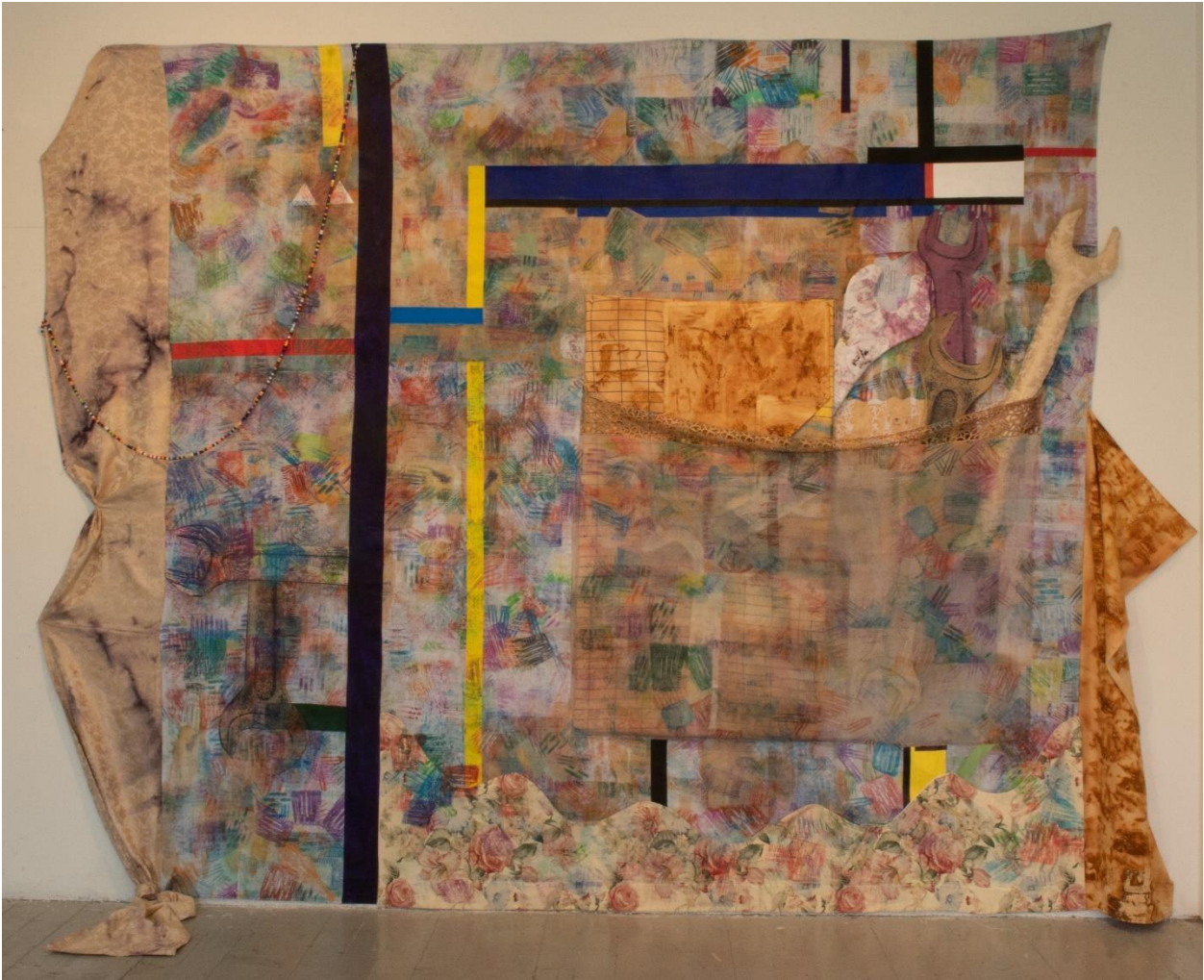
inspire new perspectives on materials and their gender associations. The process of weaving the ropes through the mattress frame's metal coils reminded me of weaving practices in Ghana. However, I'm intrigued by the gender-neutral potential of this material and how it serves as a metaphor in my work for the expression of my interests. Moreover, I employ it to address my personal struggle with societal expectations and gender roles, which often feel to be constricting.

To create pillows, I repurposed Ghana Must Go bags, which offer a powerful means of documenting everyday life and preserving past experiences. These durable plastic bags feature a distinctive and colorful design that is instantly recognizable. Originating from West Africa, they bear a rich history intertwined with migration, displacement, and economic struggles. In repurposing them, I use these bags to craft pillows filled with a variety of materials, including old scrap fabric, foam, newsprints, handmade papers, kitchen tools, nose masks, and receipts. These bags remind me of my own experiences during high school, as they were frequently used to transport personal items to and from the boarding school in Ghana. They are still widely used as storage bags for clothing in Ghana. I find it compelling to utilize this delicate material as a tangible embodiment of my experiences and memories, as it connects deeply with my senses and current experience as a non-resident alien in the United States.

Through my artistic practice, I am able to tell and document the stories I have observed and my personal experiences. Reflecting on the two-year journey at RISD in the MFA Printmaking program and witnessing the growth of my work has been an emotional mix of fear, satisfaction, and excitement. It is incredible to look back at the aesthetic transformation that my work has undergone, starting with a focus on symbols, particularly Adinkra, and textures on single fabrics, and now incorporating the collage of different fabrics, abstracted figures, and the creation of my own symbolic language. This evolution is truly remarkable to me. Throughout this journey, I have also deepened my understanding of color and material sources, acquiring a more nuanced knowledge of process.

As I envision the future of my work and the path, I want my practice to take, I am committed to ceaseless exploration and experimentation with various media and transforming my prints beyond two-dimensionality. I am thrilled about the new direction my work is taking and the possibilities for further exploration and growth. I eagerly anticipate the gradual unfolding of beauty and magic in my creations.

Not yet titled II 2023





Untitled- Where I Lay or Not, 2023







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