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Reading In Detail The Work Of Ndidi Dike

During the Africa '95 season Ndidi Dike was in England as visiting Artist in Residence at the Gasworks, an artist's studio complex, in London. She also took part in the both the TENQ/Articulations workshop organized in Senegal and the PAMOJA International Sculpture Workshop at Yorkshire Sculpture Park, England, which formed part of the Africa '95 season events. This article arises from both seeing her work for the first time and the opportunity to talk with her about her work.

The arguments advanced in the Seven Stories catalogue, and in the Nigerian section curated by Chika Okeke, highlighted the much-debated tension between the modern and the traditional in contemporary Nigerian work as well as the politics of 'National Synthesis' developed by the Zaria Arts Society. Salah Hassan's recent article 'The Modernist Experience in African Art: Visual Expressions of the Self and Cross-cultural Aesthetics' in Nka (Spring/Summer 1995 pp.30-33 & p.72) usefully suggests ways of developing a further critical framework for discussion of Dike's work.

Hassan argues for an intertextual, dialogic approach to reveal social relations of intellectual production at temporal, spatial and historical levels (1). From a Western feminist perspective, it is also possible to read Dike's work through comparisons with theories about women and modernism (contrasting her formal strategies across painting/relief/sculpture with figures like Louise Nevelson). In this respect, a strategy for reading her works in contrast to both the process-orientated formalist readings of Arnold Glimcher and Laurie Wilson's iconographic study of the modernist American artist Louise Nevelson (2) provide a useful means to consider the particularity and specificity of Dike's project. Separated by nearly half a century in age, working in two different countries America and Nigeria, the differences between these two artists superficially could not be greater.

What initially unites Nevelson and Dike are a number of formal strategies in their work. For both artists, their primary medium is wood, carved and assembled in panel forms, Dike's paneled reliefs and Nevelson's famous 'Walls'. They both produce single works as part of larger series, both use found objects in their work, though Dike's work is less dependent on this than Nevelson's. Both artists' sculptures/reliefs rely on both accumulation of detail, 'multi-layered' textures and a strong tactile sense.

(These two features take on a very specific meaning in relation to the idea of 'reading in detail' (Naomi Scho) below and a case could equally be made that their work involves concepts of the feminine identified by H. Cixous and L.

Irigaray (3). In order to compare the two in this way, a high degree of formalistic abstraction is needed: a position which overlooks the detail when it is in the accumulation of details that the differences between their projects lie and the contrast becomes most apparent between a Western modernist, born in Russia who lived and worked in America and a modern African artist, born in England who lives and works in Nigeria.

For example, both artists deliberately restrict their Palettes to a minimum number of colours. Nevelson to black, gold and white, Dike to the traditional uli colours- red, yellow ochre, white, earth hues and additional blues. Rather than a uniformity of colour, reliant on the shadows produced by architectural scale installation and lighting as in Nevelson, Dike only occasionally enhances the multiple types of natural wood she uses rosewood, elm, spotted beech, cedar, copper foil, iroko, pirana, camwood and pinewood.

Both artists repeatedly use a circle motif as symbolic not just of the sun, a cycle of life, but also ch'I (a unifying breath, spirit), though again to very different ends and in the context of a different vocabulary of motifs. Dike's carved circle-the only motif to frequently cross the panels of her compositions-acts as visual focus to both unify the work, out also to introduce a spiritual dimension i.e. Igbo Cosmology. Nevelson frequently fragments the circle across the box forms which make up her walls and very occasionally she separates the circle out, highlighting its significance as a moon or sun form by hanging these separate forms above the entrance to her installations.

By Katey Deepwell 1996

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