

WOMEN TO WOMEN
Weaving cultures Shaping history

PROF DELE JEGEDE

Quite often, our understanding of African art is tainted by our perception of Africa. This perception is rooted in our environment: the socialization process, the prejudices that we harbor (even if innocently), and the constant barrage of information, most of which is negative, uncomplimentary and sometimes factually misleading, that the media constantly feed us.

For some, Africa conjures mythical images of a frozen clime; images of idyllic and ecstatic thresholds populated by vast, uninterrupted jungle where animals roam and strut, lords in their own universe, unfettered by twenty-first century technology or other fancy gadgets.

The image of Africa that continues to circulate in the Euro-American world is often distorted, particularly where corporate or individual interests are at variance with the African reality. The fact is that today, contemporary Africa is as vibrant and complex, as varied and fascinating, as any contemporary art can be. While the arts offer visual evidence in regard to Africa's creative vibrancy, they also provide us with an avenue for highlighting the achievements of contemporary African women, a close that has done so much to render the possibility of professional effacement mute.

Ndidi Dike is at the forefront of the contemporary art movement in Nigeria today. Quite appropriately, her reputation has nothing to do with her gender; it is a

reputation earned through perseverance, experimentation, adaptation, and creative diligence. Her incursion into the medium of sculpture attests to a determination to find the most suitable mode for expressing personal subjectivities. But it also underscores, perhaps to the chagrin of those who are otherwise inclined, the relevance of formal but pliant art education, the type that allows individuals to imbibe critical intellectual and creative doctrines that are then customized to meet individual ends.

She was discerning and focused enough to realize that creating a professional niche for oneself and becoming commercially successful are two different realities. One entails an introspective search and constant experimentation, the other relies more on hustling and cutting deals than on talent. Dike's choice was obvious: re-invent yourself and be consistent.

Leaving school meant, for Dike, the beginning of education and retooling. She embarked upon a journey of self-discovery, immersing herself in sculpture, a medium in which she has now earned a strong presence. Dike worked on wood panels that she turns into mesmerizing panoply of relief designs and patterns, drawn from a wide array of cultures, Nigerian, African, and European.

In the last decade or so, appropriation and sampling have been the central creative strategies favored by Dike. Some of her relief panels which incorporate diverse elements-cowries shells, coins, beads, rings-stand out as cathedrals to eclecticism, motific vignettes that accentuate the postmodernist pre-occupation with exclusivity and de-centering.

Beyond the sense of form, composition, play and subterfuge that pervades Dike's work is the underlying preoccupation with the recuperation of African design element that, in the estimate of the artist, is faced with the prospect of extinction. Given the pace at which the infusion of Western designs occurs in Africa, Dike's mission is in tandem with an essentially Africanist stance, the type that has ensured that centuries of Western imperialism have not denuded Africa of its

individuality. In reconfiguring her work, Dike becomes at once a planner, a carver, an installation artist, and a Methodist.

Excerpt from Women to women catalogue Professor Dele Jegede

