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Nigerian Artist Marcia Kure Addressing Identity Across Various Mediums



Marcia Kure's work does not take sides. It makes two dimensions seem like three and three dimensions seem like two. It is abstract yet definite in its form. It encompasses both tradition and Afro-futurism. Her playful shapes and forms are reminiscent of a cyborg or alien species from the future, but she often creates them with the traditionally used kola nut pigment.



In the past year alone, she has covered a wide variety of subjects from the anonymous worker (The Renate Series: You Know Who and the Chambermaid VI, 2013) to famous women in art history (The Mask Series V: Mona Lisa, 2013) to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the important women's suffrage figure in Nigeria (The Three Graces, 2013). Whether Kure's work pulls you into memories of the past or fantasies of the future, it is indisputable that Marcia Kure has been present since her 1995 New York debut.

Kure began her training in 1987 at the the University of Nigeria Nsukka, a school associated with other celebrated artists such as Tayo Adenaike, El Anatsui, Chike Aniakor, and Obiora Udechukwu. Nsukka is closely associated with bringing the Igbo tradition of Uli into contemporary Nigerian art. Uli, traditionally the women's art of body painting, utilizes clean lines and layering to achieve its conflicting simple-complex aesthetic of balancing positive and negative space. Kure's work continues to function much in the same way, both in her two-dimensional and three-dimensional pieces.



For example, we see clean-cut forms with complex layering in *The Three Graces* (2013) and in the *Dressed Up* series (2011). Kure has enjoyed praise from art critics such as Holland Cotter for tackling topical and relevant subjects through a variety of artistic mediums. *The New Yorker* called her first solo exhibition a “knockout”. Kure’s work was selected to appear in the 11th edition of the Dak’Art Biennale in Dakar, and recently was selected to be showcased at the 2nd annual 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair.

Kure often uses fashion as a vehicle to explore themes of identity and culture. The clothing patterns and styles of dress that figures in her work wear range from Victorian gowns to cowboy boots to hip hop style jewelry. Her latest body of work, made during a three month residency at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and exhibited later in 2014 at the Purdy Hicks Gallery, delves into the dreamlike and “illogical” clothing fantasies of children. No matter the style or era referenced, Kure questions the role that fashion plays in constructing self-identity and cultural identities. Through such, her work also approaches themes of colonialism, post-colonialism, and its lasting effect on contemporary cultures. Kure’s work demands that the viewer take fashion seriously and realize the complex cultural realities that have played an active role in how each person dresses.



The power in Kure’s work lies in her ability to plainly address issues of identity that are often silenced. She communicates the diversity of the feminist struggle in works such as *The Three Graces* and cultivates a new definition of black masculinity in the *Dressed Up* series. Her *Vogue* Series uses abstraction to create anonymous figures in whimsical and futuristic dress. Many of the figures have hats or hair or masks that obstruct their would-be faces. With this series she tells us that identity is constructed by choice in

clothing as much as it is by facial features. I catch myself unconsciously assigning genders to each of the figures, proving Kure's point that we assume something about a person (be it gender or race or socio-economic class) based on their clothing.



Through her unique style, Kure impresses a discomfort on her viewers. This discomfort is most prominent in the *Dressed Up* series. Here, we see beautiful Victorian gowns juxtaposed in collage with hip hop imagery. While the gowns are usually appreciated for their extravagance, the viewer has to ask herself why she feels uneasy when they are paired with high top sneakers and dreadlocks. The *Dressed Up* series puts the 19th century Colonial Era in direct conversation with contemporary hip hop styling, encouraging a discourse on what social and political histories are embedded in popular and high fashion. Like the *Dressed Up* series, Kure's *Vogue Series* (2007) calls attention to fashion in a collage-like way. However, this earlier series is less obviously collage and more explicitly drawing. The figures in *Vogue Series* are both human and alien in their abstraction. Together, the collages of *Dressed Up* and the layered hardly-human figures of *Vogue Series* illustrate how Kure's artistic style has evolved in the past couple of years to produce a work such as *The Three Graces* (2013). *The Three Graces*, which was featured at the 2014 Dak'Art Biennale, is a three dimensional abstract collage that is unique in its usage of soft materials in sculpture.



The sculptural installation takes place on three walls. Each of the walls is dedicated to a different female figure in African history: (1) the Fon female military regiment of

the Kingdom of Dahomey; (2) the Zulu queen mother, Ndlorukazi Nandi kaBebe eLangeni; and (3) Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a feminist activist who led the charge for Nigerian women's suffrage. The medium of pliable felt and plush puffballs would seem to be inherently different from the definitive shapes she creates in drawing in painting, but the forms are undeniably Kure's. Comparing *The Three Graces* to *The Renate Series: You Know Who and the Chambermaid VI*—one of her two-dimensional works from the same year—shows their similarities. The clear lines of cut felt in *The Three Graces* mirror the marked lines of her pencil in *You Know Who and the Chambermaid VI*. Likewise, the soft edges of the puffballs in the sculpture mimic her finely accentuated watercolor marks in the drawing. The comparison between the sculpture and the drawing proves Kure's command over a distinct style that transverses mediums.



As an artist, Kure has established that she can approach diverse and pertinent themes of identity through drawing, painting, and sculpture. She ties these three mediums together with her recognizable style of definite lines and abstract forms. She utilizes these abstract yet humanoid forms—that seem almost devoid of gender and race—to alter our perceptions and expectations of gendered and racial identities.