

Material Meaning

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The discipline of textile art is broadly understood to include art made with textiles, as well as art made *about* textiles. Rather than provide a domestic function, textile art occupies the gallery or acts as a site-specific installation and comments on the *meaning* of textiles. The rhythms of hand and machine production, for example, appear in film and video art; the fragility of cloth is captured by artists working with sturdier substances such as metal and stone; the domestic labour invested in textile production and care is revisited and celebrated in decorative or conceptual, rather than functional, terms. But the term ‘textile art’ sits uneasily with many, perhaps for the same reason that the term ‘women’s’ fiction is rejected by many who consider ‘fiction’ to be enough of a descriptive category. Many consider art that makes use of textiles to be primarily art. It is. But pausing our attention on the textile provides an opportunity to focus on the textiles in visual culture that – just as in our daily lives – often go unconsidered.

Textiles have always played a role, albeit often uncelebrated, in visual art. On a basic level, the majority of paintings exist on canvas — a cloth. But here the textile is rarely the focus of our attention. In our increasingly globalised visual culture, textiles are often able to communicate in ways that move beyond language and culture — if we are sensitive to the messages they contain. Simultaneously, textiles can be culturally and geographically located. While most cultures enjoy a textile tradition, these traditions and their purposes can be remarkably specific. For example, the batik cloth used in the sculptures of Yinka Shonibare can look poorly printed, with the design slightly out of focus. However, to interpret these elements as simply evidence of low quality cloth ignores the cultural information the artist provides for the viewer through his choice of material. When we know that batik enjoys a particularly complex history and that different priorities when printing, such as the clarity of the print or veining of the ink on the cloth, help locate the cloth within a particular tradition, then we can appreciate what an effective tool the textile has become in allowing Shonibare to question seemingly straightforward cultural associations.

One way that textiles make their way into visual arts is through the practices of artists working at a geographical

distance from a culture with which they have strong ties. This occurs not only through relocation and the diaspora, but also when visual art moves out to an international audience of viewers. In the examples that follow, the textile is a recurring presence. The artists all have ties with the vast region of sub-Saharan Africa, to cultures with extensive and discrete textile traditions. Many voice discomfort with using the term textile art, as a discipline, to define their practice. This may be fair, particularly in light of the undervalued position textiles tend to experience, both in academic and commercial contexts, but this does not mean the textile – with all its baggage and meaning – should go unconsidered. Yinka Shonibare has made the complex history of batik cloth the hallmark of his practice and he is one example of an artist whose use of textiles deserves consideration. But this example is far from isolated: Nicholas Hlobo often makes use of rubber and leather, incorporating stitches with ribbon into two and three-dimensional work; Owusu-Ankomah paints the human form camouflaged by the adinkra symbols of printed textiles; Nnenna Okore’s installations using paper and thread are marked by a distinct ‘textile sensibility’; El Anatsui’s sculptures made from recycled metal bottle caps suggest giant pieces of strip-woven cloth. The textile may not be the central motivation of these artists’ practices, but consideration of the messages the textile conveys is crucial to a fuller appreciation of the content of their work.

The highly decorative batik cloth used by British-born Nigerian artist, Yinka Shonibare, has become one of the more familiar examples of textiles appearing in current visual art. The fabric has established itself as something of a trademark for the artist, who uses it to complicate assumptions surrounding identity. In a recently published monograph, the artist explains: ‘The fabrics are signifiers, if you like, of “Africaness” insofar as when people first view the fabric they think Africa’ (Downey 39). Shonibare, like many other artists drawn to textiles, plays with our initial assumptions about what textiles might mean. His reaction is, in part, a response to expectations of ‘authenticity’ of his work which he experienced as a student. As Shonibare explains in his interview with Downey,

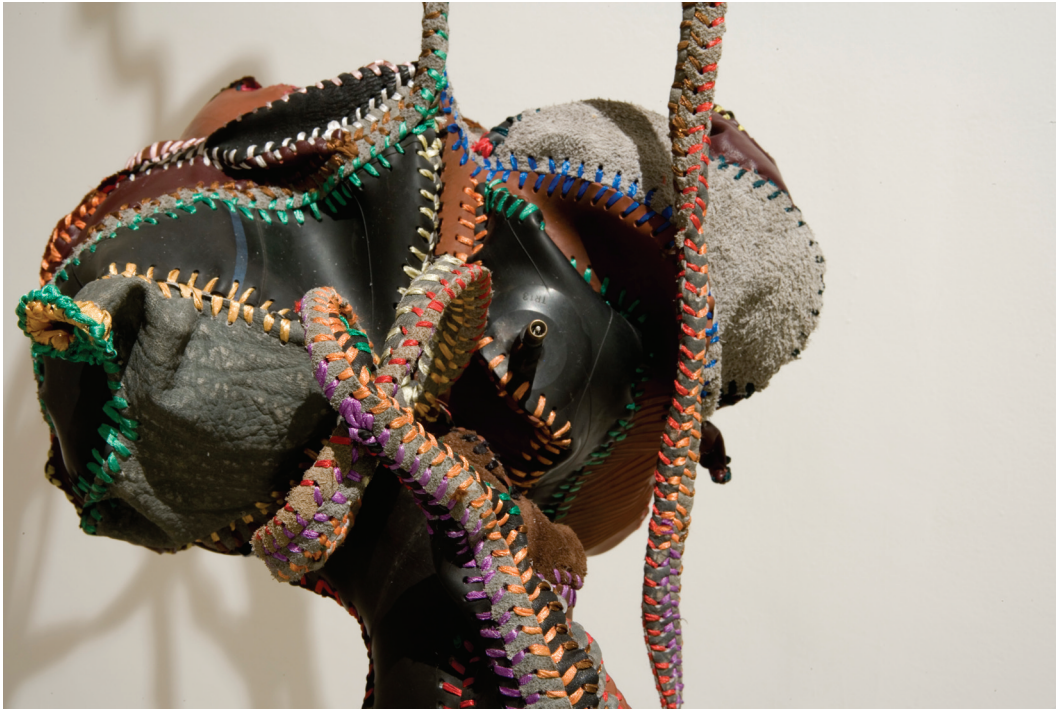
When I was at college in London my work was very political. I was making work about the emergence of



Yinka Shonibare, MBE. *Woman on Flying Machine*, 2008. Mannequin, Dutch wax × printed cotton, steel, rubber and aluminium. Mannequin: Approximately 53.1 × 39.4 × 31.5 inches (135 × 100 × 80 cm). Flying Machine: 79 × 23.5 × 35.5 inches (200 × 60 × 90 cm). Blades: 71.7 inches in diameter (182 cm diameter). Steel disc: 51.2 × 39.4 inches (130 × 100 cm). Copyright the artist. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.



Yinka Shonibare, MBE. *Man on Flying Machine*, 2008. Mannequin, Dutch wax × printed cotton, steel, rubber and aluminium. Mannequin: Approximately 61 × 23.6 × 27.6 inches (155 × 60 × 70 cm). Flying Machine: 78.7 × 23.6 × 35.4 inches (200 × 60 × 90 cm). Blades: 71.7 inches in diameter (182 cm). Steel disc: 51.2 × 39.4 inches (130 × 100 cm). Copyright the artist. Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York.



Nicholas Hlobo. *Ingubo Yesizwe*, 2008. *Leather, rubber, gauze, ribbon, steel, found ball-and-claw chair leg, butcher's hook, chain. 150 × 260 × 3000 cm. Photos: Mario Todeschini. Courtesy of Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.*

perestroika [restructuring] in the then Soviet Union and I was also quite intrigued by the idea of the Cold War coming to an end. However my tutor, upon seeing this work, said to me: 'You are African aren't you; why don't you make authentic African art?' I was quite taken aback by this but it was through the process of thinking about authenticity that I started to wonder about what the signifiers of such an 'authentic' Africaness would look like . . . (39)

The origins of batik or wax-resist cloth are claimed by a number of cultures around the world. The Indonesian archipelago enjoys a cultivated tradition of batik production, but Dutch colonisation of the region resulted in the introduction of low quality (by traditional Javanese standards) cloth from manufacturers in Holland and England. The market did not take off, something many have attributed to a quality issue, although Robert Hobbs's comprehensive contribution to Shonibare's monograph suggests that the resist dyed cloth manufactured in Holland and England was rejected by the Indonesian market not only on aesthetic grounds, as is commonly thought, but also because of a system of tariffs imposed by Indonesia's Dutch government (Hobbs 29). The cloth later found itself incorporated into West African dress as a symbol of national pride. To further complicate matters, today the batik used in Shonibare's work is (with the exception of specific commissions) acquired in London's Brixton market (Hobbs 25). Hobbs notes the confusion this healthy patronage from the African diaspora has created when he cites the misunderstanding by some today 'that the shops in Brixton had imported all these fabrics

from Nigeria', when in fact the flow of trade began in the opposite direction (30).

Shonibare has dressed a vast number of headless, race-less characters in his signature bold batik print, often using the unstable claim on batik's identity to question the identities of others. For example, his recent exhibition 'A Flying Machine for Every Man, Woman and Child' at the Miami Art Museum, included a nineteenth-century nuclear (and now nearly extinct) family dressed in Victorian clothing remade in batik cloth astride contraptions that look to be peddle-flying machines. In his unpublished exhibition proposal to the museum the artist explains,

The attempt at flying against all odds is a metaphor for the monumental efforts made by some of the inhabitants of Miami to get to the city which has come to represent the promise of America . . . Here the machines are symbolic aspirational devices, an expression of the emancipatory freedom brought about by the flight of emigration. Miami is well known for its communities of immigrants, some are economic migrants or refugees in search of a better life, while others are fleeing winter for a better climate. (Shonibare np)

Batik provides Shonibare with an ongoing emblem of cultural complexity; a way to wrap each individual he constructs in a cloth that is much more than a decorative and out-of-place layer of Victorian fashion.

South African artist Nicholas Hlobo speaks of quite the opposite experience to Shonibare's tutorial conversation



Nicholas Hlobo. *Ingubo Yesizwe*, 2008. Leather, rubber, gauze, ribbon, steel, found ball-and-claw chair leg, butcher's hook, chain. 150 × 260 × 3000 cm. Photos: Mario Todeschini. Courtesy of Michael Stevenson, Cape Town.

about 'authenticity'. He is quick to pay thanks to his education where he was encouraged to 'rethink the conventions of Fine Art' and reconsider his use of materials at every step. 'I paint with materials,' Hlobo explains in a recent telephone conversation about his work (27 Feb. 2010). Rubber, leather and sturdy stitches with ribbon all make an appearance in his work today; sculptures suggestive of phallic shapes and disembowelled organs as well as large-scale 'drawings'. The latter are made of paper cut with a knife which Hlobo then 'repairs' with ribbon and stitches. He compares the sutures found in his large map-like drawings to the process of healing his country, which he continues to confront today. Through stitch, he seems to suggest that the damage of apartheid cannot be concealed; rather, recovery should be celebrated instead of being disguised.

Like Shonibare, Hlobo speaks of an uneasy expectation of what 'African art should look like, especially from a black artist' (telephone conversation 27 Feb. 2010) and explains that his practice offers, in part, a way of questioning these stereotypical expectations. 'Instead of drawing with dry or wet materials,' he says, 'I draw with a weapon. Cutting through the surface is a metaphor' (ibid). He speaks of a South African audience who are racially aware to the point of 'expecting race and politics' to be the message behind a work. This is where his textile-like materials are adaptable, for they can both contribute to a political reading of the work, while also allowing for readings that exist on an intimate and individual level. For example, 'Ingubo Yesizwe', exhibited at the Tate Modern, London in 2009, is a large three-dimensional

patchwork of leather and rubber. The exhibition material explains that the

extensive use of leather in this piece reflects the economic, social, political, and spiritual importance of cattle in Xhosa culture . . . The rubber top, representing traditional Xhosa values and practices, and rubber bottom, signifying modernisation and urbanisation, are carefully integrated so that the beginning of one material and the end of the other is not wholly discernable. (Tate Modern Exhibition Pamphlet)

In contrast to this close material reading, Hlobo proposes that he would like his work to be universal enough to suggest 'Iceland, Japan or Indonesia' just as much as it suggests the artist's origins (telephone conversation 27 Feb. 2010). At the same time, he provides a decisive cultural marker that makes his work geographically specific. Xhosa is the language used to title his work, a language he explains that

had been less respected, hence it never made its way into the high culture and technology in South Africa, whereas English and Afrikaans have been allowed to develop and are in keeping with current global trends and developments in high culture and technology. (ibid)

Xhosa also appears in the notations that cover his large-scale drawings, a gesture he explains as an effort to

re-teach myself my mother tongue. I realised that I was slipping away from the language. Using it in my work

has an educational role. When reading the Xhosa language I try to understand how the words might have become part of the language. (Hlobo email)

He explains, by way of example, that the works in 'Umtshotsho'

are inspired by an almost disappeared tradition . . . Umtshotsho is a Xhosa youth party that doesn't happen these days and young people go to clubs and pubs instead. The works are titled in Xhosa to introduce a new language in the art world and to anchor the works in a particular location — to give them roots. (telephone conversation 27 Feb. 2010)

A tension exists in Hlobo's use of materials and titles that juxtapose specific cultural meanings with his interest in a universal identity to his work. His use of Xhosa titles and materials such as rubber and leather are meant as culturally specific references. Crucially his patchwork creatures and sutured drawings also operate on a visceral level. I would suggest that textiles and textile-like materials are often well placed to convey this second group of associations precisely because of our own first-hand experience of them. As Hlobo explains,

The work has to have a look that is universal and its place of origin would only be revealed once the viewer, especially those not familiar with the work, get to

closely engage with it. This approach in creating pieces that could be placed in any world location but with names that are specific to a certain location, in my view, is very similar to people when race is put aside. (ibid)

Hlobo's use of the textile is an effort to capture two perspectives, on the one hand the shared reality of human experience and, on the other, the specific elements that contribute to our identities including race, language and geographic location.

Another example of work that uses the textile to reflect this tension is found in the art of Ghanaian artist Owusu-Ankomah, who uses the printed textile adinkra symbols in his paintings. Considered by some to be the only example of a pre-colonial textile printing tradition in Africa, it is this symbolic value, as much as the individual messages of each symbol, which is of interest to many today. For Owusu, the adinkra symbols only became important to his practice after his relocation to Bremen, Germany in the 1980s. Painting with the same limited palette of colours used for the printed textiles, Owusu creates canvases covered in symbols, often embedding a male figure in the pattern. He explains that this camouflage technique is used to communicate the sense that we all 'belong to each other' with 'life, nature and the universe' (telephone conversation 19 Feb. 2010) entwined.

Here, too, education played a formative role in the development of Owusu's practice. He admits that a fascination



Owusu-Ankomah, *Afrika Charms*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 150 × 200 cm. Photo by Jonathan Greet. Image courtesy October Gallery, London.

with Italian Renaissance artist Michelangelo led to his study of the male form; painting the result of 'having no alternative, no teacher to teach sculpture' (telephone conversation 19 Feb. 2010). Owusu describes the emphasis of his practice as 'not about textiles, but about symbols, meanings, communication of universal truths' (ibid). The pre-colonial printed adinkra symbols are part of this worldview. In 'Afrika Charms', for example, the male body is covered in symbols. Owusu explains that the 'aya', a symmetrical fern on the figure's head (partially concealed by the arm), refers to attributes such as endurance and perseverance; just below the figure's armpit is a 'damedame' or checkerboard game, which symbolises craftiness, intelligence and strategy. Mixed with these adrinka symbols are shapes of the artist's own creation, for instance, the 'biotic' form on the upper thigh made of three lines and a swirling centre, which Owusu explains is 'in praise of nature' (Owusu email).

Owusu cites his move to Bremen as the point at which his own culture began to be of interest to his practice. Time spent viewing European art in the city's galleries allowed him to 'discover we had something universally equal and important in Ghana' (telephone conversation 19 Feb. 2010). The geographical distance allowed him to 'look at our culture with different eyes, realise the important and nostalgic desire to get back to roots, discover truths and discover inspiration' (ibid).

Since his move to Germany, Owusu's practice has developed two strands. From 2003 until recently he has

regularly exhibited work in Ghana under the ongoing title 'Heroes, Sayings and Things', in which he combines

abstract fields of colour with black outlines of white figures. The poetry on the figures and background needs to be deciphered. The viewer must first decipher the end and begin at the margins of the figure. (ibid)

Alongside this development of poetry (both borrowed and his own) filling the painted figure is Owusu's simultaneous exploration of the adrinka symbol, which he exhibits internationally. In neither case does the textile as a material make an appearance in this work, but recognition of the vast body of information contained in the printed adrinka sign system is needed to move this work beyond the decorative role of pattern and mark.

Nnenna Okore is yet another example of an artist whose practice is informed, if not fashioned, from a knowledge of textiles and craft production. Born in Australia, Okore grew up in Nigeria and now lives in the United States. She explains that the landscape of the southwest Nigeria of her childhood and the interweaving of barns and fences that she encountered growing up continue to appear in the work she creates today. While the materials that make up Okore's practice are varied, a textile sensibility is apparent throughout. She admits to an affinity for 'things that have aged or have a tattered nature', as well as being 'captivated by wear and tear of fabric' (telephone conversation 21 Jan. 2010).



Owusu-Ankomah, *On my Knees*, 2008. Acrylic on canvas, 150 × 200 cm. Photo by Jonathan Greet. Image courtesy October Gallery, London.

Okore observes that hand production can allow the act of ‘making to be as important as the outcome’ and that regular trips home to Nigeria allow her to ‘refresh my mind’ (ibid). Along with a reminder of the landscape and crafts that inspire much of her work, Okore acknowledges that her trips home also enable her to ‘play on memory, my childhood mind’ (ibid). This realisation has required her to mediate her ‘adult’ reaction to her surroundings in an effort to preserve memory — ‘I try to be less conscious of things I see now — a mature eye takes away innocence’ (ibid).

Recent work such as ‘Putting Together Things That Fell Apart’ offers a visual pun on the material challenges she faced constructing an installation made from shredded paper, as well as commenting, via Chinua Achebe’s novel *Things Fall Apart*, on the material changes she observes on her return trips to Nigeria. She explains that the work is, in part, a response to the palm thatch roofs of rural architecture stored in her memory, which today are being overtaken by building cement (ibid). Okore’s practice often involves the recycling of materials such as paper and she explains this gesture as being less loaded with social meaning than the current commentary’s eagerness for evidence of sustainable agendas may wish to infer: ‘As a child I saw my contemporaries make unique things out of transformed materials’ (ibid). Today she speaks of the importance of the ‘suggested textures of cloth and landscape [that] make people think of it [recycled materials] in a different way. The discarded can be seen as beautiful’ (ibid). This instinct to rework and recapture is guided by her ‘strong affinity to put little bits together’ (ibid). Like the previous artists discussed, the textile is not, she clarifies, the purpose of her practice.

Instead, she cites texture and then colour (two attributes that underpin textile design) as her visual priorities.

Okore concedes that her experience of exhibiting work in Nigeria is not always easy. ‘The media couldn’t engage with the conversation about the concept or relate to the materials. Why would I use paper? Who would collect it? How could it be preserved?’ (ibid). Ironically, all are questions that tend to plague art created using textile materials, wherever in the world that may be. But Okore’s response is also audience-specific and echoes Hlobo’s experience as she explains that her exhibitions in Nigeria have brought comment from ‘younger artists thrilled that art didn’t have to be about representation or political work, that it could be an expression of process or texture’ (ibid). This flexibility in the creative arts to move beyond fact and what some perceive as the burden of political commentary is far from specific to visual culture and is a shift also defended by authors, playwrights and poets. For example, the late Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera, speaking to Jane Bryce about her first novella *Nehanda*, celebrates the place of creative licence in her writing when she refers to her ‘understanding that there *are* alternatives to “history” and that in fact we *had* constructed it very differently in our lives, in our discussions, in our beliefs’ (Bryce 221).

Okore studied with another artist, El Anatsui, whose sculptures make consistent reference to textiles. Using recycled bottle caps and wire, Anatsui and his team construct large-scale sculptures that take on the rhythms, if not the materials, of strip weaving (a technique whereby weavers create narrow pieces of cloth that are then stitched together to form larger fabrics). Interestingly, earlier works made by



Nnenna Okore. *Putting Together Things That Fell Apart*, 2009. *Newspapers, sticks, clay and rope. Varied dimension.*



Nnenna Okore. Putting Together Things That Fell Apart (detail), 2009. Newspapers, sticks, clay and rope. Varied dimension.

Anatsui, who is Ghanaian and lives in Nigeria, made reference to the adinkra system, as well as referring to textiles even when working with hard materials, such as the cut wood relief from 1993 entitled 'Leopard Cloth'.

From a distance, Anatsui's materials are difficult to recognise. The flexibility of his interlinked pieces fold and pack as a fabric would, but their function – unlike the textile – is not to provide warmth or comfort. Polly Savage has written of Anatsui's work that

what is so sumptuous and evocative to the eye is, at the same time unforgiving and razor-sharp, and that which is so specifically historical, West African and personal to Anatsui, has at the same time been profoundly immediate and universal in its impact on audiences and curators in the international art world. (np)

Savage observes in Anatsui's work the presence of both the historically specific and the universal that arguably occupies the textile references present in all the above examples.

Hobbs concludes that, in Shonibare's work,

Not only do these textiles result from an involved fabrication based on a combination of local needs and international business interests, but they are also concerned with constructing shorthand signs for the local narratives that take the form of letters, depicted and written proverbs, pictures of rulers and visiting dignitaries, as well as emblems of government authority, political parties, wealth, status, and timely issues, thus enabling people wearing this cloth to demonstrate physically through their dress an allegiance to different facets of the social and political fabric constituting their cultural universe. (30)

I would suggest that the examples discussed above operate as both fiction and fact, providing viewers with information that deserves to be considered both literally and poetically.

The ubiquity of textiles in our everyday lives means that we often overlook their meaning. Yet, despite the familiar appearance of cloth, many artists incorporate the material in their work because they seek to convey complexity, rather than familiarity. While each practice now enjoys recognition by an international audience as fine art, attention to the textiles used and referenced can help us begin to appreciate the many interwoven layers of communication at work.

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