

# FABRIC AND THE IRONY OF AUTHENTICITY



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My practice as an artist deals primarily with the ongoing discourse around identity. In the 80's a lot of artist engaged the issue of identity in their work and were also influenced by poststructuralist theory and feminist theory; artists like Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce in the UK made work about identity, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger in America touched on feminist issues in their work. It was against the background of the influence of continental theory and deconstruction that my own career evolved in the early 80's. There was also a lot of pressure on me to produce something authentic. This is a bit of a trap, because, if you refuse you are seen to be in denial, and, if you comply you are seen as being confined to your past. It is essential at this point to give a sense of my own hybrid identity and my background as it is the basis of my practice. I am a product of the post-colonial period. I was born in 1962 in England to Nigerian parents, two years after Nigeria gained its

independence from Britain. Although I was born in Britain, I grew up in Lagos and later returned to Britain to complete my education. It is therefore normal for me to switch between cultures. I grew up speaking Yoruba at home and speaking English at school, as English is the language of office in Nigeria.

Post-independence Africa in the 50's and 60's anticipated a lot of change from the colonial era. A lot of Africans who had been educated in Europe sought to create new "African" identities, thus raising notions of Negritude and Pan Africanism. In the assertive drive to create a non-European identity, it was felt that identity had to be expressed culturally in people's lifestyle and dress. It was quite normal for my father, who is a lawyer, to go to work in a western suit and change into something more "African" when he got home.

My own sense of culture evolved out of what I watched on television, the music I listened to, the people I knew and

what I read and the obvious impact of a post-colonial history. I grew up watching local comedy programmes like “Baba Sala”, Australian programmes like “Skippy”, American ones like the various Walt Disney animation series, “Hawaii Five-0”, etc. I sang “London Bridge is Falling Down” as a child in a setting where London Bridge could not possibly have fallen. I listen to the music of Fela Kuti, James Brown, Sugar Hill Gang and King Soni Ade. I read Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, Wole Soyinka and Chinua Achebe at school. I am a Post-colonial hybrid. The idea of some kind of fixed identity of belonging to an authentic culture is quite foreign to my experience.

I do not necessarily like the word hybrid because it suggests the notion of some outside purity. I do however see that I am in one sense a product of an evolving concept of culture. When I returned to Britain to study, I was amused by the various forms of ethnic essentialisms in the extent at which people of African origin are expected to be “authentic” in spite of all the different cultural influences. At college I encountered the unpacking of grand narratives in the writings of Edward Said, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha, My various experiences led to the development of an eclectic art practice.

My early work was largely influenced by seeing the use of compositional fragmentation in painting, particularly in the work of David Salle, Polke and Jean-Michel Basquiat. I made a series of painting I now refer to as *The Argos Series*. In these paintings I combined images of African masks which I had picked up from the Museum of Mankind, with images of commodity objects like coffee makers, hair dryers and Philishaves from Argos catalogues.

In 1990 I developed another way of questioning ideas about cultural authenticity. I started to use “African” fabric purchased from Brixton Market in my work. Batik, which is commonly known as “African” fabric, has its origins in Indonesia and is industrially produced in Holland and

Manchester for export to Africa, where it is made into traditional dress. The adoption of the fabric, particularly in West Africa, has led to the development of local industries which also manufacture fabrics. For instance, there began a sort of commissioning system between Africa and Manchester. If there was an important occasion, like the visiting of a President, they could actually have their portraits incorporated in the design of the fabric, and the fabrics would be printed in Manchester and distributed in Africa. In my own practice, I have used the fabrics as a metaphor for challenging various notions of authenticity both in art and identity.

In the piece *Double Dutch*, I replaced canvas with “African” fabric in an installation which consists of 50 panels. I painted organic patterns on the fabric which alternates between the front and the side of the panels. The panels were installed on a colourful shocking pink background. Other works are *Sun, Sea and Sound*, which consists of 1,000 bowls wrapped in “African” fabric set onto a sea-blue floor. The idea for this piece is based on the double image of Africa. When we watch the news about Africa, it is usually about starvation, hence the metaphor of the empty bowl, but the advertisements for Kenya are of an idyllic place for holidays. *How does a girl like you get to be a girl like you?* consists of three Victorian dresses made in “African” fabric, and for the exhibition “Imagined Communities” there are five 18th century corsets made out of “African” fabric suspended from the ceiling. Corsets are garments that would have been worn by members of the 18th century aristocracy who were largely responsible for the African diaspora. They also signify excess and frivolity at the same time. They address the questions of the “other”, not only as victim but as seductive and exotic. Just as the introduction of the colour and design of the fabric challenges the high art and popular culture divisions in the white space of the gallery, my practice of painting is trying to push, as far as I can, the idea of spontaneity and seduction. I call this the political sublime.