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## Brooklyn Museum Goes Behind the Mask

'Disguise: Masks and Global African Art' explores more than a century's worth of masquerade



Zina Saro-Wiwa's 'The Invisible Man' (2015) is part of 'Disguise: Masks and Global African Art,' an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that runs through late September. *PHOTO: ZINA SARO-WIWA*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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Masks have long offered a seductive sense of possibility.

Beyond the mystery of concealment, they enable transformation and reinvention—the alluring ability to change one's self and, in the process, channel new powers and personages.

“Disguise: Masks and Global African Art,” an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art that runs through late September, explores more than a century's worth of such shape-shifting and identity-morphing.

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—Curator Kevin Dumouchelle

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Expanding on a show that originated at the Seattle Art Museum last year, it presents historical masks long ago “activated” through tribal celebrations and rituals, shown alongside works by 25 contemporary artists, all with ties to Africa.

“We begin with a moment when you see what you expect in an African masks show,” said Brooklyn Museum curator Kevin Dumouchelle, referring to a selection of visually arresting older masks from the museum’s collection, mounted mutely on the wall or in vitrines. “The rest is focused on contemporary artists playing with that [tradition] and blowing it up.”

Using a wide range of media, their work reinvents and comments on masking traditions in both whimsical and provocative ways.

Some fashion disguises incorporating nontraditional materials. Walter Oltmann of South Africa, for one, created bodysuits swathed in spiky aluminum wire and helmets circled in steel razor wire. The works bristle with the energy of a swirling dance.

Others use photography to relate masquerade to concepts such as fashion or mythology, or to comment on difficult political or social realities. A series of photos with the translated title “Make It Rain,” by Zimbabwean Gerald Machona, show a man in a Western suit and a mask made of paper money performing a kind of rain dance at the edge of a rooftop. The “rain” consists of his birth country’s obsolete currency.

“All of these artists are engaged in a process of becoming,” said Mr. Dumouchelle, who began work at the museum as a research assistant before rising to associate curator for arts of Africa and the Pacific islands. “Disguise in masquerade is a means of transforming the self to expose and clarify a truth about the world—and perhaps reinvent or affect that truth.”

Grouped by themes such as “Becoming A New Body,” “Becoming Controlled,”



'From Hiz Hands: 1979.206.143' (2010) by Brendan Fernandes PHOTO: BRENDAN FERNANDES

“Becoming Political” and others, the contemporary works often address uncomfortable political and social truths, such as government corruption or issues surrounding identity and “otherness.”

Zina Saro-Wiwa, who splits her time between Brooklyn and Nigeria, delved into the realm of masquerade as an active participant rather than a passive observer.

For her video work “The Invisible Man: The Weight

of Absence,” she created a politically charged mask for herself with carvings alluding to such subjects as her late father, a human-rights activist who was executed for his cause.

Ms. Saro-Wiwa said she was told the tradition of masquerade should be left to men—but she practiced and performed anyway.

“Masks speak so many languages that not even their makers understand,” Ms. Saro-Wiwa, 40 years old, said. “There are many stories in masks that have not been told, and it’s not only anthropologists that will tell them.”

Saya Woolfalk created an elaborate, immersive installation using video and sculptural



Walter Oltmann's 'Razor Brush Disguise' (2014) PHOTO: ANTHEA POKROY/WALTER OLTMANN/GOODMAN GALLERY

objects to conjure a complex sci-fi-inflected world. Centered on a fictional company—ChimaTEK, named for the mythological hybrid creature known as the chimera—the work surveys the firm’s fantastical products, all created to let humans adopt different personas and try on different identities.

“People’s ideas of what it means to be contemporary are shifting so much,” the 36-year-old artist said, noting fast-expanding notions of nationality and gender. “This is an exploration of that.”

Mr. Dumouchelle sees “Disguise” as a way to help update the story of African art told in many museums. Because it has been studied and treated so often as an ethnographic

specimen, he said, “there’s a perception...that African art stopped at a certain point.”

“We still have these cultural stigmas of Africa being the Dark Continent,” said Brendan Fernandes, whose works in the show include images of “masks” made of neon tubing and an installation of deer decoys wearing their own African-inspired disguises. “This is trying to uncover histories by allowing contemporary voices to come out as well.”

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