The Fowler Museum hosts exhibition that reveals how masks have influenced 21st century African and African American artists

Disguise: Masks and Global African Art
October 18, 2015–March 13, 2015

The Fowler Museum is pleased to present the Los Angeles premiere of Disguise: Masks and Global African Art (opening October 18, 2015), a critically acclaimed exhibition exploring 21st-century artistic evocations of the African mask and contemporary forms of disguise. In honor of this innovative project, the Fowler will host a party on October 17 celebrating the creativity and drama of African art, culture, music and dance. Three artists featured in the exhibition will be present at the opening and will participate in live performances throughout the museum.

This exhibition, organized by the Seattle Art Museum (SAM), brings together contemporary artists working in Africa and America. Over the past two years, SAM’s Curator of African and Oceanic Art Pamela McClusky, and Consultant Curator Erika Dalya Massaquoi, sought out artists who explore the idea of disguise in their work. Twelve contemporary artists were selected to represent the core themes of the show, and eight of those artists were commissioned to produce new visions and sounds specifically for the exhibition. The artists were encouraged to use SAM’s collection of African masks as a catalyst for creating fresh visions of masquerade, and examples of the same mask genres from the Fowler collection will be on display in the exhibition.
Disguise is more than an exhibition—it is a bold move to bring the masquerade into the museum. These contemporary artists use the notion of disguise to hide their identity and reveal issues of social, political or cultural import in their work. The act of altering or concealing one’s identity is at the core of traditional African masquerade, though with an important addition—an individual’s identity is not only concealed but entirely transformed.

The Fowler’s presentation of Disguise features 12 contemporary artists—six from continental Africa and six Americans of African heritage—who employ artistic strategies of disguise and key visual and performative elements of traditional African masquerade in their work.

These artists use a variety of creative mediums, including drawing, photography, video, sculpture, performance, and installation. Emeka Ogboh composed a soundtrack that sets a base pulse to the gallery experience. Other artists use video to document their performance-based commissions that showcase disguises being enacted in city streets, in forests, and in museum galleries. Two women artists, Zina Saro-Wiwa and Wura-Natasha Ogunji, performed and documented their own masquerades in Nigeria. Brendan Fernandes unleashes a herd of fake animals wearing fake masks, while Saya Woolfalk stages the visit of a new species here to impart wisdom about human and animal relations.

“Where disguise in African masquerade is a tool facilitating transformation,” says Marla C. Berns, Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director, “these contemporary artists use it to comment on the challenges and complexities of our increasingly digital and globalized lives. The artists meld carved wooden sculptural forms with new electronic media; they create spaces for women in masking traditions formerly dominated by men; they challenge our understandings of what constitutes authenticity in African masks; and they stimulate questions about the heritage of African masquerade and the invention of modern Western art.”

FEATURED ARTISTS

“Lighted imagery and information share an affinity with the human brain.” Jakob Dwight

Jakob Dwight (1977) is a painter, media and light artist living and working in New York City and was born in Mobile, Alabama. The aesthetic of Dwight’s Autonomous Prism series is based on a digital glitch that he found and replicates to render electronic interpretations of African masks in the Seattle Art Museum’s collection. Dwight opens the exhibition with a series that illustrates the shift from the 20th to the 21st century mask. Taking the masks in SAM’s collection that have been static references of past lives, he has electronically reconfigured their silhouettes into faces that pulse with light.
... to show how we keep the fake idea of the primitive alive.” Brendan Fernandes

Brendan Fernandes (1979) is a Canadian artist of Kenyan and Indian descent. Born in Nairobi, Kenya, he lives and works in Brooklyn and Toronto. Masquerades require a disruptor, which in his *Neo Primitivism 2* comes in the form of a herd of deer that wander around wearing white resin replicas of an identical mask. This incongruous safari sets off an investigation by Fernandes into the absurdity of clichés assigned to African realities. The question “What is ‘authentic African?’” resonates throughout his neon signs, totems, drawings, balloons, and a performance video that compares dances and gestures of French ballet with African masquerade.

“I think we all have a dark, animalistic side of ourselves.” Nandipha Mntambo

Nandipha Mntambo (1982) is a South African artist who is known for her sculptures, videos and photographs that redirect human and animal relationships. In her art, Mntambo does not put on a mask but transforms her face and body into compelling images and challenging performances. Her 2008 photograph, *Europa*, Mntambo covers her face in hair, with horns pushing out of her head as she confronts us with a reminder of the underlying myth about the origin of Europe. In *Praca de Touros III*, Mntambo strides into an arena dressed as a matador who goes to battle with a phantom version of herself. It is a startling blend: her face with a bull’s face, her body with a cow’s hide, and her aggression with that of a bullfighter.
“I want to interrupt someone’s daily journey with something different.” Wura-Natasha Ogunji

Wura-Natasha Ogunji is a visual artist and performer born in St. Louis (1970). She currently lives and works in Austin, Texas and Lagos, Nigeria. Her works include videos in which she engages her body in explorations of movement and mark-making across water, land, and air. Having steadily enlarged her scope of performance in recent years, she proposed a new form of masquerade based on a heritage that had, until now, been the prerogative of men only. Inventing her own process and adapting parts of a male performance for a female agenda, Ogunji began addressing audiences on the streets of Lagos with her troupe of women, who coordinate their masquerades to raise issues on their own terms. As she describes it: “I want people to stop, to witness, to comment on the work or ask questions because they feel drawn to it, pulled by it in a way that expands the imagination.”

“*I map the desires and ideas of people to create narratives .* ..” Saya Woolfalk

Saya Woolfalk, was born in Gifu City, Japan (1979) and is known for her multimedia exploration of hybridity, science, race, and sex. Having invented an entirely new virtual population, the Empathics, Saya Woolfalk invites her visionaries to chronicle their alternative view of the universe. For this
exhibition, the Empathics have decided to give new life to masks similar to those from Sierra Leone in the Fowler’s collection in what Woolfalk calls “a site-specific installation that blends the real with the fantastical.” Masks that have been without bodies for many years are given their own music, movements, and environment, releasing them from confinement in a conventional museum display.

“\textit{It’s a different kind of holy ground . . .}” Emeka Ogboh

Emeka Ogboh is a Nigerian artist, whose works contemplate broad notions of listening. Born and raised in Lagos (1977), Ogboh works primarily with sound and video to explore ways of understanding cities as cosmopolitan spaces with their unique characters. Stepping over the threshold into the Disguise exhibition will trigger an overture of sounds. This composition created by Ogboh acknowledges the acoustical complexity of masquerades, which rely on songs, instrumental accents, proclamations, subtle cues for performers, and streams of audience reactions. Inventing a score that complements the gathering of artists in Disguise, Ogboh has gone on a search for recordings of masquerades and particularly for older instruments that trigger memories. His tracks will serve as a sensory guide to the tension that builds as the performance gathers in intensity and dissolves at its conclusion.

“In this way we are forced to identify with the other . . .” Walter Oltmann

Walter Oltmann was born (1960) in Rustenburg, Gauteng, South Africa and lives and works in Johannesburg. Wire is Oltmann’s main medium for making sculptural works and he manipulates it using the linear quality of wire to create forms and surfaces through techniques that parallel handcrafts. He creates drawings and sculpture that capture a unique metamorphosis—one inspired by Franz Kafka’s
famous novella about a man who wakes up transformed into a cockroach. Insects have rarely been given such a starring role in sculpture and have never before shared the pedestal with humans in quite this way. At one moment, these sculptures convey the stance of a European wearing his padded waistcoat and codpiece; then, in the next moment, his clothes begin to bristle with the hairs of a caterpillar.

Born in Perth Amboy, New Jersey, Sondra R. Perry (1986) currently lives and works in Harlem, NY. Perry is known for her performance and video art that tends to reference science fiction and history, with a particular interest in questions of identity. She describes her work as “[investigating] slippages of identity through manifesting ‘paraspaces’, a term coined by science fiction writer Samuel Delany, meaning a ‘space’ existing parallel to the normal or ordinary.” In this exhibition, Perry’s video Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera I and II embodies many of the core ideas of Disguise. Capturing the pace and technology saturated nature of modern life, this video shows an individual frenetically dancing in a white room, while Perry’s manipulations of the video through optical illusion and computer magic result in the impression of a body and identity transformed by a digital disguise.

“By not having a face, I become a prop in the space.” Jacolby Satterwhite

Artist Jacolby Satterwhite makes virtual masquerades that guide viewers into brave new worlds where the past and the future play with each other. Born (1986) in Columbia, South Carolina, Satterwhite currently lives and works in New York. His own personal references are laced into a matrix of animated scenarios that are loaded with dazzling details of wonderlands, orifices, and structures, all constantly morphing. Each of Satterwhite’s videos offers a lesson plan for what to do when the apocalypse arrives, how to dance as a forest nymph, how to overcome the confusion of childhood memories, and how to savor the sense of spinning into infinity.
“...when the mask is presented as technology, it encroaches on the spiritual and becomes chimerical...”

Sam Vernon

Sam Vernon was born in 1987 and currently lives and works in New York. Vernon covers the walls of the Fowler’s lobby with black-and-white patterns that create an indirect view of a world in which masks hide, along with other sly figures who avoid both the spotlight and any clear definition. She fits her shapes and silhouettes into a membrane of cells that punctuate the walls, fracturing each cell into a maze of oblique references and hinting at hidden worlds and mystical experiences.

William Villalongo (1975) is a Brooklyn-based artist from Hollywood, Florida whose work seeks to disrupt our traditional thinking about history and art. Pieces from his Muses series in this exhibition fuse traditional African masks with 19th and 20th century nudes. This juxtaposition will remind viewers of Picasso’s similar combination of the African mask and nude female forms, while Villalongo’s work also highlights the transgressive nature of melding a mask, a sacred, cultural object meant for men, with a figure who is not only naked, but also a woman. This striking collage of disparate cultural imagery derives from his interest in how “social and cultural histories are in a constant cycle of being told and retold.” Villalongo feels that “the winners often claim authority, but the losers, lovers and haters must all have their say,” and his works in Disguise, give those losers, lovers, and haters a public platform.
“I stopped wondering about how African masks are valued in the West and have chosen to explore their value for me...” Zina Saro-Wiwa

**Zina Saro-Wiwa** is a British-Nigerian video artist and film-maker who was born in Nigeria (1976). Returning to the Niger Delta in 2013, Saro-Wiwa began a journey of cultural discovery. She went in search of masquerade culture in her indigenous Ogoni homeland and came across a modern form of masquerade started in the late 1980s called Ogele, a masquerade featuring a heavy, tiered mask that told stories about modern day politics as well as animist deities. Inspired by this modern form of masquerade Saro-Wiwa decided to create a mask and all-female masquerade group for herself. The mask she designed called “The Invisible Man” explores her own personal demons. This neo-Ogoni mask is a document of loss. It depicts the men that have disappeared in her life—her activist father who was murdered and her brother among them. Through this exploration she wants to bring African masks to life in a completely fresh way. A selection of the Fowler’s Ogoni masks is shown as inspiration. “I want to bridge the gap I always feel when I go and see African masks in museums. I want emotional connection.”

*Disguise: Masks and Global African Art* is accompanied by an illustrated catalog with artists’ statements, an essay by Pamela McClusky, and an interview with Erika Dalya Massaquoi. The catalog is co-published by the Seattle Art Museum and Yale University Press.

*Disguise: Masks and Global African Art* is organized by the Seattle Art Museum and is curated by Pamela McClusky, Curator of African and Oceanic Art for the Seattle Art Museum, and Erika Dalya Massaquoi, Consultant Curator. Major funding for the Los Angeles presentation of *Disguise* is provided by the Barbara and Joseph Goldenberg Fund, the Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director’s Discretionary Fund, an anonymous donor, the Y&S Nazarian Family Foundation, Dallas Price-Van Breda, and Manus, the support group of the Fowler Museum. Additional support comes from the Fowler Contemporary Council and the following members: Susan Burnett and Steve Dyer, Bronya and Andy Galef, Sarah and Bill Odenkirk, and Valerie and Brad Cohen.
The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country’s most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of $12 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310 825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

RELATED EVENT:

Opening Celebration
Saturday, October 17, 2015

6:00–7:00 Members’ Preview
Members’ mix and mingle with Disguise artists, curators, and special guests while enjoying light bites by fundamental LA and cocktails by Tito’s handmade Vodka.

7:00–8:00 Artists’ Panel
Presentations by Disguise artists Brendan Fernandes, Wura-Natasha Ogunji, and Saya Woolfalk will be followed by a panel discussion moderated by exhibition curator Pamela McClusky, Curator of African and Oceanic Art, Seattle Art Museum.

8:00–10:00 Opening Party
Exhibition preview, cocktails, and beats by Afro Funké DJs Jeremy Sole (KCRW) and Glenn Red (La Junta), plus exciting live performances created by Disguise exhibiting artists. Experience artist Brendan Fernandes’ African masquerade in a compelling site specific performance. Saya Woolfalk’s costumed fictional group of women called Empathics will perform with meditation and dance segments. And Wura-Natasha Ogunji will perform a special interactive piece called The Kissing Mask. Wearing a mask she has created specifically for this performance, Ogunji will kiss (cheek, face or lip) audience members who approach her. RSVP by October 9 at fowlerRSVP@arts.ucla.edu or 310.206.7001.
