

WURA-NATASHA OGUNJI
The epic crossings of an Ife head

The presence of water in Wura-Natasha Ogunji's work is an eternal one, an element as crucial to her creativity as it is to human existence. For African-descended people, the making of diaspora has much to do with crossing the sea. Once, this was a journey made by ship, and now, with flight, these routes through or over waters separating the lands of one's identity are to worldview as circulatory systems are to the body. They keep us moving and sensate, psychically in touch with what we're made of. By evoking the trope of water through affect rather than explicit reference, Wura-Natasha Ogunji explores both the paths of ancestral movements and the depths of self, spirit and wisdom. It makes sense that recognition of our private and shared waters – essences, longing, dreams, life forces – forms the through-line of Ogunji's narrative. She seeks, divines, conjures, dowses and extracts vivid narratives and indelible images from her materials like a true medium. In the process, she fathoms our individual power and collective vision as sentient beings.

Ogunji's training as a photographer informs her inventive use of various media in these new works. Her alchemical touch and camera eye require that she be innovative in making spaces in which her artistic and cultural systems of knowledge can flourish. Established art forms, such as painting and drawing, meet stitched elements familiar to needlepoint. This communion occurs on architectural tracing paper, which is usually thrown out after the building is sketched. But here, the paper has a greater purpose: to hold, absorb, to fix and to record, the ways of knowing depicted on it. The transparency of the tracing paper, its revelation of two sides of one story, like a film negative, make its use all the more poignant, as if the

works are pictures developed from another time. In revising family photos, and in the making of fictional snapshots, Ogunji creates a new form of painting, one that can support her unique approach to expressing the complex layers of narratives using seemingly disparate but mutually-dependent media.



A question (on the way to the continent), detail, 2010,
acrylic, graphite, white charcoal on paper

The paintings and videos exhibited here present a series of encounters between humans and spirits, and between the spirits themselves. What's at the center of this collection is the joy of perspective, of seeing and being seen, understanding where one is from and what one has been through, personally, genetically, historically, acknowledging the relationships between land, sea, flesh and memory across time and space. We must be willing to look at faces that are not ours, but somehow still belong to us. Ogunji acknowledges this, and beckons us to look closely and carefully at the spirit masks that

populate her work. Their expressions are passionate, joyful, confused, playful, engaged, but always intense. These spirits command respect and attention, possessing what we do: personality and dimension. *Look here. Do you know my true name? Do you know your own?* The mix of intensity and positive emotion with which Ogunji renders the spirit masks has a meditative effect. There is ambient wonder and awe emanating from their gaze. As witnesses to these encounters, we are given the chance to recognize in ourselves what the spirit masks see in each other.

The inventiveness of the African diaspora embraces Ogunji's encounters. There is something in the way the figures of Ogunji's world seem to approach each other, their various deep sea and sky blue forms slightly bent, ready to spring, reminiscent of young girls' watchful crouch as they find their space in the beat of double-dutch before jumping in, the bounce of hip-hoppers' knees and shoulders as they stand in the cipher (circle), ready for the serious game of rap, or, even more closely, the sinewy stance of capoeiristas, practitioners of the Brazilian martial art descended from African ancients, that is itself ancestor to break dancing. Continuing in the spirit of recognition, intimacy and love, on the cusp of purpose and play, Ogunji's work talks to itself as it talks to us, across forms and genres. In the video, *Two*, clipped and overlaid huffs of breath create the rhythmic soundtrack for time-traveling spirits, the editing evocative of cutting and scratching on turntables. But Ogunji's soundscape is bodily, not mechanical; each intake or expulsion of breath corresponds to the rise of the two, their flight across great expanses of land and unseen waters. A breath sharply sipped. A flash of motion. Ogunji's video work forms a bridge to the still images, making audible the gasps of paint pushed through the atmosphere, the muted spark and scrape of graphite, the

suggested whispers and cries from the spirit masks. In the expansive landscape of *A question (on the way to the continent)*, two mortal bodies pause, as their respective spirit masks have an exchange, the striations from their Ife heads coiled above them. Which of the two is the inquirer and which the respondent? The ambiguity here intrigues, as swathes and discs of paint float from their mouths into the air, creating a landmass, or a new reality between them. Language becomes a palette of color and texture. The painting *Untitled (bridge)*, similarly corresponds to the soundscape of the video, *Two*. Instead of pure silence, Ogunji intimates that what connects thought, sight and spirit is the breath: of the mortal, and of the earth itself. It connects, and it heals.

As if making the memory of her spirit masks visible, the weight of the line in Ogunji's paintings manifests itself in a beautifully active way. Line weight, heavy or light, continuous or dotted, presents a narrative of ancestry, claim and connection, of presence and absence, all amplified by the use of tracing paper. Stitched threads break the surface of the paper, puckering it with tension, to call our eye to the fingers of a hand, the face of a watch. In *It's the heart I want*, the spirit mask's embrace cloaks the white silhouette's face. It reaches for the

mortal's chest with a mass of graphite lines emanating from its head. What is this touch? There's something playful in the face of the spirit. Its mouth is animated with laughter or an excited cry. In this narrative, Ogunji's *Untitled (red speech)* might follow, an utterance of the heartbeat's message to the beloved person, the desired place.

City of Ife brings Ogunji's creative origins as a photographer full circle. The composition echoes the camera portraits of Seydou Keita. Grandmother, the regal subject, stares straight ahead at the unseen person (a son? a granddaughter? the eye of the future?) who records her image. Yet the space she occupies, with her earth green dress and wide spread knees beneath, is not staged in a studio. Ogunji's composition again makes use of ambiguity here – is Grandmother projected onto the city plan, or is it, too, made as much from her thought as she is made from it? The lines traversing the space around Grandmother's head resemble the beginning of a web, of stories, of ancestor lineage, but it represents the octagonal shape of the ancient city of Ife, the ancient birthplace of the Yoruba people and their cosmology. This world Grandmother sits in seems to issue *from* her, a natural extension of all else she has given birth to.

My father and I dance in outer space also points to the bridge between moving and still image in Wura-Natasha Ogunji's work. It appears to remix *City of Ife's* octagonal plan, its ancestral echo and utterance, into warp drive. Stitched



Two, video still, 2010, digital video, photo by
Sonsereé Verdise Gibson

elements highlight hands and feet, watch-band, the similar outlines of their faces. The artist and her father move, overlaid by the City in Space as if it is the diagram for the dance itself. Though Ogunji has specified an orientation for the piece, it is easy to imagine it from any angle, turning in the cosmos, a long-playing record of the bond between father and daughter, space and time.

In so many ways, Wura-Natasha Ogunji's aesthetic stimulates and honors the cellular knowledge she carries and makes sense of, in the flow of blood and experience that influences her belief system and self-representation. The routes and depth of connection in these works are both mortal and magical. The spirit of her artistry seems to whisper its knowledge of itself to us, as if to say, I have this guise of lines, these words of color, this way of touching soil or thread, making a mark in the firmament beneath my feet, images embedded in ancestral memory transport gifts and signs through me, on a river just below the surface of my consciousness. This is a history. And I see you in it.

Tisa Bryant is a writer based in Los Angeles who also teaches in the MFA Writing Program at the California Institute of the Arts.



My father and I dance in outer space, video still, 2011,
digital video, photo by Darcie Book

WURA-NATASHA OGUNJI

EDUCATION

- 1998 Master of Fine Arts, Photography, San Jose State University, CA
- 1992 Bachelor of Arts, Anthropology, Stanford University, CA

AWARDS AND HONORS

- 2010 Grant Recipient, The Otis and Velma Davis Dozier Travel Grant, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX
- Grant Recipient, The Idea Fund, a project of the Warhol Foundation Initiative, Aurora Picture Show, DiverseWorks and Project Row Houses, Houston, TX
- 2009 Artist-in-Residence, National Performance Network, Visual Artist Network Residency at Diaspora Vibe Gallery, Miami, FL
- International Artist Exchange, Diaspora Vibe Cultural Arts Incubator at Revolution Gallery, Edna Manley School of the Visual & Performing Arts, Kingston, Jamaica
- 2008 Grant Recipient, City of Austin Arts and Cultural Funding Programs, Austin, TX
- 2007 Artist-in-Residence, Can Serrat Artist Residency, El Bruc, Spain
- 2005 Grant Recipient, The Pollock-Krasner Foundation, New York, NY
- Artist-in-Residence, Altos de Chavon Artist Residency, Dominican Republic

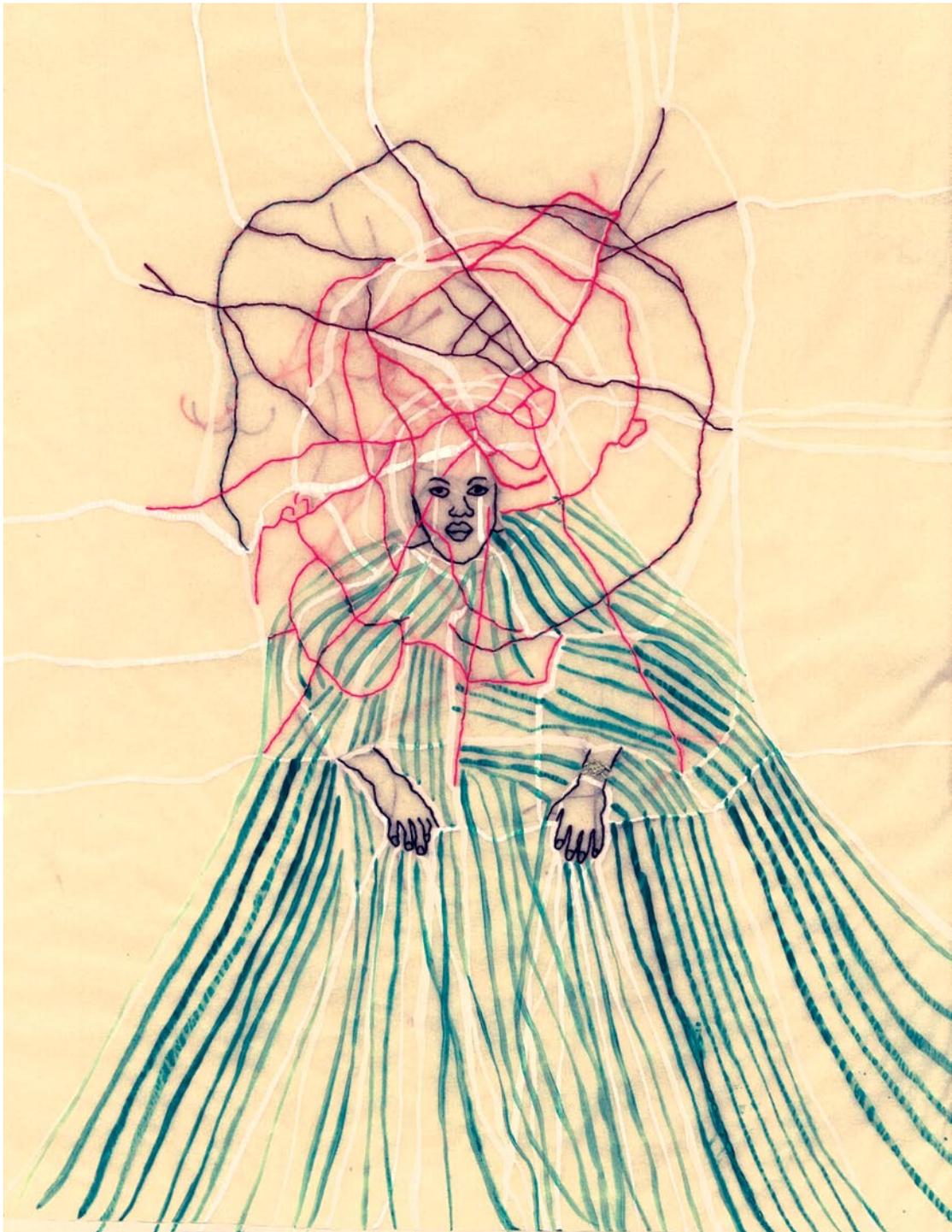
SELECTED EXHIBITIONS AND SCREENINGS

- 2010 *The epic crossings of an Ife head and Two*, The 23rd Annual Instants Vidéo Numériques et Poétiques, France (Marseille and Martigues), Italy (Milan) and Syria (Damascus)
- The epic crossings of an Ife head and Two*, Carousel Microcinema, threewalls gallery, Chicago, IL
- Currents 2010*, El Museo Cultural, curated by Parallel Studios, Santa Fe, NM
- One Hundred Black Women, One Hundred Actions*, Fusebox Festival, Austin, TX
- As Far As the Eye Can See*, Galería Universidad del Sagrada Corazón, Santurce, Puerto Rico
- ves·sel*, The Brennan Gallery, curated by Kenya Robinson, Jersey City, NJ

- 2009 *Screwed Anthologies*, labotanica, curated by Ayanna Jolivet Mccloud, Houston, TX
- Négritude*, Exit Art, co-curated by Papo Colo, Tania Cypriano, Rose Réjouis, Franklin Sirmans and Greg Tate, New York, NY
- 2008 *Delicacies*, Charles Dana Danforth Gallery, University of Maine, Augusta, ME
- Artist's Space*, Fluent Collaborative's online journal *mightbegood* #99: www.fluentcollab.org/mbg
- Women's Work*, Diaspora Vibe Gallery, Miami, FL
- 2007 *New American Talent: The 22nd Exhibition*, Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin, TX
- ¿Y QUÉ? Queer Art Made in Texas*, Landmark Gallery, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX
- Black Rock: The Metamorphosis of Home from Isolation to Connection Task Force*, Gallery Aferro, Newark, NJ
- National Black Fine Arts Show*, Galerie Bourbon-Lally, The Puck Building, New York, NY
- 2006 *The Yoruba Influence*, ISESE Gallery, University of Texas, Austin, TX
- 2005 *Artistas en Residencia*, La Galería Principal, Altos de Chavon, La Romana, Dominican Republic
- 2003 *The Messengers' House*, Alto Street Art Barn, Santa Fe, NM
- 2002 *R X D = [eros] x [ethnicity]*, Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco, CA
- 2002 *Photographic Memory and Other Shots in the Dark*, Galería de la Raza, San Francisco, CA
- 2001 *Pasajes y Encuentros: Ofrendas for Days of the Dead*, Oakland Museum, Oakland, CA
- 2000 *Hidden Histories*, Pro-Arts, Oakland, CA

SELECTED LECTURES AND PRESENTATIONS

- 2010 Guest Lecturer, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN. Run, Jump, Fly: If they tell us there are no pictures, will we see the stories when they come?
- Presenting Artist, City of Austin's Art in Public Places Symposium, Austin, TX
- 2009 Panelist, Fire & Ink, The Blanton Museum, Austin, TX. Dash: Metaphor and Connection curated by Torkwase Dyson, with Tisa Bryant, Carl Pope, Ronaldo V. Wilson, M. Asli Dukan and Nalo Hopkinson



This Panel: *City of Ife*, 2010, thread, acrylic, colored pencil on paper, 14" x 12.5"

Cover Panel: *My father and I dance in outer space*, 2010, thread, acrylic, graphite on paper, 14.5" x 12.5"



Untitled (bridge), 2010, acrylic, graphite, white charcoal on paper, 14" x 24"

Women & Their Work

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 33rd anniversary. Presenting over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film, the gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,851 artists in 268 visual art exhibitions, 113 music, dance and theater events, 14 film festivals, 23 literary readings and 440 workshops in programming that reflects the broad diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from

the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 1,800 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



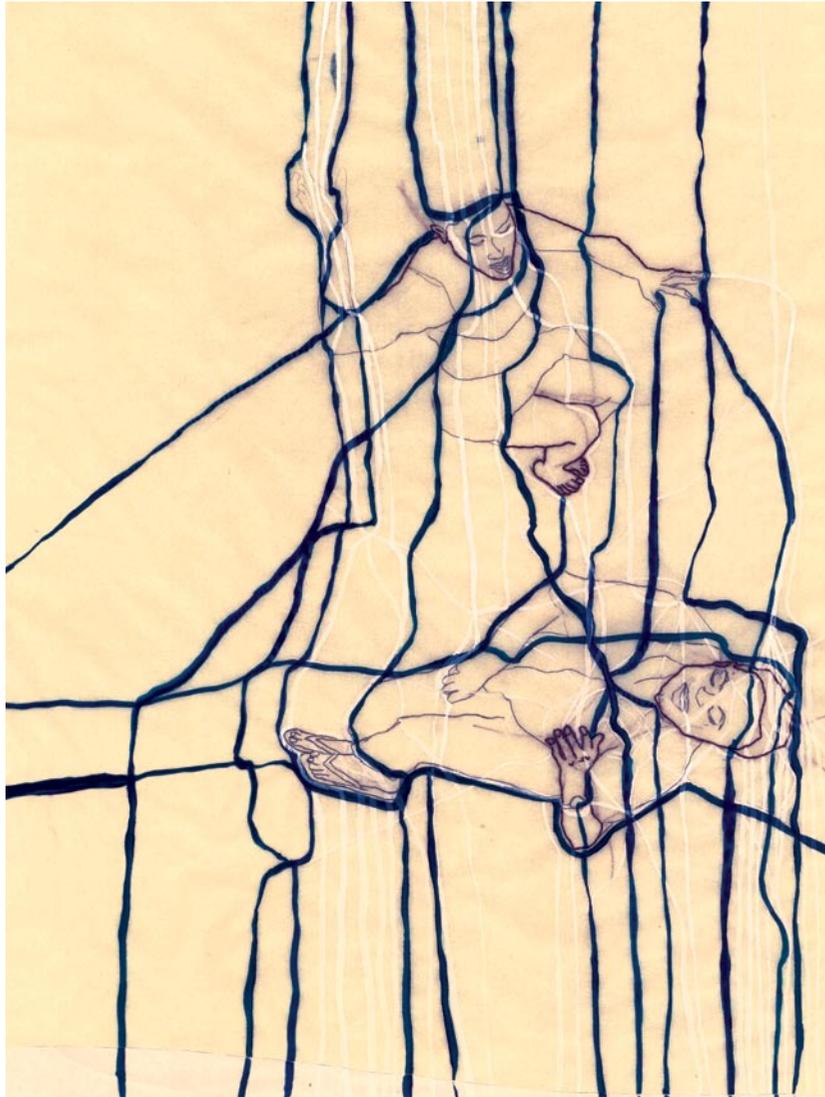
women and
their work

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WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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