

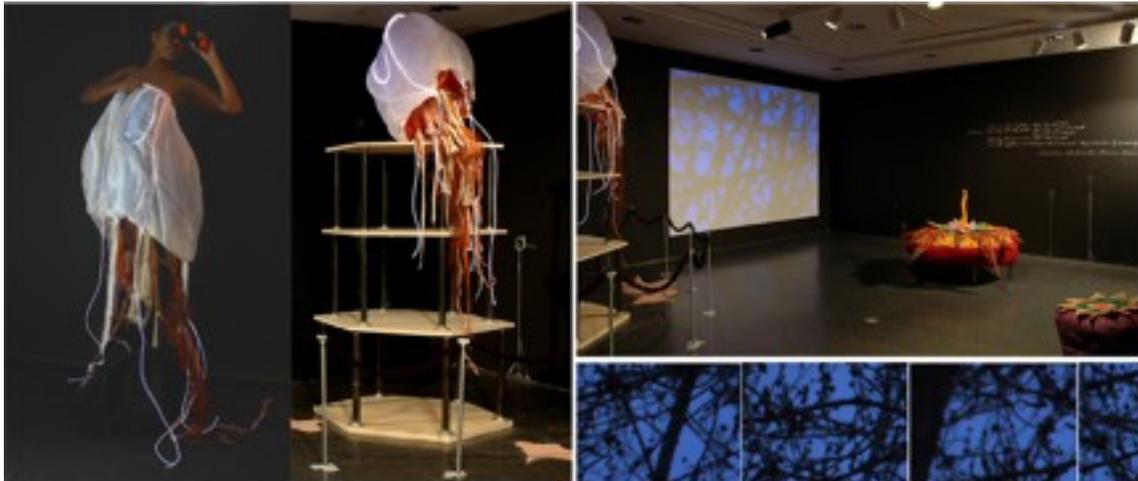


Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago

UBS 12 x 12: New Artists/New Work

D. Denenge Akpem: *Rapunzel Revisited: An Afri-Sci-Fi Space Sea Siren Tale*

Curated by Miesha Harris Shih



The following conversation was conducted with the artist and posted on the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago's website.

Miesha Harris Shih: *For *Rapunzel Revisited: An Afri-Sci-Fi Space Sea Siren Tale* you've incorporated a range of disparate themes varying from a 19th Century fairy tale, a modern-day science fiction novel, underwater imagery, and sounds from both the physical environment and outer space, all of which are mixed with an afro funky fresh flavor. However, you still managed to keep your installation quite lucid and cohesive. What was the impetus for *Rapunzel Revisited* and what inspired you to incorporate such a wide variety of ideas and symbolism?*

D. Denenge Akpem: *Rapunzel Revisited* is about distance, longing, desire, fear; it embodies Dr. Doolittle's Push-Me-Pull-You creature in a psychological way. The deepest sea and the farthest reaches of space are unknown to mankind. We do our best to understand them, and yet we also litter them with the debris of our explorations, in our fear destroying anything that gets too close. I think of the story of the giant squid found recently in Japan whose arm was ripped off by the very scientists who spent their lives studying and searching for it. In Italo Calvino's novel, *Invisible Cities*, the story of the city of Baucis describes this kind of distance, a kind of simultaneous desire and repulsion.

Also, my installations are like a poem, a haiku. I work to pare things down to the cleanest representation of each idea, and each piece is linked to the other. There are layers and layers like an onion; the installations can be read on a simply visceral, physical level or you can take it deeper to fundamental ideas about life and death and survival. I like

puzzles; I could have been a private investigator or a lawyer. It gives the mind something to chew on, to have so many layers operating at the same time.

MHS: *At the core of your artistic practice has been a strong interactive performance component, in which you metamorphose your art into a kind of living sculpture thereby giving the work an added dynamism. How did interacting with your audience become so central to your artistic expression and what performance artists have been influential to you?*

DDA: Marina Abramovic's absolute devotion to her craft is the absolute top. To be willing to die for one's art, for one's statement: that is a true performance artist. The risk is important, the fear on the part of audience and/or performer, anything to get the adrenaline flowing. I've been working with a more subtle, subversive fear, the kind that seeps in and you can't stop thinking about it. When people come around the corner, sometimes they jump and say "holy shit!" because they don't expect to see the sculpture embodied. Again, it's a way to throw things off, a small shock, a gentle seduction like a horror movie inhabited by beautiful but dead characters or Ulysses' sirens who lure sailors to their deaths. The experiential speaks across the board regardless of whether one has "art training" or not. I'm fond of singers like David Bowie who constantly reinvent themselves, people who aren't afraid to become almost like another species in the service of their craft. Cirque du Soleil has also had a huge influence as has the work of Julie Taymor. Primarily I look to them for examples of superior craft and diligence.

MHS: *You've mentioned that having been born in Nigeria to a Tiv-Nigerian father and a Dutch-American mother has led you, in part, to explore hybridity through your art. You are also inspired by a wide variety of sources such as Octavia Butler, Hussein Chalayan, and Isaac Asimov. Can you further explain how pushing the boundaries of identity through investigating race, gender, and beauty have been inscribed into your work?*

DDA: I guess I've always been on a kind of mission. I was born in the early 70s in Nigeria during a time of economic and cultural excitement, when Nigeria had just realized independence from Britain and had come out of a brutal war. So there were many bi-racial/bi-continental babies being born at the time. Barack Obama comes from this same kind of background, albeit a generation ahead of me, but you can see he has the same sort of mission, perhaps a feeling that one's upbringing has offered a certain level of insight that might have broad application on a social or political level, or can be utilized for betterment in the world. That's pretty heady stuff but on a practical level, the artists and role models I consider to be truly successful are those who play along the edges, who balance in between the extremes, who explore ways to integrate multiple modes of expression. The fashion designer Hussein Chalayan operates on so many levels; his runway shows are mind-boggling. He addresses disenfranchisement and war; fantasy and transportation; re-shaping of the body and how garments are like a skin that defines. It's almost too much; my heart starts beating really fast when I see his designs. I want to create beautiful objects that people enjoy and use; at the same time, I have a message. It may be the "We Are the World"-type, but corny as it may seem, it's real and it's true, and only by embracing that hybridity do I ever achieve the height of possibility and beauty in

my work. I am experimenting more and more with abstraction, and that is one of the strengths of *Rapunzel Revisited*. After a lifetime in academia, I am tired of being didactic. I don't have to hit people over the head; ambiguity is beautiful like a cloud or a haiku.

MHS: *For Rapunzel Revisited you've used chalk to create these wonderful, abstracted line drawings of buildings supported by stilts in water and flamingo legs with text from Invisible Cities by Italo Calvino. Your installation invokes an environment, which is haunting yet quite poetic and decorative. Can you explain why you chose that particular excerpt from Calvino's novel and what inspired you begin using chalk, (versus a more conventional medium such as paint) on walls?*

DDA: I am entranced by the way Calvino described so many faces of the same city, each like a woman with specific charms. The book speaks to individuality; it also has a twist and an undercurrent of passion. Something struck me in the vignette about Baucis: the idea of distance, gazing upon something with love and yet being somehow too afraid to tarnish that love by actual interaction, thus the spyglasses and a life lived on stilts above the earth. It really resonated with Rapunzel's story (and with my own, with the very everyday human emotion in relationships with others). I feel that both the Baucis residents and Rapunzel are victims of their own fear and at the same time their distance holds within it a certain level of respect for the beloved. Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was the first book that gave me visions. I use text quite a bit in my work, if not actually written into the piece itself (on the walls, collaged onto a costume, etc.) then at very least it is used as the impetus for the work. The installation becomes a kind of diagram where I break down the ideas into bits and each bit becomes a piece of the installation. As a child, I loved diagramming sentences, loved the order of it. Calvino's description of Baucis became the spindly chalk drawings, amorphous and architectural, a structured chaos. It became my nine-foot tower of wood and pipe, the same materials I use to build furniture for interior use. An entirely black room has a womb-like effect. The walls come alive when you write on them; there is something changeable about chalk words that can be erased and re-written, smeared to reveal the presence of someone who was physically present in the space. There is an ethereal quality to white chalk words floating in black space; they can disappear at any moment. There is this notion that you're not supposed to paint walls black. Think of all the negative associations with the color black and plus it absorbs light --not a good wall color. You can't tell where the walls begin or end so it's disorienting. I like to keep things a bit off-balance and at the same time, keep it sexy to draw you in.

MHS: *You've stated that such publications as UK House and Garden and 1,001 Home Decorating Ideas have influenced you. In fact, for Rapunzel Revisited you've constructed furniture that is covered with Nigerian wax print fabric. Can you talk about your professional background in interior design?*

DDA: It's all about space and how people move through it. I strive to maximize the potential of the individual, the space, and these two elements in interaction with each other. I have always been a designer and an entrepreneur. At the age of 12, I picked the loofahs that grow in pods like weeds all over our compound in Mkar, shook out the seeds,

sewed them to a strip of cloth with handles to create a back-scrubber, and sold them door-to-door. I learned to sew at age 10 and designed all of my clothes throughout high school. My mother and I would spend hours pouring over 1,001 Home Decorating Ideas magazine (lemon yellow paint was the answer to everything), and since I suffered from terrible insomnia as a child, I'd design the interiors of entire houses in my mind each night in order to fall asleep. We spent many happy days shopping for fabric in the market and bargaining with the vendors, an expected part of the shopping experience. I appreciate Nigerian wax print because it's printed in Nigeria and also because of the sense of humor in the kinds of images that are used (cell phones, faces of presidents and other political characters, flyswatters, disembodied floating fingers, etc.). It has such a history as a medium of communication while at the same time, the colors look beautiful on dark skin. So my life has been full of design. In graduate school I moved toward more conceptual work, and while I am a conceptual artist, my practical Dutch and Tiv heritages pushed me away from creating items that had no practical function. So I began searching for ways to integrate. And I came up with the idea of a slipcover, the ultimate inexpensive transformative item for one's personal space. By creating a slipcover that looks like a giant flower, I could transform an ordinary chair into a conceptual artwork whereby anyone who sits in it immediately becomes like a bee in a flower. It's a subversive and simple kind of conceptualism that I find very satisfying and transformative. It has since morphed into the seating in *Rapunzel Revisited*. When I do interior design, I use some basic Feng Shui techniques to clear and enhance. As a performance artist who has knowledge of Nigerian theatrical traditions, I use ideas from performance when designing to consider how people will move through the spaces and installations, to create the most effective and affirming atmosphere--and a bit of sexiness too. I've done site-specific commissions for residential spaces, re-designed office and home interiors. What I enjoy the most is working with an individual, or company, to isolate specific goals and themes and personality traits--in much the same way as I use text as the basis for installations--and then using these to build a new space that is more conducive to the kind of life they wish to activate.

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