

Transcript

AGNES Talk: With Opened Mouths

SPEAKER

Qanita Lilla

[Music]

Senzenina is a South African anti-apartheid hymn and lament, often sung at funerals of murdered activists. *Senzenina*: what have we done to deserve this? Our only sin is the colour of our skin. The voices rise, inconsolable, refusing to be silent. In the Western art museum, the mask is the face of Africa. But it is a face without a name or a body, suspended in a white field of absence, like the empty spaces on colonial maps. That emptiness means erasure, not absence. The dancers who wore the masks, the smells, words, music, and colours of the masquerade are missing.

With Opened Mouths is a curatorial intervention that seeks to start new conversations about African objects in Western art museums. We include ceremonial masks from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection with contemporary work by Nigerian, Canadian artist Oluseye, to begin to speak of what we've lost. The masks stand vigil in the grey Kingston soil of their exile, while the African Atlantic breaks on the rocks of home. How should we speak of these things? Can they begin to speak for themselves?

The soil of *With Open Mouths* recalls the outdoor masquerade, as well as epistemic fertility and possibilities of the masks' new home. This is the soil of Kingston, the first capital of the colonial province of Canada. If each mask carried African soil on its transatlantic journey as a talisman of remembering and of belonging, this display would look very different. The Atlantic Ocean is the canvas of *With Open Mouths*. It carried the masks to this continent from their places of origin, and it is their last memory of home. As they gaze out over the horizon, the familiar sounds and smells of the ocean might provide some comfort.

Artist Oluseye also makes history personal by imagining the talisman, an enslaved individual, might have carried from home. Spot lit darkness and crashing waves evoke a cargo hold or seaside dungeon. Totemic objects crystallize exile flotsam on a distant beach, melded dream souvenirs from a lost future. Washed up on the shore of the Atlantic lays Oluseye's *Eminado* series. Collections of traditional art from Africa are not collections of art in the Western sense. Objects from Africa followed in the wake of earlier transatlantic trade, the African women and men who were sold as chattel and who became part of a thriving commercial European culture. These talismanic objects, or lucky charms, are from Oluseye's ongoing *Eminado series*. *Eminado* is Yoruba for good luck charm. And this work memorializes the millions of people transported as chattel across the Atlantic. It was triggered by the history of *Friendship*, a Canadian built slave ship that carried enslaved Africans from New Calabar, in present day Nigeria, to Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1793. The constant migration of black people through time as slaves in the past and as immigrants more recently is an enduring theme in Oluseye's work. He looks at the ways in which blackness moves across space, place, and time, shaping and shifting in the world.

The Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection at the Agnes is the third largest collection of historical African art in Canada, with a substantial component of masks, hoods, and crests. Inspired by European modernism, the collection was assembled during the height of the Canadian interest in African art in the mid-20th century. As a collection acquired mostly through second parties, auctions and galleries within Canada, and with very little direct input from Africa and Africans, it is surrounded by the absence of various contexts. There is the absence of the reality and physicality of Africa but also of local knowledges, of local makers, and of local consumers. Fields of absence are the spaces that have been lost have been made malleable by colonial agents and have been overwritten with other narratives or have been entirely erased. In the context of African masks, absence is a productive marker that indicates displacement.

Dislocated, displaced in a new country, grounded in Kingston in the symbolic display of an art museum, the African masks' meanings have morphed into something entirely different. How can these potent objects only be celebrated with a stylistic formal beauty alone? Museum labels make certain assumptions about an imagined audience. That they need to be directed, guided, and educated in a particular way. But I believe that labels can teach audiences to have different expectations from museums. Labels can position the museum not as a selective knowledge holder but rather as a collaborative knowledge maker. If the masks could speak, they would ask, Senzenina, what have we done? Why are we in this alien place, breathing alien air, with alien soil beneath us, and an alien sky above? Masks like these are not used in South Africa, but the struggle against brutal colonial occupation is pan-African and universal. It is impossible to express the full diversity and richness of Africa here. Instead, my intention in *With Opened Mouths* is to pay homage to the collective struggle of enslaved and colonized people, and to also acknowledge kinship bonds that were torn apart. Placing these powerful, disembodied objects side by side is meant to reassert their collective otherworldly power in a place far from home.

[Music]

[Rolling Text]

My name is Qanita Lilla. I come from Cape Town, South Africa. I am associate curator Arts of Africa here at the Agnes Etherington Art Center, Queens University and the curator of *With Opened Mouths*.

I come from a people who have been named "coloured" which is the term used in South Africa for the generations of mixed-race people, the laboring classes of African, Indigenous and Asian origin, the descendants of slaves brought to the Cape Colony from Asia and the rest of Africa from 1653 until 1822 by the Dutch and the British.

Our existence is testament to a conundrum of the apartheid state and to the white settler colonials before them. Because of the great range of our physical characteristics: our skin color, hair texture and our bodies, our existence shows that race as defined by your physical characteristics alone is a baseless measurement that does not account for the heart or the mind. But history has shown that race carries the power to affect your existence in unimaginable ways.