

BravinLee programs

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Feature on Marcia Kure by Sarah Adams
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At the opening of her 2000 exhibition *Cloth As Identity* at the Goethe Institute in Lagos, Nigeria, Marcia Kure staged a provocative performance piece that fused a number of themes and concerns that have underpinned her work since 1992. As guests milled about the exhibition space, women dressed in burkas began to trickle into the room and circulate among them. The women approached guests and struck up conversations: “How do you feel when you meet a woman in a *hijab*?” they asked, drawing people into conversations about commonly held prejudices in Nigeria regarding women who wear the burka. After a short period of these conversations were interrupted by a steady drumbeat followed by a woman’s voice “What do we think, how do we feel when we see a woman *in hijab*? Beyond everything, the woman in *hijab* is a wife, sister, mother...She is no less human than anyone else.” As the drumbeat that followed this monologue heightened, the woman began to whirl in circles, their burkas fanning out around them so they monopolized more space, forced guests to move out of their way, and slowly asserted nearly complete control over the spatial and social dynamic of the room. Once they commanded all eyes in the room, the performers removed their burkas in a single swift gesture, revealing themselves as trendily dressed young women beneath their robes. In that moment of revelation, the guests at the exhibition were forced to confront what was perhaps a frustration of their expectation – they were faced with the ordinariness, the humanity, the individuality and the vibrancy of the young women under the burkas. The second part of the performance piece further underscored these ideas; the women returned to the exhibition space in their burkas and danced hip-hop style to Afrobeat music by Lagbaja, a popular Nigerian musician who admonished, “No do gra gra for me.”

The performance piece pushed Kure’s long-term interest in creating images of veiled women to a new space. She brought her fascination with the veil as an externally observed garment to a personal level by forcefully asserting the individual body in the veil. In that transgressive moment of revelation Kure stressed women’s embodied experiences in the burka: she presented the garment as the potential instrument of power and choice, not an imposition.

I have found a striking resonance between the development of Kure’s works on veiled women in Nigeria and the development of my research on theoretical models used to analyze the body and personal adornment. My continued interest in body theory is rooted in my study of Igbo women’s body and mural painting in southeastern Nigeria. As I surveyed some of the more theoretical frameworks used to interpret personal adornment, I was surprised to find the early 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes, who asserted an absolute dichotomy between mind and body, continues to have profound impact on all on all aspects of body theory. Body theory continues to shake out into the body or mind focused models – the two approaches are not often used in combination. I have suggested elsewhere that approaches focused only on the body and its perceived semiotics frame the body as passive, observed, simply receiving culturally derived adornment. In contrast, the application of theoretical approaches focused on the embodiment (such as Bourdieu and Connerton), to this same material replaces the mind in the body, frames the body as active, and restores agency to the wearer. In embodied models, the body

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does not just passively receive cultural inscription, it actively creates culture through bodily performances of adornment. I have started to use a combination of these approaches in my work as a way to enrich analysis and collapse the Cartesian mind/body binary I confronted in my search of useful theoretical models.

The trajectory of my research on body theory – moving from external appraisal and analysis to the embodiment and person agency – is echoed in the evolution of the recurring theme of the veiled woman in Marcia Kure’s work. Kure’s early images of the veiled woman focus on the external aesthetic appraisal, on depictions of the burka as a garment and end in itself. These works express a constellation of meanings derived solely through Kure’s visual analysis of the garment as a Christian minority in a predominantly Muslim Northern Nigeria. When Kure moved beyond pure visual analysis to actually interviewing veiled women, soliciting their stories and even donning the burka herself, she pushed her works on the theme of veiled women into a new, embodied space. She moved beyond representations of the burka as fabric enclosing a void, to visual explorations of the individual identities and agency of women in the burka.

Purdah, from 1992, is Kure’s first image of the veiled woman. As a young woman who was born in 1970 in Kano but had lived in most regions of Nigeria, Kure had long observed and taken an interest in veiled women, seeing them as somehow “mysterious” and “unreachable.” This first image, a record of Kure’s initial curiosity and observation, demonstrates her absorption with the fabric of the burka itself. In *Purdah*, Kure depicts a restrictive, bright orange garment that wraps tightly around the body and frames a shadowy void rather than a face, rendering the woman remote and anonymous. The slightly angular lines that frame this absence are restated in the geometric green halo that hovers over the figure’s head. In this early piece, Kure’s interest in the veil itself clearly eclipses interest in the woman in the garment.

Kure’s focus on the veil as a garment in this work can be traced to a parallel interest in textiles that spans her oeuvre, from her studies at University of Nigeria Nsukka (1987 – 1994) to the present. In 1997 she created works from sections of misprinted Nigerian factory cloth. She was intrigued by transformations over time in the meaning and value of this cloth, which up until the 80’s and 90’s became fashionable because it was seen as “original” and rare. Kure noted, “When people admire this cloth and ask where you bought it, you can simply say ‘misprint,’ which also means, ‘you cannot get this.’” When she installed selected sections of these misprinted textiles in a gallery setting, the resulting work was powerfully engaged with a wide range of issues, from the idea of the “ready-made” to the notion of the “original.” The works also played with the constructed dichotomies between “traditional”/ apprentice trained artists/ craft and “contemporary”/ studio artists / art.

Purdah is also an early example of Kure’s interest in the current and historical relationship between gender and power in Nigeria:

In traditional African societies prior to the advent of Islamic or western colonialism, women held significant roles...But then the twin processes of Islamization and Western colonialism, with their onslaught against traditional institutions in much of Africa, engendered a systematic erosion of the women’s role and status... The women series, which perhaps in the high point of my present inquiry into the question of gender and power relations, is an attempt to propose recovery of the lost power.

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The Woman Series demonstrates Kure's mastery of drawing – the sweeping lines arc and layer over one another and dark, heavily worked areas give way to swaths of clean white paper. There is a tremendous sense of passion, energy, and spontaneity in both scale and line. The series alludes to themes of masking, concealment and power through the repeated motif of the Bamana ci wara mask and the image of the veiled woman, ideas that are clearly compelling and yet still somewhat ambiguous in nature for the artist. In this later images of the woman's head and frames a thin slip of blank white space, an absence that is underscored by a similarity bare section that cuts through the background of the composition.

Two earlier works, *Seeking Lost Power I* and *Seeking Lost Power IV*, both from 1996, address some of the same issues Kure explored in the *Woman Series*. The works depict women wearing deep burgundy burkas, but again Kure stops short when it comes to putting a face on her observations. In one image the woman's face is a white void that narrows at the chin and extends over her chest in a slender white crack that slashes through the heaviness of the richly colored robe. A faint, narrow band outlines the edge of a cloth that frames the woman's eyes, but Kure leaves this framed area blank. In *Seeking Lost Power IV* the eyes are not even suggested, as this is an image of a veiled woman fleeing from a threat. As a part of the Christian minority from Northern Nigeria, Kure has often been witness to periodic violence between Muslims and Christians, and this work references those ongoing tensions. Kure's interest in textiles comes through at two levels in these works – through the depictions of the burka and the subtly complex background where *adinkra* symbols jostle along side patterns found on *ukara* cloth, creating muted allusions to power, secrecy, and mourning.

In her 1997 piece *Woman Thinking II*, Kure invokes the burka with exquisitely ethereal lines that wrap themselves around a suggested body like wisps of smoke. Repeated arabesque scrolls to the right of the woman's head infuse the work with a playful motion that is countered and measured by the vaguely ominous slip of dark shading over the woman's eyes. As the image of the veiled woman from the *Woman Series*, Kure emphasizes the vacancy over the eyes by echoing the swath of dark gray in the shadowy area that presses in from the left.

The visual shift in Kure's images of veiled women after 1998 is linked to interviews she conducted from 1999 through 2000 with women in Zaria. As a result of these interviews, Kure deepened her understanding of the burka and moved her project on this theme to a new space. She remembers that the first woman she interviewed forced her to reevaluate many of her ideas that were based on her earlier perceptions.

She [the woman Kure interviewed] had asked her mother if she could wear the burka, as she believed it would make her more focused in school. She felt the burka gave her both power and respect...her lecturer, boys in her class, strange men didn't now what she looked like so they couldn't bother her.

Kure noted that though we read a nun's habit as a choice, people tend to read the burka as always an imposition, never a choice. As she interviewed more women she learned that the burka shaped women's bodily movements, what Bourdieu would call *habitus*, and also determined how people related to them. In short, the garment changed the woman's relationship to the world. Through her interviews she learned that many veiled women in Northern Nigeria felt compelled to honor the garment with their bodily behavior by not cutting in lines, not being rude. And those around these women had a strong, but varying reactions – in some cases respect, in others contempt (not surprising given the conflicts between Muslims

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and Christians in Nigeria.) Through her interviews Kure explored the embodied aspects of the burka, and as a result came to see the garment's potential as an instrument of power.

Kure's subsequent works reflect this shift in her engagement with her subject matter. Her performance piece *Lagos*, in which she powerfully asserted the bodies and identities of veiled pieces in which she focused on a disembodied garment. The events of 9/11 and Kure's move to Atlanta in 2000 have also had an impact on the nature of her more recent works on the theme of the veiled woman in Nigeria. Though she experimented once with going out in Atlanta in a burka after 9/11 she no longer felt comfortable or safe doing so. She has not been back to Nigeria, so she has not been able to continue her interviews with veiled women there. However, in Kure's 2001 collage *Two Sisters II* she continues to explore the embodied aspects of veiling.

In contrast between *Two Sisters II* and her earlier works is remarkable. In *Two Sisters II*, Kure locates the work in Nigeria through the pinnacled arch that frames the two veiled "sisters" and evokes Northern Nigerian Muslim architecture. The careful depictions of the burka itself in earlier works, its folds interactions with the body, are truncated here into a blunt, shorthand icon. Instead, white veils covered with waves of blue lines draw attention to two male faces at the center of the composition – one Asian and the other Caucasian. Her provocative subversion of the ethnic and gender codes of the garment relates to her growing interest in the relationship between veil and power. She demonstrates some of the fundamental paradoxes and ambiguities she has discovered in this garment – the burka, for Kure, is a garment that affords the wearer a sense of privacy that is at once empowering and effacing. Kure's recent works reflect her efforts to push beyond earlier representations of anonymity and move towards visual expressions of potential power.

After her performance piece in 2000, Kure stood in the gallery dressed in a burka along with the women who had taken part in the performance. She was amused to find that the person who was supposed to introduce her was clearly having trouble directing the introduction toward the right person in the room filled with women in identical burkas that completely concealed their identities. Kure notes that she felt profoundly empowered in that moment of control and privacy, and it is that surge of power that and embodied experience that infuses and enriches her latest works on this theme.

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