

FRESH PERSPECTIVES *on the Permanent Collection from* DARTMOUTH'S STUDENTS

A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE

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Julie Allen, *Maryjane*, 1999, paper, thread, foil, glue.
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2010.89.14.

CHECKLIST

Joyce J. Scott, American, born 1948
Mammy under Undue Influence, 2007
Blown, cast, and lampworked glass, beadwork (peyote stitch)
Purchased through the Virginia and Preston T. Kelsey 1958
Fund; 2007.51

Sierra Teller Ornelas, American, Diné (Navajo), born 1981
Forbidden Love, two weaving set, January–July 2009
Wool, vegetable dye
Purchased through the Alvin and Mary Bert Gutman '40
Acquisition Fund; 2009.54

Julie Allen, American, born 1970
Maryjane, 1999
Paper, thread, foil, glue
Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2010.89.14

Nike Davies Okundaye, Nigerian, born 1952
Untitled (adiṛẹ quilt), 2002
Indigo-dyed cotton and thread
Purchased through the William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. Jaffe Hall Fund,
and through gifts from the Dickey Fund and the
Leslie Humanities Center; T.2003.6

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Nike Davies Okundaye, untitled (adiṛẹ quilt) (detail), 2002, indigo-dyed cotton and thread.
Purchased through the William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. Jaffe Hall Fund, and through gifts
from the Dickey Fund and the Leslie Humanities Center; T.2003.6.

TRADITIONAL CONNECTIONS / CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE



Joyce J. Scott, *Mammy under Undue Influence*, 2007, blown, cast, and lampworked glass, beadwork (peyote stitch). Purchased through the Virginia and Preston T. Kelsey 1958 Fund; 2007.51.

A dichotomy between craft and art has long been present in critical Western art history, founded largely on a deep-rooted system of aesthetic values. These definitions and values have often ignored the contribution of women artists. The most obvious example of this is women’s capacity within the world of craft—a term typically associated with a form of “low art” largely created by women in the domestic sphere to which they have been relegated. Women have excelled in the realm of craft for centuries, taking part in a matrilineal system of knowledge passed from generation to generation. Some contemporary women artists have chosen to use traditional techniques associated with craft and utilitarian objects to produce unique and innovative works of art, in the process challenging the largely male-dominated art world to overtly acknowledge their talent as artists.

The contemporary artists included in this exhibition have each inherited artistic traditions from their mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, and other relatives that include needlework, adirẹ dyeing techniques, and weaving. While they are aware of the sociocultural significance of their chosen media, whether associated with their

own heritage or connected to the origins of the medium itself, these artists transcend the materiality of their work through the messages they infuse into it. They address contemporary subject matter like popular culture, identity, race, and sex as a means of engagement with the viewer. Above all else, however, these women are creating objects to be viewed as works of *art*. They are not only perpetuating traditions but also creating a new space for craft within the art world, for, as Mary Jane Jacob points

out, “Traditional practices change; successive generations take and alter tradition; and changing circumstances transform meaning even when traditions are dutifully followed” (73).

Of the four artists represented in this exhibition, Joyce Scott subverts the craft/art dichotomy most purposefully. Combining traditional craft techniques passed down in her family with her education in fine arts, jewelry making, and beading techniques, Scott creates art that addresses serious and taboo historical and contemporary issues. She notes, “[I] can’t be complacent about the world I live in . . . It’s important to me to use art in a manner that incites people to look and then carry something home—even if it’s subliminal—that might make a change in them” (*Joyce J. Scott Kickin’ It with the Old Masters* 54). Created specifically for the Hood Museum of Art’s 2008 exhibition *Black Womanhood*, Scott’s sculpture titled *Mammy under Undue Influence* (left) exemplifies her position. Recalling the elaborate beadwork of her ancestry, including that created by the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, this figure is part stitched glass beads and part blown and cast glass. Before she created this work, Scott had done a series of black “mammy” figures that focused largely on the personal experience of her mother’s time working as a nanny for a white family. While she carries over the politically charged term “mammy” here, the focus has shifted to image and identity among African American women. She explains, “This mammy speaks to the person trying to change herself from the core, so she might be whiter/prettier on the outside for society . . . Her desire to exchange her soul-self for a society-self shows how undue this influence is” (qtd. Thompson 292). Beyond raising important issues surrounding racial and gender identity, Scott is also showcasing her technical skill in beadwork, appropriating traditional media to create a new form of art.

In the 1970s, Joyce Scott studied West African Yoruba weaving techniques with Nike Davies Okundaye at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts in Deer Island, Maine. Those weaving techniques were taught to Okundaye by her great-grandmother, who was head of a woman’s guild in Nigeria. Today Okundaye is one of Nigeria’s most celebrated contemporary artists and is known for her adirẹ dyeing techniques and innovative patterns. Using her knowledge of traditional textile art, practiced largely by Yoruba women, Okundaye was able to elevate its status through her many exhibitions around the world. The quilt included in this exhibition is exemplary of her skill in adirẹ. Adirẹ is the term for indigo pattern dyeing, which is a laborious process of creating white or light blue patterns on a dark indigo background using various resist methods. Many of the designs traditionally used in adirẹ come from Yoruba religion and folklore; for Okundaye, they also come from her dreams. In this quilt, Okundaye demonstrates her ability in the Oniko method of adirẹ, tying patterns into the cloth, as is evident in the light blue sections of the quilt, as well as the Eleko method, adding pattern by using stencils or painting on the cloth with cassava starch, as is evident in the border pattern. In this work, Okundaye not only created intricate patterns on several pieces of cloth but also then used those various fabrics to create another pattern within the quilt. Through her creation of the Nike Centre for Art and Culture, Okundaye is preserving tradition by passing down old and new techniques to the next generation while also creating her own unique and recognized works of art.

Likewise passing their knowledge from one generation to the next, Navajo women have practiced their weaving traditions since the colonization of their land, when sheep were introduced and Diné women became renowned weavers of wool blankets (Szabo 102). This tradition continues to remain significant within many Diné families. Sierra Teller Ornelas is a sixth-generation weaver who uses traditional techniques and materials to create weavings that present contemporary messages. In her weaving titled *Forbidden Love* (below), Ornelas comments upon her own romantic relationship using video-game imagery. She states: “I would call it contemporary Navajo tapestry . . . This is my landscape, my pop culture landscape, the one I interact with every day.” Like Scott and Okundaye, Ornelas hopes that her work “motivates the general public to see Navajo weaving as an art form” (*Native American Art at Dartmouth* 72).

An experienced seamstress, artist Julie Allen also addresses contemporary subjects through traditional techniques. Known for her use of ordinary materials to make unique works of art, Allen explores “the realm of domestic desire” by sewing balloons into fanciful layered cakes and recreating her underwear out of Saran Wrap and tape (McKenzie Fine Art Gallery). Here Allen has formed her work titled *Maryjane* (next page) out of paper sewn together to depict a classic women’s shoe with a sole made of Godiva chocolate wrappers. Allen presents a popular icon of style in a medium that alludes to the stereotypes of femininity as delicate and fragile, with the added twist of the gold chocolate wrapper on the bottom of the shoe. Perhaps Allen is commenting on a woman’s perceived identity in general—she must be light and dainty and turn down (trod upon) sweet pleasures—or perhaps she is evoking the chocolatier’s appropriation of the story of Lady Godiva, who rode naked around Coventry, England, in an effort to eliminate the taxes imposed on the townspeople by her husband. Whatever Allen’s inspiration, her unique pairing of everyday materials with fine needlework situates her firmly in the mainstream art world of today.

The four artists represented in this exhibition each challenge the divisions of craft and art largely upheld by Western definitions of aesthetics through the work they create. By combining innovative techniques with the matrilineal and familial traditions of their various heritages and subjects relevant to contemporary society, these artists both subvert the domestic labels associated with their medium and redefine these traditions for the next generation’s benefit.

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Sierra Teller Ornelas, *Forbidden Love*, January–July 2009, wool, vegetable dye. Purchased through the Alvin and Mary Bert Gutman ’40 Acquisition Fund; 2009.54.

