Homecoming
Domesticity and Kinship in Global African Art
Homecoming: Domesticity and Kinship in Global African Art is rooted in Black, queer, and feminist curatorial and scholarly practices. The exhibition surveys themes of home, kinship, motherhood, femininity, and intimacy in historical and contemporary art from and about Africa and the African diaspora. In curating this project, my goal was to highlight and celebrate the work women do, both in and outside of their homes, to sustain their families and communities.

I began imagining plans for Homecoming: Domesticity and Kinship in Global African Art in early 2021 at the tail end of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, a period that coincided with an uptick in conditions of and activist responses to anti-Black racism and xenophobia. At that time, I personally was immersed in the literature on women-of-color feminisms and notions of home and labor, which I had encountered during a Yale graduate seminar called “Colonial Domesticity” that was taught by Professor Lisa Lowe. This course shaped my thinking on the work that women do to build and maintain their families and communities. These experiences ultimately came together to form my commitment to narrating and exhibiting stories of African and African-diasporic domesticity and kinship. Homecoming facilitates a visual gathering of artists of African descent across space, place, and time. Specificities of region, ethnicity, migration, gender, sexuality, and historical moment are explored in this exhibition, which maintains that there can be a robust dialogue among different African and African-diasporic art histories without an erasure of local distinctiveness.

“Domesticity” is a capacious term that refers to matters of the home and family, including reproduction, housework, the use of common household items, and philosophical understandings of home. “Kinship” is used to describe relationships among families and communities without strictly defined geographical or biological boundaries.

Throughout the globe, Black women’s quilting practices blend ancestral traditions with contemporary creative innovations to produce garments that are simultaneously gorgeous and can be used to comfort and adorn the body. As such, textiles provide a fruitful site of inquiry for this exhibition. One of the many indigo textiles on display is Untitled (Adire Quilt) by Nigerian artist Nike Davies-Okundaye. Its geometric designs and varied shades of blue are characteristic of the West African art form. In southwestern Nigeria, Yoruba women have long created adire—indigo-dyed fabrics that are known to the world for their dazzling colors and intricate patterns. Historically, the dye used for these garments was sourced from local plants, but industrialized forms of the dye are now readily available, too. In Yorubaland, adire cloths are made by a resist-dyeing technique to make various tints and designs. Generations of Yoruba women maintain the tradition of designing and wearing these indigo textiles.

Photographs from South African artist Senzeni Marasela’s Baby Doll series reveal how artmaking can be entangled with the emotional processing of traumatic histories. A Black baby doll, shown against bright green grass, is captured as it unravels—or, perhaps, as it is sewn together. It is ambiguous, powerfully so, as the artist uses the image to gesture toward the uncertainty and violence of being a Black child growing up under South African apartheid. This photograph is from a series of twelve, each of which pictures the doll at a point of destruction or
construction. Regarding the series chronologically, what is occurring is a process of dismemberment, achieved by the artist’s placement of herself in the photographs. The ripped-apartness mirrors the artist’s own childhood; Marasela was sent to a boarding school to avoid apartheid atrocities and her mother was forced to be a domestic worker in a white household, a fate shared by many Black women during that era. When the series is shown in fragments, as it is here, one might initially read individual photographs as images of construction. There is certainly a feminist polemic and emotional release generated in the tearing apart of the doll. What does it mean to unpack, or dismantle, the symbols of one’s childhood? Can destruction be a form of creation?

Masks from the African continent offer a strong political and aesthetic component to the themes of domesticity and kinship. One example in Homecoming is the Gelede mask representing Osanyin, the orisha (deity) of herbal medicine. At Gelede festivals, Yoruba men perform a masquerade in honor of the significant roles women play in the community as mothers, traders, elders, and ancestors. Blue pigment, either natural Indigo or an industrialized dye called washing blue, is applied to many Yoruba sculptures, like those on this mask. The blue expresses coolness, purity, discretion, and composure. It is often associated with water deities, such as Yemoja, who is the goddess of rivers and is known as a patron deity of pregnant women.

I hope the exhibition encourages everyone to discuss the kindred themes of domesticity and kinship in their everyday lives. Who performs the labor that builds and sustains our communities and how is that reflected in the visual and material culture of the world around us? What does home look and feel like to you? Homecoming makes it possible for visitors of the Hood Museum of Art to delve into these questions while simultaneously engaging with the abundant history of African and African-diasporic art.

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