

"Making & Unmaking"

CAMDEN ARTS CENTRE



View of "Making & Unmaking," 2015. Background: Two unfilled works from Leonce Raphael Agbodjelo's series "Muscleman," 2012. Foreground: Céline Condorelli, *Average Spatial Compositions*, 2015. Photo: Mark Blower.

The opening-night atmosphere at "Making & Unmaking" was exuberant. Visitors—some magnificently dressed in bright, eclectically patterned clothing by the exhibition's curator, designer Duro Olowu—marveled at the 170 stunning, little-known artworks and objects assembled. These ranged from a one-hundred-year-old Congolese textile, with its nearly twenty-foot-long non-repeating maplike pattern, to an immense drawing by the young Australian artist Donna Huddleston. Her *Warriors*, 2015, in gouache and colored pencil, depicts a bizarre procession that prompted such disparate associations as Henry Darger's warring, pastel-colored girls; a *Sports Illustrated* swimwear issue, circa 1981; and the stylized death mask of Tutankhamun.

The show's breadth of unknown textiles, drawings, photographs, sculptural installations, craftworks, paintings, and ceramics prompted a real sense of wonder. Olowu selected across media, periods, and regions, jettisoning every familiar curatorial category; yet the overall impression was of exquisite coherence. Each piece in "Making & Unmaking" felt lovingly handpicked, suggesting the return of the curator-as-connoisseur, possessed of the committed collector's indefatigable curiosity, encyclopedic visual knowledge, and exquisitely refined taste. How had Olowu brought together, in concert, artworks as different as Lorna Simpson's photographic collages of mismatched female fragments and Diane Iler's small, intricately patterned woven-fiber work *Floating Bands*, 1979?

Olowu explained in the catalogue that he sought examples in which he felt "the hand of the artist," sometimes literally: the finger marks on Tommaso Convi-Mora's stacked ceramic pots, *Guards*, 2015–16, or the hand-tied knots in Minalini Mukherjee's blue macramé giant, *Yakshi*, 1984. Often, established artists were represented in unfamiliar guises via more intimate works: delicate botanical drawings by Kehinde Wiley, rather than his heroic portraiture; or recycled hybrid garments by Rodney McMillan, known for his large-scale shaped canvases and sculptural installations.

"Making & Unmaking" asked us to look hard at artworks, one by one, and resist any premature conclusions. A recurring motif was the juxtaposition of body and pattern, as in Nobukho Ngaba's "Untitled," 2012, which comprised photographs of the artist engulfed in the familiar plaid of cheap plastic shopping bags—the default matching luggage of migrants—or Hassan Hajjaj's twenty-first-century odalisque, *Iham*, 2000, reclining in an elaborate interior of Moroccan tile and fabric. Almost all the figures—whether Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's languid imaginary characters or the inscrutable Winifred Radford, 1921, a painting by the half-forgotten British portraitist Meredith Frampton—look straight out at you. Many pairs of staring eyes seemed to ask: Can you encounter me as I do you—without distractions or preconceptions?

The relationship between modernism and Africa was broadly interrogated, as emblematically foregrounded in Céline Condorelli's wax-fabric-upholstered, El Lissitzky-esque furniture sculpture *Average Spatial Compositions*, 2015, placed at the entrance. Back in 1984–85, the Museum of Modern Art's "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" addressed a similar theme, and was loudly accused by critics, including Thomas McEvilley (in these pages) and Hal Foster, of formalist tunnel vision—the heavy-handed result of deterministic, top-down curatorial methods. Whatever question the New York museum was asking about African influence on the Western avant-garde, the answer was always going to be Picasso. Could a new model of modernism be envisioned, begged Foster, "based not on transformation within but transgression without"? "Making & Unmaking" might just be the long-awaited answer to his question.

Coinciding with the unveiling of Tate Modern's splendid new extension and a vibrant Mary Heilmann retrospective at the Whitechapel Gallery, Olowu's exhibition sparkled as the jewel in the crown of a glorious season for art in London. Then, within a week, the jubilation dramatically soured as the pro-Brexit referendum result set off shock waves. "Making & Unmaking"—a cross-geographical, cross-medial, cross-disciplinary, cross-generational survey by a Nigerian-born, London/New York-based lawyer/designer/artist/curator—was a testament to the richness achieved by opening borders, in every sense. Overnight, such freedom was put desperately at risk.

—Gilda Williams