

Zina is the inaugural artist in the MiMA “Hearing from Artists” interview series (March 2020)

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Zina Saro-Wiwa Hearing from Artists

Zina Saro-Wiwa is an artist who works with video, photography, sculpture, sound and food to map emotional landscapes. She is based in Los Angeles. In 2019, Zina showed two works at MiMA, in the exhibition Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust. Here, she is in conversation with Elinor Morgan, Head of Programme, in March 2020.

EM: As we write, the UK and USA are experiencing the impacts of Covid-19. How do you feel at this moment about the pandemic?

ZSW: I feel I have been talking about a coming cataclysm for some time. I always thought it would be to do with rising waters. I guess there's still time for that. But this really is a terrifying situation and I think that the West are now understanding the insecurity that many other societies of the world have had as their everyday lived experience. I love that one of the biggest lessons here is that you are only as safe as the poorest among you in society. There is a great levelling occurring. It doesn't matter if you are healthy or have access to hand sanitizer, everyone has to be healthy or have hand sanitizer or else this thing - in one form or another - is coming for you. It's very simple and direct.

I have experienced existential instability due to multiple utterly shocking family deaths and by virtue of coming from a place like the Niger Delta, so whilst Covid is scary, it is one of many scary things. Think about what people



in Gaza or Syria go through. Or countries that have experienced multiple pandemics in Africa and Asia. Or indeed oppressed populations where I live in the US. I feel very fortunate in fact. Covid is a great challenge to the American psyche and democracy. But for some reason I trust America to get through this creatively and ultimately positively. However this pandemic came about, there is an opportunity here to go within and restructure ourselves and find safety and regeneration internally. This is where real revolutions start. After all there is no safe shore to flee to in this pandemic.

This global time-out is simply extraordinary. Not everyone will find it easy to stop and meet themselves or meet their God or face their demons, either because of the circumstances in which they are quarantined or more personal blockages, but if you do you will be rewarded. Now is the time. I'm not sure how much fundamental structural societal change will occur to be honest. But change will come and that is beyond necessary. I hope we start honouring medical workers, farmhands, supermarket workers, teachers as we should. I hope we permanently encode the lessons we are learning into a new social and political charter. Honestly I would like to see the world halt for a month or six weeks every year.



Holy Star Boyz We Don't Tire 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Go monastic. That would be revolutionary, would demonstrate that the system is NOT unstoppable and would give the earth some desperately needed respite.

The opening up of connections and the expanded flow of information between quarantined people is paradigmatically interesting too. New ideas and alliances will emerge from quarantine that we cannot predict the effects of. A rewiring is taking place. But I say all this when I am feeling positive and trying to see some good in a terrible situation. But I tend to feel sad, wobbly and scared at night. I'm reading too much information and honestly it's tearing me apart a bit. News of Covid deaths come in and bite around the edges of your psyche. It's destabilising. And more death is coming. A lot more instability, recrimination, anger, violence and civil disobedience. This initial phase of lockdown is one thing. The next phase is going to be exponentially more challenging. But then in the daytime I feel better again. Especially when I'm in my garden. So I am vacillating between the two states. And I am not sure who I will be after a month or two (or more?) of this. But it's about not letting the chaos take over. We need to meet existential challenges creatively. Art can emerge by directing chaos and curating anarchy. If we can survive this ride then I

think we are in for a very interesting time as a global community.

EM: How did you come to be an artist and what is important or special about this role?

ZSW: I became an artist to find freedom. To free myself from pain and from super-colonised ideas about what Ogoniland is, what my father's life and death meant, what it is to be an activist or environmentalist, to expand the meanings of Africanness and ultimately, to decolonise the idea of the self. I am referring to myriad colonisers. Decolonisation as an exercise is super interesting and politically complex. It is not a leftist exercise at all. In fact, it laughs in the face of all that. Decolonisation itself wants to be decolonised from decolonisers.

We need to get to a place where different disciplines and ideas come together and create a new prism for looking and experiencing. That is why I like art. It is (supposed to be) this space where you experiment with bringing together elements in a free and associative way and let the thing teach you something. Relinquishing control a bit. A lot. This is really a model or approach that needs to be exported to every discipline. Art is a vital modality.



Phyllis I Am Not Alone 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

EM: Much of your recent work connects with Ogoniland in the Niger Delta, Nigeria. Could you unpack your relationship with this area?

ZSW: I was born there and I believe all my ancestors are from there. I have made artwork there for the last seven years. Due to the socio-economic and political upheavals in the region, people have read Ogoniland and the Niger Delta in a very narrow way. My art-making enables me to tap into and amplify the magic I see and feel there. It gives me permission to turn my back on accepted notions of the "moral" journalistic approach to storytelling about an oil-cursed region and says it's OK to look into the history and to dig up strange and powerful new ways of seeing and mapping this site.

Ogoniland is truly a curious and extraordinary place, in ways that actually have nothing to do with oil; there's something underneath the surface that is far, far more potent and interesting. It is rich and powerful. Devastation narratives have limited use.

It's time to do something countercurrent but ultimately closer to our history and who we actually are. We need to tinker under the hood and not simply wring our hands at the rust and dents on the surface. We will get to the damage from the inside out. Trust. So much creativity and expansion can happen in the Niger Delta and the people are ready for it. But first we have to go within.

But my relationship with the place is very interesting now. I moved to the other coast of America and I am even farther away from the UK and Africa. Then there is also crisis in Ogoniland. It is super dangerous right now. It was always volatile and insecure but now it is not worth the danger and I am tired after 7 years of working hard and recent family tragedies. So I find myself in California with this body of work tucked under my belt. My task is to forge a more creative and expansive connection with the Niger Delta and also to live fully as an artist, woman and human being where I find myself. Before, when I lived in New York, my art practice and my sense of self were totally split in two places. There was no integration.

My challenge now is to work out how the Niger Delta and Africa live in me and my practice when I am even further away and to some extent blocked from returning from the source of my art. This has forced an evolution in my practice and is eliciting from me a new theory of Afro-centrism. It's forcing me to be deeper and more expansive. It feels good. The seeds of these ideas are germinating in this new Californian soil and I am quietly excited at what is growing inside me.

EM: You use food as a site for understanding traditions, identity, exchange and relationships with land. One of your pieces that we showed at MiMA was a series of stories in recipe form. What is it about food that captivates you?

ZSW: That's a huge question. I don't understand why food is so important to my practice. But I like that I don't understand. It is kind of taking over to be honest. Each piece of work I make reveals itself and its purpose

to me, often years later. Each work moves me from one point in the conversation to the next. But no ultimate conclusion has arisen. Just some interesting observations that fold into the next work. Anyway, I'm still trying to figure out what it ultimately is to "know" anything.

Also I don't use food for understanding traditions or identity actually. It might have started out that way (sort of) but things have shifted and I am understanding my work differently. I am not interested in identity or identity politics. Even when I talk about decolonisation I am talking about decolonising from humanity altogether. As an artist I want to peek behind the curtain and find a way for food to tell me about itself and the nature of the universe. I want to hit upon a new understanding of what eating means and does psychically. And I think the information is right under our noses, we just have to get to a point of stillness to perceive and locate it. I just happen to be Ogoni and I just happen to be using food to access a different realm. Culture and identity are utterly mundane and transitory. They are merely tools, implements. I want to get to the subcutaneous layer and navigate that space. That is what interests me. I am merely following my intuition.

EM: You showed your work at MiMA in *Fragile Earth: seeds, weeds, plastic crust*, in the Summer of 2019. What are you working on now and what do you hope to make in 2020?

ZSW: Well despite the wild and intense year we have had so far, from an intellectual perspective my year is developing nicely. Everything has kind of blown open. I'm feeling freer and much less constrained. For the last few years I have felt intense frustration with my practice. As soon as I let go (and I had to let go because I became very ill for a while at the end of last year and really had to focus literally on how to breathe again and getting through the day) everything arranged itself into the correct order. Moving to California did something. The land speaks through me differently here. It has led me to dive back into a genre I invented ten years ago called alt-Nollywood. I made two alt-Nollywood films

back in 2010 (*Phyllis and The Deliverance of Comfort*) and since then, over the years, many people - especially students - have written to me asking about this genre.

Now I think it's time to take it forward so I am finally writing the official manifesto and making a new alt-Nollywood film that relates to, believe it or not, aliens. I have always been obsessed with alienhood. I've long wondered why it was not in my work more. I want to divorce aliens from the science fiction genre so this next work attempts this. Many other of my interests have been sucked into this new film: ecopsychologies; fruit; object oriented ontologies in relation to animism, epistemicide, farming and creativity; my hatred of athleisurewear, the ark of the covenant; 90s Nollywood aesthetics; The Beach Boys. It's an absolute hoot. Older works of mine or ideas that have lain dormant are finding activation in this new film and I am getting a whole new understanding of my practice and how all my ideas fit together.

By letting more aspects of my culturally-hybrid self into my creative explorations and not feeling bound to being an Ogoni-themed purist, my work potentially has more motility and dynamism. Hybridity is fuel. Like a chemical reaction between elements. It's a really exciting time. Aside from the new film I am also setting up an experimental thinktank at University of California, Los Angeles, relating to gin made in the Niger Delta and making installation work for a couple of biennales that may or may not get cancelled. I guess everything depends on what this world becomes. Who and what lives or die, what I manage to raise money for. Who knows what the world will be once the invisible flood waters of Covid-19 have receded? I am just finding joy in what I am feeling at this moment. I am channelling furiously right now - the earth stopping will do that - and everything is swimming into focus. I am starting to see the whole elephant.