

Ruwenzori Sculpture Foundation Artist in Residence Report

'An investigation into the religious and social artifacts of the *Bakonjo* in Uganda, and their semiotic and material value in relationship to contemporary art forms'.

By: Dr Kate Parsons

As 'Artist in Residence' at the Ruwenzori Sculpture Foundation, Uganda my research focused on investigating the material artifacts of the *Bakonjo* and their traditional practices, both religious and environmental. This built on previous anthropological research that contributed to my doctoral work on the Giriama tribe of Kenya and their commemorative grave posts called Vigango. From this I made artwork for exhibition and dissemination in different textual formats. Similar research methods were applied for this investigation – see IJADE Vol.24.3 2005.

For a detailed account of the residency please refer to my blog at www.non-objectsandthingness.blogspot.com which is my reflexive diary and forms an important part of the documentation of the research. For the most part I was working closely with David Bwambale (one of the bronze founders) making my sculpture and investments, and acting as translator and guide for the anthropological element. The artwork was carried out within the limitations of the facilities which was no problem as I tend to work from the same premise as the Arte Povera artists and having worked in Kenya before, I realized the conditions under which I would be operating.

The artwork that evolved from the residency was an outcome of both being in the place, 'a sense of place', the way the *Bakonjo* used to bury their dead using a circle of Muramura trees on the grave, and the witch doctors belief in the intangible (spirits) through very tangible objects, which were made or collected. In this way the residency added value to my previous development as an artist, by using the yam to represent a sign of fertility and regeneration which I had used in a work influenced by a research trip to Nigeria, albeit different shapes – these yams were vessel shape and the ones in a previous work were like body shapes indicating more direct reference to reproduction – see Fig.1 & 2. Vessels are often indicative of the female and receptacle. Then I combined these vessel-like yams with the Muramura plant (Fig.3) which I inverted or reversed (another recurrent theme in my work) under a flat plane which I see as a dividing line between the living and the dead, the plant underneath representing death and burial.

In terms of the materials and processes I used to convey the concepts of the piece, the yams have a muram patina or earth-like quality and the Muramura plant will have a matt black patina which in our culture is the colour associated with death and mourning. The idea that life is ephemeral is now made permanent in the use of bronze as a material, so again a reversal of concepts but through the material as well. The presentation of the piece I see as being mounted high on the wall giving it a less than practical purpose, as a shelf might be otherwise, adding to the notion of something more ethereal.

The second piece of sculptural work was more obviously descriptive, depicting seven small trees made from a parasite on the Acacia trees in the grounds of the foundry, which were dropping off at this time of year and were interesting shapes. These delicate tree-like shapes are to be mounted on 23 cm circular columns of wood stained black to match the black patina of the trees – the height of the column indicating the depth of the earth beneath the trees and burial. The fragility and vulnerability of the trees themselves reflect the human body and life itself (Fig 4).

My initial interest in death as an ongoing theme in my work and research was triggered firstly by the death of my father and then a two year teaching contract in Kenya where I found life and death went very much hand in hand on a day to day basis, and more recently having my mother pass away just before the residency compounded this fascination with mortality and our perceptions of it.

As Alfred Gell points out in Coote and Shelton and in 'Vogel's Nest', magic and art have some commonalities in that they both conjure up the imagination which is externalized often through objects. So in terms of further work, taken from my experiences in Uganda, I felt compelled by the witch doctors notions of consulting the spirits who are invisible with the very tangible objects used to assist and cement these beliefs – these objects being a fascinating embodiment of concepts and philosophies. I would also like to experiment with earth as a medium in and of itself and then bury the object or hide it from view, as in 'Earth Matters' (2004:116), it forms an 'intimacy between the worlds of the living and of the dead'.

Outcomes

An exhibition at the Uganda High Commission, Uganda House, Trafalgar Square, London next April /May 2016 showing my work alongside curating that of Ugandan artists.

Funding grants and reports written for the *British Institute in Eastern Africa, British Council, and the *Royal Commonwealth Society (Bath Branch) - * denotes final reports attached. There is a website entry on the RCS website under the Bath branch, and there will be a short report in the Annual Report for the British Institute in Eastern Africa. Other publications to follow.

The Blog: www.non-objectsandthingness.blogspot.com, which documents my residency and the interviews carried out with the respondents for the anthropological research.

References:

Coote, J. and Shelton, A. (1995) (eds) '*Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*'. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Gell, A. (1996) '*Vogel's Net: traps as artworks and artworks as traps*'. *Journal of Material Culture*, vol.1, no.1, March. London: Sage Publications.

Milbourn, Karen E (2013) '*Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa*'. USA: Smithsonian Institution and National Museum of African Art. P.116.

Stacey, T (2003) '*Tribe: The Hidden History of the Mountains of the Moon. An Autobiographical Study*'. London: Stacey International. P.31.

The Bakonzo Booklet: *An Indigenous Tribe in the Rwenzori Mountains of the Moon, Western Uganda*. Published by the Ruboni Community Conservation and Development Program (RCCDP). P.16 [Purchased in Ibanda 2014]

