

# The Spirit of the Ancestors

## The Photography and Installation

ANA-MAURINE LARA

*Les œuvres des artistes Albert Chung et de Wura-Natasha Ogunji servent d'exemples quand le médium choisi, les images, les messages, les rituels deviennent des signifiants de*

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*l'africanité, et réinscrivent ainsi le sacré et le savoir dans les espaces de l'art contemporain en une forme spécifique à la diaspora africaine.*

Visual art in the western context, and specifically the contemporary mediums of photography and installation art, serves to document cultural trends, beliefs, values, popular culture and to re-inscribe the images of the world around us with artistic meaning grounded in the assumptions of a formalist modernity. These assumptions include the notions of: art as separate from life (high art), the iconography and objects of high art as embodying universal principles of human Enlightenment, and the authenticity of art being based on not so much the creator of the artistic product, but on the viewers' authentication of the body of work. Though the post-modern<sup>1</sup> movement has challenged some of the assumptions of modernist thought, the framework still holds relevance in the contemporary art context. These fundamental assumptions implicit in the western reading of modern art have been criticized as an outcome of western agendas of colonization. Tom McEvilley, a post-modern critic, comments on a modernist show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City:

It is a belief in the linear continuity of the Western tradition that necessitates the claim that Western artists would have come up with primitive-like forms on their own, as a natural development. The purpose of such theorizing is to preclude major breaks in Western art history; its tradition is to remain intact, not pierced and violated by influence from outside the West. The desire to believe in the wholeness, integrity, and independence of the Western tradition

has at its root the Hegelian art-historical myth ... that Western art history expresses the self-realizing tendency of the Universal Spirit. (350)

In contrast to modernism, I would argue that art of the African Diaspora is embodied in a completely different set of assumptions arising primarily from the contexts of ritual and sacred spaces, post-colonial urban struggles, and a transnationalism that doesn't aim to claim universality, but rather specificity. These assumptions include the notions of a) "deep knowledge"—the hidden meanings underlying rituals, art and cultural norms understood by the guardians of that culture (Apter 1992: 5); b) fluidity between the physical and ethereal worlds; and c) a connection between the work of the individual and the community out of which that individual emerges.

As Paul Gilroy states:

The expressive cultures developed in slavery continue to preserve in artistic form needs and desires which go far beyond the mere satisfaction of material wants. In contradistinction to the Enlightenment assumption of a fundamental separation between art and life, these expressive forms reiterate the continuity of art and life. They celebrate the grounding of the aesthetic with other dimensions of social life. (56-57)

In addition to the "continuity of art and life," Robert Farris Thompson in his now historic book *Flash of the Spirit*, has outlined and defined specific elements of African organizing principles in the visual art of the black Atlantic that arise out of the Yoruba, the Kongo, the Mande, the Fon and the Ejagham. These elements include "the richness of detail, moral elaboration and the emblematic power" (xv) of Yoruba sacred art, the use of "rituals of healing and/or initiation" (xvi) that accompany the use of art among Diaspora populations that reflect Kongo origins, and the use of fabric and textile as mediums for conveying traditions (xvii).

In this paper I will begin by defining the Herskovitzian concept of an "African baseline," arguing that this concept is not inherently flawed, but rather can be used to illuminate certain signifiers of Africanity in the realm of contemporary art I will then focus on the work of two contemporary artists, Albert Chong, and Wura-Natasha Ogunji, to present and argue that these signifiers of Africanity in

# Art of Albert Chong and Wura-Natasha Ogunji

clude the mediums, the images, the messages and the rituals of performance used by these two artists to re-inscribe sacredness and “deep knowledge” into the spaces of contemporary art. And lastly, I will highlight how these signifiers are transformed into work that is specifically African-American.

## The “Baseline”

Melville J. Herskovitz’s work in the earlier half of the twentieth century was critical to the development of a syncretic paradigm at a time when the prevailing notion in anthropology was that slavery and contact with Europeans had completely eliminated any sense of history, origin or identity among American Negroes. Though based on the naïve notion of African purity, this paradigm represented a major shift in thinking around Africa, the place of Africa in relationship to Europe and the Americas, and the cultures and histories of African peoples brought to the Americas. His work served to introduce the concepts of acculturation within the context of slavery, a process that he argues allowed for the survival of “a Negro culture” (Herskovitz 8) and that of an “African baseline—the variations of African ancestral cultures that form a starting point for defining what is African in the African Diaspora. For example, in the application of this theory we could understand the blues and jazz—a music form born out of African-American experiences and voices—to be based on “African baseline” polychromatic rhythms and “African baseline” sounds. While Herskovitz is often criticized for his static notions of African purity, and the racist essentialism that is assumed with notions of purity (Apter 2003), his underlying intent has opened us up to interrogating modernist assumptions/colonial assumptions of origin.

Some elements of the concept of an African baseline, specifically “reinterpretation,” “syncretism” and “cultural imponderables” provide us with language and a framework for understanding how it is possible to have two artists, born in the Americas, whose work is shaped by signifiers of Africinity. Both artists, when asked what the major cultural influences are in their work, responded by stating “it’s in the genes,” that is, as Albert Chong specifically stated: “You are going to be who you are in the end. You can say it’s in the genes, like appetite, like diet. It may not be just in the art. It’s something amorphous and ambiguous, how you see the world.”

Robert Farris Thompson has illustrated this concept of an African baseline, and the subsequent “reinterpretations,” “syncretism,” and “cultural imponderables” of music,

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language, and art in the Americas. In a recent lecture at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA),<sup>2</sup> Thompson (2003) demonstrated how the holding of the hand, a deliberate gesture in Kongo dance, has appeared in the Americas as a cultural imponderable, visible in the dances of Michael Jackson and Josephine Baker. He goes on to demonstrate how the symbols of Kongo monarchy are reinterpreted in the syncretic creole culture of New Orleans in the later nineteenth century, when the umbrellas used to usher the king in the Kongo are used in the *mardi gras* dances of New Orleans. And, in his performance of the passion, the rhythms and the lyrics of Tango, he illustrates the most sublime forms of cultural syncretism: a blending of African Kongo rhythms with European harmonies and intonations that are re-inscribed with cultural meaning in Argentina, and then again in Spain.

In addition to these elements defined by Herskovitz and illustrated by Thompson, I also believe that signifiers of Africinity rest in the mediums used to create, the images used within, the rituals that are used to perform, and the messages that are embodied and encoded within the images, rituals and mediums of the artistic products of Chong and Ogunji. Both artists use installation to perform the rituals of the creation of images and messages; a process that is then documented via photography. They both use ritualistic objects found in Yoruba and Santeria religions, objects such as bird feathers and cloth wrappings. Both artists imbue their works with messages which can be received by all, but understood by holders of a “deeper knowledge.”

This deeper knowledge that Thompson presents is what Andrew Apter (2003) has described as the power of secrets, a power that “transcends realms of religious and

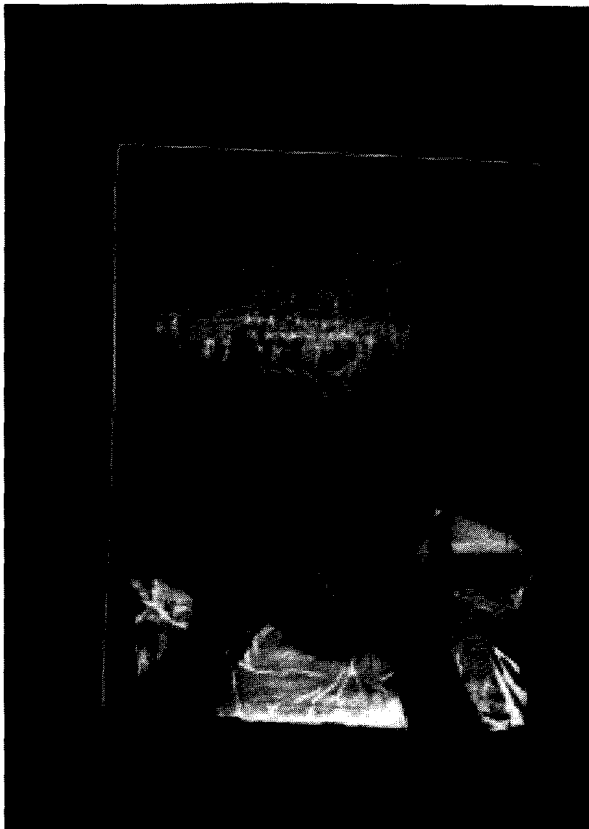


Plate 1: Wura-Natasha Ogunji, "Her Crossroads"



Plate 2: Wura-Natasha Ogunji, "I Remember"

political critique into the realm of cultural production." African Diaspora art, when removed from its ritual context, continues to be art: a mode of historicizing cultural and political realities, thus continuing to embody "deep knowledge."<sup>3</sup> The power of cultural production lies with the creator of the work. It is the artist who ultimately understands the finite moments of the work's creation, the moment when the work has reached what Chong describes as its "magical threshold." This power is challenged by audiences who lack the magical and historical understanding of the images embedded in the artist's work. In contrast, those who hold that information are privy to the subtle and powerful messages communicated in the visual language of art. Chong (2003) describes how art holds power in its very essence when he describes his thrones, altars to his African and Chinese ancestors :

For a formal, white audience [without the underlying knowledge], the ancestral thrones would be connected with voodoo; this audience can't get beyond that and can't be aware of the underlying icons. It's almost a programmed response. You have to wait for the right audience to find you so that your work can be understood on that deeper level.

I chose to interview Wura-Natasha Ogunji and Albert Chong because unlike artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat,<sup>4</sup> Adrian Piper<sup>5</sup> or Rotimi Fani-Kayode,<sup>6</sup> these artists en-

gage contemporary art spaces, modern/post-modern art spaces, by embodying the signifiers of Africanity, rather than hegemonic imagery, language or concepts. The dialogues around and about the works of Basquiat, Piper and Fani-Kayode work are marked by a reactionary, reactive undertone: a frustration and anger arising out of their experiences of racism, codified by images that have traditionally been used to denigrate black peoples in Europe and America that are then re-presented as hyperboles meant to push a contemporary audience into a mode of self-reflection and questioning, a process which is often lost in the subtleties of post-modern racism. These artists fully inhabit the space of "double-consciousness" (Gilroy 30). In contrast, the works of Ogunji and Chong are a type of counter-modernity. Their work is created within the spaces of modernity, with an audience mediated by these spaces, but the content of their work is based on the centrality of African imagery, iconography and ritual traditions, in the assumptions of the African Diaspora. This counter-modernity is at the heart of notions of African baseline and syncretism.

#### Medium, Images, Ritual and Messages in the Work of Ogunji and Chong

In "Crossroads, Blood Diary, Medicine Bag," Wura-Natasha Ogunji tells the story of a woman, a spirit, who is trying to reach her unborn child. The spirit carries a



Plate 3: Wura-Natasha Ogunji, "Medicine Bag"



Plate 4: Wura-Natasha Ogunji, "Blood Diary"

message: I remember you. I remember. The story is of a black woman, a slave in colonial America, who after being raped, decides to abort her child. Ogunji characterizes the piece as a vision, a message that arrived to her through dreams and visual language that she then transformed, through ritual and the creative process into the piece "Crossroads, Blood Diary, Medicine Bag" (see Plates 1-4). Ogunji is the vessel that through ritual embodies the spirit who has returned to tell her story; it is during this process that Wura uses the camera to capture the spirit's presence, a moment that she describes as a crossroads:

Photographs are my way of documenting conversations and language between spiritual and physical world which are not separate but are different places. The photograph is a crossroads because it is a place where the spirit can have form—physical form—through light. (Ogunji)

The photographs are mounted on a plain white wall, the words "*medicine bag, her crossroads, I remember you*" inscribed underneath a series of ten images covering the left hand side of the wall. On the right hand side of the wall, there is a single image with the words "*His Increase*" inscribed underneath as the images are replaced with blood streaks painted on the wall, the words "*cotton root bark, black haw, useless artifacts*" leading us to the edge of the room. The blood, the images and the words are carriers

of hidden meaning: "cotton root bark, used by women to bring on pre-mature labor, by women slaves in the early stages of pregnancy"; "black haw, given by slave masters to prevent pre-mature labor." The piece, a collection of photographs and blood mounted and painted on a simple white wall, becomes a conversation between African-American/black women, between African-American/black people, between people of the African Diaspora and whites living in a post-modern world. It tells the story of power and tension between black women and white men, slaves and masters. The piece, a memory, asks us the audience to remember. Ogunji describes this piece in the following words:

A story came to me of a slave who had aborted her child because she had been raped, and she wanted to tell the child that she remembered. I made a dress and mask for the child spirit. I made a dress and mask for the mother. The mother's dress had blood and pockets and writing that was a dialogue between mother and child. The paper had palm oil and blood all sewn into the dress. The ritual was the mother going through the abortion, but telling the child why she did what she did and that she remembered her. The story is for the spirits, but in this world it's conveyed on glass negatives, [in a physical form].

The images that are in Ogunji's piece are black images:



Plate 5: Albert Chong, "Anointing the Eggs"

they are photos of her, a black Nigerian woman, going through the ritual described above. Her black body, on this side of the Atlantic and far from Africa, becomes a vessel to tell a story that is specific to the history of black slaves living on this continent. Ogunji's use of blood and palm oil, of dresses and pockets, are African in their symbolism: burial garbs constructed for the spirits, offerings so that they will rest. The ritual is enacted through possession by the spirit. The message is embodied in the elements: received by all, understood by those carriers of deep knowledge who understand the psychological tolls of slavery. These deeper messages act as a medicine to heal the wounds of slavery, to help us remember so that we can then move on with the subtleties of racism in today's world.

In Sunday Dinner for the Ancestors, Chong has constructed a ritual space walled in with stones, the floor lined with 50 pounds of duck feathers: what Chong (1993) labeled a "substitute sacrifice." In one corner of the stone wall there is an opening so that people can enter the ritual space and sit at a table placed in the center. The table is covered with a copper table cloth, palm bristles growing out of its center. The four place settings each have rusty iron ashtrays, cigars, and glasses for rum, gin and water. Each place setting has an offering of food: Jamaican "rice and peas" with fish. Each of the chairs forms an altar for a different ancestral spirit. Chong (2003) describes this piece as:

... an attempt to fuse the practices inherent in the

cosmological system of my life with the art making process. To bring home the Ancestral Spirits that have been part of my life, and seat them on the thrones that have been created for them, upon and about which offerings are made to them. Their presence I conjure to the dinner table, where the Sunday Dinner is offered, the cigars have been smoked and the rum has been sipped.

The images of Chong's work are based on elements of Africinity: palm fronds, food offerings, substitute duck feathers. The altars are placed on the "thrones," chairs consecrated with images and objects such as hair, cowry shells, fruit, bones, iron pots, snakes and Eleggua's clay head. The ritual of placing food at the table, a weekly ritual informed by Santeria practice, collapses the boundaries between art and life. The gallery space is transformed by the stones that mark off the place of this ritual, for this altar. The piece tells the story of Chong's ancestors, his Chinese and black parents who raised him in Jamaica. Its messages embed multiple stories: that of family, that of ancestors, those people

who only Chong has known: amorphous beings that are remembered through objects set out in their honor and through the shared ritual of eating a Sunday Dinner. The universal messages illustrate the role of food in bringing people together, a sacred act in a profane world. The deeper ancestral message shows us the audience how we can act to remember those who came before us, in ways that are inscribed with specific icons of blackness and Africinity. The even deeper messages tell us that our ancestors are our own to remember. Through this piece we learn how much we have yet to discover.

### Africinity in America

While the works of these two artists indeed illustrate the notion of an African baseline, of cultural imponderables, of reinterpreted objects, and of syncretized rituals, these works are inherently Diasporic, and I would even go so far as to say: of the Americas. The signifiers of the African baseline, the counter-modern elements of a contemporary cultural product, lead us to a complex exchange within what Gilroy has termed "The Black Atlantic." What beyond these concrete elements make these works Diasporic within a context of modernity?

[The distinctive attributes of black cultural forms] ... are modern because they have been marked by their hybrid, creole origins in the West, because they have struggled to escape their status as commodities and



Plate 6: Albert Chong, "Sunday Dinner for the Ancestors"

the position with the cultural industries it specifies, and because they are produced by artists whose understanding of their own position relative to the racial group and of the role of art in mediating individual creativity with social dynamics is shaped by a sense of artistic practice as an autonomous domain either reluctantly or happily divorced from the everyday lifeworld. (Gilroy 73)

In addition to what Gilroy has presented as an argument for the modernity of black cultural expression, I would add that the way in which this hybridity occurs is in non-tangible forms. For example, in Ogunji's Crossroads piece, a Nigerian woman living in America is possessed by the story of a black female slave: her work engages the American political, social and historical contexts, creating a continuity of experiences out of a discontinuous reality. Chong's work is highly syncretized, collapsing the boundaries between what is African, what is Jamaican, what is Santeria and what is American. As a Jamaican man living in the United States, he borrows Santeria imagery to remember his ancestors who are of African and Chinese descent.

In both of these artists work we can intuit the concept of a present Africa not delineated by nostalgia, but informed by the presence of spiritual powers that inform the very images manifested in the work. Thompson states:

The care and precision of art, the total involvement

of self which its proper execution demands, is a kind of generosity which lessens the distance between the sacred and profane. To be generous in a beautiful way seems the essence of morality and the assurance of continuity. (1976: 11)

In stating this, Thompson is speaking of art among the Yoruba. Yet, we can see this same characteristic in the art of Ogunji and Chong: a generosity evoked through beautiful installations that are to be shared with a world beyond the gallery walls. A total involvement of self that expands into the realm of possession.

While contemporary discourse seeks to legitimize the medium as art, these photographers use the documentary underpinnings of photography to collapse boundaries between art and documentation, physical and ethereal, sacred and urbane in exploring sacred ritual, ancestral memory and family history. The underlying assumptions in these works are that for art to be meaningful, it must collapse those boundaries and must embody a layer of deeper knowledge. It needs to reach the "magical threshold" of creativity because it is not art for art's sake, but rather art as a part of life. Art becomes a cultural product that can serve as a powerful tool for engaging life and communities, transforming modern/post-modern/contemporary spaces into sacred spaces, into spaces embodying a powerful historical and cultural dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup>A direct discussion about post-modernism and its aftermaths is outside the scope of this paper. However, Arturo Lindsay discusses this at length in relationship to art of the African Diaspora. Post-modernism, an almost direct response to the “the commodification of art and the final ‘erasure’ of Modern art by Pop art and Minimalism” (209) gave rise to new forms of visual and artistic expression, including installation and performance art. The works of Diaspora artists were reshaped by the Afrocentric movements of the 1960s and ’70s, by the era of post-modernism and the rise of multi-culturalism: it was shaped into a dialogue between artist and the underlying concepts of the work, as well as between artist and communities.

<sup>2</sup>Thompson (2003) focused on mambo rhythms in music and dance, tracing the language from the Kongo, to Cuba, the southern United States, Argentina and finally: Barcelona.

<sup>3</sup>For further discussion on deep knowledge, specifically as it relates to historicity, refer to Apter 1992.

<sup>4</sup>A more detailed discussion of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s work is outside of the scope of this paper. His paintings used visual symbols such as language and icons in paintings to historicize and dissect notions of blackness. His work is not so much about a modernist aesthetic, as it is a post-modern reinterpretation of the role of art in engaging a larger dialogue that, because of its focus, naturally juxtaposes itself to normative concepts of whiteness. For more information/critique of his work, please refer to Shafrazi 1999.

<sup>5</sup>Adrian Piper presented a retrospective discussion about her work: photographs and installations, performance art spanning a 30-year period. Piper’s work directly engages normative discourses on race, with pieces such as *My Calling I - IV*, or *Streetwork*, and *Funk Lessons*. Adrian Piper, a light skinned black woman, uses these pieces to directly confront peoples’ stereotypes about black people. A more detailed discussion of this artist’s work is outside of the scope of this paper.

<sup>6</sup>Steven Nelson’s lecture, while focused on the homoerotic nature of Fani-Kayode’s work, in particular the piece *Bronze Head*, also illustrated the modernist undercurrents in the artist’s work. While Nelson claims that Fani-Kayode’s work falls outside of the African Diaspora because of its discourse of exile, I disagree with this interpretation. Fani-Kayode’s work does indeed fall within the notion of African Diasporic work. In fact, like artists Basquiat and Piper, it is a direct engagement of notions of blackness as it relates to the concept of whiteness.

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## DANIELLE VILLENEUVE

### UNKNOWN

Behind the truest lies, within the  
transparent eyes  
There’s a story to tell, a secret dying to sell.  
A truth beyond essence, that has altered  
our presence;  
A peculiar unknown, that is dying to be  
shown.

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