

A Masquerade of Apparitions

The Yoruban/Nigerian-British artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode frequently used masks in his performative photographs, which depict the artist in moments of liberation and ecstasy. In works such as *Dan Mask* and *Adebiyi* (both from 1989) we see Fani-Kayode combine Yoruban and Western symbolism to contest the marginal status of Yoruba cosmology and to critically examine ideas around authenticity, diasporic identity and queer desire. The mask is central to Yoruba knowledge systems and forms an integral part of ceremonies such as the Epa masquerade (performed chiefly to ensure the physical and spiritual security of the community). Epa masks often feature a small, circular face adorned with a larger, elaborate crown of intricately carved motifs depicting figures central to Yoruba community life (such as priests, hunters, farmers and mothers). When not in use, these wooden masks are kept in shrines by elders or heads of families, a signifier of their importance to the community. Yoruba wood carvers hold an important stature in Yoruba society: conduits to the vital, ecstatic experience of òrìsà worship.

Masks have become a sustained and integral part of Ashanti Harris's practice, undertaking multiple roles across performances and sculptural installations (perhaps a reflection of the infinite and ever-evolving functions that masks carry in West African and Caribbean cultures). Ashanti first started making casts of Black women's faces in response to the lack of representation of people of colour in Scotland's civic spaces. By casting the faces of Black women she knows intimately, Ashanti populates the world with the physical forms of those who remain underrepresented in our civic and cultural landscapes. This is a radical act of self-making and self-realisation: there is an inherent power and affirmation in seeing a solid, physical relief of oneself, especially in a context where Black people are rarely allowed to see themselves represented on their own terms. However, in contrast to the cold, unyielding materials used to carve quotidian public statues, Harris works with fine, delicate mesh - tactile enough to capture extremely intricate details of the model's face, while also completely disguising the identity of the wearer. Crucially, the use of mesh allows for the wearer to see others, but not for those others to see the wearer - a protective spell, a shield against an imposing gaze - restoring agency to the self. For centuries, the face has been used by the European imperial project

as a signifier of race and ethnicity: our faces used to over-determine our identities. The African mask has often been cited as a form that is oppositional to the idea of Western 'faciality' by racist discourse. This concept of faciality has traditionally marked the face as a 'territory', analysed through the prism of imperial, racial and gender hierarchies. Melanie Ulz notes the dependent relationship between the face and the mask, claiming that 'setting the African mask as a counter concept to 'Western' faciality ultimately means that the face cannot exist without the mask'. The mask then, is not a departure from, or a derivative of, the face, but rather its own entity: with its own knowledge systems and set of logics.

Harris has created the masks with a range of materials including glittering gold sequins, copper and brass. In *Emi Ore Cse in Copper* (a reference to the three selves in Yoruba philosophy), three glimmering masks made of copper mesh are displayed in tandem, recreating a Carnival procession, an ephemeral masquerade. In the context of the Caribbean, the mask evolved as a symbol and a tool to disrupt Western notions of race, ethnicity and gender - often through mimicry and mockery. One of the many masked archetypes in Trinidadian carnival culture is the Dame Lorraine, or 'Mother Sally'. Mimicking the decadent and pompous dresses of women who were part of the islands' colonial class, formerly enslaved people recreated these costumes complete with hats, fans and masks, (exaggerating certain aspects for comedic value) and masqueraded in the streets. Harris describes these sculpted masks as an 'Afrofuturist masquerade': appearing now almost as an apparition, the procession of masks retain their ethereal, transcendent presence.