

installation, aims at simulating the Benin shrines of old from where the artefacts were stolen. The natural arrangement of objects on Benin shrines and many other African shrines, as well as some African cultural practices, is the precursor of the modern-day art style called Installation. Installation art, among other definitions, is defined as ‘the type of work, often three dimensional, that derives its formal logic from its dialogic connection with the space in which it is displayed. Here, space is no more than that neutral background or surrounding.’⁵ In the Benin context, the dialogic relationship is not only physical but also spiritual; the artworks, apart from serving as records of events and the world view of the people, also served as objects of communication with the ancestors. Installation art, like many other rejuvenated/re-branded art styles in contemporary times, is often touted as a creation of the West. Like many other developments in world art history, it is of African origin, and has now, like the Benin artefacts, been appropriated by the West. If mere simulation of the display in Benin shrines of old is naturally an Installation, it beats the imagination how the same style can be touted as a Western creation, centuries after. This is an extension of the ludicrous ‘Mungo Park discovered River Niger’ theory. The West in its ‘grab all’ approach does not intend to credit any major feat to Africa; Africa, in the mind of Western people, is the Dark Continent, fit only to be associated with absurdities.

Benin1897.com features seven major works comprising 1000 Benin terracotta heads, titled *1897.com* (fig. 53); the 113 calabash installation titled *Oba ghato okpere*, (Long live the king, fig. 76); *Chequered History III* (fig. 95), polyester and glass; *Theatre of War* (fig. 94), terracotta and copper wire; *In Praise of God* (fig. 83), polyester and foil; *What Next?* (fig. 106), Plaster of Paris; and *What the Thieves left Behind* (figs. 9, 33, 34), copper and aluminum.

The exhibition is no doubt ambitious in scope and theme. The political and cultural weight of the theme may to some extent undermine the creative and technical input of the artist. This does not however detract from the artistic dexterity but only underscores the controversial and emotional nature of the theme, which seeks to re-awaken and redress the great injustice done to the Benin people and Africans as a whole. The works are to be appreciated not as commodities (not that they are not aesthetically qualified) but more importantly, as creative explosions deriving from a history of injustice. It is, in my view, an attempt to excite the conscience and expose the greed and chicanery of the West. This is where Layiwola's experience, first as a blueblood, then as a practising artist, and an historian and culture activist, comes into play.

The heads in the exhibition have been slightly updated to reflect change. The standard image of Benin Idia head is adorned with modern jewelry with the sharp angularities of the facial features in the antique originals given a more rounded and life-like resemblance in the copies, thereby attesting to Layiwola's versatility and dynamism.

In choosing the archetypical images in the installation, *1897.com* (fig. 53), Layiwola is sensitive to equal representation of the genders. Whereas there are more male images in Benin artefacts which could have encouraged more male works or even outright exclusion of female images from the exhibition, her involvement in gender studies and issues will not permit an oversight of the feats of females, exemplified by queen Idia, who is reputed to be the only Benin woman who went to war in defence of the throne. What is left out in the entire exhibition, however, are the zoomorphic objects in the Benin corpus: the leopards, the rams, the horses, fishes, cocks, crocodiles, etc. and the utensils.

The calabash installation, *Oba ghato okpere*, (Long live the king, fig. 75) offers another view of Layiwola's creativity. They, according to her, are an extension of an exploration that started in her youth.⁶ From early contact with the works of her mother's students at Itohan Girls' Grammar School, Benin City between 1960-1970, Layiwola has had a rich repository of images to draw from. She has used the calabash as a canvas for painting in her numerous workshops with children