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## INQUIRING MINDS EXHIBIT QUESTIONS CULTURAL PRESUMPTIONS

ARTIST Dori Grace Udeagbor Lemeh skates on a hyphen between African and American.

Her father is Nigerian, her mother American.

Issues of identity, ancestral memory and gender and race representation permeate the Pennsylvania artist's work, which is included in a major show opening Saturday at Old Dominion University Gallery.

The exhibit, "(re)search, (re)vision, (re)construct: a contemporary visual dialogue," features seven artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds whose work questions traditions in art and society. Their art redresses those conventions they felt needed a little retooling.

Take Lemeh's mixed media painting, "Between Two Beating Hearts."

At the center of the 6-foot-high work is a large figure, symbolizing the artist. The faces of women are painted on either side of the figure, representing Nigeria on one side, America on the other.

Phrases, broken and whole, pepper the image. The artist intended the text to be the whispering voices of American women and mothers who are unable to tell their African ancestors that they survived the torturous journey to America, and the cruel aftermath.

The central figure's arms are outstretched, alluding to a crucifix. The diagram of a slave ship is overlaid on her dress, relating her own body as human vessel to that of the ship - one life-giving, the other heinous.

The inclusion of quilt pieces, both African and European, refer to African fiber traditions carried over to the new world. Also to that end, the canvas hangs from a dowel, like fiber art.

So how does Lemeh's piece question traditions?

"She revises narratives that we've been told," said Stephen Carpenter, assistant professor of art at ODU and organizer of the show. Lemeh is telling it like it is, about the horrors of slave ships and the strength-giving wonders of Africa, for so long dubbed the "dark continent."

She is taking her own figure, that of a black woman, and putting herself in Christ's position on the cross, thereby breaking a gender and a race role. "Which is like saying, 'I can identify with struggle and pain,'" Carpenter said. Not to mention martyrdom, sacrifice, healing and selfless giving, too.

"She reconstructs our way of thinking about heritage, thinking about who we are and where we come from," said Carpenter, who directs ODU's art education program and is a working ceramicist represented in the exhibit.

The quilt design in "Between Two Beating Hearts" is a pattern called "My Mother's Garden," Lemeh said earlier this week in a phone interview from University Park, Pa., where she works at Pennsylvania State University.

On the African side of her canvas, the women are holding a gold heart. "It's like an offering to me, about my ancestry," she said. On the other side, there is another heart, and it is partly filled.

"The woman as procreator is the primary theme in my work." Her work is not just about the African-American experience, she said. "It's something anyone can relate to, in understanding the similarities of women's experiences.

"Through that, we can gain an understanding of our strengths and our hardships. And through that greater understanding, there can be some sort of unity among people. And a compassion that can grow out of people understanding each other's human-ness."

She and another artist in the show, Rina Banerjee, a lecturer in women's studies at Penn State, will lead a forum on Friday afternoon at ODU.

Most of the artists in the show have some association with Penn State, which is where Carpenter earned his master's degree and doctorate in art education. He and Lemeh were graduate students there at the same time.

When given the opportunity last year to organize an exhibit for ODU, Carpenter began by choosing artists he knew and admired. Most are college art professors with burgeoning careers as exhibiting artists; they are as far flung as Savannah, Ga., and Kingsville, Texas.

"There is a narrative quality to all of their work, something visceral I was attracted to." After Carpenter scrutinized their works, a shared theme rose to his attention.

Each of these artists researches the roots of his subject, revises his views and reconstructs what his newfound vision might look like.

"All of these artists are teachers," Carpenter said. "And they inquire. They are always reading or investigating something. So this is about inquiry.

"We don't learn unless we inquire, unless we probe into the 'whys' of things." ILLUSTRATION: Color photo

"Terra Nimbus," a 1997 earthenware piece by Malcolm Mobutu

Photo

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY

"Between Two Beating Hearts," a mixed-media painting by Dori Grace

Udeagbor Lemeh, depicts the artist's double heritage.

Graphics

#### RELATED EVENTS

Forum: At 3 p.m. Friday, artists Dori Grace Udeagbor Lemeh and Rina Banerjee will lead a forum titled ``is you is or is you ain't my icon?: gender representation and the authenticity of culture in visual art." In the Charles Burgess Room, 921 Batten Arts & Letters Building, on campus. Free and open to the public, sponsored by ODU's women's studies program and the art department.

Reception: A free, public reception for the exhibit begins at 8 p.m. Saturday at ODU Gallery.

Exhibit website:

<http://iris1.arts.odu.edu:443/artleague/reexhibit.html>

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by CNB

