





Richard Ayodeji Ikhide interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 1 May 2019

**Paul Luckraft:** In your drawings you combine copies of objects and artefacts with things you imagine. What is the relationship between the existing and the imagined in your work?

**Richard Ayodeji Ikhide:** I think our imaginations are an amalgamation of different references that we've absorbed throughout our lives. I read a book by Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*, during my BA studies. He talks about the primordial mind and how, although we might think we're born with no experience of anything, the mind carries the experiences of our ancestors. I feel a lot of images are deeply ingrained within us, and drawing is essentially me trying to absorb these images into my practice. When I draw an object it gives me an understanding of its structure, how it was made, and the context it might have been used in.

**PL:** Would you say the ritual purpose of an object is what fascinates you?

**RAI:** Yeah, definitely. These artefacts served a psychological function for people, so what I'm trying to do when putting them alongside images from my imagination is to form a new kind of psychological language, a new kind of symbol-making.

**PL:** The German art historian Aby Warburg used the phrase 'the after-life of antiquity' in relation to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* project he began in the 1920s. He sought to map how images reappear across eras, places and cultures, from Renaissance Italy to the Pueblo peoples of North America. There seems an affinity here with the way you link together images that resonate with you.

**RAI:** Yeah, I'm looking at different time periods and cultures and trying to bring them together to create a new language. But I want it to be open enough for people to be able to gain their own understanding of these things, because for me that's what's

interesting about symbols: they depend on your experience, and everybody's interpretation of them is different. If I were to draw a snake and show it to a group of people, everybody would give me a different experience of that symbol – some might see it as an ominous evil thing, and some might see it as a beautiful animal.

**PL:** Could you talk a bit more about how your work relates to archives and the notion of time?

**RAI:** We're living in a time when we have access to a wealth of imagery – you can go on Instagram and follow pages that are obsessed with antiquity, for example. Then I think about people who lived in India in the early 1700s, say, who wouldn't have had access to people living in Africa, but there are parallels between the ways the two cultures made images and artefacts. Now you can Google an image and it comes right up away, and it allows you to see relationships across time and place immediately.

**PL:** Talking about time and space, in your small black-and-white studies in particular there are often landscape settings and the implication of the rituals of an unspecified society. Are your pictures looking forward to a future or are they visions of a fictitious past?

**RAI:** I think they're a bit of both. I wanted to be an archaeologist when I was a kid. When experts look at megalithic sites they can't replicate the technology that was used to build them. Certain new technologies help us unlock the past, but we still don't understand anywhere near everything. We consider our society to be super-advanced, but those stones will outlive anything we've built – the Eiffel Tower will rust, and contemporary glass towers like the Shard, they're not going to outlive the Pyramids. I feel what I make sits in a space that could be called 'future-past'. The idea is to point to weird gaps in time, because even with our extensive recorded history

there are still many things that we don't know. When you look at ancient cultures, there's a lot of oral tradition that has been lost. Where I'm from in Nigeria there was no written language; instead, bronze plaques were a way of recording the times, with the images on them determined by whoever was telling the story.

**PL:** This was the Kingdom of Benin, right? From what I understand, it was a rigidly structured society and the bronzes were a way of furthering power. I was going to ask about the British Museum – and museums and collections in general – as they are a big source of visual material for you. There's obviously a contested history there, of how objects came to be in Western institutions though colonial exploration and exploitation. How do you see your activities in relation to this history?

**RAI:** My work isn't directly politicised around a particular issue, but it can't avoid addressing it. It's a difficult question to answer because the British Museum is a double-edged thing – I love the fact that I'm in London and I can go and spend hours there drawing, but then in the Africa section there's a little sign that tells you about the British expedition. Growing up in Lagos, my grandad would tell me about the bronzes. Then coming to England and seeing them in a museum was crazy. In my drawings I'm imagining certain histories that weren't given the chance to be told.

**PL:** You also look at the Renaissance tradition, making drawings from visits to the National Gallery or your visit to Italy. There are some studies based on El Greco here in the studio. Perhaps you could talk a bit about what drawing, as an activity, means to you?

**RAI:** I've been drawing since I was five so it's quite hard to describe it: for me it's almost like writing, a second language. The immediacy is what fascinates me – a mark on a piece of paper can

communicate an idea and I feel that's something we take for granted today. In terms of the European tradition – whether that is Rembrandt or more contemporary people like Moebius [Jean Giraud], who contributed to insane comics like *Heavy Metal* – these are the people I feel have really pushed the medium of drawing, because they're not trying to give you any gimmicks, it's just ink and a piece of paper. Drawing should be taken a bit more seriously. I teach, and seeing students' responses to drawing is amazing: it's their entry point into art, and it connects to the first ever marks humans made. If we talk about the development of the human imagination, drawing has always been at the centre point of everything else that has sprung forth.

**PL:** You're drawing all the time in sketchbooks, some of which are in a display case in the show. What status do those sketchbooks have in relation to the works on the walls?

**RAI:** I think of my sketchbooks as being like a book of spells. They are very personal and I see them as pieces of work in themselves.

**PL:** So the images in the books are, for you, almost more powerful and potent than the works that end up at a larger scale?

**RAI:** Yes – to be honest with you, if you really want to dig down into my practice, my sketchbooks are a lot more important. Initially I studied textile design, and drawing got me into a new method of working as a fine artist. My sketchbooks are essentially where the real grit of the work is.

**PL:** Which throws up the tricky question of how best to share your sketchbooks with people. You post pages to Instagram, and in this exhibition we're displaying them under glass, although people can request to hold and view one. Once you open a book at one page and put it inside a case, is there a

risk of locking it down? How do you carry through the energy that's in the books?

**RAI:** Working outside the sketchbooks is something I'm coming to grips with. Sometimes I make things in a book that I want to turn into a larger painting but don't, for fear of it not having the initial energy.

**PL:** Going forward, maybe there's the option of printing the books as published editions?

**RAI:** Yeah, an artist's book or a collection of sketches as a zine could be a nice way of getting the work out there. William Blake made his little pamphlets of pictures and poems. Distributing work to people who might not necessarily visit a gallery or be aware of the art scene is something I'd like to explore.

**PL:** Returning to the works in the show, some have a clear central portrait element. How often are your works representations of people you know?

**RAI:** The stand-alone figures are extensions of me. In Jungian psychology, we all have both feminine and masculine aspects of ourselves. In a lot of my figures there's androgyny, and I'm exploring a part of me that might be slightly different from the persona that is Richard Ikhide. The piece *YA* [2017] in *New Contemporaries* was based on my mum. I come from a matriarchal family and have loads of older female figures in my life. There's an aspect of that that lives inside of me.

Reverse: Richard Ayodeji Ikhide, *Microcosm 3*, 2018. Acrylic ink on paper, 28.5 x 38 cm. Courtesy the artist.

**Artist's presentation:** Sunday 7 July, 3pm. Free

As a closing event to his exhibition Richard Ayodeji Ikhide will be joined in conversation by an invited guest. Please see our website for further details.

**Richard Ayodeji Ikhide** (b. 1991, Nigeria, lives and works in London) studied BA (Hons) Textile Design at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London and recently completed a postgraduate diploma at the Royal Drawing School, London. Exhibitions include: *Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2018*, John Moores University, Liverpool and South London Gallery, London, 2018; *Best of Drawing Year 2017*, Christies, London, 2017 and *Obscurity*, Somewhere, London, 2015.

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