

From: Interviews: Zina Saro-Wiwa discusses her new show in London
by Ian Bourland
2 October 2018

ARTFORUM



Over the past decade, the Brooklyn-based artist, filmmaker, and curator Zina Saro-Wiwa has developed a multiplatform career. Since 2014, she has led the contemporary art gallery Boys' Quarters Project Space in downtown Port Harcourt, Nigeria. "The Turquoise Meat Inside," her first solo gallery show in London, features recent and ongoing video works and photographs set in the oil-producing Niger Delta. The exhibition is on view at Tiwani Contemporary until October 27, 2018.

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED in using food as a way to explore the self. Globally, not much is known about African food cultures, and I still think there's this pervasive idea that we have problems feeding ourselves or that we are at odds with our own environment in some way.

Unfortunately, this is certainly the case in the Niger Delta. We don't control the oil that is extracted and exported from under our feet, and our fishing and farming have been severely disrupted as a result of extractive processes. It's a shame that oil was found somewhere as verdant and fecund as the Niger Delta. It would've been better if this had happened somewhere unpopulated, such as in a desert. But this is where the oil is, and it is in this contested landscape that I have made an artistic intervention.

I'd been a radio and TV journalist in my past. But when approaching the Niger Delta—the place of my birth—the experience was so overwhelming for me that a journalistic lens wasn't ever going to be fulfilling. That's a large part of the reason why art attracted me. It gave me the latitude and the space to allow the Niger Delta to speak to me and speak through me. I wasn't willing to go there with anything fixed in mind—I wanted the place to tell me what it wanted to say.

Don't get me wrong: I see the value in good journalism and some forms of ethnography. But I myself am far more interested in experimental ethnography. It gives me permission to think about and comment on knowledge production and play with it—to perhaps create something new and expand the sense of self.

From 2014 to 2016, I made this series of videos titled “Table Manners,” which is in my London exhibition and will be shown at Art Basel Miami this December, where people are eating for the camera. So far, it's my most popular work that I've made in the Niger Delta, but to me it's not about food so much as about place. That action of people eating on camera, their hands moving from the plate to their mouths and back to the plate, acts as a kind of metaphorical suturing. With this movement, I see this as them insisting on their place in the environment and repairing their broken landscape, all the while implicating the viewer in this process through their gaze. It's an important work of binding.

I'm also interested in social sculpture. There is the enterprise of artmaking and the visual consequence of it. So I make video art and photographic pieces primarily, but that is only part of the work. Being in Ogoniland, deciding to film someone, making connections, showing interest and love for certain cultural practices or knowledge bases by researching them or filming them are just as important parts of the work as the resulting video or photograph. I think the act of being an artist in that space is super powerful. It is moving something. That is why I am committed to art—not just to have shows, but to create movement.