

From: *Zina Saro-Wiwa: 'For 10 years I didn't cry about my father'*  
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'I was always an artist' ... Zina Saro-Wiwa. Photograph: Jill Mead

There's a small piece of orange text on the wall of Zina Saro-Wiwa's first UK solo show. It's a recipe for bread and butter pudding with paw-paw custard and palm wine glaze, which is also an account of watching her father eat. "When I was younger I found the act of eating sad and solemn. Tragically human," she writes. "Watching him eat made me think of him as vulnerable and in need of protection."

And so it was to prove. Her father was Ken Saro-Wiwa, one of nine environmental activists executed by the Nigerian government on 10 November 1995 for opposing the oil industry's exploitation of their ancestral lands. In a five-screen video installation that runs the length of London's Tiwani Contemporary gallery, Saro-Wiwa sends a drone over those lands to photograph apparently endless vistas of lush green forest.

But its surface is deceptive: an idyllic-looking path through the woods is in fact the track of a buried pipeline, while what appears to be a totem pole in a dried-up riverbed is the rusting carcass of a well head, on ground left so toxic that the trees have yet to reclaim it. Through this landscape, criss-crossed with the scars of a defunct industry, a troupe of masqueraders leap and tumble in extravagantly horned antelope masks.

BREAD AND BUTTER PUDDING WITH PAWPAP CUSTARD  
AND PALM WINE GLAZE



INGREDIENTS

Nigerian Bread  
Butter  
Lime Marmalade  
Evaporated Milk  
Brown Sugar  
Fresh Pawpaw  
Eggs  
Palm Wine



METHOD

Go to the bakery and buy a loaf of the sweet bread that is so beloved by Nigerians. We may like our meat tough but our bread is sweet and soft as brioche. My favourite bakeries in Port Harcourt are Skippers and Buraka.

Once you are home, slice the bread and cut the slices into diagonal halves to make triangles. Butter both sides of the triangles generously and spread lime marmalade onto one side. Lime marmalade is surprisingly hard to find. I order it off the internet. You could always make your own, of course. It was my father's favorite preserve. When in England he would eat it on slices of white, medium-sliced, English bread that had first been slicked with soft margarine. It was the 1980s and margarine was deemed the healthy choice. I can see his fingers handle the bread delicately as he spreads the green marmalade on. He would chew loudly. Mouth closed, of course, but the noise was still audible. When I was younger I found the act of eating sad and solemn. Tragically human. Watching or hearing him eat made me think of him as vulnerable and in need of protection. My responsibility.

The bread and butter came at the end of his usual breakfast when he was in England: cornflakes with warm milk; followed by smoked mackerel with a wedge of lemon; then came the bread and marmalade washed down with black tea and lemon. It was my job to make his breakfast when he came to the house. I once met an Ogoni woman in New York, a refugee, who told me she used to feed him too when he was in detention in 1995. One day, the morning of the 10th of November, she visited the prison with her usual package of food. She was told to go home because "he would not be needing food today."

'Watching him eat made me think of him as vulnerable' ... Bread and Butter Pudding with Pawpaw Custard and Palm Wine Glaze, 2018. Photograph: Zina Saro-Wiwa, courtesy of Tiwani Contemporary

Like Saro-Wiwa herself, the masqueraders are Ogoni – the occupants of 111 villages in five kingdoms of the Niger Delta, whose art is rooted in ancient animist beliefs. "I'm always trying to inject our own indigenous cosmologies," she says. "I'm sick of the fact that all over the delta there are highways with names like 'Refinery Road'. Our landscape shouldn't just be described in terms of oil. Historically, British colonialism in Nigeria was solely about accessing raw materials and shipping them out as quickly as possible. My work seeks to map and mark the landscape in a cultural way."

Though their parents came from the same village, Saro-Wiwa and her four siblings had a cosmopolitan childhood, educated at English boarding schools and returning home to Nigeria for holidays. "My father would deposit us in the village, but we were just bored young kids who wanted to go back to Port Harcourt and watch television. We were emotionally very disconnected," she says.

Their visits to Nigeria stopped as the oil protests intensified when she and her twin – the travel writer Noo Saro-Wiwa – were 14 years old. Five years later her father was killed, leaving her culturally and emotionally marooned. "For 10 years I didn't cry about my father, because I felt there was no space for me in the highly politicised wake of his death," she says.

It was, paradoxically, during a gap year in Brazil that she began to explore and articulate her African heritage. After returning to the UK for a degree in economics and social history at Bristol University, she talked her way into the BBC, where one of her early successes was a two-part radio documentary about her time in the old Brazilian capital of Salvador in Bahia, which she found saturated in West African culture.

Though she thinks now that “I was always an artist”, she remained a broadcast journalist for 10 years – only changing track after an impulse decision to up sticks and move to Brooklyn. Her calling-card was a film about Africans in London, which was quickly picked up by HBO. Just a year later she was invited to curate her own gallery show in SoHo, Manhattan, which she titled “Sharon Stone in Abuja”. “America has been good to me career-wise,” she says. “New York told me I was an artist.”

One of her responses was to bury herself in Nigerian popular culture – particularly the fantasies peddled by the thriving Nollywood film industry; another was to dig further into her own grief. In a powerful early piece, she filmed herself – in shaven-headed, bare-shouldered close-up – alternately weeping and laughing convulsively to camera. “It was the fourth art film I ever made and it cost me something,” she says. “I’m trying to get over the idea that art always has to cost you something.”

Her tactics in her current show are more nuanced. A lightbox displays a vivid photograph of two figures wearing the distinctive antelope masks. “In a way, this piece is about me and my sister. I see a lot of twin stuff in there,” she explains. “A lot of my work is trying to connect the personal with the political because I think blatantly political work doesn’t really reach people. That’s why I talk about things like emotional landscape.”

Above all, there is food. The bread and butter pudding piece, she writes, is about “him” ... “The committed Nigerian who nevertheless chose England for our childhood ... I am the little girl in the doorway of the kitchen watching the back of his head ... he knows I am there but does not turn around. Nor does he send me away.”

There are no backs of heads in the show’s centrepiece – Table Manners – in which four video screens rotate eight leisurely closeup films of Nigerians eating: Felix Eats Garri & Egusi Soup or Barisuka Eats Roasted Ice Fish and Mu. They chew slowly and sensuously, kneading the starch with their hands, in a celebration of Nigerian life that is also a jewel of classical portraiture. Two editions have already been sold – one to a private collector and one to a German foundation.



Nuanced ... Brotherhood from Karikpo Pipeline video and photo series (2015). Photograph: Zina Saro-Wiwa, courtesy of Tiwani Contemporary



Classical portraiture ... Grace Eats Garden Egg and Groundnut Butter (2014–15). Photograph: Zina Saro-Wiwa, courtesy of Tiwani Contemporary

When he's not acting as a model, Felix is Saro-Wiwa's driver and assistant on her long filming expeditions to the heart of Ogoni country, where her father's legacy has been carved into masquerade culture: his pipe-smoking, moustached face makes a regular appearance on the newer, more elaborate masks. His daughter, meanwhile, is carving her own niche, as the founder and patron of a permanent art gallery, the Boys' Quarters Project Space, set up in the Port Harcourt office where her father used to do his writing.

Saro-Wiwa does not see herself as a solely African artist, saying that living and operating between Brooklyn, Port Harcourt and London has given her an agnostic approach to questions of identity and identity politics. Her father, the recipe tells us, loved white bread spread with lime marmalade. How does her own multicultural identity play out in her eating? In Brooklyn, she laughs, she's joined the no-carbs culture. In Nigeria it's fish, plantains and lots of green vegetables. In the UK? "As soon as I arrive I find myself succumbing to the delights of Maltesers and salt-and-vinegar Hula Hoops."