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Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 39(1)

ISSN

0041-5715

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Publication Date

2016

DOI

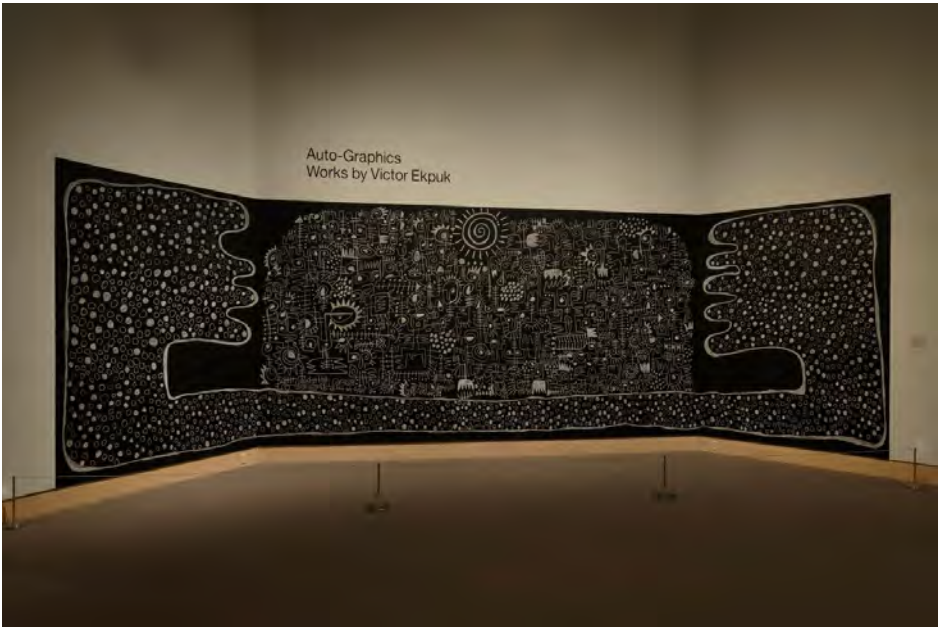
10.5070/F7391029815

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Exhibition Review



Auto-Graphics: Works by Victor Ekpuk, Lathrop and Jaffe Galleries, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, April 18–August 2, 2015. Photo by Jeff Nintzel. © Trustees of Dartmouth College



Ukara: Ritual Cloth of the Ekpe Secret Society, Hall Gallery, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, April 18–August 2, 2015. Photo by Jeff Nintzel. © Trustees of Dartmouth College

Review of *AUTO-GRAPHICS: Works by Victor Ekpuk and Ukara: Ritual Cloth of the Ekpe Secret Society*

Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, April
18–August 2, 2015

Elizabeth Holland Searcy

Forty objects—including drawings, paintings, textiles, videos, and photographs—hung in two exhibitions exploring African visual forms at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, where they were on view from April 18th through August 2nd of this year. *AUTO-GRAPHICS: Works by Victor Ekpuk and Ukara: Ritual Cloth of the Ekpe Secret Society* displayed art of and inspired by cultures in the Cross River Basin in Nigeria and Cameroon. *Auto-Graphics*, originally organized by the Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and curated by Allyson Purpura, presented the artwork of Nigerian-born American artist Victor Ekpuk, who finds inspiration for his forms in the *nsibidi* writing system of the Ekpe Society, a multi-ethnic male association. *Ukara*, organized by the Hood and their Curator of African Art, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, delved into the best-known symbol of this society—the *ukara* textile used as clothing and decoration for Ekpe clubhouses.

Located on the second floor of the museum, the exhibitions were contiguous with one another. Walking up the stairs, the visitor immediately saw the large, hand-drawn mural made specifically for this exhibition. This mural, rendered in white chalk on black paint, demonstrates some of Ekpuk's signature forms, including his own gestural symbols as well as the *nsibidi*. While studying art at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile Ife in southeastern Nigeria, Ekpuk became deeply interested in the formal elements of this writing system. Over time, however, it has developed into both a performative gesture and a marker of cultural memory for the artist. The other three walls of this first room were dedicated to ten drawings from Ekpuk's 2007-2013 *Composition*

series, which he began during a residency in Amsterdam and concluded at another in Santa Fe. Walking around this spacious, well-lit room, viewers gain perspective on how this recent series evolved over time. For while all of the drawings share common elements—like the *nsibidi* forms and large geometric shapes—it is interesting to note how they shift from primary colors in the early works to earth tones in the Santa Fe drawings.

The second room of *Auto-Graphics* contained a scattering of the artist's earlier works and other series. This room, while much smaller than the first, held a similar number of artworks: five large-scale works (including digital prints and drawings), four smaller collages and drawings, and an enlightening video showing him producing an ephemeral mural at a different location. What results is less cohesive than the initial room, yet the art remains impressive and informative. From the earliest object in the exhibition—*Boy and Cow* (a pen and ink drawing from 1998), which tells us of Ekpuk's early cartoon work and influences—to the later *Slave Narrative* series also done during his residency in Amsterdam, these works provide context to Ekpuk's body of work and the *Compositions* drawings.

After walking through *Auto-Graphics*, you entered the *Ukara* room. Distinguished from the Ekpuk exhibition by the indigo blue walls (matching the color of the dye used on the textiles), this exhibition explores the visual culture of the Ekpe Society, and specifically the role of the *ukara* cloth within it. Once a powerful political authority, the group remains important in the region and unifies the diverse cultural groups that make up its membership. The *ukara* cloth, it explains, is both a signifier of the prestige of belonging to the group and the bearer of its secrets through the *nsibidi* inscribed on the cloth through the indigo dyeing process. Five textiles dating from 1972-2010 hang loosely from the wall; given their large size—all over five feet wide, most over eight feet wide—they dominate the room. The left side displays clusters of explanatory objects: photographs showing the textiles in use, a video of the making and dyeing process, raffia, a basket of dye, and cloth in various stages of completion. The room also contains two mannequins wearing the *ukara* and mask of the Ekpe Society lit with bright spot lighting. Scattered throughout the room are informative wall texts that explain the nature of the group and their relationship to *nsibidi*.



Victor Ekpuk's wall drawing as of noon on Thursday, April 23, 2015, Lathrop Gallery tripartite wall, in conjunction with the exhibition *Auto-Graphics: Works by Victor Ekpuk*, Lathrop and Jaffe Galleries, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, April 18–August 2, 2015. Photo by Alison Palizzolo. © Victor Ekpuk



Victor Ekpuk working on his wall drawing, Lathrop Gallery tripartite wall, in conjunction with the exhibition *Auto-Graphics: Works by Victor Ekpuk*, Lathrop and Jaffe Galleries, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, April 18–August 2, 2015. Photo by Alison Palizzolo. © Trustees of Dartmouth College

These two exhibitions both experientially and thematically fed into each other. Walking through the museum, the visitor could not see the *Ukara* display without first going through *Auto-Graphics*. (One could elect to ignore *Ukara* after seeing the first, but the bright blue walls were so welcoming, it is hard to imagine that.) More than the physical space, however, each exhibition contributed the other's resonance and educational appeal. *Ukara* provided cultural context and depth of knowledge, while *Auto-Graphics* balanced that with contemporary interpretation and a global perspective. Ekpuk often points out that African forms that have served as inspiration for Western artists are still dynamic practices in their home regions.¹ These exhibitions worked together to demonstrate that with abundant clarity.

Note

¹ See "Victor Ekpuk—artist" from *Seeds and Fruit*, September 24, 2009. <http://www.seedsandfruit.com/2009/09/victor-ekpuk-artist/>