



## **Making Art in Africa: Frances Richardson**

Interviewed by Robert Loder and Polly Savage, Gasworks, London, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2010

I thought I would end up being a public sculptor when I first went to art college. I wanted to make great big public sculptures that had a social function, architecture. I was very idealistic. I came to London after that, and met Fela Kuti because my partner the poet Michael Arch-Angel knew him from FESTAC<sup>1</sup>. I went to one of his concerts, which is where the story begins. There was a lot of spliff smoking going on; I think I was high to be honest. I got lost backstage at Brixton Academy, and ended up walking out onto the stage, before the show had started. There was no one there, nothing, apart from this huge carved drum; it was about 8 ft long. I looked at this drum and said 'I am going to Nigeria to carve a drum'.

A year later, in 1990, I was awarded a Commonwealth Foundation Fellowship and invited as a Research Affiliate to study contemporary African sculpture at the universities in Ife, Nsukka and Benin. I got to Ife and thought, 'what the hell am I doing here?' The semester hadn't started so there were no students about and the sculpture department was littered with pastiche busts of President Babangida. I had an address for an artist, Nike Davis, who lived in Oshogbo, so I got in a taxi and went there, it took the best part of the day. I arrived at Nike's Centre for Arts and Culture, and Segun Faleye, who was the carver there, took me to see Nike at her house. I stayed there that night. In the morning she offered me a room to stay in at the arts centre, and said that Segun would teach me carving. He had that look on his face of 'God, not another European wanting to carve', I hadn't the intention to apprentice myself to anyone but I was grateful for somewhere to stay away from the university, and a studio space to work in. I had brought my own woodcarving chisels and showed Segun images of carvings I had made. He wasn't that impressed, but he was curious I think, to see what I could do. After I had made a few things on my own including a copy of some carved Ibeji figures from the museum, he asked me to copy one of his carvings made for tourists, a palm wine tapper. I didn't like the carving particularly but in copying it I realised how difficult it was to do and I gained a huge respect for him. He was just watching me and I was just wondering what on earth I was going to do, stay there or move on to Benin.

Then he showed me a large carving he was doing for himself, rather than for tourists. It was of Ogun, God of War, in flames. We had been listening to world service reports about the Gulf War, and the oil refinery fires, this was his interpretation of that image. We started to have a rapport as artists, and he said 'if you really want to understand my work then I have to teach you my language.' I wanted to make a Gelede mask because I liked the style; they're from a region to the South West of Osoybo, Abeokuta, where Fela's from. That was a mistake. He took me into the bush and told me to pick up a piece of wood. It was the heaviest piece of wood you can imagine. I struggled carrying it back to the studio and it was really hard to carve, he teased me, and did everything he could to put me off; he kept disappearing, calling me silly names, asking me when I was leaving. Every time he returned he couldn't believe that I was still there. It was Iroko wood, hard and dense like ebony, not mask wood that dries light; it is in the wrong style, using the wrong wood, but curiously looked authentic. I think he enjoyed playing with that notion as well.

One day, just before Christmas, these expats came looking for fabrics, saw me sat on the floor chipping away, and asked 'what an earth are you doing here?' Not knowing why I was still there I just said, 'I came here to carve a drum'. Segun was there, so I told him the story of the drum on Fela's stage. He looked at me. 'I carved that drum', he said 'I never got paid for it'. I had been going to Lagos quite a bit, and staying at Kalakuta Republic, Fela's house, so when I was there I asked him about the drum. He said it came from somewhere up north, Oshogbo, and that he had given the money to what turned out to be Segun's cousin, who was one of Fela's musicians. I told Segun on my return and he said 'there are things greater than you or I which have brought us together.' He was saying, it is no longer my decision, I will teach her traditional Yoruba carving. He surrendered himself to the encounter.

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<sup>1</sup> FESTAC was the Second World African Festival of Arts and Culture, held in Lagos State Nigeria in 1977.

He took me on several trips to see things, like the hunters in the forest and the palm wine tapper and indigo dyers, village life, and a festival where I met male and female Shango priests. We went to a village and negotiated a price for one of the trees. Before cutting it, at its base we sacrificed a goat. I had to whisper into the goat's ear then its throat was cut. It was an offering to the Orisa, to bless the work we would make, and give thanks for taking a life out of nature. The tree had stood for longer than anyone in the village could remember. We gave the sacrificed animal to the village elder and they had a party, whole village ate. We made another sacrifice when the work was ready to be painted, and another before it went into the world. The blood from the sacrifice is painted onto each work.

We carved everyday in the forest, the villagers had to shout before approaching and we would cover our work, the carvers' practice is secret, it is part of the sacred system. You have the blacksmith at the top, then the carver, then the priest. I went to the blacksmith, and asked him to make an adze and a couple of knives for me. I went back a week later, and the tools were really badly made. Segun just laughed at me, 'look at yourself'. I didn't get it at first but then I realised the blacksmith was looking at a white woman.

I wanted to carve a drum, but Segun had already trodden on sticky territory teaching me traditional Epa masks. Lamidi Fakeye a celebrated carver and faculty member of Ife University, Gorgina Bier and Susanne Wenger both European artists influential in the region, had all expressed to Segun their doubts about teaching me. One concern was that I was going to go back to London and produce fakes. My Epa mask was exhibited in the Fakes and Forgeries department of the V&A, but in truth it's authentic, it can be used for traditional ceremonies, it really poses a question about cultural identity and authorship. Segun said I was his best student, so why shouldn't he teach me? He wasn't making traditional ceremonial objects anymore, none of the young artists wanted to learn the traditional pieces, just small work they could sell to tourists even Fakeye was making diminutive decorative versions of Epa mask and not the real thing. In a way I was an excuse for Segun to revisit the traditional knowledge he had and pass it on. With the drums there was a hesitancy to go ahead and make them because you are supposed to be part of the Ogboni secret society to make the drum. You have to be initiated and I wasn't. He got around it by not telling me what to do, we each made a drum I followed his lead, and we worked in silence. Sometimes he would speak in riddles and I would try and figure out what he meant. If I did something that wasn't OK he would just take the adze from my hand, hack it off and I'd start again. He wouldn't talk to me about it and I won't reveal what I learned.

When I left Nigeria, Segun gave me his tools. You don't buy tools from the blacksmith, you're given tools by your master when you get your 'freedom'. The carver's Orisa is Ogun; god of iron and war, Segun would say his tools mean more to him than his wife and children. It was a complete surprise when he gave me his adze and two knives with beautifully carved handles. I think he secretly enjoyed my frustrated trips to the blacksmith. Humbled by that first experience of making the Gelede mask I was very much his apprentice and I too lost my self to the encounter. He said we were making an Epa mask, but we didn't have any pictures of them I had no idea what one looked like. I worked blind on the first mask, Iya Ibeji, mother of twins, just following his instruction. On the second mask though, because there was no other traditional female image on an Epa mask, he said 'make something up'. I made a composition of figures that told a story I had heard from the woman who cooked pounded yam across the road, about Shango and Oya. He approved it. If you invent something within the tradition, then you gain your freedom.

I shipped the works back to the UK, and exhibited them at the Commonwealth Institute. Segun's work sold. He managed to build a house. It really set him up as someone within the community to be respected, after the ridicule, 'you spent all that time making the work, you didn't get paid and she's taken it with her!' Segun, you were amazing to give up a year of your life to teach me. When I left he said I must learn to sing my own song. I think I have.

As I edit this transcript in 2013 I am delighted to say we got to meet again this spring, after 21 years, we just happened to be in NY at the same time.