



A fee for locker locks? That's just part of a growing list of demands from school districts to students this fall.



The artist as provocateur: damali ayo wants people to see beyond race. "America is a beautiful country. But do I like the society?"

PATRICK SULLIVAN
THE OREGONIAN

PREVIEW

"Playback" by damali ayo

Where: Mark Woolley Gallery, 120 N.W. Ninth Ave., No. 210
Hours: 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday
Closes: Sept. 27



FIRST THURSDAY

Satire in black and white

Artist damali ayo's provocative parodies push the public's hot buttons with the aim of sparking discussions of race

By D.K. ROW
THE OREGONIAN

With a headful of dreadlocks, small ring in her left nostril, tattoo on her right arm and delicate, cat-like features, damali ayo cuts a striking figure walking down the street.

But according to the Portland artist, it's not her bohemian fashion sense that catches people's attention.

It's the fact that she's black that provokes people — white people, specifically — to awkward, foot-in-mouth utterances about her appearance. Take this unusually candid observation made by her friend: "I like this light because it makes our skin look like they're the same color."

"People don't know the ABCs of racial discussion," sighs the 31-year-old artist, her eyes rolling in mock exasperation. Ayo eventually incorporated her friend's remark — and many others she's heard during conversations with friends and strangers — into her latest prints, assemblages and multimedia work now on view at the Mark Woolley Gallery.

Called "Playback," the exhibit is an opportunity to size up this provocative and talented artist whose career has been boosted into the national orbit with recent write-ups in magazines such as Harper's and Salon.com.

It's for good reason that ayo has been catching the eyes and pens of critics around the country. Few local artists are willing to address the ABCs of race. And even fewer are willing to pinch the public's sensitive nerves while doing it — a useful talent in this marketing age when artists must manipulate the public as well as craft material.



The Creator

DAMALI AYO

In this digital print, ayo incorporates one of the direct quotes she's taken from conversations with people.

CRITIC'S PICKS

It looks as if First Thursday fans will bask under the not-so-Tuscan sun for another month or two before the gray winter gods transform us into hermitic beer and coffee drinkers. Here's a crib list of shows for September's art walk.

Laura Russo Gallery: Portland is about painting — always has been, always will be. And two very good painters with long histories here — Marlene Bauer and Jack Portland — show their latest studio work. Both are abstractionists; Bauer paints exquisite landscapes of familiar local areas; Portland heightens traditional still-life subjects with a Mediterranean delectation inspired by his other home, Italy. (805 N.W. 21st Ave.)

Soundvision: Curator T.J. Norris has assembled some of the city's most adventurous exhibits this past year at this gallery in the Everett Station Lofts. In November, Norris plans to close the venue, hoping to concentrate instead on his artwork. In what's likely to be the gallery's final exhibit, Norris presents a sampling of his multimedia art made with three artists who sound like Discovery Channel refugees: Beequeen, Illusion of Safety and Humectant Interruption. (625 N.W. Everett St. No. 108)

Motel: Los Angeles has a baseball team and bigger art scene, but Portland's still a happening enough place that some Los Angelenos want to visit — or even move here permanently. This month, three up-and-coming artists from the City of Angels — Caroline Hwang, Saelee Oh and Rachel Sumpter — offer a glimpse of the excitement and energy going on in the metropolis where, even though the sun shines all the time, you still can't see the mountains. (Northwest Couch Street between Fifth and Sixth avenues)

— D.K. ROW

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Subverting forms and reflections on color: a not-so-ordinary assemblage (left) and deck of cards (right) by damali ayo.

First: 'Rent-a-negro'

Web site has drawn threatening reactions

Continued from Page E1

Her most famous work, for example, is a Web site called www.rent-a-negro.com, which allows customers to "rent" ayo for public occasions such as parties. With tongue firmly in cheek, the Web site is a wicked satire on political correctness and racial awareness.

"The presence of black people in your life can advance business and social reputation," ayo writes in the site's explanatory section.

The work has provoked both fawns and yawns — as well as threats from those who have taken ayo's intentions too literally. "Black people said I was re-instigating slavery, while white people invited me to lynchings."

Because of these threats, ayo has yet to fulfill a rental order from the site.

Fear, however, has not stopped her from again pushing sensitive buttons in this latest show, which finds the artist trying to provoke, if not clearly illuminate, a discussion about race.

One series of digital prints, for example, parodies racial attitudes by reconceptualizing works by Norman Rockwell, chronicler of apple-pie America.

In each print, ayo has substituted variations of a golliwog — a pejorative black caricature — for Rockwell's images and then added comic-book word bubbles filled with direct quotes taken from the artist's conversations about race with friends and strangers.

"I never thought of her as a person of color until she pointed it out to me," one bubble reads, rising to the heavens of disingenuousness.

A group of assemblages features golliwog dolls that ayo bought on eBay and then placed into physical environments ranging from desk drawers to pet carriers. Called "how i sometimes find myself," these pieces, ayo says, are metaphors for how society has made her feel as an African American: trapped.

With its racist imagery and brazen tone, this is not easy work to absorb. Think of an unsettling marriage between Barbara Kruger's primal advertising screams ("I shop therefore I am") and African American cultural critic bell hooks' inquiries on race.

Hooks is one of ayo's heroes — she even followed hooks' example and changed her name to lowercase letters.

But for all of its emotional power, ayo's art is also more blunt knife than sharp edge. And its mixed tone of anger and humor suggests that maybe ayo is not sure how to interpret the work she's created.

"I don't have a statement about my work," she says, when asked to explain her art during a recent interview at her Southeast Portland home. "When I hear that, you're saying, 'I either want to agree or disagree with you.' I'm not saying I don't want to respond to that. But art isn't about what art means."

Her opinions outside art are pretty clear, however. For instance, ayo thinks the American economic system doesn't support people of color and that portrayals of African Americans in the media are stuck in the 1920s.

"All I see on television is minstrelsy," she says.

Ayo's father is an engineer, and her mother works for an educational nonprofit organization. A native of Washington, D.C., ayo attended the prestigious Sidwell Friends School on scholarship — famous alumni include Chelsea Clinton — then it was off to another haven of privilege, Brown University in Rhode Island.

Does the artist who disdains the ideas and trappings of privilege and power — the White Establishment — see the irony in being a product of one of its best prep schools and private universities?

"I don't know what that means," she says with a frown that turns into a smile. "Language is subjective. A white person reads that I'm middle class and they'll think we had a pony."

So what are ayo's intentions, ultimately, with these brash artworks composed of golliwog imagery, odd quotes taken from conversations with friends and strangers, and an audacious Web site where the public can rent an African American for a night?

"All artists are manipulators," she says. "I'm an honest manipulator."

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