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Profile

Sonya Clark: References to Metaphor and History

Sonya Clark believes her aesthetic sensibility was molded in the black beauty salon. She has powerful visceral childhood memories: the feeling of hair being tugged; the rhythm of braiding; the slice of scissors and the buzz of hair clippers; the smells of lye in hair relaxers and oily pomades; the sensation of those pomades on the fingers and scalp. Clark's artwork is built on the spiritual energy tied up with those processes. She calls hairdressing a way of knowing that is simultaneously cultural, spiritual, and personal—the primordial fiber art.

Her work explores the continuum between fiber, hairstyling, and the energies of the head. To date, she has focused on African/African-American traditions. **Onigi: 13 Sticks**, for example, is a wearable headpiece—a cross between a wig and a hat—that directly addresses African-American hair. However, it is clearly a fiber construction, and not hair, and asks us to contemplate this relationship.

As all of Clark's work, this piece also takes us much further. It is about identity—not just about race, but about the more universal identity of the soul. Following the tradition of the Yoruba (West Africa), Clark locates the soul in the head. The head is a sacred space, she says, “the center where cultural influences are absorbed, siphoned, and retained. It is the site where we process the world through the senses.” **Onigi: 13 Sticks** literally maps the head. It is concerned with the surface of the scalp and what lies inside it, but its “sticks” or braids also expand or extend the energy into a radiating nimbus. It calls attention to the act of parting, which Clark finds very powerful. Parting cuts through the scalp, almost like an incision that allows the blood or life energy to flow freely. Significantly, the piece is worked in 13 sections. It is based on the Fibonacci system, a mathematical sequence (each successive number is the sum of the previous two) found in such natural phenomena as the

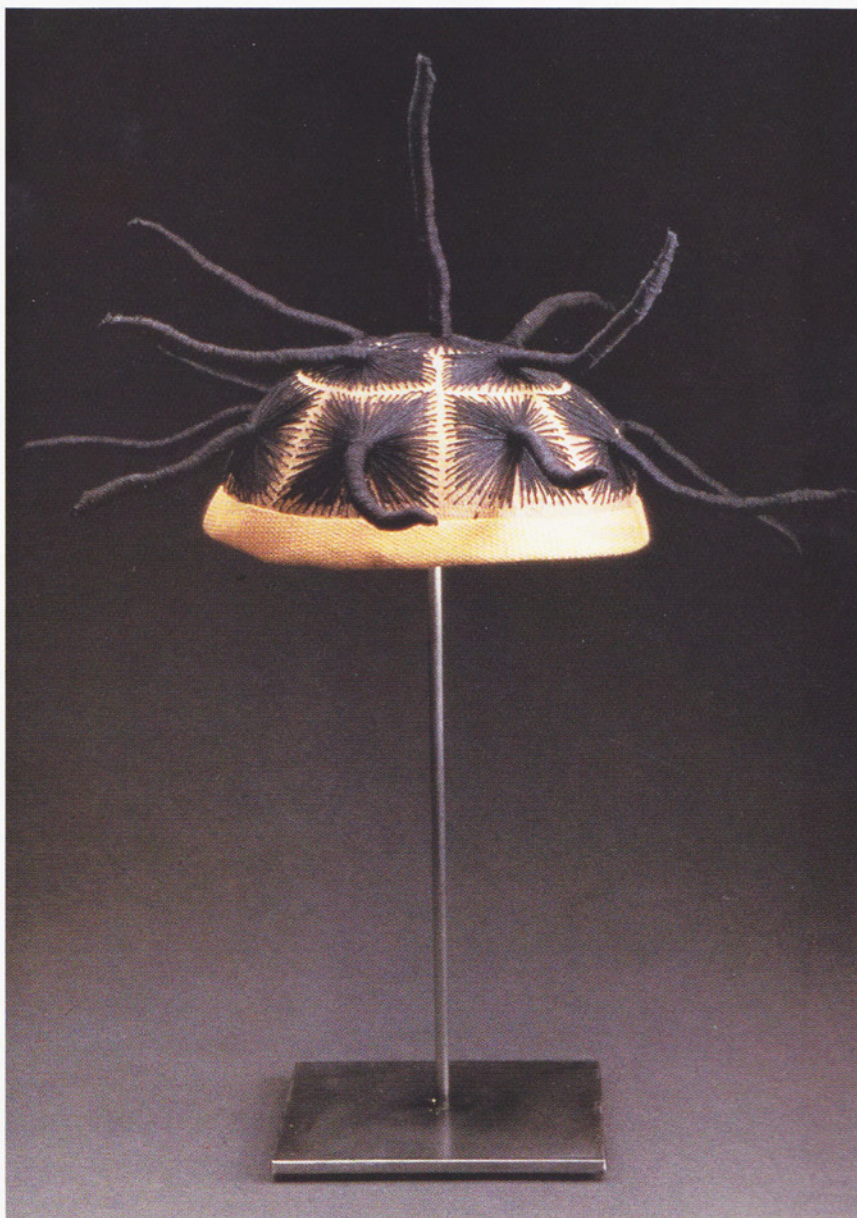
spiraling growth patterns of tree buds or pine cones. **Onigi: 13 Sticks** speaks, then, of primal patterns and relationships, of the mysteries of life, growth, and energy.

Clark's headpieces address these forces. She wants them to affect people viscerally and to engage their senses synesthetically. Overall, the work is colorful, richly textured, and filled with a range of textile tech-

niques, but Clark is less concerned with technical prowess than with the effect and power of any given piece. She wants it to express her inner vision as well as to help others find their own life force energy.

—Beverly Gordon

Beverly Gordon is professor of textile and costume history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



Onigi: 13 Sticks; stitched and wrapped cloth; 10 by 10 by 10 inches. Photo: Tom McInville, courtesy Leedy Voulkos Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri.