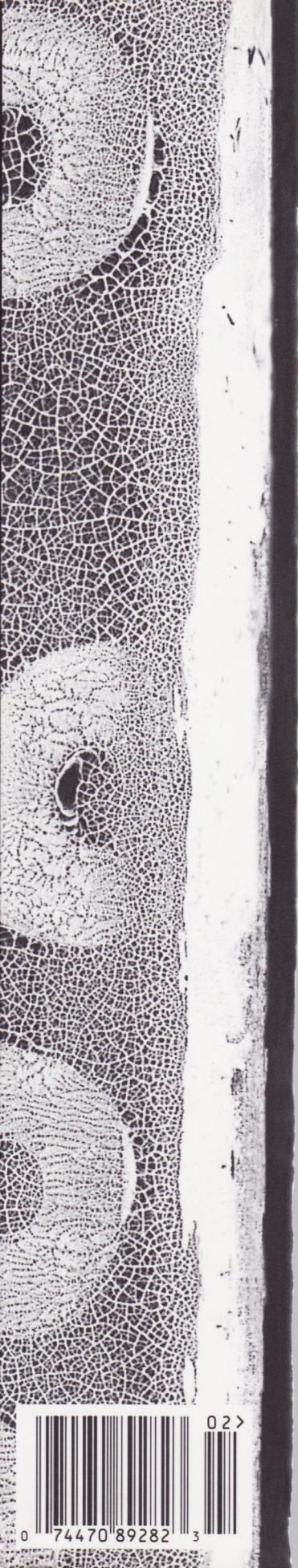

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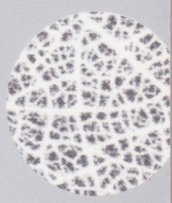

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Sonya Clark

Crowning the Spirit

by Jodie Clowes

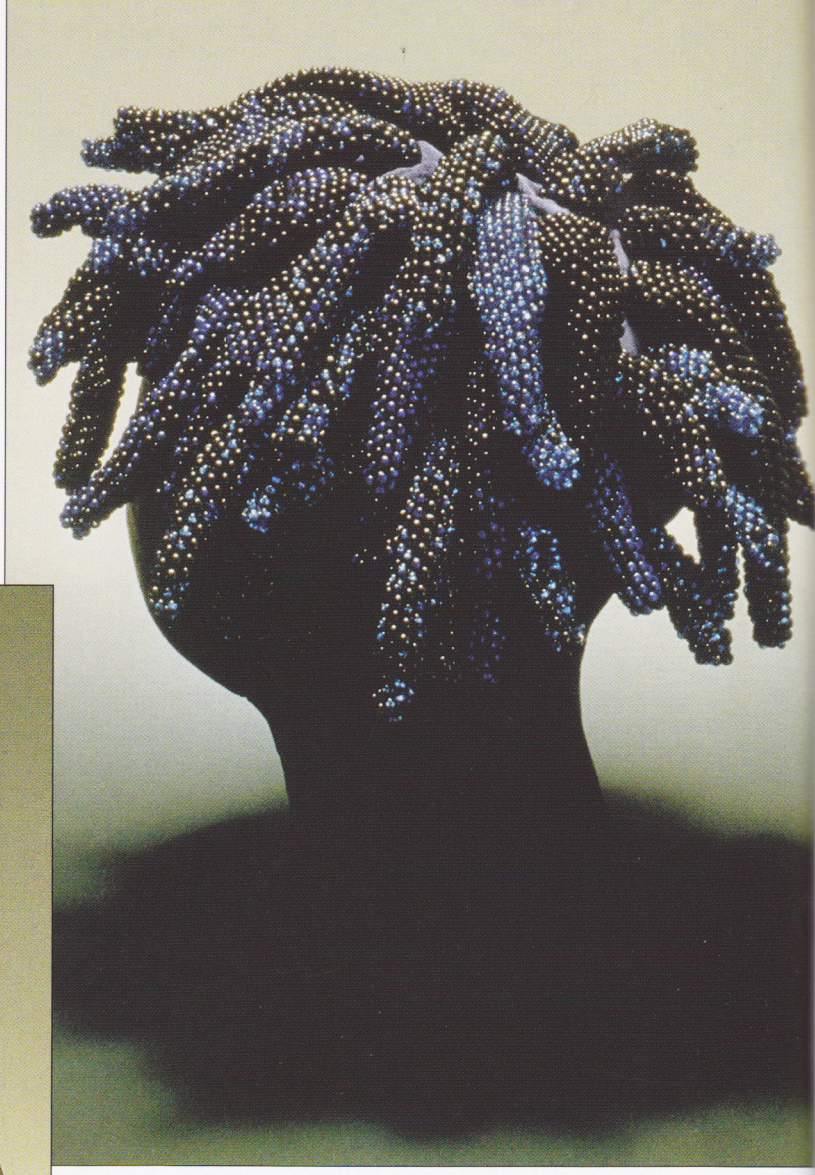
Even viewed as sculpture in a white-walled gallery, Sonya Y. S. Clark's headdresses, hats, and wig-like constructions inspire a straightened spine and dignified, assured carriage. This physical response draws energy up through the body to the top of the skull, focusing attention on the head's subtle balancing act. Sheltering the brain, eyes, ears, tongue and nose, the head receives information, processes it, and expresses our response; it projects (or masks) our identity, our intent, our desire; and, in many traditions, it is our point of contact with the spiritual realm. It is part of and yet apart from the body. One can be a whole person without arms, breasts, fingers or a nose. But without the head, there is no self—and perhaps no home for the soul.

It is this understanding of the head's spiritual importance, drawn from African tradition—particularly the Yoruba concept of asé, the divine life energy which moves in and out of the body through the head—that drives Clark's interest in headdresses and hairstyles. If the head houses the spirit, then its adornment and protection is a sacred act of reverence and celebration. Clark conceives her headdresses to articulate and extend communication with the spirit world, marking and strengthening a channel for the soul. Since the transition between spirit and matter is a delicate business, these pieces may also be seen as cushions or filters, protective devices for the hazards of the soul's journey.

Many religious traditions give great weight to the head: consider the seventh chakra and third eye of the Hindus, the Christian halo, or the prescribed head-coverings worn by Muslims and Jews. While Clark is fascinated by other cultures and religions, she has been most inspired by her own African heritage. As an African-American whose parents immigrated from the Caribbean, she is intensely interested in both traditional African art and the complex of expressive arts developed throughout the African diaspora. Her work is rich with ancestral echoes—royal hairdos from ancient Benin, Yoruba beaded crowns, sweetgrass baskets and scarification—and with contemporary forms: American schoolgirls' braids, Rastafarian dreadlocks, 1970s-style "Afro puffs." Clark offers these layered references as a source of strength and pride for the African-American community, and as reminders of the essential continuity of African tradition.

In granting Afro puffs and simple twists the same consideration and dignity as a royal headdress, Clark simultaneously addresses issues of social hierarchy and the hierarchy of the arts. As a class, "wearable art" is viewed less seriously than almost any other form, and hairdressing has virtually no place in critical discourse. Yet the passionate energy devoted to African-American hair demonstrates its fundamental importance to the community. Clark draws explicit connections between traditional African headdresses (now collected and displayed as art) and the 'dos worn by "ordinary" American women, and she proudly

Sonya Y. S. Clark *Well Cloth*, pennies, beads, found metal, 13" x 8" x 8", 1996. **Photo:** J. Nedresky.



Sonya Y. S. Clark *Ras Blue* glass beads, felt, 6" x 8" x 8", 1996. **Photo:** J.Nedresky.

disregards the low status of both fiber and personal adornment in contemporary art. As carriers of cultural pride, her headdresses are protective: they assert themselves against the judgment of a hostile viewer. Many of Clark's early pieces are quite direct about this: *Extrovert* (1995) and *Bristle Sprout* (1996) are spiked with copper tacks, and *Cyclotincture* (1996) bears a huge copper "third eye" which reflects a ruddy light, coloring the viewer with a fiery essence. With a similar sense of purpose, Clark claims a place for her wearable fiber works in the realm of art.

It seems significant, given Clark's desire that her work project a confident, historically grounded African-American identity, that she has chosen to make headdresses rather than masks. African masks are central to European and white American perceptions of African art, yet their original meanings are so overladen with Picasso's and Modigliani's baggage that it is difficult to see them without invoking a flurry of preconceptions, from the benign to the outright racist. Headdresses and hairstyles may have been left out of art history until recently, but they have also been less tainted by Western concerns.

It is this understanding of the head's spiritual importance, drawn from African tradition—particularly the Yoruba concept of asé, the divine life energy which moves in and out of the body through the head—that drives Clark's interest in headdresses and hairstyles.

Despite a personal allegiance to fiber, Clark has not tied herself to a particular medium. Good technique is basic to her work, which is uniformly beautifully made. But she is more concerned with the history and symbolic weight of her chosen materials and methods than with any specific process. Clark has used beading, crochet, embroidery and quilting; wrapped wire and stitched down pennies, mirrors, tacks and haircurlers; molded and burned polarfleece. Her formal sources extend well beyond hair and hats to include the growth patterns of coral and nerve cells, the repetitive dots of Braille, thatched roofs and seed pods. Such complex informational webs tie dense knots of references and questions into nearly every piece she undertakes. In *Freed Seed* (1996), a lotus pod crowns a stitched field dotted with pennies. For Clark, the lotus suggests personal transformation, and the copper pennies offer both the red blood of life and (via Lincoln's profile) an image of historical emancipation; the funky hand-stitching brings these symbols home. *Mitosis* (1999) and *Synapse* (1998) are dense networks of thread-wrapping that recall both the traditional hairstyle and the branching forms of nerve cells. *Telepaths*, riddled with burnt holes, and *Communicants* (both 1999), with its bumpy heat-molded surfaces, conjure up scarification, trepanning, and the unforgiving hot comb. These vivid, visceral evocations rumble beneath the surface of Clark's most successful pieces, deepening her headier notions about spiritual knowledge, ancestral connections, and the translation of divine intelligence through organic form. Even her recent "wigs" of braided cotton yarn, which can be experienced purely as a loving homage to parts and plaits, were conceived as an embodiment of the golden section: as a group, Clark calls them *Fibonacci Series* (1998). They run in arithmetic progression from *Unum*, a single curving braid rising from the crown of a fabric cap, to *Onigi: 13 Sticks*, which radiates from thirteen stark sections. Beginning with the idea that hair carries the head's power, Clark shaped this series into a reverie on organic patterning and, to adopt a Yoruba perspective, the physical expression of asé.

Over the last several years, Clark has continued to expand her interest in spiritual and cultural communication to the nature of dialogue between cells (*Mitosis, Synapse*), the logic underlying organic growth (*Fibonacci Series*) and, most recently, the complex, intelligent linkage of our bodies and brains. Struck by the relationship between "texture," "text," and "textile," she began to study Braille, pondering the mysterious process of recognition required to "read" texture. Telepaths is comprised of twenty-six simply molded skull-caps—each pierced with burnt holes—arranged on the wall to spell out its own title in Braille. This exploratory piece links Clark's interest in internal, cell-to-cell communication and the synaesthetic translation of touch into language with her continued focus on the top of the head as a mediator between spirit and matter.

We are lucky to be on the receiving end of Clark's outgoing messages: this ambitious, intellectually focused artist is already deepening dialogue within the fiber arts.

—Jodie Clowes, Associate Curator of Decorative Art at the Milwaukee Art Museum, has a longstanding interest in the craft revivals of the 19th and 20 centuries, and often writes about contemporary artists working in craft media.